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Strindberg: Drama and Theatre



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The Voice and Position of the Lower Class in Strindberg's Swedish Historical Plays¹

In the early Eighteen Eighties Strindberg experimented with a new way of writing Swedish history: history was to be seen from the point of view of the common people, and everyday life in various social environments, including their material culture, was to be described. What he put forward in prose works such as *Gamla Stockholm* (*Old Stockholm*, 1880-82)², *Svenska Folket* (*The Swedish People*, 1881-82)³ and *Svenska öden och äventyr* (*Swedish Destinies and Adventures*, 1882-83; 1883-1905)⁴ was a deliberate and provocative change of perspective compared to the prevailing conservative discourse, according to which the history of the country corresponded to that of its monarchs⁵. Contradicting that fiction in a so-called cultural history was part of Strindberg's realistic breakthrough; if real Swedish life had taken place only to

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¹ I thank my friend and colleague Patrick Johnson, lector of English at the University of Pisa, for revising my English text.

² A. Strindberg, *Gamla Stockholm*, *Samlade Verk*, 8, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2006.

³ A. Strindberg, *Svenska Folket*, I, *Samlade Verk*, 9, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2001 and A. Strindberg, *Svenska Folket*, II, *Samlade Verk*, 10, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2002.

⁴ A. Strindberg, *Svenska öden och äventyr*, I, *Samlade Verk*, 13, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1981; A. Strindberg, *Svenska öden och äventyr*, II, *Samlade Verk*, 14, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1990. The democratic standpoint applies especially to the first volume, i.e., to the stories written and published in 1882 and 1883. The second volume, which contains the stories written and published between 1883 and 1905, testifies to the shift from a democratic to an aristocratic and Nietzschean standpoint.

⁵ In *Svenska Folket* Strindberg attacked the thesis of the influential romantic writer and historian Erik Gustaf Geijer. His attack was strategically stronger and more direct in the paratext (the back cover presentations) than in the text, which provoked a lively, but sometimes superficial debate among his contemporaries. See Strindberg, *Svenska Folket*, II, cit., pp. 346-50 and 532-37. The question is discussed in C. Kretz, P. Stam, "Kommentarer", in *ibid.*, pp. 371-537, especially pp. 415-75.

a limited extent in the king's castle and in the rooms of power, who, then, was to write that 'other' history?⁶

Representing the voice and expectations of the people, though, was never an easy task. Already as a young writer Strindberg had recognised the risks involved in the role of intellectual and spiritual leader. The ambiguous voice of the lower class in his first masterpiece, the prose version of the historical play *Mäster Olof* (*Master Olof*, 1872, published in 1881), deserves attention in this respect.

In the second act, the dialogue of four minor characters at the tavern takes on the function of a modern chorus, because the opinions expressed by the community through dramatic dialogue work as exposition and comment on the state of the realm from the point of view of the lower classes. In particular, the words of the farmer from Småland reveal some uncomfortable aspects of the abuse of power by the new king Gustav Vasa and the nobles⁷. A critical social note is struck through humour and a colloquial tone:

WINDRANK: Kors är kungen på det maneret! Jag trodde han höll adeln i örat!

SMÅMÅLÄNNINGEN: Han? Nej han låter dem födas med rättighet att fälla ek på mina ägor, om jag hade några kvar, för ser ni jag har haft en jordlapp en gång men så kom en herre och sa' att min morfars mor fått låna dem av hans farmors far och så var jag ifrån den historien⁸.

Later in the same act, however, the community of people will turn into a mob, when Master Olof, the spiritual leader of the Swedish Reformation, invites them to rebel against the authority of the pope. Although they are socially and spiritually oppressed and may complain, they feel disturbed by the intellectual who proposes too great and sudden a change. They shout and throw stones at the very person who wants to set them free:

⁶ See U. Zander, "August Strindberg och den kulturhistoriska utmaningen", in *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider. Bruk av och debatter om svensk historia från sekelskifte till sekelskifte*, Lund, Nordic Academic Press, 2001, pp. 76-80, and C. Kretz, P. Stam, "Strindberg och den nya vetenskapen på modet: kulturhistoria", in Strindberg, *Svenska Folket*, II, cit., pp. 381-93.

⁷ Cf. H. G. Carlson, "Strindberg and the Carnival of History", in B. Steene (ed.), "Strindberg and History", in *Scandinavian Studies*, 62, 1990, 1, pp. 39-52: p. 48: "In a number of Strindberg's history plays and historical studies [...] the people often serve, like a Greek chorus, as a collective witness to the truth of Society's Secret, a reminder that lies must eventually be penetrated".

⁸ A. Strindberg, *Mäster Olof, Samlade Verk*, 5, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1994, p. 48.

(Scenen är tom ett ögonblick och man hör blott Olofs stämman än starkare – avbruten av rop och stenkastning.)

CHRISTINA: (kommer ensam tillbaka och stänger dörren inifrån, kastar sig ned på en böpall – Starka slag höras på dörren – tumult ute i kyrkan. Detta tystnar och Olof kommer ned med blodig panna och förstört utseende.)

OLOF: (utan att se Christina kastar sig i en stol.) Förgäves! De vilja icke! Jag löser bojan på fången och han slår mig, jag säger åt honom "Du är fri"! och han tror mig icke! – Är det ordet då så stort att det ej kan fattas!⁹

The biblical motif of a people's leader chosen by God to become a prophet and, if necessary, a martyr, becomes a recurrent echo throughout *Mäster Olof*. At the tavern, after the above-mentioned scene with the farmer from Småland, another biblical reference anticipates the motif of common people throwing stones at someone who is despised and unwanted. Olof's explicit identification with Jesus as he is defending a prostitute – "Kom fram den som är ren och kasta första stenen!"¹⁰ – is in fact further evidence that the Bible is the most important intertext in Strindberg's first Swedish historical play¹¹.

Shakespeare's work represents another important heritage for *Mäster Olof* and, in general, for Strindberg's historical plays. The first critic to explore this path was indeed Strindberg himself; this occurred in the essays on Shakespeare and historical drama from 1908-09, which were connected to the Swedish playwright's activity for the *Intima Teatern* (Intimate Theatre)¹². And ever since the seminal analysis by Martin Lamm¹³ scholars have followed the critical path suggested by Strindberg. Strindberg used Shakespeare as a model within, again, a realistic project for historical drama, according to which even the main characters ought to be represented as ordinary human beings, for example by including their domestic and intimate sphere¹⁴. By treating the protagonists

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57. See John, 8, 7.

¹¹ H. Sandberg, "Kommentarer", in *ibid.*, pp. 457-551: pp. 482-84. Cf. M. H. Wikander, *The Play of Truth and State. Historical Drama from Shakespeare to Brecht*, Baltimore-London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 160-63.

¹² A. Strindberg, *Teater och Intima Teatern, Samlade Verk*, 64, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1999, pp. 43-115, 129-220 and 238-43.

¹³ See M. Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer*, I, Stockholm, Bonniers, 1924, pp. 106-21; M. Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer*, II, Stockholm, Bonniers, 1926, pp. 101-8, 114, 118, 131, 139-40, 162, 417; and M. Lamm, *August Strindberg*, Stockholm, Aldus-Bonniers, 1968 (1 ed. 1948), pp. 27-35 and 278-81.

¹⁴ A. Strindberg, "Julius Caesar. Shakespeares historiska drama", in *Teater och Intima Teatern*, cit., pp. 89-128: pp. 89-115.

not as monuments but as complex or even “characterless” characters, as Walter Johnson suggests, Strindberg made them share the same condition that affects mankind in general: they belonged either to the higher or to the lower class¹⁵. This approach also affected the polyphonic use of voices and the way in which folk scenes and subplots were interwoven with the main plot, another aspect of the Shakespearean heritage. The traditional idea of separating themes, language styles and registers according to the social status of the speakers was rejected by Strindberg, and where Shakespeare still distinguished between high, serious speech in blank verse and the low and often comic prose speech of the subplot, all Strindberg’s characters – both high and low, in *Mäster Olof* as well as in the later historical plays – share a modern Swedish prose. The written and the spoken language come closer to each other¹⁶, and the humble characters can interpret the comic *and* the serious subjects of the play. Reflecting upon historical drama in *Öppna brev till Intima Teatern* (*Open Letters to the Intimate Theatre*), Strindberg described, with retrospective accuracy, the question at stake at the time of writing *Mäster Olof*:

Min medfödda lust att gå vidare än jag lärt, att utveckla och fullkomna, gjorde mig till granskare och anmärkare. Jag sade mig att för vår tvivlande och undersökande tid med våra föreställningar om människorätt och människovärde, det icke gick an att göra sådan utvärtes skillnad på “bättre” och “sämre” folk, att furstar, hovmän och vederlikar talade vältalighet på vers, under det män av folket talade gatspråk och förlöjligades i komiska lägen. Följaktligen slog jag undan de höga klackarne på de höga och skodde under de lägre stånden liten smula.

