

Erotic Reason and Female Desire in Maria Jotuni and Elin Wägner

In early twentieth-century Nordic novels, female characters acted out the repertoire of the New Woman, as did their contemporaries elsewhere.¹ The New Woman challenged moral, social and political norms to the delight of some, to the despair of others. Depending on the society she emerged in, the New Woman took different guises. The image of the Nordic New Woman in life and literature coincided with the popular understanding of the Nordic countries as a place where women's sexuality was understood in less moralising terms than in many other places. Although this understanding of a Nordic exceptionalism has deeper historical roots, it was a recurring theme of political and literary debate during the period covered in this article, c. 1900–1930.²

The aim of this chapter is to analyse a decisive time in the formation of a new social and political role for women in the first half of the twentieth century, in order to discuss how sexuality and social policy are intertwined with literature. The authors discussed are Maria Jotuni (1880–1943) from Finland and Elin Wägner (1882–1949) from Sweden. Methodologically, we have chosen not to follow the trajectories of the female protagonists in Jotuni and Wägner, but rather to identify moments of moral, political, sexual and matrimonial deliberation, moments when core dilemmas concerning love and sexuality are rationalised. This, we contend, is key to understanding the idea of a specific emotional and sexual coolness in the Nordic woman. Cool refers here to a self-reflective and distanced state of emotional detachment that allows, or indeed forces, women to consider their actions as well as their emotions from the point of view of society. The struggle between reason and passion is of course age-old, and is often activated when women seek a “subject position beyond a social order based on masculine domination” (see Carin Franzén's chapter in this volume). Furthermore, rationalising the erotic is an answer to ongoing legislative debates in the Nordic countries, and the combination of emotion and reason, or desire and coolness, negotiates women's role in a changing society. Is it possible to combine erotic reason with female desire? How is the Nordic woman constructed as

¹ See, for instance, Angeliqve Richardson and Chris Willis, ed., *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997); Kristina Fjelkestam, *Ungkarlsfläckor, kamrathustrur och manhaftiga lesbianer: Modernitetens litterära gestalter i mellankrigstidens Sverige* (Stockholm and Stehag: Symposion, 2002).

² Frederick Hale, “Time for Sex in Sweden: Enhancing the Myth of the ‘Swedish Sin’ during the 1950s,” *Scandinavian Studies* 75, no. 3 (2003): 351. Hale argues that Swedish Sin became part of the U.S. image of Sweden in the 1950s, but that there had been a historical interest in Scandinavian sexuality dating back to the Vikings.

one who is independent of men and rational in life choices, yet sexually free and active, even frivolous? Does she display erotic reason?

In feminist literary history the perspective of literature as an expression of, and an active contributor to, social change is well established. The most comprehensive analysis of Nordic women's literary history is *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* (1993–98, Nordic women's literary history), which strongly advocates a Nordic Model in women's literature.³ Our chapter is, furthermore, related to a research field concerned with the junction between law and literature, which generally emphasises one of two perspectives. Firstly, law-*in*-literature suggests that literature is a source from which legal scholars and practitioners can draw valuable and varied insights into human lives, thus making them better equipped for their professions. Secondly, law-*as*-literature focuses on rhetoric, narrative and interpretive aspects of legal texts.⁴ Our study, however, understands literature as *challenging* law. We approach literature as a source in which female authors, through their literature, comment on and interfere with legislative processes, and thus adopt a more direct and decisive approach to the relationship between literature and law.

It is in this tradition of Critical Legal Studies that Jotuni's and Wägner's questioning of the patriarchal implications of legislation should be understood, although they convey criticism through literature rather than political or scholarly discourse in the service of radical social change.⁵ As authors they did not take issue with legal texts as such, but rather used their chosen medium and genre to highlight prevailing injustices both before legal change of women's status in the 1920s, and after. As Judith Resnik and Carolyn Heilbrun argue in an early article in feminist legal studies, the conjunction of literature and law has the power "of generating narratives that illuminate, create, and reflect normative worlds, that bring experiences that might otherwise be invisible and silent into public view."⁶ Jotuni and Wägner thus contribute to the public discourse

³ Elisabeth Møller Jensen, "Historien om kvinnornas litteratur," in *I Guds namn*, vol. 1 of *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria*; ed. Elisabeth Møller Jensen (Höganäs: Viken, 1993), 11. Published in five volumes between 1993 and 1998, it highlights a special Nordic community and identity that extends to women's literature: "The characteristics that isolated one female writer in her country are often found among female writers in other Nordic countries." It is also argued that women writers in different countries had more in common with their female colleagues than with their male compatriots. See also Päivi Lappalainen and Lea Rojola, eds., *Women's Voices: Female Authors and Feminist Criticism in the Finnish Literary Tradition* (Helsinki: Studia Fennica Litteraria, 2007); Irma Sulkunen, "The Mobilization of Women and the Birth of Civil Society," in *The Lady with the Bow: The Story of Finnish Women*, eds. Merja Manninen and Päivi Setälä (Helsinki: Otava, 1990), 42–53. The Nordic Model is most often used to describe the similarities in the political, social and religious structure of society.

