

Heiberg's Conception of Speculative Drama and the Crisis of the Age: Martensen's Analysis of *Fata Morgana*

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Johan Ludvig Heiberg was one of the leading figures in theater life in Golden Age Denmark. He was also a Hegelian. According to his own autobiographical statements, these two aspects of his intellectual activity were in perfect harmony with one another.¹ Hegel's philosophy provided the abstract and theoretical background for his concrete and practical works on aesthetics and theater. However, later commentators have often found it difficult to grasp exactly how these two things fit together in a harmonious manner and have been keen to point out contradictions in his general program. Indeed, there was substantial confusion about this in Heiberg's own time since he was criticized by both sides, that is, by philosophers and by theater critics, being rebuked for both bad philosophy and bad theater.

Perhaps his most overt attempt to combine these two interests was his ambitious work, *Fata Morgana* (which premiered on January 29, 1838), an allegorical piece in which he attempts to bring Hegel to the

¹ Heiberg, "Autobiographiske Fragmenter," in Heiberg's *Prosaiske Skrifter*, vols. 1-11, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1861-62, vol. 11, p. 501. (English translation: "Autobiographical Fragments," in Heiberg's *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2005 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 1), p. 66.)

stage.¹ He regarded this as a new genre which he designated “speculative drama.” This claim to novelty or innovation was a contentious one at the time. In this article I wish to explore what Heiberg meant by this designation. I wish ultimately to try to come to an assessment of his claim to have created a new dramatic form with this work.

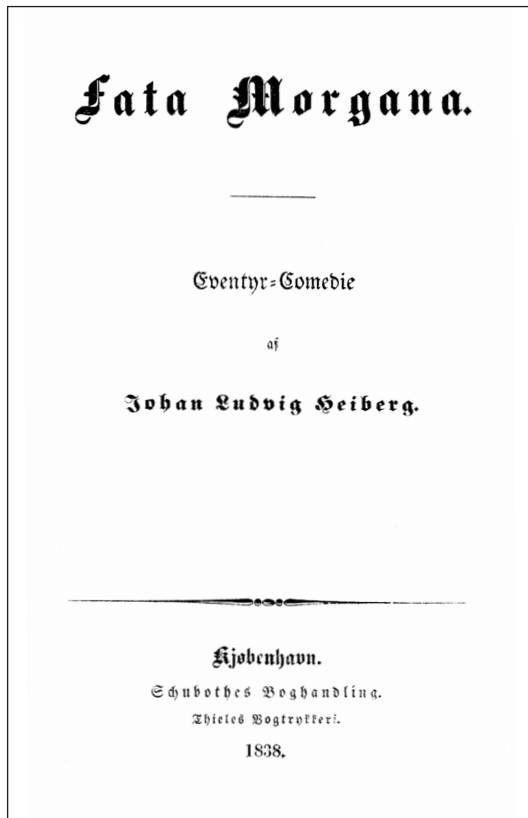
The piece was badly received at the time and was thus in need of some explanation. Before the play was ever produced, Heiberg’s wife, the actress Johanne Luise Heiberg (1812–90), had a negative premonition about how things would go. In her memoirs she explains this as follows:

In the season 1837–38 Heiberg wrote his play *Fata Morgana*, at the request of the board of directors of the theater, for the celebratory performance on occasion of Frederik the VI’s birthday. His mother [sc. Thomasine Gyllembourg] and I had often urged him to write something for the theater again, saying that we now longed to receive this work. Over the past few years, Heiberg had occupied himself almost exclusively with philosophical studies, and his *Fata Morgana* is strongly influenced by this, indeed probably all too strongly. With excitement and anticipation we sat one evening around our living room table in order to hear him read his new piece aloud. I was excited beyond words to hear once again something from his pen, but while he was reading I became more and more uneasy and distressed—not because I did not find this work worthy of a poet—but because I knew the audience and knew that this kind of allegorical poem would be impossible for them to comprehend, and, moreover, the actors at the theater’s disposal would be unable to understand or present what was placed in their hands.²

Johanne Luise Heiberg, who played the role of Fata Morgana herself in the piece, correctly foresaw that the work would not be comprehensible to those who were not already initiated into the intricacies of Hegel’s philosophy.

¹ Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Fata Morgana, Eventyr-Comedie*, Copenhagen: J.H. Schubothes Boghandling 1838. (Reprinted in *Poetiske Skrifter*, vols. 1–11, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1862, vol. 2, pp. 93–226.)

² Johanne Luise Heiberg, *Et liv genoplevet i erindringen*, vols. 1–4, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1973, 5th revised edition, vol. 1, p. 296.



Title Page of Fata Morgana
(Private Collection)

As it turned out her fears were confirmed. The play only saw a total of five performances and was removed from the billboard after February 21, 1838.¹ There were many dramatic works at the time that had a short lifespan—indeed, works quickly came and went—but this one was particularly troublesome due to its special role as a ceremonial work for

¹ The five performances were on January 29 and 30; February 3, 15 and 21, 1838. See Thomas Overskou, *Den danske Skueplads i dens Historie, fra de første Spor af danske Skuespil indtil vor Tid*, vols. 1-7, Copenhagen: Samfundet til den danske Literatur Fremme 1854-76, vol. 5, pp. 311-312. Arthur Aumont and Edgar Collin, *Det danske Nationalteater 1748-1889*, vols. 1-5, Copenhagen: J. Jørgensen 1896-1900, vol. 5.1, p. 224.

the king. The premiere was attended not just by the king and the court but also by a host of Danish and foreign diplomats, ambassadors and high-ranking officials. The theater critic and historian Thomas Overskou (1798-1873) gives a detailed account of the event. According to his description, the audience was so perplexed that no one applauded after the show was over.¹ There was a numbed silence, as people scratched their heads and looked at one another in the hope that their neighbor had understood it and could explain it.