Sålunda kom *Mäster Olof* i manuskript¹⁷.

¹⁵ See W. Johnson, *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1963, in particular pp. 33-41, 73-4 and 279-87.

¹⁶ See E. Törnqvist, *Det talade ordet. Om Strindbergs dramadialog*, Stockholm, Carlssons, 2001, pp. 11-20 and 133.

¹⁷ A. Strindberg, “Ur några Förord till Historiska Dramerna”, in *Teater och Intima Teatern*, cit., pp. 193-206, p. 195. This aesthetic intention is already formulated in a retrospective analysis from 1887, in the chapter of the third part of the autobiography *Tjänstekvinnans son* (*The Son of a Servant*) that deals with *Mäster Olof*: A. Strindberg, *Tjänstekvinnans son*, III-IV, *Samlade Verk*, 21, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1996, pp. 22-9; see in particular p. 23: “Alltså ingen vers; ingen deklamation; ingen enhet i rummet. Handlingen själv skulle betinga tablåernas och akternas antal. Mänskorna fingo dessutom tala ett enkelt vardagspråk så som människor bruka utom scenen; tragiskt och komiskt, stort och smått omväxla såsom i livet. Det var gamla nyheter allt det där, men tiden var inne att återupptaga dem, menade Johan”.

As Herbert Lindenberger observes, “[...] the history of historical drama in the nineteenth century reveals a persistent battle between high and low language, between high and low personages, for dominance of the form. Within specific national traditions certain works – for example [...] *Master Olof* in Sweden – count as landmarks in which lowly people and/or lowly language successfully invaded a form hitherto confined to higher matters”¹⁸.

It is, then, not by chance that the Bible and the Christian sources played a central role in Strindberg's realistic project. The circumstance confirms at least what Erich Auerbach put forward in his analysis of the representation of reality in Western literature. The story told by the Gospels – a deity who becomes human, cares for the last, thereby experiences the utmost degradation and humiliation, and finally dies on a cross – is in Auerbach's reading the culmination of a Jewish religious tradition where the most humble and everyday situations of life can testify to the metaphysical dimension, the presence of God. In this sense the lowest and the highest, the most humble and the most sublime can meet in the same representation. Consequently, the aesthetic revolution provoked by the Jewish-Christian tradition in the Western literary canon is, according to Auerbach, precisely the abolition of a sharp separation between ‘high’ themes, social settings, language styles, registers and genres on one side, and ‘low’ ones on the other¹⁹. Although Auerbach does not study the case of Strindberg²⁰, his analysis gives us, I think, a more profound understanding of the roots of the realistic breakthrough accomplished by the Swedish writer – a writer who was considerably indebted to the Lutheran tradition with its close relation to the word of the Bible.

¹⁸ H. Lindenberger, “Experiencing History”, in Steene (ed.), *Strindberg and History*, cit., pp. 7-23: p. 17. Cf. also G. Printz-Påhlson, “Historical Drama and Historical Fiction: the Example of Strindberg”, in Steene (ed.), *Strindberg and History*, cit., pp. 24-38: p. 25, where, following Lukács' analysis in *The Historical Novel*, it is pointed out that while the historical novel of the nineteenth century is basically democratic, as it depicts the Common Man's life and viewpoints, the contemporary (and more aristocratic) historical drama can go through a certain degree of “novelization”. See also *ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁹ E. Auerbach, “Sacrae Scripturae sermo humilis”, in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, Helsinki, 1941, pp. 57-67 [Italian edition: in E. Auerbach, *Studi su Dante*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1999 (1 ed. 1963), pp. 167-75], and E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Bern, Francke, 1946 [Italian edition: *Mimesis. Il realismo nella letteratura occidentale*, I-II, Torino, Einaudi, 2000 (1 ed. 1956)]. Cf. H. G. Carlson, *Genom Inferno. Bildens magi och Strindbergs förnyelse*, Stockholm, Carlssons, 1995, where Strindberg's realism is discussed with reference to Bakhtin's concept of “carnival”; in particular pp. 97-100.

²⁰ See the important chapter about Naturalism, “Germinie Lacerteux”, in Auerbach, *Mimesis. Il realismo nella letteratura occidentale*, II, cit., pp. 269-304.

The passage quoted above from Strindberg's *Öppna brev till Intima Teatern* reveals the author's advanced consciousness also as regards his hermeneutical approach to historical drama and historical literature in general: the language spoken by the characters on stage must be, according to him, an artistic expression of the present time that recognizes the past and makes it knowable – what Hans Georg Gadamer has termed “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*)²¹. As a writer of his own age, characterized by growing democratic ideals, Strindberg was aware of viewing and re-creating the Swedish past in a certain way.

When, some twenty-five years later, Strindberg took up writing historical plays again, he was in several respects far away from his radical standpoint and social commitment of the Seventies and Eighties. His earlier statements about real Swedish history being something different from royal history may seem a paradox, if we consider that, between 1899 and 1909, he wrote eleven plays dedicated to Swedish monarchs and leaders²². We know that it is not a paradox, as we are acquainted with Strindberg's system of contradictions and with the different stages he went through in his intellectual development. In this respect, a significant turning point as regards Strindberg's evaluation of the role of individual personality in history is witnessed by the author's critical notes on *Svenska Folket*, published as late as 1909 in the fourth and last part of his autobiography *Tjänstekvinnans son* (*The Son of a Servant*), but written between 1886 and 1887. With his typical mixture of commitment and detachment towards the life and works of the fictional protagonist Johan, the autobiographical narrator recalls:

Hittills hade man sett historien såsom frambragt av mer eller mindre starka personliga viljor ställda upp och understödda av intressen, man hade sett försynen regera ödena genom gudavalda människor, och man hade fått historien skriven av de gudavaldes privilegierade.

²¹ H. G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1960 [Italian edition: *Verità e metodo*, Milano, Bompiani, 1997 (1 ed. 1983), in particular pp. 312-63]. Cf. Lindenberger, “Experiencing History”, cit., p. 21.

²² The shift of perspective is pointed out early in E. Hedén, “Strindbergs Gustaf Adolf”, in *Nordisk tidskrift*, 1900, pp. 559-69: pp. 560-61. Cf. H. V. E. Palmblad, *Strindberg's Conception of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1927, pp. 93-116; Lamm, *August Strindberg*, cit., p. 272. The later emphasis on monarchs and leaders is reflected in Strindberg's historical prose as well; see the last stories in Strindberg, *Svenska öden och äventyr*, II, cit., “Vid likvakan i Tistedalen”, “Stråmannen” and “En kunglig revolution” (pp. 282-360), and the whole concept of A. Strindberg, *Nya svenska öden, Samlade Verk*, 56, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1998, published in 1906 and also called *Hövdingaminnen* by its author.

Nu skulle en man från de nedre klasserna hålla räfsken, nu ville en oprivilegierad skriva historien sådan den tett sig nerifrån och man skulle se huru underbelysning verkade på de monumentvordna historiska personligheterna. Att detta nu en gång skedde var icke alls illa, och överdrifter måste botas med överdrifter, men sanningen kom han kanske knappt närmare än de andra. Huvudfelet i hans metod blev med nödvändighet det att han överskattade de härskande lagarne, och underskattade personligheten²³.

