Genre as Fictional Action

On the Use of Rhetorical Genres in Fiction

Af Sune Auken

Abstract

Artiklen er en interdisciplinær studie imellem den litterære og den retoriske genreforskning med udgangspunkt i den retoriske genreforsknings velfortjente dominans. Artiklen foreslår et samarbejde og angiver ét muligt startpunkt for samarbejdet, idet den bruger Carolyn Millers berømte begreb om genre som social handling som redskab til at analysere litterære figurers sociale handlinger gennem genre internt i fiktioner.

Sune Auken, Dr.Habil., Head of PhD School, Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen (auken@hum.ku.dk)

Introduction

The distinction between "fiction" and "non-fiction" is the subject of extensive scholarly debate. This debate is usually carried out within the study of literature, but could be taken into the domain of non-fiction (or: "rhetorical") genres, since structures usually connected to fiction are also active in genres considered to be independent of literature (Nielsen et.al., 2013, Walsh, 2007, see also Cohn, 1999).

Within Genre Studies this borderline problem is critical in the distinction between literary and rhetorical genre research. I use the word "distinction" deliberately. To talk about "dialogue", "debate", or "conflict" would be too strong; there is very little actual contact between the two. Carolyn Miller's "Genre as Social Action" (1984) carved out a new direction for Genre Studies by demonstrating how a rhetorical approach must perceive genres as functional, as a means for "Social Action". Miller is subdued in her call for a rhetorical approach to genre, but later researchers have been bolder, and by now, non-literary Genre Studies are by far dominant within the field.² Literary scholars, however, (barring, notably, Frow, 2005, 2006, and 2007) have mostly ignored the wide-reaching changes in the concept of genre that have taken place outside of Literary Studies. This is noted by Bawarshi (2000), and mirrored in the lack of references to current genre theory in, for instance, Sinding (2002, though better in Sinding, 2011), Dimock (2006), and Lyytikäinen (et.al. eds, 2010). Literary Genre Studies, therefore, seems to be

stuck in a scholarly paradigm from the early eighties. (With Bakhtin, 1986; Derrida, 1980; Fowler, 1982; Genette, 1992; Jauß, 1982; and Todorov,1990; at the center of the canon). This has made Literary Studies all but redundant in general Genre Studies.³

Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) has been a little more attentive towards literary research-though not much, as it mainly concerns itself with other matters. It tends to work from the assumption, contrary to Miller's more cautious approach, that all genres, including the literary ones, need to be seen as rhetorical (Freedman, 1999). This divide is evident in the rather too harsh renderings of Literary Studies in, for instance, Vandenberg (2005) and Bawarshi & Reiff (2010). In practice, however, attempts at stretching RGS into the study of literature have been few and far between (most consistent is Devitt, 2000, and 2004) and these attempts are generally more sociological than strictly literary in character. The relationship between rhetorical and literary genres, therefore, remains under examined, caught between different scholarly fields and between polemical positions.4 In order to remedy this, we need to conduct a series of open-minded and unpolemical interdisciplinary studies. This is one modest attempt at such a study.

Genre as Fictional Action

One subject which offers itself readily to an interdisciplinary approach is the study of how rhetorical genres work within fiction-in this case using Miller's understanding of "Genre as Social Action" not on literary genres as such, but on the rhetorical genres embedded within or forming the patterns of works of fiction. I use the word "fiction" here in a quite vague sense, as it includes any kind of plot-driven, fictional work; one of the central examples given below is from a drama.

Within the framework of fiction we find a plethora of genres used for social actions, all of them contributing to either the story or the characterization of people and milieus pertinent to the story. A theory of genre as social action could be enlightening as a means of analyzing genre as fictional action. Rhetorical genres can manifest on a number of levels within a work of fiction. At the top-most level they can appear in the title or subtitle of a book: *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (Dickens