Problems at the box office meant financial losses for the ticket scalpers, who would buy tickets for an entire loge and then sell their own tickets at a reduced rate to as many people as could fit into it. However, if the piece was unpopular, this practice was a tricky matter since it was uncertain if they could make enough money even to cover their own costs for the price of the original tickets if there were not enough people who wanted to see the piece. Overskou reports that a painfully embarrassing scene took place at the second performance, when one of the loge hucksters aggressively booed and hissed the work and encouraged the rest of the audience to do the same, in the hope that the theater's board of directors would be moved to discontinue the piece as soon as possible.

In his review of this second performance Overskou, who was a traditional ally of Heiberg, rebukes this uncultivated practice and tries to give as positive an assessment of the piece as he can.² He seems to support Heiberg's view that the work represents a new genre in drama since, in his defense of the piece, he argues, "it is the first work of this kind which has been brought to our stage." *Fata Morgana* was also the subject of a satirical rhymed letter that appeared in the journal *Den Frisindede*.³ The letter, which is addressed "To a Friend in the Countryside," refers to Overskou's review as the lone supporter of Heiberg's piece: "It [sc. *Fata Morgana*] is likewise praised by no one except / the editor of the journal, *Dagen*, / who is especially pleased to find in it / a particularly brilliant presentation / of Heibergian-Hegelian philosophy / and Calderón's

¹ Thomas Overskou, *Den danske Skueplads*, vol. 5, p. 320.

² This review appears under the heading, "Kjøbenhavn, 31. Januar," *Dagen*, no. 27, January 31, 1838 (no page numbers). The review covers most of the first page.

³ xx., "Til en Ven paa Landet," *Den Frisindede*, vol. 4, no. 13, February 13, 1838, pp. 49-50.

poetry.”¹ Heiberg could not let this stand and wrote a response, also in the newspaper, *Dagen*, in which he claims that trying to please such a base and uncultivated member of the audience was like casting pearls before swine, thus alluding to the pearl, which is a central motif in the dramatic work.²

The important role of Heiberg's friend Hans Lassen Martensen (1808-84) in relation to all of this has in general remained unrecognized. I wish to argue that it was Martensen who provided Heiberg with the original inspiration for the piece. Moreover, while Heiberg was still licking his wounds from the poor reviews and catcalls, Martensen attempted to repair the damage by writing a defense of the work. His goal was to explain its allegorical meaning to those critics who were quick to dismiss it. What is particularly interesting about this review is that Martensen attempts to defend Heiberg's claim to have invented a new literary genre. This was a particularly controversial point, as I will try to sketch in what follows.

I. Møller's Criticism

At the beginning of the 1830s Heiberg had a good relation to the poet and philologist Poul Martin Møller (1794-1838). At this time they were both associated with the new trend of Hegelianism that they jointly defended in any number of works.³ However, by the time of the

¹ Ibid., p. 49: “*Den roses ei heller af Nogen, undtagen / Af Redacteuren for Bladet: Dagen, / Der frydes især, ved at finde deri / Af heibergsk-hegelsk Philosophie / Og Calderonisk Poesie / En særdeles genialsk Fremstilling.*”

² J.L. Heiberg, “Til Riimbrev-Skriveren i *Den Frisindede* Nr. 13,” *Dagen*, no. 39, February 14, 1838 (no page numbers): “*At Fata Morgana Dig ei behager, / Og at i det Hele Du Perler vrager, / Er troligt, men Skylden er ikke min, / Thi skjøndt jeg en Perle har foræret, / Saa har det dog aldrig min Hensigt været, / At ville kaste Perler for Sviin.*” See also P.R., “En lille Vise for *Den Frisindede*,” *Søndagen. Et Tillægsblad til Dagen*, no. 6, February 11, 1838.

³ See Frederik Ludvig Bang Zeuthen, *Et Par Aar af mit Liv*, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad 1869, p. 44, where he refers as follows to his dissertation *De notione modestiae, imprimis philosophicae* (Copenhagen: J.D. Qvist 1833): “The content of the work was essentially directed against the philosophical immodesty which appeared or seemed to me to appear in Hegelianism, which in particular Heiberg and Poul Møller at that time represented in Copenhagen.”

performance of *Fata Morgana* the two had had a falling out, in part due to Møller's distancing himself from Hegel's philosophy in his well-known treatise on the German debates about immortality, a work that appeared the previous year.¹ Heiberg responded to this in the first volume of his philosophical journal *Perseus* by referring to Møller as a "deserter" with regard to the cause of Hegelianism.²

In a letter shortly before his death, Møller gives an extended account of his view of *Fata Morgana* and its claim to originality. The letter is addressed to the poet Carsten Hauch (1790-1872) and represents a follow-up to a discussion that they had in person, perhaps on occasion of one of the performances of the piece. Møller begins in a fairly generous manner, acknowledging that the work does contain some positive poetic elements:

I recently said some things to you on occasion of Heiberg's *Fata Morgana*, which I have hastily run through, and I now want to write down a few words about it. No one can deny that there are beautiful, well-conceived things in this poem, and it is certainly a rarity that a theater piece which was made to order, indeed, ordered with a very short deadline, was so successful.³

This positive tone, however, quickly changes. Møller focuses on what he regards as a misunderstanding about the nature of the work that he believes Heiberg himself is responsible for promulgating: "But I believe that the author and his friends have mistaken ideas about it. They regard it as a wholly new genre in art, to which they give the name a 'philosophical drama.'...I cannot make any sense of this."⁴ Møller is

¹ Poul Martin Møller, "Tanker over Muligheden af Beviser for Menneskets Udødelighed, med Hensyn til den nyeste derhen hørende Literatur," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 17, 1837, pp. 1-72, pp. 422-453.