⁴ Cristine Sarrimo, "Professorn och kärleken: Sexuella trakasserier i fiktion och verklighet," *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* 27, no. 4 (2006): 29–51; Bjarne Markussen, "Rett og litteratur: En introduksjon og et bidrag," *Edda*, no. 3 (2005): 226–44.

⁵ Per-Anders Forstorp, "Det juridiska fältet: Critical Legal Studies, Foucault och Bourdieu," *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 33, no. 3 (2003): 16, 19.

⁶ Judith Resnik and Carolyn Heilbrun, "Convergences: Law, Literature, and Feminism," *Yale Law School Faculty Scholarship Series*, paper 909 (1990): 1914.

alongside feminist and women lawyers and politicians, doing perhaps what feminist literature does best—fleshing out the consequences of legal change in its social and historical context.

Two authors, different literary trajectories

Maria Jotuni and Elin Wägner are two very different authors, here brought together because of their diverse contributions. Firstly, they problematise the institution of marriage in relation to reason and the erotic. Secondly, they address issues of class differences between women, and thirdly, both use class and gender to highlight the problematic tension between women's true emancipation, legal change and social convention.

Elin Wägner was an esteemed author and journalist in her lifetime, and her feminism is evident in her oeuvre. She received high literary recognition, for example in being elected into the Swedish Academy, where she promoted Gabriela Mistral for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1945. In the early twentieth century, Wägner's novels and articles often addressed the precarious working life of women in secretarial jobs where male managers were free to harass women who were under the threat of being fired, which both strengthened female collectivism and was a possible wedge in such solidarity. As a journalist she covered the occupation of German territory after the First World War, and as a feminist activist she participated in starting feminist education for citizenship and a women's journal. Later she spearheaded the pacifist movement, all the time continuing to write fiction about women's lives.

The style of Elin Wägner's literary works varies, but there are a few recurring themes. One is the female protagonist, another is the testing of boundaries for female agency in places like city work, vicarages or rural settings, in their roles as wives, daughters, sisters, employees. Although widely read in her time, since the late 1970s Wägner has primarily been regarded as a feminist author and her combination of activism and literary production has been studied in several scholarly works.⁷

Maria Jotuni (née Haggrén, married Tarkiainen) was contemporary with many prominent Finnish female authors such as Aino Kallas, L. Onerva and Edith Södergran.⁸ Jotuni started off as a writer of short stories and later moved on to prose and drama. Her choice of topics was at

⁷ Ulla Isaksson and Erik-Hjalmar Linder, *Elin Wägner, Amazon med två bröst and Dotter av Moder Jord* (Stockholm: Bonnier 1977 & 1980) is the most comprehensive biographical work on Wägner; for a more analytical approach see e.g. Helena Forsås-Scott, *Re-writing the Script: Gender and Community in Elin Wägner* (London: Norvik Press, 2009); Birgitta Wistrand, *Elin Wägner i 1920-talet: Rörelseintellektuell och internationalist* (Ph.D. diss., Uppsala Universitet, 2006); Katarina Leppänen, *Elin Wägner's Alarm Clock: Ecofeminism in the Interwar Era* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

⁸ See further Leena Kurvet-Käösaar and Lea Rojola, *Aino Kallas: Negotiations with Modernity* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2011); Kukku Melkas, *History, Desire and Knowledge in the Work of Aino Kallas*. (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2006); Viola Parente-Čapková, "Free Love, Mystical Union or Prostitution? The Dissonant Love Stories of L. Onerva," in *Changing Scenes: Encounters between European and Finnish Fin de Siècle*, ed. Pirjo Lyytikäinen (Helsinki: SKS, 2003): 54–84; Agneta Rahikainen, *Kampen om Edith. Biografi och myt om Edith Södergran* (Helsinki: Schildts & Söderströms, 2014).