1837), A Study in Scarlet (Doyle, 1974), Brideshead Revisited, The Sacred & Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder (Waugh, 2000), Wilderness Tips (Atwood, 1998), Lempriere's Dictionary (Norfolk, 1992). Cloud Atlas (Mitchell 2012), etc. On the level of text itself rhetorical genres play even more important roles-sometimes coinciding with the function mentioned in the title of the work: The memories in Brideshead Revisited form the basic structure of the novel. Indeed, a number of first-person novels mimic the memoir in their composition - giving us autobiographical novels. Along the same lines, the letter and diary have their own counterparts in the epistolary novel and the diary novel respectively. As always with genres, there is a lively interchange between the levels, and the different genres combine freely. Thus, for instance, Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (Cleland, 2001) is written in the form of two letters to an unnamed woman addressed only as "Madam". The retrospective narrative position of the memoir, as well as the discursive position of the letter, both contribute to the defense of the lascivious story. The defense is not very convincing, but the allure of the novel, of course, was never the strength of the defense but the lasciviousness of the story.

Below the level of the overall genre-but fundamental to the argument presented here-are the rhetorical genres embedded in fiction. These could be as obvious as a business letter embedded in a novel or as discrete as a conversation over coffee. Most of the genre structures embedded in a story do very little to draw attention to themselves as genre: A fictional work can pass through genres like "conversation", "discussion", "date", "promise", "argument", "interview", "consultation", etc, without any noticeable shift of discourse or discursive position. However, despite their discretion, they are not just prolific, they form one of the fundamental building blocks of fictional narratives.

Obviously, none of the genres embedded in a work of fiction are social actions per se, if for no other reason then because there is no sociality for them to act on in the first place. The people moving between the different genres do not exist, neither do the actions taken through genre, so whatever is accomplished by genre is without effect. Nothing is changed, as the whole thing is invented. However, if we shift the focus to the role of the genres within the framework of fiction, then this changes radically. Here genres

play an important part in driving along the action of the story.

Due to the strong position of narratology, the character of a fictional action is reasonably well known. It is sketched out by Aristotle and repeated and modified in numerous different versions and variations. For my purpose, Aristotle's version is quite adequate:

"We have laid down that tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself as a whole of some magnitude (...). Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else. And which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something else, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle that which is by nature after one thing and has another after it. A well-constructed plot therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described". (Aristotle, 1984, 2321f., 1450b23-34)

The passage is characterized by Aristotle's well known deceptive simplicity. On first reading it appears frightfully obvious and hardly worthy of a great philosopher: First comes the beginning, then the middle, and then the end-pure tautology. On top of this Aristotle's argument has a normative approach usually abandoned today. On closer reading, however, a number of important points become apparent. Firstly, there is a causal or semi-causal relationship between the different parts in the story. Events following upon one another do not automatically form a plot; they have to follow upon one another with necessity or as a usual consequence.

Secondly, they have to form a whole and thus Aristotle's description of the beginning and the end becomes important. There has to be something which sets the plot moving and *that* is the beginning. Analytically this means that we are looking for an initial situation in the plot which must in one way or another contain the prerequisites for the plot about to unfold. Also we are looking for the driving force which sets things moving. In the same way we are, in any plot, looking for the point where the driving force has moved to its final point-we are looking for the ultimate consequence of the necessity inherent in the plot.

Thirdly, they have to have "some magnitude". This again reads like a platitude, but it is not. Just like the concepts of beginning, middle and end have to do with the coherence of the plot, so the magnitude has to do with the overall whole of the plot. The magnitude of present-day stories contain more variation than the magnitude presupposed in Aristotle's concept of tragedy, moving from smaller (various microfictions, see Nelles, 2012), to much larger fictions (up to and including such behemoths as A la recherche du temps perdu (Proust, 1987) and Joseph und seine Brüder (Mann, 1983)) or beyond, to some of the even larger popular fictions. At the present point in time George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire-series (1996-?)-the one popularly called Game of Thrones after the first volume and the TV-seriesseems to be foundering under the very weight of the pages needed to cover an overstretched narrative. But in order to be comprehensible at all the story has to take shape and part of this shape is defined by size and boundaries: magnitude.