There is, still, something of a paradox in the fact that the idea of providential history, which Strindberg again criticized in 1886-87 as old-fashioned, became the underlying concept of his later historical Swedish plays. Most of these plays, written after the Inferno Crisis, in fact present a transcendental view of history, according to which monarchs and leaders are uncommon individuals in the hands of a divine will providentially ruling the destinies of nations and of the world. This providential reading of history was fundamental, and it characterised other works written by Strindberg during the first years of the twentieth century. His vision was reinforced in the series of articles which form "Världshistoriens mystik" ("The Mysticism of World History", 1903)²⁴, and, as Strindberg's historical imagination was constantly at work, those ideas were again translated in the collection of stories *Historiska miniatyrer* (*Historical Miniatures*, 1905)²⁵, creating, as Conny Svensson has shown, an intertextual web between historical plays, philosophy of history and historical prose fiction²⁶.

How, then, did Strindberg use the voice and position of the lower class in the historical plays within the new interpretative frame? Strindberg in fact stressed continuity rather than discontinuity, when he, again in the *Öppna brev*

²³ Strindberg, *Tjänstekvinnans son*, III-IV, cit., p. 139.

²⁴ A. Strindberg, "Världshistoriens mystik", in *Essäer, tidningsartiklar och andra prosatexter 1900-1912, Samlade Verk*, 71, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2004, pp. 9-58.

²⁵ A. Strindberg, *Historiska miniatyrer, Samlade Verk*, 54, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1997.

²⁶ C. Svensson, *Strindberg om världshistorien*, Hedemora, Gidlunds, 2000. Svensson argues that "Världshistoriens mystik" has been used as too obvious an evidence of the idea of history expressed by Strindberg in the historical plays, whereas Svensson suggests that the articles of "Världshistoriens mystik" reveal a more thorough evolutionary vision of a conscious will governing world history, and he studies the closer link between those articles and the stories of *Historiska miniatyrer*. See in particular pp. 9-107. See also H. G. Carlson, "Strindberg and the Dream of the Golden Age: The Poetics of History", in G. Stockenström (ed.), *Strindberg's Dramaturgy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp. 27-40.

till *Intima Teatern*, referred to the aesthetics of *Mäster Olof* and to Shakespeare's example:

När jag efter 25 års förlopp återvände till det historiska dramat, behövde jag icke hysa 1872 års betänkligheter, då jag ville teckna historiska män och kvinnor, och därför återgick jag till min dramaturgi från första *Mäster Olof*. Jag tog till min uppgift, efter läraren Shakespeare, att teckna människor med stort och smått; att icke skräda det rätta ordet; att låta det historiska vara bakgrund; och att förkorta historiska tidslängder efter nutida teaterns fordringar för att undvika krönikans eller berättelsens odramatiska form²⁷.

Dealing with *Folkungasagan* (*The Saga of the Folkungs*, 1899) and *Gustav Vasa* (1899), Birgitta Steene defines the Shakespearean heritage in Strindberg as “[...] the method of painting history on a broad canvas. The effect”, she continues, “is a vivid and animated picture of a bustling world where the grotesque mingles with the pathetic, and where a whole age comes to life on the stage. Strindberg’s conscious adaptation of Shakespeare’s ‘free composition’ allows him maximum variety – widely spaced character grouping and wide changes of scenes, parallel actions, and multiple plots”²⁸. Again while discussing *Folkungasagan* and *Gustav Vasa*, Steene stresses “[...] the juxtaposition of high political affairs with familiar pictures of low life. As in *Henry IV* the vision of reality is expanded to include court and tavern, king and country folk [...]”²⁹.

Further evidence of continuity is Strindberg’s reuse of his knowledge of Sweden’s and Stockholm’s cultural history in order to create the atmosphere and the setting of the plays. And as regards the religious contents, the Bible is as fundamental in the later historical plays as it was in *Mäster Olof*³⁰. Furthermore, Strindberg, while pursuing new, ambitious and extensive historical research for the later plays³¹, went back to the same, more popular historical

²⁷ Strindberg, “Ur några Förord till Historiska Dramerna”, in *Teater och Intima Teatern*, cit., pp. 195-6. The scruples (betänkligheter) refer to the fact that a realistic treatment of national monuments like Olaus Petri and Gustav Vasa, as human beings, was unacceptable in Sweden in 1872. The long journey to recognition, from 1872 to 1881, of the prose version of *Mäster Olof* is important in the history of Swedish theatre. The renewed success on stage and canonization of this play in 1897 and 1899 were also an incitement for Strindberg to write the new historical plays.

²⁸ B. Steene, “Shakespearean Elements in Historical Plays of Strindberg”, in *Comparative Literature*, 11, 1959, pp. 209-20: p. 215.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³⁰ Cf. Törnqvist, *Det talade ordet*, cit., pp. 186-7.

³¹ See G. Stockenström, “Strindberg och historiens Karl XII”, in *Meddelanden från Strindbergssällskapet*, 47-48, 1971, pp. 15-37: pp. 30-6; G. Stockenström, “Charles XII

sources that had supported *Svenska Folket* and *Svenska öden och äventyr*, such as *Berättelser ur svenska historien* (Tales from Swedish History, 1823-79) by A. Fryxell, *Svenska folkets sagohäfder* (*The Legendary History of the Swedish People*, 1839-70) by A. A. Afzelius and *Berättelser ur svenska historien* (*Tales from Swedish History*, 1860-76) by C. G. Starbäck and P. O. Bäckström³².

Strindberg's later historical plays adopt the democratic standpoint of *Svenska Folket* and *Svenska öden och äventyr* as one of their elements³³, and the voice and position of the lower class constantly accompany the main and, so to speak, royal course of events unfolding on stage³⁴. The choral function of the opening act is recurrent in most of the plays. In the first acts of both *Folkungasagan* and *Gustav Vasa*, the state of the realm is commented on critically by the voice of the common people. To be sure, the central issue of both plays is religious, and it concerns the ruler as a tool of Providence. Both kings are caught in a moment of doubt, fear and crisis, naked and alone in front of God, going through a process of guilt (either inherited or personal), expiation and atonement. In spite of the biblical and mythical references³⁵, it is however difficult not to see how this kind of plot also conveys a social and political reading by Strindberg. The making of Sweden as a united and strong nation, governed by fair laws, appears as nothing less than the fulfilment of a divine will, of which both Magnus Eriksson in the 14th and Gustav Vasa in the 16th century are, despite their tor-

as Historical Drama", in Stockenström (ed.), *Strindberg's Dramaturgy*, cit., pp. 40-55: pp. 43-4; and O. Kindstedt, *Strindbergs Kristina: historiegestaltning och kärleksstrategier. Studier i dramats skapelseprocess*, Uppsala-Stockholm, Skrifter utgivna av Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen vid Uppsala universitet-Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988, pp. 52-3 and 60-5.

³² Cf. A. Strindberg, "Begreppet Stilisera m.m.", in *Teater och Intima Teatern*, cit., pp. 238-43: pp. 239-40.

³³ Hedén, "Strindbergs Gustaf Adolf", cit., pp. 562-63, stresses for example the consistency of Strindberg's ideas about the Thirty Years War from the time of *Svenska öden och äventyr*; and Stockenström, "Strindberg och historiens Karl XII", cit., shows the coherence of Strindberg's ideological hostility against Charles XII. Zander, *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider*, cit., p. 79, sums up: "Svenska folket utgjorde en plattform för de historiska dramer som han skrev 1899-1909, men då hade, som Gunnar Brandell uttryckt det, 'Sveriges historia också för Strindberg blivit dess konungars'".

³⁴ Johnson, *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*, cit., pp. 73-4, observes that Strindberg's later historical plays build upon the achievements of his naturalistic masterpieces as regards the realistic dialogue and the concept of the "characterless character".

³⁵ H. G. Carlson, "Christian Ritual and Mythic Pattern in *Gustav Vasa*", in O. Bandle (et al.) (ed.), *Strindbergs Dramen im Lichte neuerer Methodendiskussionen*, Basel-Frankfurt am Main, Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1981, pp. 83-96, considers the social and political dimensions carefully, but within a polyphonic, mythical structure, which in his view is more interesting and valuable.

ment, special tools³⁶. A patriotic reading is thus embedded in the religious plot of *Folkungasagan* and *Gustav Vasa*, and the same is true for later plays such as *Engelbrekt* (1901), *Siste riddaren* (*The Last of the Knights*, 1909), *Riksföreståndaren* (*The Regent*, 1909) and *Bjälbo-Jarlen* (*Earl Birger of Bjälbo*, 1909). Moreover, as several scholars maintain, the whole production of Strindberg's Swedish historical plays between 1899 and 1909 ought to be seen as the playwright's attempt to adapt himself and respond to dominating nationalistic currents in Swedish cultural life around the turn of the century³⁷.