times seen as controversial, and one of her plays even caused parliamentary debate about decadent morals in the 1920s. Her debut collection of short stories *Subteita* (1905, Relations) was published the same year as Finnish women gained suffrage—the first in Europe to do so. She is considered as one of the first feminist thinkers and authors of her time, together with Ellen Key and Aleksandra Kollontai.⁹ Her main novel *Huojuva talo* (The tottering house)¹⁰ has gradually gained the position of a classic, and was turned into a famous TV series in the 1990s by Eija-Elina Bergholm and has been adapted into numerous theatre plays (the most recent in spring 2018), analysing the anatomy of violence and elements of social and gendered power relationships.¹¹

In her writing Jotuni chooses to describe ordinary or everyday life, and we are offered glimpses of women's toil in varied social classes, in the countryside as well as in the city. These women would like to take control of their own lives, but they encounter obstacles mainly pertaining to the traditional institution of marriage. The complex relations between women and men are under critical analysis through the whole of Jotuni's oeuvre.

The deviant widow and citizen

Elin Wägner's *Natten till söndag* (1926, The night before Sunday) is a story about one woman's struggle for self-determination. The protagonist Anna Magni is a well-to-do widow, a trained nurse, who has recently buried her husband. The novel starts in Stockholm as Anna settles into a furnished, sub-let room. The reader is held in suspense about the reason for the move, why Anna seems short of money, and why she avoids meeting friends. Instead she strolls around the city, talks to people who live on boats, and strikes up a friendship with the cleaning lady and her daughter. Anna's contact with people of different social classes highlights the liminal existence she finds herself in as a wealthy destitute. As a widow, all economic responsibility rests on her for the first time, yet her surroundings make it impossible for her to assume the new responsibilities that, until the new law on marriage in 1921, had been a male domain. The book was published five years after the new Marriage Act was passed in Sweden.

Anna's self-chosen exile turns out to be an escape from small-town gossip. She is under the temporary guardianship of the mayor, who now controls her expenditures. Anna's daughter and son-in-law question her right to manage property and finances, with explicit references to Anna

⁹ See Pirjo Lyytikäinen in <http://www.helsinki.fi/sukupuolentutkimus/klassikkogalleria/jotuni/>.

¹⁰ Jotuni wrote the novel between 1929 and 1933 and submitted the manuscript to a novel competition arranged by a famous publishing house, Otava, in 1935. The authoritative (male) panel considered the manuscript too daring and Jotuni withdrew from the competition; the novel was published posthumously in 1963.

¹¹ Kukku Melkas, "Huojuva aika: 1930-luku," in *Maamme romaani: Esseitä kirjallisuuden vuosikymmenistä*, ed. Jussi Ojajarvi and Nina Työlähti (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän Yliopisto 2017). <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/56198>.

having a relationship with the town's doctor "at the age of over forty-eight".¹² Thus, the combination of gender, money, sex and age speaks against Anna. The younger generation are both appalled by her misbehaviour and afraid of losing out on their coming inheritance. Anna decides to fight her family and contacts a young feminist lawyer who writes a legal retort.

The tone of the novel is light, the style is quick and witty, yet the question of an adult woman risking her self-determination based on rumours, misunderstandings and accusations of sexual licentiousness is, of course, a serious issue. Anna finds it absurd to have to *reclaim* her rights, that her status as an adult citizen can be revoked on the basis of actions that any man could perform without being questioned: Do men not spend money haphazardly? And liaise with younger women? And all this without losing their credibility as adult citizens.

The terms normal and abnormal are sprinkled throughout the book. It is by pointing out Anna's abnormality that accepted female behaviour is defined. References to abnormality clearly suggest that unmarried women must take a distanced attitude to eroticism, while Anna wants to combine the erotic with a cool and sensible rationality. Anna Magni, as the first-person narrator, has reason to reflect on her precarious position: she is, and acts, "abnormal", "against the order of nature", and she must act according to what "they consider normal for a woman".¹³ She has failed, and must be cared for by compassionate men, the mayor explains: Men do not view "a woman getting involved in a relationship that does not suit her age or position, to be a normal woman and they want to take care of her for her own good".¹⁴ Again, sex, age and money (e.g. position) interplay in the disqualification of her reason.

The only happily married couple in Wägner's literary production during the 1920s can be found in *Natten till söndag*.¹⁵ Mrs Musselman is politically active in the peace movement, and the Musselmans, clearly a marriage of equals, are the only ones who stand by Anna. The impossibility of combining reason and desire is further strengthened when Anna's male companion, whom she would like for a lover, suggests that "only after we have rooted out eroticism from our lives, will we be free and happy people".¹⁶ He abandons their romantic companionship, which was evidently part of their business partnership in opening a mineral-water well that he would

¹² Ö"ver fyrtyoåtta år". Elin Wägner, *Natten till söndag* (Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1926), 72. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations into English are ours (K.L. and K.M.).