² Johan Ludvig Heiberg, "Recension over Hr. Dr. Rothes *Treenigheds- og Forsoningslære*," *Perseus, Journal for den speculative Idee*, no. 1, 1837, p. 33. (Reprinted in Heiberg's *Prosaiske Skrifter*, vol. 2, pp. 41-42. (English translation in *Heiberg's Perseus and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2011 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 6), p. 107.)

³ *Poul Møller og hans Familie i Breve*, vols. 1-3, ed. by Morten Borup, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Boghandel 1976, vol. 2, letter 168, p. 109.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, letter 168, pp. 109f.

perplexed primarily by the claim that *Fata Morgana* represents a new genre of poetry.

He goes on to recount what he takes to be Heiberg's argument for this. What does it mean to designate a work a "philosophical drama"? Møller continues,

It is a philosophical drama—so it is argued—for in it the "*Idea*" is expressed that there are illusions which have meaning and completely empty illusions. But it is my conviction that, taken in this manner, every true work of poetry, or almost every one, contains a "philosophical idea."...One would particularly expect a philosophical formalist such as Heiberg to recognize this. However, H.[eiberg] with his oral statements about this has put his opinion about his work into circulation, and every schoolboy who keeps step with the city's aesthetic tradition says that *Fata Morgana* is a philosophical comedy.¹

Møller is skeptical about this claim since he fails to see anything new with respect to genre. There are many poetical works that contain various philosophical ideas. Just to make use of certain philosophical questions or doctrines in verse form is not enough to justify designating the work a new genre of poetry. The only thing new is the designation that Heiberg has given it: "philosophical drama" or "philosophical comedy." Møller seems to be correct in his assessment that this view was widely held as a result of Heiberg's influence. Many years later Hans Friedrich Helweg (1816-1901) still refers to *Fata Morgana* as a "speculative drama" in his article on Hegelianism in Denmark.²

As Møller notes, these terms are an echo of Heiberg's earlier designation of "speculative poetry." This was a term that Heiberg used in *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age* in 1833 in order to designate the highest form of poetry at the time.³ This was the apex

¹ Ibid., vol. 2, letter 168, p. 110.

² Hans Friedrich Helweg, "Hegelianismen i Danmark," *Dansk Kirketidende*, vol. 10, no. 51, December 16, 1855, p. 826.

³ E.g., Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid. Et Indbydelses-Skrift til en Række af filosofiske Forelæsninger*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1833, pp. 36ff. (Reprinted in *Prosaiske Skrifter*, vol. 1, pp. 417ff.) (English translation in *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age and Other Texts*, pp. 107ff.)

of the genres of poetry. Moreover, it was the artistic equivalent of what Hegel called “absolute knowing” in the sphere of philosophy. According to the account given there, Heiberg seems to take speculative poetry to be the ability to create a large systematic overview in the way that, for example, Dante does in the *Divine Comedy*. Then with this grand system, the author has the ability to shift perspectives from the very large to the very small, from the most abstract and sublime, to the most empirical and base. With this shift of perspective the author demonstrates his mastery of the whole and conveys the organic unity to the reader. In that work Heiberg goes through a long list of well-known poets who are either praised as “speculative” poets or criticized as reactionary, empirical poets. While the English poets bear the brunt of the hardest criticism, Goethe, Dante and Calderón come out best on his account. Given this earlier analysis, the implication seems to be that with *Fata Morgana* Heiberg is following in the footsteps of these great poets by creating a speculative drama.¹

In his letter Møller expresses his frustration with the fact that Heiberg seems too fixated on the specific term and is not able to discuss its actual meaning. He writes in confidence to Hauch:

What I here tell you I would never dream of saying to Heiberg himself; we have long since ceased to get along. He seems to me to have sometimes one favorite word and sometimes another with which he connects a half-mystic, wholly subjective meaning, for example, the way he once used “speculative” poetry....But when one presses him for a more precise explanation about what he actually means, then he withdraws into the snail shell of his subjectivity. He seems to me to lack either the ability or the good will for a really lively conversation in which the participants can exchange their views without reservations.²

Here Møller rightly associates the earlier designation “speculative poetry” with the new one “philosophical drama.” Møller calls into question the meaningfulness of these designations and ultimately the originality of

¹ For another account of speculative poetry see Heiberg’s “Til Læserne” in *Perseus, Journal for den speculative Idee*, no. 1, 1837, p. viii. (English translation: “To the Readers,” in *Heiberg’s Perseus and Other Texts*, p. 76)

² *Poul Møller og hans Familie i Breve*, vol. 2, letter 168, p. 110.

Heiberg's contribution. Although his remarks appear in a private letter, it can probably be assumed that his criticisms were shared by others at the time.