In a collective scene of the first act of *Folkungasagan*, where the representatives of the nation are gathered in front of their sovereign, Magnus Eriksson is shown as the *good* king for the lower class, as well as for the whole country³⁸. He has protected the underprivileged farmers against the abuses of the lords, giving the country a national code of laws, and he has abolished serfdom:

BÖNDER

BÖNDERNAS TALMAN: Herre och Konung, som landslag och loven givit, Bondens lås och lada fridlost, åker och teg i förvar tagit mot herrarnes hov och klöv, Konung och Herre, hell och hyllning!

BÖNDERNA: Hell och hyllning Konung och Herre!

MAGNUS: Utvalde av Sveriges Allmoge, Frid och lycka! med lag och med lydriad!

³⁶ See Johnson, *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*, cit., pp. 73-113.

³⁷ See C. Rosenqvist, *Hem till historien. August Strindberg, sekelskiftet och "Gustav Adolf"*, Umeå-Stockholm, Acta Universitatis Umensis-Almqvist & Wiksell, 1984, pp. 9-87; U. Zander, "August Strindbergs dramatiska historier", in *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider*, cit., pp. 109-15; and U. B. Lagerroth, "Tillbaka till den svenska historien", in T. Forser (ed.), *Ny svensk teaterhistoria, 2, 1800-talets teater*, Hedemora, Gidlunds, 2007, pp. 193-205. According to B. Sundberg, "'Guds hands menniskor' – ett stråkdrag genom Strindbergs historiedramatik", in B. Landgren (ed.), *Att välja sin samtid*, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1986, pp. 199-210, the religious and providential reading in Strindberg's historical plays redeems the flat patriotic message they contain. In my opinion the making of Sweden is for Strindberg intertwined with his providential teleology.

³⁸ By the time of the play Strindberg had changed his opinion on Magnus Eriksson, from a negative one (traditional in Swedish historiography since the attacks of Heliga Birgitta, Saint Bridget of Sweden, against him) to a positive one (and, at the same time, negative about Birgitta). See M. M. Roy, "History Revisited and Rewritten: August Strindberg, Magnus Smek, and Heliga Birgitta", in A. C. Gavel Adams, T. I. Leiren (ed.), *Stage and Screen: Studies in Scandinavian Drama and Film. Essays in honor of Birgitta Steene*, Seattle, DreamPlay Press Northwest, 2000, pp. 105-18.

TRÄLARNE

TRÄLARNES TALMAN: Trälarna, o Konung, har du återlöst! Hell Fridsfurste och Frälsare... (*På knä*)

MAGNUS: (*reser sig, förtvivlad.*) Ve, ve! Icke så! Hädare! Må himlen icke höra dig förmätne. Herren din Gud skall du tillbedja, icke mig, fattig, syndig människa! – Gån i frid och frihet! (*Sätter sig*)³⁹.

The solemnity of this collective and national scene is conveyed, as we can see, through rather high and archaic language. However, the same paradox as in *Mäster Olof* occurs when, in the fourth act, the common people are easily manipulated by the king's enemies and scorn the deposed Magnus Eriksson, by this time in a more appropriate colloquial tone. As a mob, they have failed to recognize their true and fair leader:

BAGAREN: Tyst, där kommer kungen!

MUNSKÄNKEN: Nej, se den Tosken!

MAGNUS: (*in, i vit tunika med rep om livet bärande ett stort svart krusifix åtföljd av två gråbrödrumunkar med tända ljus i händerna; de gå mot kyrkoporten.*)

BAGARN: (*Till Barberarn.*) Ska vi stiga opp?

BARBERARN: Nej; tvärtom. Sitt, och hattarne på! Han är ju bannlyst⁴⁰.

The secondary character of the Barber in fact shows an interesting development during the play. In the first act, he may be said to be part of the popular chorus who unveil the rulers' intrigues. The Barber, in particular, thinks that Magnus is a weak more than a good king; and in the fourth act he becomes a sort of mob leader at the service of the king's enemies. When he, in this new role, self-complacently exclaims "Folkets röst är Guds röst!", this is to be read ironically according to the moral of the play⁴¹.

Beatrix, the deposed king's daughter-in-law, implores the king's mother Ingeborg to have mercy upon Magnus Eriksson. Again, the echoes of the Gospels

³⁹ A. Strindberg, *Folkungasagan. Gustav Vasa. Erik XIV, Samlade Verk*, 41, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1992, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114. The Barber is later mocked by the duke Porse with the same words, when he in his turn is chased by the mob, and finally dies of plague; *ibid.*, pp. 118-9 and 124-30.

are heard, as the good, deposed and humiliated king is represented as a case of *imitatio Christi*:

BEATRIX: (*till Ingeborg.*) Kvinna, se din Son! Honom som löste fångar och trälar binden I med rep! – (*Till Magnus.*) Min dyre Fader förlåt dem och oss, ty de veta icke vad de göra! och icke vi heller!⁴²

The question of serfdom reappears later in *Engelbrekt*, the play about the leader of the rebellion against the Danes and the Kalmar Union in the 15th century. Engelbrekt finds his best and most loyal friend in Varg, a freedman. This is a social and patriotic marker of the play, as the Danes had not abolished serfdom, and their domination in Sweden threatened among other things this tradition of freedom and individual rights. At the end of the play, Engelbrekt is mortally wounded and, supported by Varg, is waiting for a boat with his wife, son and daughter, to come and rescue him – or possibly is simply waiting for Charon's boat:

ENGELBREKT: [...] Varg, stackars Varg! – – – Stöd mig!
 VARG: Herre, jag är icke värdig!
 ENGELBREKT: Gav jag dig icke fri? Äro vi icke människor? – Stöd mig!
 VARG: (*stöder Engelbrekt.*) Gud hjälpe oss, herre!
 ENGELBREKT: Det gör han! – – – Kommer icke färjan?⁴³

In the opening act of *Gustav Vasa* the dalesmen, who have strongly supported the king and helped him to free the country from the Danes and their king Christian “The Tyrant”, cannot but complain about the abuses of the new king, who now behaves as the new oppressor and who is actually coming to their region to punish their disobedience. They are afraid of him:

MAGISTER S.: Man visste vad man hade, men icke vad man skulle få!
 Kristiern tog huvet av herrarne och lät folket gå; den här låter herrarne gå och knektar folket – vem är Tyrannen?
 [...]
 NILS I S.: Kungen kommer!
 MÅNS N.: Tyst i Herrans namn! Icke få vi frid med sådana foror! –

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 108. Cf. John, 19, 26 and Luke, 23, 34.

⁴³ A. Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt, Samlade Verk*, 47, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1993, p. 281.

Allt vad I talen har nog sin riktighet, men vad som skett är med Försynens vilja...

MAGISTER S.: ...som lät barnen få sin vilja fram, att de skulle se sin dåraktighet⁴⁴.

The dalesmen, however, suffer injustice and martyrdom without ever turning into a mob. This makes Gustav Vasa's torment and burden even greater, because he knows that his ruthless repression is unjust. In spite of the rational and critical standpoint expressed in the words of Magister S., social justice here comes into conflict with the national teleology, and the iron hand seems to be, according to the play, the only option if Gustav Vasa wants to fulfil his task, the making of Sweden as a strong and united nation. The final, unexpected support the dalesmen give the king to fight the rebellion led by Dacke in southern Sweden is represented in the play as a providential sign, where the patriotic and the religious codes coincide. "I verkligheten" – observes Gunnar Ollén – "var det kungen själv som genom en rad skickliga manövrer hade organiserat dalahärens uppmarsch för att ge sken av att ha hela folket bakom sig i kampen mot Dacke"⁴⁵. As Niccolò Machiavelli argued, the highest virtue for the modern prince was keeping his state safe and united, even, if necessary, by being as sly as a fox⁴⁶. This secular consciousness, when referred to the founding father Gustav Vasa, would however have seemed to Strindberg and to his Swedish contemporaries sheer blasphemy.