¹³ "abnormalt", "abnorm", "mot naturens ordning", "vad de anser normalt hos en kvinna". Wägner, *Natten till söndag*, 61–62, 70–71, passim.

¹⁴ "inlåter sig i förhållanden, som inte passar hennes år och hennes ställning, anser vi icke vara en normal kvinna och henne vill vi ta hand om för hennes eget bästa". Wägner, *Natten mot söndag*, 64.

¹⁵ Wistrand, *Elin Wägner i 1920-talet*, 197.

¹⁶ "först när vi har rotat ut erotiken ur våra liv, skulle vi bli fria och lyckliga människor". Wägner, *Natten mot söndag*, 104.

manage as a doctor and in which she would invest, as the spring was on her land. The real problem, however, turns out to be that the good doctor is afraid of her passions. If her partner is clearly scared of her passions, the concern of her daughter and son-in-law is primarily financial. Yet sexuality and age are implicated, as her son-in-law “scorned me [Anna] for my middle-aged eroticism”, while really worrying about their house and inheritance.¹⁷

It is the lack of proper erotic reason that is used against Anna. Paradoxically, this causes her to start reasoning about the connections between gender, sex, money and age, thus making her consider her options more coolly. At some distance, she can observe how her actions are interpreted—by her daughter, by old friends, townspeople and the legal system: “They measure the morality of your actions here,” the lawyer says.¹⁸ What is at stake is Anna’s human value, a concept she initially finds difficult to relate to. Her lawyer reminds her, again and again, of her “most valued property, the right to govern over” oneself.¹⁹ The need to legitimise her actions fundamentally questions her self-identity: “Who am I really? The woman in my enemy’s document or the woman in my defence counsel’s document?”²⁰ Her emotional life, as well as her financial decisions, have to be rationalised in order for her to be considered a trustworthy citizen. By withholding money, her emotions and actions can be totally controlled.

The character Anna Magni shows no explicit feminist tendencies, holds no programmatic speeches or internal monologues to that effect. On the contrary, she even declares that perhaps women should be more moral since they are less intelligent, thus echoing the widely prevailing understanding of the complementary roles of the sexes.²¹ Yet law is clearly related to Anna Magni’s predicament in *Natten mot söndag*.²² Co-dependence is created between the erotic and the legal in a manner that requires balancing: the rationalising of the erotic becomes the only way of staying on the right side of the law. Anna’s self-understanding as an emotionally cool and

¹⁷ “hånade mig för min medelålders erotik”. Wägner, *Natten mot söndag*, 64, 68.

¹⁸ “Man lägger här en moralisk måttstock på era handlingar.” Wägner, *Natten mot söndag*, 63.

¹⁹ “dyrbaraste egendom, rätten att råda över”. Wägner, *Natten mot söndag*, 108.

²⁰ “Vem är jag egentligen? Kvinnan i fiendernas skrivelse eller kvinnan i försvarsadvokatens?” Wägner, *Natten mot söndag*, 186.

²¹ Wägner, *Natten mot söndag*, 71.

²² The historian Zara Bersbo emphasises the ambivalence in the new Marriage Act in Sweden, as its primary aim was to assure that young, educated, self-sufficient women continued to get married, while previous research has seen the legislation as the culmination of the Nordic legal tradition that gradually extended equal rights to both sexes. Zara Bersbo, “Självständig och oberoende: 1921 års giftermålsbalk och den gifta kvinnans ekonomiska medborgarskap,” in *Det politiska äktenskapet*, eds. Bente Rosenbeck and Hanna Sanders (Göteborg: Makadam 2010).

reserved woman is a result of social control. Only after the acquittal can she live without asking anyone “who I am and what is suitable for me and my age”.²³

The unhappy couple of reason and emotion

The main theme in Maria Jotuni’s work from the early twentieth century until the 1930s concerns the unequal relationships between men and women, and even more interestingly, the inequality between women of different social classes. The protagonists in her short stories—wives, maids, matrons—manage their way through smartness and sometimes devious manipulation.²⁴ The quotidian in Jotuni’s fiction serves as the setting and symbol for female resistance against the patriarchal order and is connected to questions of money and property. As long as women cannot earn and keep a proper income and are instead kept dependent on their husbands, they are not their own masters. Jotuni’s protagonists yearn for emotional fulfilment but it comes at a social and economic cost that they cannot afford, thus forcing them to rationalise their desires and needs.