The main difference, therefore, between the role played by rhetorical genres outside and inside of fiction is the fictional framework itself. The different rhetorical genres which a narrative moves through, interlock with the multiplicity of other types of events described, into a chain of events which form a meaningful whole, moving with necessity from the beginning of a narrative to its end. There is nothing in everyday life that corresponds to this strong coherence; even extensive genre chains (Swales, 2004, 18-21) do not have this kind of fixed progress of (reasonable) cause and effect. This is, in fact, one of the reasons why many rhetorical genres have such a versatile and temporary character. They need to be "stabilized for now" (Schryer, 1993, 200), but not more than that, in order to encompass both that situations rarely if ever recur completely and that they may contain a certain degree of contingency: The effect of a given action through genre may not be the one desired and thus there has to be room for changed approaches, including ones that modify existing genres or create new ones.

The only real world action performed in a work of fiction is the act of creation carried out by the fiction maker or makers (be that a single author, a collaborative team of film makers 50 or 100 persons strong or anything in between). Thus the coherence in a work of fiction is something created and the close inter-

locking of all the different actions forming the action, (the Greek word employed by Aristotle has the same double meaning of the word "action" that we find in English as either something someone does orat a higher level-as a complete and organized series of events) is the result of planning on a level unachievable in everyday life-because there is only one entity creating the entire complex of fictional actions.

However, when we shift the perspective back again and ask about the role played by the rhetorical genres within fiction, a different situation emerges. Here the genres are indeed frames for social actions carried out by the characters of the story. They are actions through which one character in the story tries to achieve certain social ends, and a rhetorical interpretation inspired by Miller has much more to say about the working of genre within fiction than has been recognized-and is definitely richer and more fruitful than attempts at analyzing the genres of fiction through their real life social function. Aristotle's claim that tragedy "is an imitation of an action" has been and can be made the subject of extensive controversy. But regardless of whether imitation is to make an action mirror real life or simply to make it look real, the genres brought into the story will, one way or the other, be recognizable from the culture surrounding the work, and knowledge of the genres of a given culture may be a prerequisite for understanding its narratives. So the kinds of action performed through genre in fiction will mimic the actions performed through genre elsewhere. Thus the kind of rhetorical interpretation used to analyze social actions through genre can also be used within fiction: What exigence is this character trying to answer through this genre? What is the rhetorical situation and the constraints of the situation, and how does the genre function in relation to them?⁷ Also: How does the individual character shape the genre to his or her individual expressive or social needs? How does the character's personality shape the genre, and, inversely, how does the choice and handling of genres characterize the character's personality? These analytical questions-and many more related to RGSare as pertinent for studies moving within a fictive world as outside of it

A famous-though infernally complicated-example could be Mark Anthony's speech by Caesar's dead body in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Mark Anthony has to handle a situation of extreme exigency: the

need to turn the crowd against the popular Brutus; and the constraints he faces, are perilous at best: The crowd's excitement for the much-beloved Brutus, its aggression towards the newly murdered Caesar, the need to defeat Brutus' own eloquent speech setting forth the motives for the assassination, and the volatile and unreliable character of the crowd itself including its willingness to harm whoever speaks ill of Brutus. Mark Anthony's only tool to turn this situation around is the genre of the speech. If ever a successful social action were needed, this would be it.

Whereas Brutus' speech was aloof, aristocratic and formally well-ordered, clearly stating its purpose and calling for the support of the public, Mark Anthony chooses a wholly different approach. Fully aware of the fickle nature of public opinion and his initial need to keep his agenda hidden, Mark Anthony understands the individual rhetorical situation far better than Brutus does. And so his communication remains covert; his true purpose only becoming manifest in hints, innuendo and presuppositions until he has the crowd in his grasp. Take, for instance, this passage from the early part of the speech where Mark Anthony's true purpose has not yet become transparent.

The noble Brutus Hath told you Caesar was ambitious: If it were so, it was a grievous fault, and grievously hath Caesar answered it. (257)

The devil, or rather the persuasio, is in the detail: Mark Anthony works by implication. The description rests on a parallelism as well as a contrast. There is a parallelism between the seriousness of the transgression and the severity of the punishment-both are described as "grievous"-but there is a contrast between the degree of reality of the two. The fault, ambition, is expressed as a conjecture by Brutus, neither confirmed nor denied by Mark Anthony, however, the punishment for the fault is very real. Without contradicting Brutus the remark establishes the possibility that Caesar might have had to answer for a fault he did not have, and thus without speaking ill of Brutus just yet, Mark Anthony undercuts the central argument of his opponent's speech-paving the way for the overt attacks which follow later.