The providential divine plan can at times be difficult to discern. In *Erik XIV* (1899) the king, Gustav Vasa's son, and his counsellor Göran Persson appear as the wrong men in the wrong place in spite of their efforts to find a direction⁴⁷. Even social connotations are involved in this general lack of references. In the voice and position of Persson, and of Erik's concubine and eventually wife, Karin Månsdotter, we perceive their humble origins:

⁴⁴ Strindberg, *Folkungasagan. Gustav Vasa. Erik XIV*, cit., pp. 167-8.

⁴⁵ G. Ollén, "Kommentarer", in *ibid.*, pp. 467-530: p. 502. Lamm pointed out the fact already in 1926; see Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer*, II, cit., p. 137.

⁴⁶ N. Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, Torino, Einaudi, 1995. See in particular the discussion on ethics and politics in chapters XV-XVIII (pp. 102-20). Machiavelli on the contrary never wrote such a vague statement as "the end justifies the means". *Il Principe* was written in 1513 and published probably between 1514 and 1517. L. O. Larson, *Gustav Vasa – landsfader eller tyrann?*, Stockholm, Prisma, 2005 (1 ed. 2002), argues convincingly that king Gustav was a truly Machiavellian prince.

⁴⁷ According to Steene, "Shakespearean Elements in Historical Plays of Strindberg", cit., p. 218, "[i]n Erik XIV [Strindberg] abandons his providential view altogether." See also the analysis in M. Robinson, "History and His-Story", in *Studies in Strindberg*, Norwich, Norvik Press, 1998, pp. 55-71: p. 68. This essay was earlier published in Steene (ed.), *Strindberg and History*, cit., pp. 53-66.

KARIN: Jag fruktar er; men vi två måste vara vänner.

GÖRAN P.: Det är det enda som är säkert...

KARIN: Måtte jag aldrig få ångra detta!

GÖRAN P.: Fröken, oss binda band som knutits därnere vid rännstenen; det är blodsband ser I! som duga!⁴⁸

In the peculiar rehabilitating portrait of Persson his opposition to the nobles is related to his bonds of loyalty to the poor people he comes from. “In *Erik XIV* (1899)” – has Harry G. Carlson observed – “king and commoner, high and low, work in awkward concert in the odd partnership of Erik and Göran Persson”⁴⁹. In the second act the nobleman Svante Sture pays a visit to Göran Persson’s humble home, where he lives with his mother. The words through which Göran defines himself and his task, while facing his opponent, suggest the son of a servant, who has become a democratic intellectual – another case of “fusion of horizons” between past and present:

GÖRAN PERSSON: [...] Adel är I; men vad är adel? En häst med en karl på! – Styra riket förstån I icke, och viljen intet lära utom stalltjänst och knektforor; I föraktar pennfäktarn, men pennan har planritat hela den nytid som gått förbi er och som I ej förstån! Män-skorätt och mänskovärde, vörndnad för olyckan, och förlåtelse för skulden, det är nya deviser, som ännu icke skrivits i era sköldemärken. Jag kunde varit Greve, men har icke velat, ty mitt öde befaller mig dväljas där nere bland de ringa och vanbördiga, där jag är född⁵⁰...

When the nobles call Erik a madman, this seems a pretext to attack the king’s close relation to the people from the lower class – a social pattern that is also found in *Folkungasagan* and in *Engelbrekt*⁵¹. Yet, even here the people finally become a mob and are unable to recognise their true friend. The sense of offended justice and dignity of a whole class is expressed in the harsh voice of Måns Knekt, Karin Månsdotter’s father, against the king, since Erik keeps Karin as a concubine and does not marry her. Måns finally recognises the king’s

⁴⁸ Strindberg, *Folkungasagan. Gustav Vasa. Erik XIV*, cit., p. 338.

⁴⁹ Carlson, “Strindberg and the Carnival of History”, cit., p. 50. See also Carlson, *Genom Inferno*, cit., p. 104.

⁵⁰ Strindberg, *Folkungasagan. Gustav Vasa. Erik XIV*, cit., pp. 371-2.

⁵¹ See the Bishop’s words when he deposes king Magnus (*ibid.*, p. 59); Svante Sture’s comments against king Erik (*ibid.*, p. 399); and Måns Bengtsson’s words against Engelbrekt in Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt*, cit., pp. 260 and 275.

humanity, but only too late, at the wedding banquet⁵². In the last act the world appears grotesque and turned upside-down. The nobles have not come to the banquet, and the king, with misanthropic scorn, decides instead to invite the people from the street. The only nobleman who is still faithful to Erik kneels down and calls him “the good king, the people’s friend”⁵³, while the poor people at the table appear greedy and coarse, a mob without either name or humanity:

MANSRÖST III: Ja unnrar juss var de fina herrarna sitter å eter? Ska di vara liksom för goa?

MANSRÖST I: Kungen? Den är ju galen vet ja’!

KVINNORÖST II: Visst är han galen, för inte skulle vi sitta här annars!⁵⁴

Their uneducated language, emphasised by the irregular spelling which imitates pronunciation, is another sign that anticipates the forthcoming deposition of king Erik XIV.

In the wide polyphonic play *Gustav Adolf* (1900), set in the Thirty Years War of the 17th century, sovereigns, noblemen and officers mingle with the troop and with ordinary German people. The main topics of the play – the uselessness of war and the importance of religious tolerance – are introduced in the first act by the popular voices of the miller and his wife. He is a Protestant whereas she is a Catholic, and their secret is simple: they love and respect each other, because God is one and the same for everybody. From the very beginning their marital sphere is thus linked to the main political issue of the play:

MJÖLNARHUSTRUN: (*fram till Madonnabilden med ett tänt ljus som hon sätter i en pipa på staketet; korsar sig och faller på knä.*)

MJÖLNAREN: (*efter, stannar orörlig och väntar.*)

MJÖLNARHUSTRUN: (*reser sig.*)

MJÖLNAREN: Ingalunda var det min avsikt att störa dig, hustru...

MJÖLNARHUSTRUN: Vet väl det, kära man; i tolv år ha vi pläгат hjonelag och fastän kriget rasat i dessa år, ha vi hållit husfrid, du med din evangeliska lära och jag med min katolska tro.

⁵² Strindberg, *Folkungasagan. Gustav Vasa. Erik XIV*, cit., pp. 459-60. See Wikander, *The Play of Truth and State*, cit., pp. 176-7.

⁵³ Strindberg, *Folkungasagan. Gustav Vasa. Erik XIV*, cit., p. 457: “Gud skydde och bevare den gode Konungen, folkets vän, Erik Bondekonung!”

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

MJÖLNAREN: Att var och en blir salig på sin tro, det lärde jag av min mor redan⁵⁵...

At the end of the first act the Swedish king meets the miller's wife, and through her words, as a Catholic, she can teach him something that he will need in his *Bildungsreise* through the absurdity and atrocity of war – a final journey that will prove to be a theodicy, a revelation of God's providential plan through evil. Within this theodicy the miller and his wife create, then, a tragic subplot that runs all through the play, as they prove to be victims of war as a morally disrupting force⁵⁶.

Some parts of *Gustav Adolf* show a poetic and visionary quality, a particular lightness in spite of all human misery, a spiritual yearning while the action is compelled to dive into the mud of life. Another beautiful and painful episode is the well-known one of the child soldier, 10-year-old Nils the trumpeter, who was born in war and has never set foot in his home country. The simple sentence he repeats three times while he is dying in the king's arms – “jag vill gå hem” – seems to concentrate his longing for that Sweden he has fought for but never seen, his protest against the lack of home and love, and his deep desire for reunion with his divine origin⁵⁷.

The chorus function of the lower class is again an important structural feature in *Karl XII* (*Charles XII*, 1902). The opening scene in Tableau I is a powerful act of accusation, expressed by the lower classes, against the king who weakened Sweden through prolonged war at the beginning of the 18th century. The action starts in December 1715, as the king is coming back to Sweden after years of war and exile. In a parallel subplot, a former soldier of the Swedish army who had previously been a farmer comes back to his abandoned cottage in Skåne at the same time, and tells the coastguard his bitter story of loss and despair. The apple tree outside the cottage, with only one apple at the top, becomes in his words the symbol of the state of a whole country. Again, here, we see how Strindberg the playwright is capable, in a deceptively simple way, of bringing the great issues of world politics down to the ordinary, human

⁵⁵ A. Strindberg, *Gustav Adolf, Samlade Verk*, 42, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1998, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Cf. Rosenqvist, *Hem till historien*, cit., pp. 178-9 and 208-16. Wikander, *The Play of Truth and State*, cit., p. 178, observes: “The couple, separated and impoverished at the end of the scene [in the first act], weave in and out of the play as a constant, choric reminder of the folly of intolerance.”