The new matrimonial law in 1929 in Finland ended the guardianship of women in marriage and gave them the right to own money and property. In Jotuni’s major novel, *Huojuva talo*, she describes an infernal marriage, mirroring the situation where legislation had changed, yet social convention and ideologies still required women to take a subordinate role in the household and in marriage. Nuclear family ideology was paradoxically strengthened by the 1929 matrimonial legislation, and gendered division of social agency and labour was constantly renewed along the lines of a domestic ideology in public discourses. The metonymical chain between women, home and the nation represented a strong symbol in Finnish literature and political rhetoric until at least the 1940s.²⁵ Woman embodied the nation, emphasising security, permanence and a sense of duty. Women were predominantly seen as maintainers and reproducers of the traditional order, as mothers.

In *Huojuva talo*, the wife Lea is abused physically and mentally by her intelligent and respected—albeit psychopathic—husband Eero, while keeping up a bourgeois façade. The unequal relationship between a woman and a man is taken to its most extreme form in this novel, which can be read as an allegory of the contemporary political development towards

²³ Wägner, *Natten mot söndag*, 222.

²⁴ Lea Rojola, “Konstit on monet kun kahvihammasta kolottaa,” in *Täysi kattaus: Ruokaa ja juomaa kirjallisuudessa*, eds. Siru Kainulainen and Viola Parente-Capková (Turku: Turun yliopisto, 2006): 269–96. See also Riikka Rossi, “The Everyday in Nordic Modernism: Knut Hamsun’s *Sult* and Maria Jotuni’s *Arkielämää*,” in *Scandinavian Studies: The Journal of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies* 82, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 417–38.

²⁵ See, for example, Johanna Valenius, *Undressing the Maid: Gender, Sexuality and the Body in the Construction of the Finnish Nation* (Helsinki: Finnish Literary Society, 2004).

totalitarianism in Europe in the 1930s.²⁶ The husband Eero is a manipulative tyrant and represents destructive power and authority, while Lea's strengths and vulnerabilities are constituted by "the everyday" aspect of her life—taking care of the household and children.

Jotuni highlights the strained circumstances of a married middle-class woman, as well as the complex relationships between the lady of the house and the maid, the very ideal on which the bourgeois home and family were built. The servants become almost a part of the family through their attachment to the children in their care and their commitment to the family. Yet they remain outsiders in many respects and are dependent on their employers. The question of double moral standards and moral norms, the abuse of maids, and the problematic connection established between the lower classes and precarious sexuality are among the central issues that *Huojuva talo* raises.²⁷ Jotuni thus shows how sexuality is always a social and political question.

Although there are discrepancies between women from different class strata, Jotuni also focuses on their mutual commitments, which creates solidarity among women trying to cope with the everyday under the master's rule. Moreover, it is significant that the maids and the servant-girls are granted a voice in Jotuni's work in a way unforeseen in Finnish literature, they speak for themselves and have a will of their own.

One of the maids in *Huojuva talo*, Siiri, is eventually the one who indirectly and unwittingly saves Lea from her violent marriage. Siiri is the mouthpiece of the novel, in which she bluntly puts into words what kind of a man Eero really is. In one of the closing scenes of the novel where Siiri and Eero are quarrelling over an alimony because she has become pregnant, Siiri shouts defiantly at him: "Wasn't I a decent maid, what! And what am I now? Answer me. Don't think that you can treat everybody as you wish. Nobody is safe in your home."²⁸ When Eero defends himself by referring to his responsibility as defined by law, the fact that he is only responsible for children born in his marriage with Lea, Siiri snaps at him: "According to law. You and your rules. Who told you to start another family? You wouldn't be the first man in the market square shouting 'justice, justice'."²⁹

In Siiri's words we can hear an outcry for the defence of all the other maids as nobody is safe in his house, but also a defence of Lea in pointing out Eero's double standard of morality. In this way the words reveal the structure of a society that is built on silently accepted double

²⁶ Kukku Melkas, "Huojuva aika: 1930-luku" *tiivistelmä*, (2017)8 and Riikka Rossi, "The Everyday in Nordic Modernism i ä" (2010): 417–38.

²⁷ See, for instance, Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997).