II. Martensen's Anticipation of *Fata Morgana*

Fata Morgana met with such misunderstanding and lack of appreciation that it seemed clear that some explanation was required. Martensen was uniquely placed to mount this defense due to his intimate knowledge of Hegel's philosophy and his friendship and private conversations with Heiberg. Thus although Martensen was known for his theology or philosophy of religion and not for his aesthetics, this review demonstrates beyond any doubt that he had a profound understanding of this field as well.

Before we turn to the review itself, Martensen's inspiration for the work should be made clear. This inspiration has not been recognized in the secondary literature, presumably because Heiberg does not mention Martensen in his introductory comments to the piece. Instead, there he names Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* as his principal source for the work.¹ The term "fata morgana" refers to an actual meteorological phenomenon common to the Sicilian coast. It is a kind of fog that produces mirages. In Ariosto's work this is, following Sicilian tradition, represented by the fairy Morgana, who is thought to cause illusions. Heiberg then develops this figure of folklore into a major character in his piece. While Heiberg does not mention Martensen in this account, there is very good evidence that in fact it was Martensen who was, if not the original source, then the proximate source for this work.

In the first issue of Heiberg's Hegelian journal *Perseus* from 1837, Martensen published an article on a version of *Faust*, by the Austro-Hungarian poet Niembsch von Strehlenau (1802-50), whose pseudonym was Nicolaus Lenau.² This article, entitled "Observations on the Idea of

¹ See "Forerindring" in Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Fata Morgana, Eventyr-Comedie*, Copenhagen: Schubothes Boghandling 1838 (on unnumbered pages). (Reprinted in Heiberg's *Poetiske Skrifter*, vol. 2, p. 95.)

² Nicolaus Lenau, *Faust. Ein Gedicht*, Stuttgart: Verlag der J.G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung 1836.

Faust with Reference to Lenau's *Faust*,"¹ was a modified Danish version of a short monograph that Martensen published upon his return from his journey abroad,² during which he met Lenau in person.³ In this work Martensen interprets Lenau's efforts as speculative in Heiberg's sense. He thus makes use of Heiberg's designation of speculative poetry in order to understand Lenau's contribution and to distinguish its merits from Goethe's famous version of the Faust legend.

In his Faust article, Martensen draws on the thesis of his dissertation, *On the Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*.⁴ This work, which appeared in the same year, argues that the shortcoming of the modern systems of theology—primarily those of Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel—is that they are based on a misguided conception of autonomy, which is the general principle of modern thinking. The principle of autonomy undermines the true religious view of theonomy. By claiming to know the truth by means of, for example, pure reason or speculative dialectics, these modern thinkers deny the need for God. By contrast, Martensen argues that we must return to a principle of theonomy and accept our dependence on God for our lives and truth.

Martensen then applies this theological principle from his dissertation to the interpretation of Lenau's *Faust*. According to this view, the figure of Faust is a paradigm case for autonomous thinking. Faust is a scholar who has a deep-seated belief in the achievements of secular knowing. He is proud of what the human mind can achieve on its own and not least of all of his own learning. Martensen writes, he embodies "the deep feeling of the corruption of the human will, its desire to transgress the divine law, its arrogant striving to seek its center in itself instead of in God."⁵ Given this, Faust's fate is unsurprising. He has no use for God or religion. He rejects the principle of theonomy and fails to recognize his dependence

¹ Hans Lassen Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust. Med Hensyn paa Lenaus *Faust*," *Perseus, Journal for den speculative Idee*, no. 1, 1837, pp. 91-164.

² Johannes M.....n, *Ueber Lenau's Faust*, Stuttgart: Verlag der J.G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung 1836.

³ Martensen, *Af mit Levnet. Meddelelser*, vols. 1-3, Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag (F. Hegel & Søn) 1882-83, vol. 1, p. 167, p. 170.

⁴ Johannes Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae in theologiam dogmaticam nostri temporis introducta*, Copenhagen: I.D. Quist 1837.

⁵ Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust," p. 94.

on the divine. In his arrogance and hubris he spurns the divine. The character of Lenau's Faust thus provides Martensen with a vivid literary example of the dangers of modern thinking that he attempted to sketch in the context of theology in his dissertation.

What is of particular interest for our purposes is that Martensen draws on Heiberg's aesthetics in his analysis. Specifically, he designates Lenau's work as an example of speculative poetry. In this context he seems to mean by that via a specific character a universal type is represented. Martensen explains, speculative poetry's "essence does not lie in the poetic presentation of the external event or the development of the *single* individual, but since its creations are individuals, they are also universal and symbolic, i.e., they are absolutely penetrated by the speculative Idea, which has, so to speak, been incarnated in them."¹ Seen in this light, Faust represents symbolically the principle of modern autonomy that Martensen is so keen to sketch. Faust "represents the human race's striving to ground a realm of *intelligence* without God."² This is not just an individual shortcoming but, according to Martensen, it represents a general tendency of the modern age. Thus, Faust functions as a useful symbol for this.

Like Heiberg, Martensen cannot resist the temptation to give a general outline of the development of poetry through the ages. His goal is to place the Faust story in this scheme in order to understand its significance more clearly. According to this pseudoHegelian triad, there are three historical stages of poetry, each with its own paradigmatic work. The first stage is the poetry of the ancient world, and instead of choosing a well-known Greek or Roman classic, such as Homer, or Virgil or Hegel's favorite Sophocles, Martensen claims that its characteristic work is the biblical Book of Revelation.³ Martensen's argument is that this work represents the stage of immediacy, the point in early Christianity, where the new religion definitively broke away from Judaism and the pagan religions. Martensen's second stage of poetry is the Middle Ages, and its paradigmatic work is Dante's *Divine Comedy*.⁴ Heiberg had already hailed this work as a great speculative poem in *On the Significance of Philosophy*

¹ Ibid., p. 96.