⁵⁷ Strindberg, *Gustav Adolf*, cit., pp. 285-6. Cf. Rosenqvist, *Hem till historien*, cit., p. 166.

level of domestic concerns with just a few, humble words. The consequences of war appear very concrete from this lowly position:

KUSTBEVAKAREN: [...] Du har varit vid hären?

MANNEN: Jo, och vid Poltava, och i Ryssland och i Sibirien.

KUSTBEVAKAREN: Vad hade ni där att göra? Skulle hållit er hemma!

MANNEN: Säg det! (*Undersöker stugan.*) Det är alldeles rätt! Här stod min stuga, här var mitt hem, här satt min hustru och mina två barn! Vid denna spis kokades min gröt, vid detta fönster lekte mina barn, på denna tröskel satt min hustru och väntade, lappande kläder — Det är femton år sen! — — — Femton! — — — Detta äppelträd planterade jag, innan jag drog ut; jag fick aldrig se frukten ... [...] Så här ser väl hela riket ut! — — — En ruin, en skräphög — och ett ruttet äpple i toppen⁵⁸...

In Tableau II the ex-farmer and soldier breaks into Charles XII's chamber while the king is trying to rest, and again takes up his accusations against the speechless monarch:

MANNEN: [...] Detta är alltså Konungen i Sverige som ligger på en säng i sju år under det landet förgås — — — det är en konung som lämnar sin huvudstad och sin regering, som inte vågar återvända till sitt hem och sina anhöriga uppe i Stockholm emedan han skäms för sitt fiasko! Hade svurit förstås att han skulle återvända med triumfport på Norrbro och ha ett erövat konungarike på vart finger! — — — Han skäms! — — —

KONUNGEN: (*orörlig.*)

MANNEN: Vet du var jag kommer ifrån? — — — Från Sibiriens gruvor, från Rysslands ödemarker! Där råkade jag dina vänner, Piper, Rehn-schiöld, Lewenhaupt som du lämnade i sticket under det du låg nere i Turkiet och fånade. Men jag kommer även över Danmark, där jag såg din bästa man, din trognaste tjänare, Stenbocken arbeta i järn, därför att du förvägrade lösepenningen!⁵⁹

This and other voices of the lower class are rendered in an atmosphere that recalls *Till Damaskus* (*To Damascus*, 1898-1901), *Ett drömspel* (*A Dream Play*, 1902) and other major post-Inferno plays⁶⁰. It is in fact not clear whether they

⁵⁸ Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt*, cit., pp. 16-7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁶⁰ On this aspect see in particular the analysis in G. Stockenström, "Charles XII as a Dream Play", in Stockenström (ed.), *Strindberg's Dramaturgy*, cit., pp. 223-44.

are materially real or rather mental projections of the king's bad conscience, or even, as Susan Brantly suggests, whether the characters on stage, and the king among them, are living or dead⁶¹. The fact that the Man declares that he experienced many things in both Russia and Denmark, makes him a symbol of all the sufferings the Swedish army endured during the campaigns of the Great Nordic War. And when he finally declares that his name is Svält (Starvation), that name cannot be found in the registers of the army⁶².

As Walter Johnson has observed, the complaining presence of the people in *Karl XII* can even be voiceless, in a couple of interesting stage directions:

Vid gallergrinden samlas nu folk, bland vilka märkas Mannen (från 1: a Tablån), Missnöjd, Kvinnan (från 3: e Tablån). De äro tysta, men hemska att åse.

[...]

Ruskiga Mans- och Pojkfigurer börja garnera muren i fonden. De dyka upp tyst, omärkligt och sitta där ett tu tre, men märkas ännu icke av de på scenen⁶³.

The several and contradictory voices of the people on stage try, in their turn, to convey a mysterious and ambivalent character, someone who is both loathed, feared and respected, a ghostlike presence but, at the same time, a man who retains a sort of sinister dignity. The ambiguity and unreliability of the information given by the voices of the play – both the higher and the lower classes – and the different possibilities of interpretation resulting from this circumstance (even beyond Strindberg's ideological hostility against Charles XII) make *Karl XII*, in Barbara Lide's words, "Strindberg's most fully modern historical drama"⁶⁴. It is no coincidence that the scholarly interest of the last decades has focused on the complexities of this play with a series of stimulating contributions⁶⁵. It can further be said that, more than Strindberg's other

⁶¹ S. Brantly, "The Formal Tension in Strindberg's *Carl XII*", in Steene (ed.), *Strindberg and History*, cit., pp. 92-107. Cf. also Johnson, *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*, cit., pp. 155-74; Wikander, *The Play of Truth and State*, cit., pp. 182-3; Stockenström, "Charles XII as a Dream Play", cit., and G. Ollén, "Kommentarer", in Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt*, cit., pp. 283-333: p. 303.

⁶² Brantly, "The Formal Tension in Strindberg's *Carl XII*", cit., p. 99.

⁶³ Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt*, cit., pp. 127-8. See Johnson, *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*, cit., pp. 171-2.

⁶⁴ B. Lide, "Strindberg and the Modern Consciousness: *Carl XII*", in Steene (ed.), *Strindberg and History*, cit., pp. 85-91: p. 85.

⁶⁵ See G. Stockenström, "Kring tillkomsten av *Karl XII*", in *Meddelanden från Strindbergssällskapet*, 45, 1970, pp. 20-43; Stockenström, "Charles XII as Historical Drama", cit.; Stockenström, "Charles XII as a Dream Play", cit.; E. Törnqvist, "Verbal and Vi-

historical plays, *Karl XII* shows the feature that Peter Szondi considers Strindberg's fundamental contribution to the development of modern drama: the widening of the main character's subjectivity so as to include all the action and all the characters on stage⁶⁶.

We can therefore observe a process of identification by which the author interprets the monarch's subjectivity. Charles tries to defend himself, and, to illustrate this point of view against the claims and complaints of the Swedish people, Strindberg can either lend the king some of the typical aristocratic arguments he used towards the end of the Eighteen Eighties:

KONUNGEN: [...] Lärpojken kallar gesällen tyrann, och gesällen mästaren despot. Alla förmän kännas som despoter. De skulle så gärna vilja vara't, alla, om de fingo, om de kunde!⁶⁷

Or he can interpret him (possibly this time a little too conventionally?) again through the words of Jesus, as a fallen great man facing the end and the mysterious will of God, as in Tableau IV:

KONUNGEN: (*ensam, förtvivlad.*) Åh min Gud! Gånge denna kalken ifrån mig!⁶⁸

Even Charles XII is alone and naked in front of God, but in Strindberg's view he destroyed Sweden rather than making it. As a tool of Providence he was meant, according to at least one of the points of view expressed in the play, to be an example of arrogance⁶⁹. He wanted to act as Providence himself and was

sual Scenery in Strindberg's Historical Plays: the Opening of *Carl XII* as Paradigmatic Example", in Steene (ed.), *Strindberg and History*, cit., pp. 76-84; Lide, "Strindberg and the Modern Consciousness: *Carl XII*", cit.; Brantly, "The Formal Tension in Strindberg's *Carl XII*", cit.; A. C. Hanes Harvey, "The Theatrical Compulsion of Strindberg's *Carl XII*", in Gavel Adams, Leiren (ed.), *Stage and Screen*, cit., pp. 63-90; and O. Reinert, "Meaning Compounded: Strindberg's *Charles XII* and the Question of Genre", *ibid.*, pp. 91-104.

⁶⁶ P. Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1956 [Italian edition: *Teoria del dramma moderno 1880-1950*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000 (1 ed. 1962), pp. 31-45]. As Stockenström has observed, this feature creates a peculiar tension within the realistic conventions of historical drama; see the two related articles Stockenström, "*Charles XII* as Historical Drama", cit., and Stockenström, "*Charles XII* as a Dream Play", cit.