²⁸ "Enkö ollut kunniallinen palvelustyttö, mitä! Ja mikä olen nyt? Vastaapas! Älä luule, että sinä jokaiselle saat tehdä mitä tahdot. Eihän teillä säily kukaan." Maria Jotuni, *Huojuva talo*, 527.

²⁹ "Lain mukaan. Onhan teillä lakipykälänne. Kuka käski sinun laittaa toista perhettä? Etkö liene ensimmäinen mies huutamassa joka torilla kaula pitkällä 'oikeutta, oikeutta'." Jotuni, *Huojuva talo*, 528.

standards. When Eero tries to hit Siiri, she refuses the role of a passive victim and instead prevents the violence by stopping him aggressively. As he is unable to find the means to quench Siiri's obstinacy, Eero finally shoots both her and himself.

We have analysed Siiri as the heroine of the novel with her characteristic stubbornness and outspokenness. She cannot act on desire, but instead has to defend herself by remaining utterly rational and cool in the complex situation in which her respectability is questioned. In her character we see how the law does not protect or apply in the same way to all citizens—poor, unmarried women remain on the lowest step of the social ladder, and their cries for help are not heard. By introducing discordant notes into the ideals of the bourgeois family, Siiri also underlines class differences among women.

In Scandinavia, the turn-of-the-century concept of social motherhood, understood as emancipatory, was transformed after the First World War into a model of nuclear family motherhood with strict norms and guidelines as to women's choices.³⁰ This new model served to regulate and restrict the social space allotted to women. Jotuni shows her readers how middle-class women are trapped into marriage and remain under their husbands' rule if they do not acquire a proper profession and personal property. Lea survives thanks to her persistence, and ultimately only because her husband dies. In the end she reopens her late father's shop and is finally on her own and financially independent. Siiri, instead, has no chances because there is no law to protect unmarried mothers and children outside marriage. The likes of Siiri are eroticised, and they themselves have to rationalise their erotic desires without getting emotionally involved. *Huojuvu talo* serves to highlight these issues through Siiri's voice and reminds the reader of the fact that although domestic workers attained suffrage in Finland in 1905 on a par with middle-class women, the legislation still left many women outside legal equality or protection, especially if they acted out their sexual desires. Jotuni's novel exhibits the law as legitimising male erotic unreason (acting out their desires without thinking of the consequences) under the mask of rationality—which leaves it up to the women to rationalise both the men's and their own desires.

Conclusion

In contrast to legal texts, literature allows for meta-reflection and the twisting and turning of several possible outcomes of legal change. Maria Jotuni and Elin Wägner problematise the institution of marriage in relation to reason and the erotic in their works, which were

³⁰ See, for instance, Claudia Lindén, *Om kärlek: Litteratur, sexualitet och politik hos Ellen Key* (Eslöv: Symposion, 2002).

simultaneously strongly feminist, to use a modern term, and widely read.³¹ The challenge of the legal discourse, as we have analysed it here, was probably more visible and important to some readers than others. In quite a similar manner, but in different contexts, they probe into the failure of legal change as a means of creating equality and thus uncovering remaining injustices. The fact that class differences between women play an important role further highlights the near impossibility of attaining women's true emancipation through law as long as traditional social conventions prevail. Reactions from society and family to Anna's, Lea's and Siiri's life-choices, which are all within the limits of the new law, in fact reveal the dominant ideology of the law, in Critical Legal Studies terminology, which on a surface level propagates equality while ideologically supporting patriarchy. Through their personal struggles against a social order that restricts their capacity for acting independently, they emphasise issues that were occupying many fictional New Nordic Women, although they are far from the wilder figures of the flapper or young hard-working city women.

The women in Jotuni's and Wägner's texts hold ambivalent and liminal positions in society because of their gender, age, and position. On the one hand, an extremely rational and cool attitude is a prerequisite for attaining decency, respectability and individual freedom in a society that would rather define women as emotional and self-sacrificing. Sexuality, on the other hand, is exclusively imputed to women of lower social standing, and in the case of the middle-classes, to younger women as wives and future mothers. Thus, it seems nearly impossible to embody respectability and sexuality simultaneously, and erotic reason becomes something of an oxymoron in a society built on double moral standards.

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³¹ Wistrand, *Elin Wägner i 1920-talet*, 159–225. Wägner's work was discussed in reviews, in literary debates, by other literary authors and by scholars. Irmeli Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet. Maria Jotunin elämä ja kirjailijantyö*. (Helsinki: Otava, 2001). In Jotuni's biography, her work and debates around it in her own time is illuminated through reviews and through literary or theatre debates.

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