² Ibid., p. 97.

³ Ibid., pp. 99f.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 100-102.

for the Present Age.¹ There Heiberg portrays Dante's masterpiece as a speculative poem because its three parts, hell, purgatory and paradise, represent the Hegelian triad of immediacy, mediation and mediated immediacy. Martensen, however, emphasizes the religious dimension, arguing that this second historical stage is that of Catholicism.

The third stage is the modern world, which is associated with Protestantism.² This is the proper context for understanding Faust since it is, according to Martensen, the representative work of the modern world. The world of the Middle Ages was caught up in visual images and representations, and for this reason painting and the visual arts flourished. By contrast, the modern world is no longer satisfied with this sensible element and demands to know not in terms of an image or picture but in terms of a concept. Martensen is clearly influenced by Heiberg's preference for Dante and Goethe, whose Faust is obviously the important forerunner for Lenau. He thus understandably draws on Heiberg's literary heroes to illustrate the notion of speculative poetry.

In this text Martensen also takes up in two different passages the key motif of Heiberg's *Fata Morgana*, which was written only a few short months after the Faust article had appeared.³ In the first passage in question Martensen discusses the development of human knowledge and science. He argues as follows: "In its striving for the knowledge of the speculative truth, it [sc. spirit] loses heart, and the truth of the idea seems to be a mere appearance, a *fata morgana*, when compared with the immediate, palpable reality of experience."⁴ The idea here is that at the initial stage of empiricism, the human mind is captivated by the richness of the senses. Empirical experience seems to be more real and more substantive than a mere idea. Martensen employs the *fata morgana* motif in an inversion of its usual usage. It is natural to think of a *fata morgana* as representing a deception of the senses due to the fact that it

¹ Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, pp. 41f. *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 110.

² Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust," pp. 102ff.

³ In a letter dated November 25, 1837, Heiberg was requested by the Board of Directors of the Royal Theater to write a special work that could be used to celebrate the birthday of the Danish King Frederik VI. He thus had precious little time to compose the work, when one considers that it premiered on January 29, 1838. *Breve og Aktstykker vedrørende Johan Ludvig Heiberg*, vols. 1-5, ed. by Morten Borup, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1946-50, vol. 2, Letter 377, p. 289.

⁴ Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust," p. 114.

is a deception of the eye, the empirical faculty of vision. The eye thinks it sees something, but it turns out to be a mere mirage. Here, by contrast, Martensen turns the image on its head and refers not to the realm of the senses but to the realm of thought as a *fata morgana*. By this he wishes to underscore the ephemeral nature of ideas, which from the perspective of empiricism, seem to be insubstantial. For the empiricist, they represent an illusion with nothing behind them, whereas the world of the sense is the domicile of truth.

The second passage comes from Martensen's specific analysis of the story of Lenau's Faust. He explains how Faust disdains all of existence and attempts to eliminate it from his thinking. However, he is unable to do so since he cannot escape his own history. He is unable to create himself, as it were, *ex nihilo*, or as Martensen says, *a priori*. Martensen writes, "Thus even at the beginning of his [sc. Faust's] trip, the earth and his life's better spirits, which he had cast out, were already showing themselves in the dream's *fata morgana*, and he had to struggle with melancholy's final feeling."¹ This time the *fata morgana* does not create an illusion or hide a falsehood but rather veils something true, Faust's past. This is in accordance with Heiberg's use of the motif. Heiberg wishes to point out that there is no essence behind the appearance, no thing in itself behind the representation; in short, there is nothing that we can grasp absolutely. We are always dependent on the appearances and our ways of perceiving. Thus the truth lies not in a correspondence of the appearance with some hidden truth or reality but rather in the appearances themselves without reference to some other term. In Heiberg's play the goddess of illusion Fata Morgana says,

I show him [sc. man] the golden phenomenon,
His eyes are blinded, his thought captivated by it,
And he does well to be satisfied with this;
For if he wants to penetrate the phenomenon,
Wants to seek the truth on the other side of it,

¹ Ibid., p. 154. This appears as follows in Martensen's earlier monograph in German: "So zeigten sich ihm schon im Anfänge seiner Reise die Erde und jene besseren Gestalten seines Lebens, die er von sich gestoßen hat, noch in der Fata morgana des Traumes, und er mußte mit dem letzten Gefühl der Wehmuth kämpfen." Johannes M.....n, *Ueber Lenau's Faust*, p. 48.

Then he creates for himself the worst illusion.
 For him no other truth exists,
 Except that from which my mirage borrows its outline:
 The magic castle which I show him in the sky,
 He can find as real on earth.
 But if he thinks that there is behind the heavenly image
 A truth, which is not borrowed from the earth,
 But comes from above to the phenomenon;
 And he forces his way to see it,
 Then he will meet only me, and I will destroy him.¹

Fata Morgana attempts to cultivate the illusion of a transcendent truth beyond the appearances. But the moral to the story is, as one learns from the later school of phenomenology, that the truth is in the appearances.

