

Laila Akslen:

*Femfaldig festbarokk. Norske perikopedikt til kyrkjelege høgtider*

[Fivefold Festive Baroque. Norwegian Pericope Poems for Church Festivals]

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The title of Laila Akslen's comprehensive study, *Femfaldig festbarokk. Norske perikopedikt til kyrkjelege høgtider* ('Fivefold Festive Baroque. Norwegian Pericope Poems for Church Festivals') on Norwegian poetry from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, may at first seem cryptic. 'Fivefold', however, indicates that the primary sources under investigation in the book were written by five Norwegian poets: Petter Dass (1647-1707, a clergyman), Peder Matthiisøn Offvid (?-?, a farmer and tax collector), Dorothe Engelbretsdatter (1647-1716, daughter as well as wife to clergymen), Samuel Olsen Bruun (1660?-1694, a clergyman), and Ingeborg Grytten (1668-?, a clergyman's daughter, whom we know suffered from leprosy). 'Baroque' refers to the literary period, and 'Festive' to the fact that the poems studied are hymns or songs intended for church festivals such as Christmas, New Year, Passion, Easter, Ascension Day, and Whitsuntide. The texts are labelled 'Pericope Poems', since they are all closely related to the Pericopes, i.e., the Gospel texts and Epistles on which the festival-day sermons were focused.

In the introduction, Laila Akslen notes that her way of studying these works differs from what she calls 'the Norwegian tradition'. Researchers in this tradition, she claims, have hitherto used the very same method when studying literary works from both before and after the Romantic period – with the result that Baroque poems have been evaluated according to Romantic standards such as originality, national spirit, and the like. Akslen instead joins particularly German and Swedish historians of classical rhetoric in stressing that the only adequate way of studying this kind of poetry is to see it as a species of practical rhetoric. Akslen's insistence on this point might seem a bit strange, even *post festum*. Taking a rhetorical approach to seventeenth-century literature was indeed a provocative notion to literary historians in Sweden in the early 1970's, when I myself wrote a doctoral thesis of that kind. But it is hard to believe that it would still seem unorthodox in today's Norway. (A fact indicating that I may be wrong and Akslen right, however, is that her book apparently has not attracted the attention of either a commercial publishing house or an academic series: Akslen has published and is marketing the book herself.<sup>1</sup>)

In any event, Akslen's approach to her subject proves to be both effective and fruitful. She studies the five poets' pericope songs with two distinct sets of background material in mind. First, she examines them against the background of traditional patterns – with regard to both content and form – found in the parts of the Gospels and Epistles that were used as pericopes. Second, she examines the poems against the background of both biblical and classical rhetoric in general. The focus of the investigation is twofold, mirroring the rhetorical processes of *inventio* and *elocutio*. Thus, in the first part of the book, Akslen explores the motifs and themes

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<sup>1</sup> Those wishing to purchase a copy of the book are requested to write to her home address: Laila Akslen, Oskar Braatensveg 2 A, N-1412 Sofiemyr, Norway.

that recur in the poems, whereas in the second part, she deals with their stylistic features. Other issues discussed include the way the poems relate to the Christian faith and to the period's conception of *decorum*, as well as the modes of persuasion used in them. Akslen also asks whether it is possible to see any kind of historical relationship between the poets, and whether there are any differences between the ways that the male and the female poets wrote.

The introduction (pp. 1-34) presents and discusses – as it should – the topic and the source material; the methodology; the book's organization; and the selection of the material. Akslen's ambition is to study all of the pericope songs that were composed by the five poets in connection with the Church festivals mentioned above. According to Akslen, there is a very large number of printed sermons that she could have used in order to compare the songs with sermons on the same pericope. She decided, however, to use only two collections of sermons, each well known and widely disseminated: (1) Johann Arndt, *Postille. Das ist Geist-reiche Erklärung der Evangelischen Texte durchs gantze Jahr* (Frankfurt 1713), and (2) Jesper Brochmand, *Sabbati Sanctificatio. Gudelig Betenckning oc kort Forklaring offuer alle Evangelier oc Epistler* (Copenhagen 1636 and 1638).

