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## **Misogyni and Vampirism in Strindberg**

Well, over the years, August Strindberg has gained a strong reputation for being a more or less ruthless misogynist. By definition, a misogynist is someone who hates or strongly dislikes women. But is Strindberg's reputation well deserved?

There is no doubt that Strindberg in many ways was a highly reactionary man. But he was also a rebel, one who dared to think new thoughts and fight for his opinions.

Generally one can still say that Strindberg had very little time for the so-called women's rights movement, bourgeois women's demands for voting rights and such. Very often Strindberg portrays the relationship between men and women as a brutal battle, almost as a Darwinian struggle for life and death.

It is, however, difficult to read Strindberg's statements about women without relating them to his private life, especially his three marriages.

Strindberg's first marriage was with the Finnish aristocrat and actress Siri von Essen. Their stormy marriage lasted almost 15 years and they had three children together. During the marriage, he wrote

about this relationship in the novel *Confessions of a Fool*. (*En dåres försvarstal*, 1887-1888).

In many ways, the marriage between Strindberg and Siri was quite radical. Firstly, she was already married when he met her, secondly, she was nine months pregnant when she married Strindberg. Furthermore, she was no classic wife for home and husband and children, but a distinctly artistic soul.

During his marriage to Siri, Strindberg experienced himself persecuted in Sweden, and they moved abroad. In these years also Strindberg's paranoia and morbid jealousy escalated. Strindberg felt in this respect confident that Siri was unfaithful, cheating him with other men and women – that she really was a lesbian – and that their children were not really his. They were divorced in 1892.

Strindberg's next marriage was to the 23 years younger Frida Uhl from Austria; writer, translator, dramaturg. Also this marriage was rather stormy. Strindberg suffered from severe depression and furious jealousy, and the marriage was repeatedly interrupted, only to be resurrected again. In a letter Strindberg writes that Frida probably not is healthy, because she suffers from the delusion that **he** might be mentally ill! At the end of the marriage, he doubted whether their daughter Kerstin, whom he also sometimes regarded as his rival in relation to Frida, was not really his biological child.

Strindberg and Frida were married for four years, from 1893 to 1897, and parts of the marriage is depicted in the autobiographical

novel *Inferno* (written in French in 1896-97, and including alchemy, and occult, Swedenborgist reflections).

Strindberg's third and last marriage was to the Norwegian actress Harriet Bosse, almost 30 years younger than himself. They were married in the years from 1901 to 1904. Harriet Bosse herself has told us how it began: "Strindberg laid his hands on my shoulders and looked deeply and earnestly at me and asked: - Do you want to have a child with me, Miss Bosse? I curtsied and replied quite hypnotized: Yes, thank you. And so we were engaged."

Strindberg's marriage to Harriet was also problematic, but no doubt that he desired her deeply, yes, he even claimed to be in telepathic sexual contact with her! Nevertheless: Strindberg believed that Harriet had twisted up his head and he holds her responsible as he tries to push her out of his life. Finally, he informs her that he has replaced her with "a small child at seventeen, who like you, can smile as you."

This "child" was Fanny Faulkner, Strindbergs last love.

Strindberg's relationship with women in his life seems to have been generally complicated, as his divorces testifies. Strindberg has often been identified as misogynist, but the justification for this has, in recent years, increasingly been questioned. Eivor Martinus has – in the book *Little devil, little angel! [Lite djävul, lite ängel!, 2007]* – reviewed a large body of letters between Strindberg and his women.

Martinus' conclusion is that Strindberg could not possibly have hated women, although he was often in conflict with them.

But there are still several statements that Strindberg makes, which must be characterized as misogynistic. In the preface to *Miss Julie* [*Fröken Julie*, 1888], he writes: "Aside from the fact that Jean is now climbing upwards, he stands over Miss Julie because he is a man. Sexually he is the aristocrat through his male strength, his finer developed mind and his power of initiative."

And in a letter to Verner von Heidenstam in 1888, where he among other women mentions the Swedish writer Victoria Benedictsson, Strindberg writes:

The woman as such is small and stupid, and therefore evil, shall as the appendage of the man be humiliated as a barbarian or a thief. She is only useable as our ovaries and womb, at her best, however, as a sheath [sw. "slida"; ≈ vagina]!

*Getting Married* (Swedish: *Giftas*) is a collection of short stories. The first volume was first published in 1884 and contains twelve stories depicting "twenty marriages of every variety," some of which present women in an egalitarian light. The first volume also contains a long preface, in which, in addition to his support for women's rights, Strindberg offered criticisms of the campaign (such as its class bias), as well as of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879, the collection contains a story entitled "A Doll's House").

Strindberg finished a second volume of stories (*Giftas II*) dealing in part with "all the less common forms of 'marriage'" such as "pederasty and lesbianism," in the summer of 1885. [published in October 1886.]

While the first two stories are as sympathetic to women as some of those in the first volume, many border on misogyny. Its preface blamed women for religious persecution, war, and all of history's other misfortunes. Both volumes were written at the time when Strindberg was still married to Siri von Essen, though the publication of the second volume probably had a disastrous effect on their marriage.

The *Getting Married*-short story collections (I & II) are quite similar. They are both about the relationship between the sexes and how Strindberg felt it should be like.