Both speakers are trying to act through their speeches, both are successful, but Mark Anthony's success

devastates Brutus'. The difference between the two speeches as social actions within the fiction springs from the way each speaker forms the genre. Brutus, rhetorically keeping to the high ground, relies on his ethos and his well-formed argument to make his point for him. Mark Anthony faces an even sterner exigence but operates from a much clearer perception of the genre. He understands its constraints, its inherent possibilities and its possible effects on the public, and his speech matches this insight. In this way he succeeds in turning the perspective of the listeners by a full 180 degrees.

Within the diegesis therefore, both characters are trying to act through genres which for them are non-literary, socio-rhetorical devices. The difference between them is that Mark Anthony is a much better genre user.

The strength of rhetorical genres within fiction bears witness to the permeability of the borders between fiction and non-fiction. Even fictions that are not based on real-life occurrences are completely dependent upon our understanding of real non-fictious rhetorical genres. The texts can and will presuppose that their readers are able to recognize a whole network of genres (Swales, 2004, 21-25) and how they function in any given society-even an invented one. In most cases, in fact, this is not a big deal. Tacit, shared knowledge of standard genres like the letter, the consultation, the order, the speech or for that matter the challenge or the insult, is taken for granted in most fictions. So as readers we comprehend the social interaction of the characters through superimposing our understanding of rhetorical genres from our lived experience and into the realm of the fictitious. The generic competence is the same.

There is nothing surprising about the relevance of rhetorical genre analysis as a tool for the interpretation of fiction. In fact, genres probably have a clearer functional perspective within fiction than outside of it. Due to the close interlocking of the different events forming the action of a work of fiction there is little or no room for events that do not contribute to the action or at least actively characterize one or more central characters (Auken, 2011, 126f.). In rhetorical genres only the tightest genre chains work like this-and only for very clearly defined purposes.

Literature as Fictional Action

Interestingly, even literary genres acquire a very specific rhetorical function within the framework of a narrative. If a character recites a poem it will be to express feelings, to inspire courage into an army, to woo a member of the opposite (or the same) sex or to achieve some other end. Witness, for instance, Thomas Mann's aforementioned novel, in which a poem is used by the brothers to inform the venerable Jacob that his beloved son Joseph, long thought dead, is still alive. The point of the unorthodox choice of genre for the message is to soften the shock which might otherwise kill the weakened old man. Within the diegesis the poem is the genre which meets the exigence of the specific rhetorical situation.

Just how central a role the rhetorical use of literary genres within fiction can have, is demonstrated in Margaret Atwood's The Blind Assassin. Using artistic genres as social actions within fiction is not uncommon for Atwood. The protagonist of *Lady* Oracle makes a living writing popular fiction in the vein of Barbara Cartland, and the semi-autobiographical protagonist of Cat's Eye is a painter and takes out her hatred against her childhood tormentors through her painting. However, the use of fiction in *The Blind Assassin* is far more complex than that. Aside from all the usual embedded genres one would expect to find in a novel, The Blind Assassin contains a double-layered fictive structure. Spread throughout Atwood's novel is the complete text of another novel, also titled The Blind Assassin, which tells the love story of an anonymous couple, referred to only as "she" and "he". This novel-within-the-novel (from now on: NWN) is penetrated by storytelling too, as a major part of the dialogue between the lovers is structured around stories told by him to her. In fact, the very first line of conversation we hear between them concerns these stories:

"What will it be then? he says. Dinner jackets and romance, or shipwrecks on a barren coast? You can have your pick: jungles, tropical islands, mountains. Or another dimension of space-that's what I'm best at." (Atwood, 2001, 11).