Martensen clearly was aware that Heiberg was working on *Fata Morgana* intensively after he had been commissioned to produce the work at the end of November 1837. Indeed, given the references in his Faust article, it is quite possible that he discussed this motif with Heiberg during this time. In any case, he refers to it once again in a private correspondence with Heiberg on January 4, 1838, only three weeks before the premiere of the piece. In the letter Martensen announces to Heiberg that he is engaged to be married:

I have followed your own guidelines and struggled against it [sc. marriage] as long as I could. The opinion cannot, however, be that such a conflict should continue in a bad infinity, or when it is once sublated, that it should end with a merely negative result. On the contrary—if love is more than a *fata morgana*—and mine certainly is, then the result must be the knowledge that it is not some illusion, regardless of the finite view it could easily seem

¹ Heiberg, *Fata Morgana*, p. 26. (*Poetiske Skrifter*, vol. 2, pp. 121f.) “Jeg viser ham det gyldne Phænomen, / Hans Øie blendes, Tanken fanges i det, / Og klogt han gjør at slaae sig der til Ro; / Thi vil han Phænomenet gjennemtrænge, / Vil søge Sandhed paa dets anden Side, / Da skaber han sig selv det værste Blendværk. / For ham er ingen anden Sandhed til, / End den, hvoraf mit Luftsyn laaner Omrids: / Det Trylleslot, jeg viser ham paa Himlen, / Det kan han finde virkeligt paa Jorden. / Men troer han, at der bag et himmelsk Billed / En Sandhed er, som laantes ei fra Jorden, / Men kommer ovenfra til Phænomenet; / Og trænger han igjennem for at see den, / Da møder han kun mig, og jeg ham knuser.”

to be; it must be recognized as an absolute reality, an ideal power, which can be reconciled but not reasoned away.¹

Clearly, there is a playful tone in this letter. Martensen refers to a number of philosophical motifs that both he and Heiberg had discussed and written about, especially in connection with Hegel's philosophy: the bad infinity, the sublation of the negative, the finite and the infinite, etc. The allusion to the illusion of love as a *fata morgana* can hardly be coincidental. By declaring his love to be more than a *fata morgana*, Martensen makes explicit appeal to a motif that Heiberg was working on at the time. This might be taken as evidence that he had perhaps already seen part of Heiberg's work in progress. In any case, given all this, there can be little doubt that Martensen was a cardinal source of inspiration for the piece.

III. Martensen's Review of *Fata Morgana*

Martensen's defense of Heiberg came in the form of a review that appeared in the *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur* for April of 1838.² As he was writing the review, he shared it with Heiberg both orally and in writing. This is clear from what Heiberg writes in a letter to Martensen, dated March 5, 1838:

Perhaps we could soon have the pleasure of hearing your review from start to finish. We are all longing very much for this, and I, for my part, cannot omit repeating my thanks for the great pleasure which you gave me the day before yesterday by communicating to me a large part of it. Not only was I glad to see so many points of my own aesthetic view set forth with such talent that I must hope that they in this way will find entry among the reading public, but also your presentation of my own poetic activity has, so to speak, raised me in my own eyes and is for me almost the dearest reward that I have yet received for it.³

¹ *Breve og Aktstykker vedrørende Johan Ludvig Heiberg*, vol. 2, Letter 381, p. 293.

² Martensen, "*Fata Morgana, Eventyr-Comedie af Johan Ludvig Heiberg*. 1838. 125 S. 8°. Kjøbenhavn. Schubothes Boghandling," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 19, 1838, pp. 361-397.

³ *Breve og Aktstykker vedrørende Johan Ludvig Heiberg*, vol. 2, Letter 389, p. 298.

Here one can see confirmation that Martensen's review is wholly in line with Heiberg's intentions and the Heibergian aesthetics in general. Heiberg seems particularly impressed with Martensen's gift for communicating some of these difficult ideas in a didactically effective manner. Just as Heiberg was enthusiastic about the draft that he saw, so also was he profoundly moved by the published version of the review when it appeared a few weeks later. In a letter dated April 1, he writes the following words of unrestrained praise to Martensen: "I have now also read your review slowly and carefully so that I could give myself the chance to examine every word in it. It is without doubt the best treatise on aesthetics which has been yet produced in this country."¹

Martensen organizes his review of *Fata Morgana* in the same way that he did his article on Lenau's *Faust*. He uses the first part to give a general assessment about the current status of poetry and dramatic poetry in particular, and then the second part is dedicated to a more detailed examination of the work under review.

Martensen takes some of his inspiration from the first two volumes of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* that had recently appeared.² Hegel traces how different forms of art come and go with specific historical time periods. As the human spirit develops, so also do the different artistic genres. Certain forms of art appeal to the human mind at a rudimentary stage, but then seem hollow and lifeless once that stage has been surpassed. Each historical epoch thus has its own preferred form of art, which matches its own level of development. Heiberg had also defended this view in *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*. Now Martensen takes it up again. His claim is that with the development of the human spirit, poetry and specifically dramatic poetry has been displaced from its once central role in culture. He regrets that it is no longer taken seriously as it once was. The reason for this, he argues, is that the human mind has progressed to a higher level, and dramatic writers

¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, Letter 394, p. 304.