In the preface of *Getting Married I* Strindberg develops his views on women's issues. And here Strindberg propounds many controversial views, as:

- that it is the man who is suppressed because he has to support the woman
- it is the prostitutes that exploits the paying man
- all married women are prostitutes because they may require financial support of the man
- the only purpose of marriage is children and a childless marriage is no real marriage

- a married woman has no right to possess money, everything should belong to the man who is responsible for the family
- women have no right to demand the right to work, they've got all the time, but are so lazy that they only bother if it is necessary for the family to get by (and barely even that)
- women have had the opportunity to go to war during the whole course of history, but they have preferred to let men do the dying and therefore they have no right to complain about anything
- men have built the entirety of civilization and if women choose to go out into the community, they only lean back lazily on what men already have developed.

And he also attacks Ibsen strongly, arguing that Ibsen in *A Doll's House* has caricatured the so-called culture woman and man of culture.<sup>1</sup>

In an article called "From misogyny to the crisis of masculinity. Strindberg as gender construction" ["Från kvinnohat till maskulinitetskris. Strindberg som genuskonstruktion", 2006] Anna Westerståhl Stenport claims that

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<sup>1</sup>Låtom oss nu se huru Ibsen, av okända, obegripliga skäl, karikerat kulturkvinnan och kulturmannen i sitt *Et Dukkehjem*, som blivit en codex för alla kvinnofrågans ivrare. Et Dukkehjem är en teaterpjäs. Kanske skriven för en stor skådespelerska, vars prestationer i det sfinxartade alltid kunna påräkna succés. Författaren har begått en stor orättvisa mot mannen, då han icke anför några ursäkter i ärftligheten till hans förmån men väl till hustruns, vilka senare ursäkter han många gånger betonar då han talar om hennes far. Men låtom oss skärskåda denna Nora, som nu blivit alla fördärvade kulturkvinnors "ideal".

Strindberg's so-called misogyny is partly about the search for a masculine identity during a period when even the question of searching for such a seemingly obvious given, man's image is taboo. But the complexity of gender construction is evident in Strindberg's texts.<sup>2</sup>

Well, then, what has the term misogyny to do with the concept of vampirism?

The play *The Pelican* (1907) portrays the mother as a vampire. The mother's vampirism is suggested by the stepson, as he at the wedding of the daughter compares her mother with a pelican, which is said to give his blood to his children. But the real pelican turns out to be the deceased father, who has sacrificed himself for the children. The mother turns out to be the real vampire, who has taken the best of food for herself, making her children weak and malnourished.

There are a number of vampire-like characters in Strindberg's writings. His vampires are primarily people who consume other people, in the sense that they attempt to dominate them.

Strindberg's use of the vampire motif emphasizes often the sucking of mental energy, not necessarily blood or other body fluids. This is in line with another concept that abounded at this time: the psychic

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Westerståhl Stenport, "Från kvinnohat till maskulinitetskris. Strindberg som genuskonstruktion", in *Det gäckande könet. Strindberg och genusteori*, red. Anna Cavallin & Anna Westerståhl Stenport, Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag, 2006, p. 13, my translation from Swedish.

vampire. Suggestion og psychic vampirism is thus topics of Strindberg's age and time.

In his book *Strindberg and the Horror*, Henrik Johnsson claims:

The motive of vampirism appears in Strindberg's writing often as fear: fear of influence, love, degeneration, but also fear for the dependence itself. Being dependent on other people is a barrier to the individual quest to feel unique as a human being. This is especially a problem the vampires in Strindberg's writing may encounter.<sup>3</sup>

Well, also Laura in *The Father (Fadren, 1887)* is a kind of vampire, all the while that she sucks the physical energy out of The Captain [Ryttmästarn] by sowing doubt about his paternity. And finally he lies there, helpless in his straitjacket, like an empty wreck, literally heart attached, all the joy of life sucked out of him.

In *The Ghost Sonata (Spöksonaten, 1907)* the grotesque vampire Cook usurps the members of the family she is supposed to feed. She feels entitled to suck the blood out of the privileged classes, who – for their part – feed on their servants.

The vampire Old Man in the same play, who draws life-strength from the young Student, is exposed as a former servant of the Colonel's servant, while the Colonel himself is unmasked as a former parasite in other people's kitchens.

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<sup>3</sup> Henrik Johnsson, *Strindberg och skräcken. Skrächmotiv och identitetstematik i August Strindbergs författarskap*, Stockholm: Bokförlaget h:ström – Text och kultur, 2009, p. 105, my translation from Swedish.



The entire society thus appears as a giant mechanism of mutual vampirism and cannibalism, enclosed in Strindberg's funhouse where everyone is related to everyone else through deception, adultery, exploitation, enslavement – and through the constant and unpredictable rearrangement of roles.

This provides a leitmotif found in several Chamber Plays, that of vampirism, manifest in the characters' financial, social, emotional and spiritual usurpation of one other.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In *A Blue Book* (*En blå bok I-IV*, publ 1907-12) there is a sketch called "The Vampire" ("Vampyren"), which takes the form of a dialogue between a teacher and his student. The teacher describes how he introduced a farm boy called Cinnober to his friends, family, publishers and actors, only to find that the boy Cinnober had stolen them all and taken over the teacher's life and writing career. So, Strindberg's formulation of vampirism is not about conventional blood sucking. Instead, it often consists of one character inserting himself into another character's domestic or professional life and taking it over for personal gain. [Besides: Martha Joann Kissling, *Strindberg and Vampirism*, Butler University, 1974; it has not been possible for me to obtain the book]