The introduction is followed by a chapter of background material (pp. 35-79), offering a survey of the kinds of texts that use the Bible as their main source of material, for example, devotional literature, sermons, pericope poems, and pericope prayers. Akslen thereafter describes the four ways in which the source material was most often used in these types of texts: in the form of paraphrases; in meditations; for educational purposes; and as a means of exemplification. This is illustrated through an overview of the typical uses of the biblical source material in the pericope poems.

The chapters that follow (pp. 80-223) deal with the motifs and themes, the 'things' (*res*), recurring in the songs. After a short introduction to the idea of rhetorical invention according to general and specific *topoi* or *loci*, some of them illustrated by examples from Arndt's collection of sermons, there follows a series of analyses of specific texts, discussing the biblical allusions in the pericope poems. Akslen here proceeds from festival to festival and from poet to poet, analysing one or two and sometimes three songs by each of the five poets. She also compares the contents of the poems with each other and with the sermons of Arndt and Brochmand. This section on *inventio* concludes with a summary and a discussion of how the poems represent central features of the faith like God, Christ, Man, Evil, the Sacraments, and the destiny of mankind.

In the second part of her book (pp. 224-355), Akslen first introduces three theorists who are important for her study of the *verba*, the 'words' of the poems – Debora Shuger, Hans-Henrik Krummacher, and Joachim Dyck – and their different approaches to the *elocutio* of Christian texts. The main focus here is on the three persuasive modes of classical rhetoric, *docere*, *delectare*, and *movere*. There follows a series of textual analyses, organised – like those found in the book's first part – according to the festival in question, and including from one to three songs of each poet for each festival. The poems analysed are not, however, the same as those dealt with in the previous chapters. Akslen does not comment on why she has chosen different songs this time – perhaps she wants to avoid *taedium*, or perhaps she wants to present more of her material to the reader. In the textual analyses, Akslen discusses the choice of words, the metaphors, and the level of style in the poems, along with the disposition of the texts and the persuasive mode employed in each poem. The analyses also involve comparisons among the poems as well as between the poems and the sermons of Arndt and Brochmand.

Following the textual analyses is a section on 'Docere, delectare, or movere?' (pp. 355-61). Here Akslen argues that the songs make use of all three persuasive modes, but especially *delectare* and *docere*; the stylistic levels preferred by the poets are, accordingly, the medium and the low style. The styles employed by the five poets are then compared to each other.

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The last chapter sums up the results of the investigation. Akslen observes that the poets apparently did not imitate either each other or the sermons of Arndt and Brochmand. The fact that songs composed for a specific festival are similar is not due to the influence of one poet on another; rather it depends on a common tradition in European literature that conditioned which 'things' were to be brought up in this kind of poem and which 'words' were to be used in composing them. The governing principle is *decorum*, Akslen maintains, and this is at work both when the poems are alike and when they differ from each other. The poets wrote in a common tradition, but were free to make choices within it. *Decorum* thus conditions the relation between the poet's intention, the organisation of the poem, and the persuasive mode employed by the poet in his or her poem. The differences between the poems for a particular festival should therefore not be explained by referring to the poet's person, or the poet's gender. In fact, Akslen has found in her material no differences between the writings of male and female poets. The only general differentiation in the material, according to Akslen, is that between 'more or less good poets' – that is, poets more or less skilled at coping with the tradition that conditions all these poems.

Laila Akslen's book is an important and most welcome contribution to the history of early Norwegian literature, opening many new perspectives on the subject. It is also a valuable contribution to the history of rhetoric in the Scandinavian countries. Unfortunately, the book contains no indices; however, its clear organization helps the reader to manage without them. The book is written in New Norwegian. Readers who do not master that tongue will find a short presentation in German of the book's findings in J. Glaser and B. Sabel (eds.), *Skandinavische Literatur in der frühen Neuzeit*, Beiträge zur Nordischen Philologie 32, (Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2002), pp. 75-96.

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