

## **"Liberating Ideas – Marriage, Morality, and Nordic Women Writers at 1915"**

Chair: Mads Bunch (University of Copenhagen)

The keynote address takes the centennial of women's suffrage in Denmark in 1915 as the point of departure and connects it to the changing views on marriage and sexuality morality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in particular to Karen Blixen's experimental essay, "On Modern Marriage and Other Observations."

The lecture opens with a discussion of the Danish women's movement and the role of Karen Blixen's aunt, the feminist and activist, Mary Bess Westenholz, who famously stormed the Danish parliament in 1909. Then the lecture turns to questions of marriage as an evolving institution, and to Nordic literary works of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which reflect social anxieties around marriage and women's new freedoms. Literary texts of this period often depict marital infidelity ('faithless wives') and women in conflict with maternal roles; Sigrid Undset's *Fru Marta Oulie* (1907) presents one such example that is illuminated further by Undset's essays.

The lecture focusses on Karen Blixen's essay "On Modern Marriage and Other Observations," written in 1923/24, in which the author provocatively proclaims that the old marriage institution, "based on family, clan or nation," is dead, an empty shell. Instead, Blixen proposes that "a new kind of marriage" has arisen, a voluntary love relationship between two individuals made possible by advances in birth control and women's emancipation. Blixen's essay demonstrates her standing as a progressive European intellectual engaged in the topical debates of her day and attuned with the complexities of feminist movements in the 1920s. Her essay "On Modern Marriage" seems to anticipate current social debates on same-sex marriage and new reproduction technologies.