⁶⁷ Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt*, cit., p. 119.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105. See Jesus' words in the garden of Gethsemane, Matthew, 26, 39. Cf. Brantly, "The Formal Tension in Strindberg's *Carl XII*", cit., p. 102, and Hanes Harvey, "The Theatrical Compulsion", cit., pp. 70 and 77.

⁶⁹ See Horn's words in Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt*, cit., p. 139.

therefore punished by divine will. Even in this case the metaphysical angle seems to be added to an earlier, and for Strindberg still valid, historical and ethical assessment⁷⁰.

The final, indulgent and forgiving comments of the anonymous Man (or Starvation) and of the Malcontent after the king's death, towards the end of Tableau V, indicate, however, that the ideologically critical voice of the "chorus"⁷¹ against the king is only one standpoint of the play, and that a sort of admiration for the peculiar, negative greatness of Charles XII is also part of its message:

SJÖMANNEN: Sveriges aldra största konung är död! Gud bevare oss!
 MANNEN: Är boven död?
 MISSNÖJD: Han är död! Och nu förlåter jag honom!
 MANNEN: Tänk att jag kunde inte bli riktigt ond på den där karln!
 En helvetes karl var det i alla fall!⁷²

In *Kristina* (*Queen Christina*, 1901, published in 1904) Strindberg works with the commoners in a different way. The queen is obsessed by the people's opinion of her and repeatedly wonders whether she is loved by them. We do not see much of these people, as the queen has deliberately surrounded herself with a fictional world at court. The growing rage of the masses outside is, however, referred to and heard off-stage, which increases both *Kristina's* terror and the tension of the whole play. This characterisation is skilfully used also in a meta-theatrical sense. The growing popular unrest outside the castle is connected to protests against the execution of the Messeniuses, father and son, who have published a pamphlet against the queen⁷³. In the fourth act, while *Kristina* is playing Pandora, the background wall is raised according to the

⁷⁰ See the articles in the second chapter of *Tal till svenska nationen* in A. Strindberg, *Tal till svenska nationen. Folkstaten. Religiös renässans. Tsarens kurir, Samlade Verk*, 68, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1988, pp. 35-53. Cf. Stockenström, "Strindberg och historiens Karl XII", cit., and B. Meidal, *Från profet till folktribun. Strindberg och Strindbergsfejden 1910-12*, Stockholm, Tidens Förlag, 1982, pp. 58-61, 87-91 and 290.

⁷¹ Cf. Ollén, "Kommentarer", in Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt*, cit., p. 313: "Även om det i mycket är missvisande att jämställa *Karl XII* med en grekisk tragedi, finns det en parallell utöver den allmänna att en hjälte faller därför att gudarna (makterna) så har bestämt. Den gäller de anonyma företrädarna för det lidande folket – Mannen, Missnöjd, Kvinnan m. fl. – och den antika kören. I ett utkast (2:6, 13) kallas 'Adel. / Prester. / Borgare. / Bönder' för 'Chörerna'". Cf. Stockenström, "Kring tillkomsten av *Karl XII*", cit., pp. 30 and 38.

⁷² Strindberg, *Karl XII. Engelbrekt*, cit., p. 149. Cf. Hanes Harvey, "The Theatrical Compulsion", cit., p. 85.

⁷³ See O. Kindstedt, "Underklassperspektivet och den messeniska smädeskriften", in *Strindbergs Kristina*, cit., pp. 140-7.

stage direction of that play-within-a-play. But reality breaks into the fiction at court, and a group of motionless and silent, pale people from the lower class appear unexpectedly – an act of silent accusation from the street and a device that had already been used, as we have seen, in *Karl XII*:

KRISTINA: Vad är därute?

HOLM: Varför frågar drottningen...

KRISTINA: Emedan det oroar mig som allt okänt!

HOLM: Nåväl, det är folket som hört att drottningen av sagt sig regeringen...

KRISTINA: Driv ut dem!

HOLM: Det har sig svårt... emedan de häktade Messenierna just nu föras till avrättningen!

KRISTINA: Evige Gud! (*Rätar upp sig.*) Vi låta ej störa oss! (*Viskar till Holm, som går ut igen.*) Nu Pafos hyllning ger, åt Epimetheus som Pandora fick! (*Hon slår i händerna.*)

(*Fondväggen i Kompartimanget dras upp. Man ser i stället för den väntade tablån – en skara underligt folk, alla orörliga, tysta, bleka i ansiktet. Främst synas Köpman Allerts, Tavernaren och Bonden från 1: a akten*⁷⁴.)

Again the Strindbergian text expresses a manifold and contradictory meaning, because the play-within-a-play is both a fictional act through which the monarch wants to forget the uneasy reality outside her court, i.e. an act of deceit, *and*, as Margareta Wirmark has argued, the representation of something authentic and existential for her, i.e. her falling in love for the first time and her (imagined) marriage with Klas Tott⁷⁵. Since we know, as well, that the writing and staging of *Kristina* was imagined by Strindberg as a possibility of reunion with his wife, the actress Harriet Bosse, we can sense a quality of *mise en abyme* in this Pandora-play⁷⁶.

In both *Kristina* and *Gustav III* (1902, published in 1904) the psychological and political aspects prevail, as well as the notion of the world as theatre, with its meta-theatrical implications. Strindberg insists less on the providential

⁷⁴ A. Strindberg, *Kristina. Gustav III, Samlade Verk*, 48, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1988, pp. 129-30. Cf. Carlson, "Strindberg and the Carnival of History", cit., pp. 48-9, and Carlson, *Genom Inferno*, cit., pp. 101-3.

⁷⁵ M. Wirmark, "Strindberg's *Queen Christina*: Eve and Pandora", in Steene (ed.), *Strindberg and History*, cit., pp. 116-22.

⁷⁶ See Kindstedt, *Strindbergs Kristina*, cit., pp. 159-206: pp. 202-6 in particular, and K. Dahlbäck, "Kristina and Strindberg's Letters and Diary", in Steene (ed.), *Strindberg and History*, cit., pp. 108-15.

scheme⁷⁷. As for the mid 17th century of *Kristina*, a central issue for the late 18th century of *Gustav III* is an oppressive absolute monarchy which tends to suffocate freedom of expression. The recurring critical-chorus function of the opening act is significantly set in a bookshop, a meeting point for the educated and politically conscious upper and middle class, as well as for writers and intellectuals. The difficult paradox for Strindberg is that Gustav first applied the ideas of Enlightenment, allowing such a freedom, and then suppressed it when he needed absolute power⁷⁸. Unlike *Kristina*, though, Gustav appears as a successful demagogue, able to manipulate the lower class against the conspiring nobles, who in this case more truly represent the growing democratic ideas. This is how Anckarström, a nobleman and leader of the conspiracy against the king (and eventually his murderer⁷⁹), describes Gustav:

ANCKARSTRÖM: Nej! Rör inte vid hans trassliga härva; ni fastnar i den! Hela hans machinationer äro som fan själv skulle ha gjort ihop dem! Han uppträder ju som folkets och frihetens man, störtar herrarne med de ofrälse ståndens hjälp, men gör sig själv till envåldsherre över alla fyra stånden. Ser ni inte att han spelar Mirabeau och förvänder synen på oss; han gör ju Franska Revolutionen skenbart, han, kungen! Det är ju perverst som hela mannen!⁸⁰

To conclude, why did Strindberg systematically use popular voices and positions in his historical plays about Swedish monarchs and leaders? Were these subplots peripheral or even unnecessary? One may argue that using folk scenes and a plurality of voices can create – as in Shakespeare – practical obstacles for theatre production. As the staging of *Kristina* at the Intimate Theatre in 1908 demonstrates, even Strindberg seemed to prefer a more sober version of his own historical plays, with fewer characters and scenes and less décor⁸¹. On the other hand, the quite recent (and truly magnificent) theatre production of *Vasasagan* in Sweden, directed by Staffan Valdermar Holm, which in three acts

⁷⁷ According to Wikander, *The Play of Truth and State*, cit., pp. 181 and 192, this applies to *Karl XII* and *Engelbrekt* as well as to *Kristina* and *Gustav III*. Stockenström on the contrary argues, quite convincingly, that the metaphysical and providential vision is fundamental in *Karl XII*; see Stockenström, “*Charles XII* as Historical Drama”, cit., and Stockenström, “*Charles XII* as a Dream Play”, cit.