² *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vols. I-III, ed. by Heinrich Gustav Hotho, vols. 10.1-3 [1835-38], in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe*, vols. 1-18, ed. by Ludwig Boumann, Friedrich Förster, Eduard Gans, Karl Hegel, Leopold von Henning, Heinrich Gustav Hotho, Philipp Marheineke, Karl Ludwig Michelet, Karl Rosenkranz, and Johannes Schulze, Berlin: Verlag von Duncker und Humblot 1832-45.

have not kept pace. Thus, they continue to produce works that are no longer appealing to the intellect of the modern age. As a result, theater in general looks lifeless and uninteresting as a genre. The challenge that confronts the modern age is then to develop drama further so that it better suits the needs of the modern audience. The present age is thus in a crisis—to use Heiberg's expression—since it wallows in an indeterminacy and uncertainty as it taps in the dark, searching for a new form of poetry in step with the time.

In this context Martensen launches into a polemic against Romantic poetry, which he regards as characteristic of the artistic crisis of the age. Romanticism presents truth and beauty as something abstract or unattainable.¹ Truth is something out of reach for human beings, a mere idea that we hope for or long after. The present age is thus lost in a relativism or agnosticism that is unsatisfying for those who take art seriously and regard it as a vessel of truth. The Romantics enjoy pointing out to their readers the transitoriness of human existence and empirical things. All truth claims and beliefs are hollow since the real truth cannot be obtained. In this crisis human beings simply wallow in a confused jumble of appearances with no truth or validity. Since, for the Romantics, we are only left with mutable and transitory appearances, there is in effect no truth. Martensen argues that the key to the solution to this crisis is to realize that there is a truth in the appearances themselves and that there is no need to posit some transcendent sphere in order to validate them.² Specifically, the speculative Idea can be found in the perceived phenomena and not outside them. Here one can start to see the point of Heiberg's *Fata Morgana*. It demonstrates this philosophical insight by means of dramatic poetry.

In this context Martensen makes his central claim that Heiberg has in fact managed to create the new poetic genre that is needed, and that *Fata Morgana* is the first example of this. Thus Martensen not only attempts to defend or explain the misunderstood work, but his claim is far more ambitious: *Fata Morgana* represents the solution to the current crisis of art. Here it is clear that there is much more riding on the question posed at the outset, namely, whether or not this work represents a new poetic

¹ Martensen, "*Fata Morgana, Eventyr-Comedie af Johan Ludvig Heiberg*," pp. 370f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 373.

genre. Now what is at stake is no less than the salvation of art as such in a confused age. For Martensen to make this plausible, he must persuade his readers that in fact Heiberg has developed a new genre; for indeed if he is simply repeating an old genre, then he too would be stuck in the same reactionary situation as the other dramatic authors who fail to realize that human spirit has moved on, while they continue to produce the same old works. Instead, Martensen's case must be that Heiberg has rightly diagnosed the artistic crisis of the day and has offered the age a concrete solution to it by means of an entirely new poetic genre that is consonant with the current historical level of spiritual and intellectual development.

Martensen tries to make his case by arguing that the human mind has reached the level of speculative thinking. It is no longer satisfied with grandiose displays for the sense, but rather now the mind wants to understand by means of the speculative Idea. For this reason speculative poetry is a perfectly understandable solution since it attempts to do just this: to demonstrate the truth of the speculative Idea by means of poetic expression or in the case of *Fata Morgana* by means of dramatic-poetic expression.¹

According to Martensen's interpretation, Heiberg's piece points the way towards human freedom. The message of the work is that we can break out of the current crisis of relativism and nihilism if we have the will for action. But in order to do so, we must follow the lead of Clotaldo, who destroys the illusions of the goddess Fata Morgana by destroying the magic pearl, which is responsible for creating the illusions.² Once this is done, then we will be able to grasp the truth of the appearances. Again the sphere of truth and beauty will be available to humanity.³ This is a defiant act that each individual must undertake for him- or herself. After he sees the beauty of his beloved Margarita, Clotaldo says in delight, "I feel my mind liberated, / When I sacrifice the image of the illusion / for the true appearance."⁴ At first, he was enchanted and infatuated by the

¹ Ibid., p. 367.

² Ibid., p. 391.

³ Ibid., p. 389.

⁴ Heiberg, *Fata Morgana*, p. 45. (*Poetiske Skrifter*, vol. 2, p. 141.) "Frigjort føler jeg mit Sind, / Naar jeg offerer Illusionens / Blendværk for det sande Skin."



Johanne Luise Heiberg and N.P. Nielsen in Fata Morgana (1838)
 (Colored copper engraving by Christian Wolmar Bruun in his
Danske Theater-Costumer, Copenhagen: n.p. 1826.)

imaginary picture of the princess in his mind, but this is discarded when he perceives her true beauty in person, that is, the empirical beauty that corresponds to the speculative Concept. At the end Clotaldo enjoins the audience to a similar act of rebellion. When he receives the Duke's sword for his heroic services, he declares, "With this sword I will be reminded of / The fight which is made for the actual; / And the poet in his world of images / Shall not himself be held in illusions / But struggle for the real truth."¹ Finally, in his triumphant speech to Fata Morgana, Clotaldo defiantly exclaims in their decisive violent encounter, "Poetry is truth, although it / Consists of images."²

¹ Heiberg, *Fata Morgana*, p. 62. (*Poetiske Skrifter*, vol. 2, p. 160.) "Ved dette Sværd skal jeg erindres om / Den Kamp, der for det Virkelige føres; / Og Digteren skal i sin Billedverden / Ei være selv i Illusioner bildet, / Men kæmpe for den virkelige Sandhed."