A major part of the relationship between the twotheir courtship and their subsequent affair-is carried out through storytelling. So the story has a distinct function as action between them: It brings them to-

gether, and it binds them together. It even ever so often causes or settles conflicts between them. Their relationship is socially impossible; a scandalous, illicit affair, carried out in seedy rooms and hidden from the public eye. Through the storytelling they create a different world which is theirs to share. He is a hack writer and what little income he has is derived from writing for the pulps; so as she takes him up on his offer to tell a story which takes place in "another dimension of space", they end up with an imaginary universe-which is what they have to share. When he dies this universe also becomes the place of her memory: she remembers it as "Beloved planet, land of my heart. Where once, long ago, I was happy" (Atwood, 2001, 573). So inside the frame of NWN, the fictive genres connected to the pulp work socially, both as means of courtship and as a community between the lovers. On top of that when "he" is dead, the pulp stories also work as a commemoration for her

Moving one level up from the diegesis of NWN to its function within the novel proper, the roles played by the NWN is manifold. Only one of them can be touched upon here. The NWN is presented as the posthumous work of Laura Chase, who is the sister of Iris Chase Griffen, the elderly narrator of the main part of the novel. It stirs up considerable commotion as the illicit affair described in the novel is seen as describing her own relationship with an unnamed man. For a 1947 book its sexual descriptions are very explicit and this leads to a scandal when "the pulpitthumbers" (Atwood, 2001, 622) pick up the book. The public attention results in a close scrutiny of Laura's life leading to a recognition of her suicide as well as the discovery that her former brother-in-law, rising politician and industrialist Richard Griffen, has impregnated her and hushed her off to an illicit abortion clinic disguised as a psychiatric ward, in order to have the fetus removed and the possible scandal suppressed. The ensuing scandal crushes Richard Griffen's career and drives him to suicide

However, as is revealed late in the novel, the NWN was not written by Laura at all but by Iris herself. And the scandal is a calculated effect by her in order to exert revenge on Richard not only for his treatment of Laura but also for his abuse of herself and his complicity in the death of her father.

None of the social functions usually attributed to the genre of the novel-and certainly none that could be seen as generically inherent to it-cover what Iris does with her novel. Bhatia notes that generic conventions "are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognized purposes" (Bhatia, 1993, 13). The effect achieved by Iris is wholly private and not calculated into the genre. She proves to be an expert member of the discourse community by exploiting the genre for her own ends, thus transforming a fictive story into an instrument of social action. The literary becomes rhetorical.

Perspectives

The antagonism or apathy between Literary Genre Studies and RGS should be left behind. So very much is to be gained by opening up a line of inquiry relying on both approaches. What I am proposing here is one example of such an inquiry. It expands the reach of RGS into the field of literature; instead of ignoring or denying the differences between the two fields, it makes them explicit and takes them into account. This does not deny the strength and pervasiveness of RGS, but adds to it by re-framing it and opening up new ways to use it in the understanding of literary texts-allowing it to play a positive role in the understanding of fiction without having to claim superiority vis-a-vis Literary Studies.

What I am proposing here in relation to Literary Studies is less a theory of fiction than it is an approach to reading fiction; it is a hands-on endeavor that does not, to my mind, presuppose any particular theoretical underpinnings. By analyzing the working of rhetorical genres within fiction-and thus analytically granting a much larger role to embedded genres than is usually assumed in genre theory-this strategy allows the interpreter to highlight how the social actions and situations that make up the action of a story is shaped by the usage of a series of rhetorical genres through which the different characters act to further their cause. The complete pattern of the action is the sum of these actions through genre, usually with non-generic elements added-natural disasters, bar brawls, illnesses or whatever (though even a bar brawl may be a genre of sorts).

The question of the recurrent nature of genre is of particular interest when it comes to genre as fictional

action. Looking at the examples given, neither Mark Anthony's speech, the poem from Joseph und seine Brüder, or Iris Chase Griffin's novel are classical typified reactions to recurrent situations, as the characters acting through genre face situations with quite unique features and perform their actions through creative uses of genre. Mark Anthony's speech is a somewhat more typified response than the other two, but his usage of its typicality is free indeed. The recurrence is what allows us to recognize the genres in play in any given work of fiction, however, their actual form and function within the fiction will frequently vary considerably from a common sense rhetorical understanding of the relevant genres and their social role. We are therefore dealing with a use of genre as fictional action, in which its role is at one and the same time typified and creative.

This focus on the unique and surprising use of genre to perform specific and complex social actions could be useful in the study of the meeting between recurrence, situation and intentionality in rhetorical genres. The high level of variation vis-a-vis recurrence was always a fundamental problem for Literary Genre Studies. As Atwood herself puts it:

"genres may look hard and fast from a distance, but up close it's nailing jelly to a wall." (Atwood, 2004, 513).

