

Johan Ludvig Heiberg

(1791-1860)

an introduction by Jon Stewart
2000 Inger Sjöberg Prize Winner

In Denmark in the first half of the 19th century (during the period known as the Golden Age), while thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Hans Christian Andersen were laboring in obscurity, it was Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791 – 1860) who stood at the focal point of Copenhagen’s rich and varied intellectual life. Through his vast range of activities, he came to dominate Golden Age culture for a quarter of a century. He is, perhaps, best known among present-day Danes in the context of the celebrated Royal Theater. He introduced French vaudeville as a genre to the Danish stage, and his own vaudevilles soon became classics in the history of Danish theater. He wrote and translated dramas and held the post of Director at the Royal Theater for many years. In addition to this, he was also a philosopher: He wrote works on aesthetics, logic, philosophy of history, philosophy of nature, and philosophy of language, all generally from the perspective of Hegel’s thought. Moreover, he was one of Denmark’s leading poets during the heyday of Danish poetry. He wrote many kinds of poetry, including lyric and versified dramas. Further, he founded and edited the leading academic journals of the day, such as *Kjøbenhavns flyvende Post* (Copenhagen’s Flying Post), *Intelligensblade* (Intelligence Papers), and *Perseus*. These journals provided the forum for Heiberg to become the leading aesthetic theorist of the day and to form his own school of criticism. The main philosophical and literary debates of the age were carried out in his journals and their rivals.

Heiberg’s home was among the most important literary salons of Golden Age Copenhagen; his father, Peter Andreas Heiberg (1758 – 1841), was an accomplished author in his own right, and his mother, Thomasine Buntzen, known as Fru Gyllembourg (1773 – 1856), became an extremely popular novelist relatively late in life. They saw to it that their son received a traditional humanist education, which was to



Johan Ludvig Heiberg.

(Courtesy of the
Danish Information Service)

prepare him for his later literary endeavors. Evidence of this education can be seen in the fact that, in addition to his native Danish, Heiberg wrote in German, French and Latin. He was among the most cosmopolitan thinkers of the 19th century, traveling throughout Scandinavia, England, France, Prussia and the German states. He made it a part of his academic mission to introduce the latest trends from abroad — be it Scribe's vaudevilles or Hegel's philosophy — to his native Denmark. Moreover, Heiberg's wife, Johanne Luise, *née* Pätges, usually referred

to as Fru Heiberg (1812 – 90) was the leading actress of the day at a time when Copenhagen's Royal Theater was the focus of Danish intellectual life. Some of Heiberg's most famous dramas were written with the lead role intended specifically for her.

Heiberg exercised a profound influence on the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828 – 1906). In 1852 Ibsen, then the director of the Bergen Theater, visited Heiberg during a trip to Copenhagen where he studied the theatrical techniques of the Royal Theater, where Heiberg had been appointed Managing Director in 1849. Ibsen carefully studied Heiberg's dramatic style and works on aesthetics, and after Heiberg's death in 1860, worked together with Heiberg's wife in the production of some of his own pieces. Thus, even after his death, Heiberg continued to exercise a profound influence on theories of aesthetics and drama. All of this makes it regrettable that since his death in 1860 Heiberg has fallen into almost complete obscurity. Today he is hardly known by anyone outside of Scandinavia and inside it only by a few interested in the history of the Danish Theater. ■

Jon Stewart is an Associate Research Professor at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen, which is supported by the Danish National Research Foundation. He is the author of *The Unity of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Systematic Interpretation* (Northwestern University Press, 2000) and the forthcoming volume *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*.

The Inger Sjöberg Prize was established in 1993 by the prominent Swedish scholar, translator and editor, Professor Leif J. Sjöberg (1925 – 2000) in loving memory of his wife, Inger. It is administered by The American-Scandinavian Foundation and awarded in conjunction with its annual Translation Prize competition.