² Heiberg, *Fata Morgana*, p. 112. (*Poetiske Skrifter*, vol. 2, p. 212.) "Poesie er Sandhed, om den / End i Billeder bestaaer."

Martensen points out Heiberg's critical portrayal of Pierrot, the president of the Academy of Sciences, and Arlechino, the Superintendent of the Academy of Arts.¹ These figures are keen to maintain the status quo and to cultivate the world of illusions, and thus they guard the pearl as something precious. But by doing so, they prevent humanity from rising above the current crisis and seeing its correct solution. This is clearly a critical reference to Heiberg's contemporaries, who are, in his view, overly fixated on the empirical and who fail to see the truth of the speculative Idea. These are the same people that Heiberg's speculative journal *Perseus* is intended to do battle with.

Martensen attempts to understand *Fata Morgana* in the context of the general overview of the development of poetry as it appears in Hegel. According to Hegel's hierarchy, comedy is a higher dramatic form than tragedy.² While tragedy still takes seriously the reality of established customs, institutions and the external world generally, comedy calls all of this into question. In so doing, it shifts the locus of truth to the individual. Thus the principle of subjective freedom is introduced. Martensen explains, "Comedy rests on the doctrine that the mundane does not exist; its principle can be designated, to use a word which Hegel has introduced in a different context, as *acosmism* or the denial of the reality of the mundane, while tragedy, by contrast, rests on the conviction of the absolute reality of mundane endeavors and interests."³ Given that comedy is the highest dramatic form, it is natural for Heiberg to make use of it in his attempt to create something even higher. Thus, while *Fata Morgana* may look on the face of it to be simply a traditional form of comedy, in fact with its use of Hegelian speculative thinking, it presents something new that goes beyond the standard forms of comedy.

IV. Critical Evaluation

Given this analysis, it is clear that the goal of Martensen's review is far more ambitious than a simple *apologia* for a box office fiasco. In fact, he addresses a major issue about the current status of art in society in general.

¹ Martensen, "*Fata Morgana, Eventyr-Comedie* af Johan Ludvig Heiberg," pp. 396f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 376.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

Given his agreement with Heiberg about the current artistic crisis of the age, his attempt to see Heiberg's *Fata Morgana* as a solution to it makes perfect sense. Since the age now demands speculative knowing, it is only appropriate that art meet this demand by creating works that produce this speculative knowing in different artistic forms. Given that Hegel had in his lectures traced the development of art to its end in drama, which then had its end in comedy, it was natural for Heiberg to use comedy as his point of departure since that was, up until that point, the highest form of art. He then simply needed to modify this by adding a speculative dimension to it. Thus Heiberg attempts to put a new gem in the Hegelian crown by taking the next step. Just as the present age needs Hegelian speculative philosophy to emerge from its crisis of knowing, so also it needs speculative drama in order to emerge from its crisis of art.

Heiberg, Martensen and Overskou all attempt to play down the fact that the work was a disaster with the audience; they appeal to the argument that this was understandable given that Heiberg's piece was something pioneering and entirely new. However, the reaction of the audience can be interpreted in a different manner. It might well be taken as evidence that in fact there was no grand crisis of the age as Heiberg claims. Perhaps the theater-going public was not, after all, yearning for something new. Perhaps the demands of the age were met perfectly well by other more traditional works. The fact that the audience did not understand the piece can be taken as evidence that the age was perhaps not yet ready for speculative knowing. In *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, Heiberg talks about how specific gifted individuals such as Goethe or Hegel in effect run ahead of the common mass of humanity and lay the groundwork for their epoch. They thus play an ambiguous dual role as being, on the one hand, representatives of their age and, on the other, misunderstood anticipators of a new age, who will only be truly understood by a future generation.¹ Heiberg acknowledges that the work of Goethe has been at least in some respects appropriated by his contemporaries; however, Hegel's work remains poorly understood and is still waiting to be embraced by the wider masses.² With the

¹ Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, pp. 36f. *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, pp. 107f.

² Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, pp. 50f. *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, pp. 116f.

disappointing reception of the piece, Heiberg could perhaps congratulate himself as being one of the harbingers of the new age, but it could be that he simply got his diagnosis of his contemporary historical period all wrong.

With regard to the question of the novelty of *Fata Morgana* as a new genre, one can also claim that this remains an open and ambiguous issue. While Møller's objection that many poetic works contain philosophical motifs seems immediately intuitive, it cannot be denied that drama has developed enormously since Heiberg's time and perhaps his dramatic works played some role in these developments. In order to make good on the argument that Martensen wants to make on Heiberg's behalf, one would have to claim that these later developments have more and more invested drama with elements of Hegel's philosophy. This would of course be a difficult case to make since Hegel's philosophy is today no more generally accepted or intuitive than it was in Heiberg's time. However, one might nonetheless still try to argue that with the subsequent developments in, for example, the visual arts that art has become more about the cognitive dimension than about the sensible one. Indeed, today some special training in modern aesthetics or art theory is virtually a requirement for an appreciation of contemporary art works. With regard to theater specifically, the so-called theater of the absurd, made famous by Beckett and Ionesco in the 1950s and '60s, clearly rests on an abstract theoretical foundation that is not necessarily immediately obvious from the absurd dramas themselves. Thus in order to make any sense of these pieces, one must be familiar with the theory that informs them. This is something cognitive and not something empirical. On this point the Hegelian aestheticians seem to be correct: modern art appeals more to the intellect than to the senses. But Heiberg's influence and role in this wider development of art remains an open question.