Consequently, some of the most important studies in how genre categories form remain literary (among these Fowler, 1982; Frow, 2006; Sinding, 2002 and 2011; and Steen, 2011). However, the dichotomy between recurrence and variation is also prolific outside of aesthetics. A pursuit of this dichotomy employing both the strong analytical understanding of the individual utterance of Literary Studies and the understanding of the recurrence and functionality of genre so strong in RGS, offers excellent possibilities for interdisciplinary research.

Another point readily apparent in a study of genre as fictional action is that as social actions go, any particular use of genre may actually fail-especially since different characters often act against one another through genres. Mark Anthony's triumph over Brutus as a speaker is only one example; the actual occurrences within fiction are legion. A very large part of the action, as well as the drama of any plot, is, in fact, based not on physical but on social action

taking place through genre. Different characters trying to achieve different, and often mutually exclusive ends, clash through their respective uses of genre and the end result of this clash may be the triumph of either one over the other(s), a compromise between positions, or something not desired by either party-it may even be unforeseen by the characters involved.

The specific problem of genre actions working against one another seems under examined in RGS, though a small beginning has been made through the meeting point between Genre Studies and Forensic Linguistics (i.e. Fuzer & Barros, 2009). Further studies could easily be imagined in connection to for instance political debate or other social activities involving polemics or a clash of interests. Trying to understand the mechanics of struggles through genre can only benefit from being carried out in an interdisciplinary endeavor between literary and rhetorical genres-especially since fictionalization and different kinds of storytelling has such a large role to play in polemical rhetorical genres. So an approach which works to find parallels, overlaps and contrasts between fictional and rhetorical conflicts through genre seems fruitful for both the reading of literature and the understanding of rhetorical genres.

Being marginalized within modern Genre Studies, we on the literary side have nothing to lose by engaging in dialogue and collaboration with the dominant rhetorical trend in Genre Studies. The opposite should also be true, as the chance of making rhetorical investigations relevant in Literary Studies, as well as the insights into the workings of rhetorical genres gained by the interdisciplinary approach, would provide an attractive opportunity for the rhetoricians. Despite institutional and scholarly differences neither of us have anything to fear by working together, but we all have much to gain.

Notes

Non-literary Genre Studies are broader than
what is represented by RGS as witnessed by the
breadth of different approaches described by
Bawarshi and Reiff, 2010. However, as evidenced by Bhatia, (2004, 22-26), there is common ground between the different scholarly
approaches. So establishing an interdisciplinary
dialogue between Literary Studies and RGS
might also invite a continued dialogue with the

other approaches. See also Smedegaard (forthcoming).

- 2. This development merits closer attention, which I hope to give it in a later article. It can to a certain extent be studied in Bawarshi and Reiff (2010).
- 3. I was probably too optimistic on this point in Auken (2011). The possibilities for Literary Studies within Genre Studies described there are most likely just that: possibilities, not realities.
- 4. One of my reviewers gracefully pointed out to me that some Scandinavian genre research has been going across the disciplines (for instance Jordheim, 2007, and Asdahl et. al., 2008). More can probably be found through a closer search, though my own surveys have met with limited success. The Research Group for Genre Studies at the University of Copenhagen will contribute to the field with Auken et.al., (forthcoming).
- 5. See Auken (forthcoming).
- 6. Aristotle does not have the dual model dominant in the narratology of the last decades. The storyplot distinction with its manifold variations (see for instance the listing in Cohn (1999, 111) is still a few thousand years away. So it is not apparent from the description whether Aristotle is talking about one or the other. My interpretation follows the main line in narratology by assuming that it applies to the concept of story.
- 7. Due to space limits I cannot elaborate on the consequences of the famed interchange between Bitzer, 1966, and Vatz, 1973, for the study of fictional action (see Sunesen, forthcoming). However, the relation between situation, actor and genre as well as the relative weight of each, are obviously crucial subjects for fiction and merit closer scrutiny.
- The author wishes to thank the Research Group for Genre Studies at the University of Copenhagen-in particular Jack Andersen, Anne Smedegaard and Michael Schmidt-Madsen-and also Helene Felter and George Hinge for their valuable contribution.

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