⁷⁸ Cf. A. Strindberg, “En kunglig revolution”, in *Svenska öden och äventyr*, II, cit. pp. 340-60.

⁷⁹ The murder in 1792 is not part of the play, which focuses on events from 1788-89.

⁸⁰ Strindberg, *Kristina. Gustav III*, cit., p. 240.

⁸¹ See Strindberg, *Teater och Intima Teatern*, cit., pp. 60-1, and P. Stam, “Kommentarer”, in Strindberg, *Teater och Intima Teatern*, cit., pp. 245-472: pp. 276-7.

concentrates *Siste riddaren*, *Riksföreståndaren*, *Mäster Olof*, *Gustav Vasa*, *Erik XIV*, *Gustav Adolf* and *Kristina*, is able to use mass movement and choral presence on stage, including, at some crucial moments in the play, the voice and views of the lower class, while at the same time representing the stories of the Swedish monarchs and leaders and their fight for power⁸².

From the point of view of dramatic construction, these popular voices are not superfluous. History as dramatic action is necessarily a result of social, as well as human, intercourses and conflicts, and if it is true, in a certain sense, that Strindberg's historical plays come closer to Geijer's opinion, according to which the Swedish people's history is their kings' history, one could even argue that no kings ever exist without their people. "To the extent that the nineteenth century was obsessed with the genesis, the nature, and the fate of what Hegel called world-historical individuals" –, as Herbert Lindenberger has observed – "historical drama tended to set these individuals against a social framework that could work to support them, to impede their progress, to goad them on to significant action, often even to martyr them"⁸³. The popular voices contribute therefore to the creation of a context and, together with stage directions, they also give a more precise definition of space; the topography of Stockholm and Sweden (and of Germany during the Thirty Years' War) is also conveyed through the spoken language and the diegetic or descriptive space within the dialogues.

Nor is it ideologically irrelevant for Strindberg that the body of the nation, to which the monarch or leader has to relate, is often on stage. If his historical Swedish plays focus on the existential and often religious struggle of the monarch, and on the ultimate historical meaning of his or her fate, such a perspective is also tested against the author's former stances, where the needs and claims of the lower class can challenge the sovereign by asking fundamental questions about meaning and justice. In other words, even if Strindberg's earlier vision of the lower class as the new subject of historical progress⁸⁴ is lost

⁸² Strindberg, *Vasasagan*, Stockholm, SVT, SVT2, 27th December 1998, theatre director S. Valdemar Holm, tv-director J. Hemmel, seen at *Kungliga Biblioteket, Avdelningen för audiovisuella medier*, Stockholm, on 30th January 2009. I thank professor Sven Åke Heed, who mentioned this production during the discussion following my paper at the Strindberg conference held in Turin in November 2008.

⁸³ Cf. Lindenberger, "Experiencing History", cit., p. 18.

⁸⁴ See for example the end of the poem *Sömngångarnätter på vakna dagar* (*Sleepwalking Nights on Wide-Awake Days*) as it was completed in 1884 (i.e. the end of "Fjärde Natten", "The Fourth Night", before the more pessimistic "Fifth Night" was added in 1890): A. Strindberg, *Dikter på vers och prosa, Sömngångarnätter på vakna dagar och strödda tidiga dikter, Samlade Verk*, 15, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1995, pp. 222-4. See al-

by the time of the plays written between 1899 and 1909, his democratic ideas and his historicism are still, if only peripherally, at work within the new individualistic, patriotic and metaphysical frame. Claes Rosenqvist has argued that *Gustav Adolf*, with its subplots and secondary characters, shows the ambition to give a wider historical representation beyond the limits of a play about a king – a representation that is able to include the history of common people⁸⁵. My point is that this ambition proves to be recurrent and consistent all through Strindberg's Swedish historical plays.

The main characters of these plays certainly have a more complex psychology, where most of the minor characters appear flat in comparison. One may, however, question whether the minor characters are always totally flat⁸⁶. Just a few replies can be enough to tell the story of a life. The case of the Miller and his Wife in *Gustav Adolf* has already been mentioned. Another case is that of the Fisherman, the Watchman, his son the Fool, the Hermit and the Ex-Priest in Strindberg's last and least successful Swedish historical play *Bjälbo-Jarlen*, about Birger Jarl, the founder of Stockholm in the 13th century and another tormented maker of Sweden. The Fool especially is an important secondary character in *Bjälbo-Jarlen*. Strindberg writes about him in *Öppna brev till Intima Teatern*, because he represents “the people's voice” and the “chorus” in the play, telling the powerful men the truth no one else would dare to utter, but also because he is, according to Strindberg, a character in his own right, with a developing life story⁸⁷. A further aspect that makes these minor voices and positions interesting is that the people from the lower class – interacting with the voice and position of Birger Jarl and other nobles at the castle – build up a fascinating topography of the town of Stockholm at the very moment of its foundation⁸⁸.

so the political articles written, or begun, in 1884 such as “Underklassens svar på de viktigaste av överklassens fraser”, “Överklassens bevisföring. För Budkaflen” and “August Strindbergs Lilla Katekes för Underklassen”, in A. Strindberg, *Likt och olikt I-II samt uppsatser och tidningsartiklar 1884-1890*, *Samlade Verk*, 17, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2003, pp. 143-75.

⁸⁵ Rosenqvist, *Hem till historien*, cit., pp. 218-9.

⁸⁶ Cf. Törnqvist, *Det talade ordet*, cit., p. 133: “Strindbergs dramagestalter tillhör i stort sett över- och medelklassen. Underklassen har relativt få företrädare och det rör sig här, som man kan vänta sig, ofta om biroller. Det betyder att deras repliker ofta har referentiell snarare än expressiv betydelse. I sin egenskap av flata figurer ägnas de inte något större individuellt intresse”.

⁸⁷ A. Strindberg, “Det historiska dramat”, in *Teater och Intima Teatern*, cit., pp. 207-10: pp. 209-10, and Strindberg, “Begreppet Stilisera m.m.”, in *ibid.*, pp. 238-43: pp. 241-2.

⁸⁸ Cf. Johnson, *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*, cit., pp. 270 and 274-5. See the first act, taking place on the hill of Brantberget (later Brunkeberg), with a view on the castle of Stockholm and the town: A. Strindberg, *Siste riddaren. Riksföreståndaren*.

It is often difficult to find a sharp divide, in Strindberg's works, between the historical and socio-political idea of liberation or emancipation and the transcendental and religious idea of redemption. As Harry G. Carlson has shown, it is fruitful to study how and why these two levels tend to imply each other⁸⁹. While showing the complications of the conflict between the upper and lower classes, this group of historical plays, from *Mäster Olof* onwards, presents a specific use of the Bible in order to illustrate the difficult relationship between the leader and his people. In this sense, too, the historical problem is intertwined with the metaphysical one. The three world historical plays *Genom öknar till arvland* (*Through Deserts to Ancestral Lands*), *Hellas* and *Lammet och vilddjuret* (*The Lamb and the Beast*), all written in 1903 and published in 1918, show this connection very clearly, thanks also to what in many respects is their limit as art: that is, that they are an exercise in creative transcription of the Old Testament, the Gospels and the history of ancient Athens and Rome. The Strindbergian archetype in *Mäster Olof* – the prophet who is not acknowledged – proves here to refer back to much older and more universal archetypes in Western spiritual and cultural history. The people as a mob, inconstant in their will and unable to recognise their great men, but on the contrary prone to mock, betray and fight them; the people who easily fall victim to demagoguery (the dilemma between democracy and demagoguery is central in *Hellas*): these situations recur in the stories of Moses, Socrates and Jesus⁹⁰.

The cases of impossible dialogue and communication between the leader and his people may also remind us of Strindberg as a Nietzschean elitist and enemy of the people during the last years of the Eighties and the beginning of the Nineties. The author of the historical plays may undoubtedly make us feel sympathetic to the monarch or leader who, as an individual, is exposed to the aggressive voices of the masses; the people of the lower class do not necessarily represent a better humanity. Even the Nietzschean stance, together with the democratic stance, is therefore included and remodelled by Strindberg into the new frame of his

Bjälbo-Jarlen, *Samlade Verk*, 61, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1988, pp. 275-93. Cf. also A. Strindberg, "Bjälbo-Jarlen", in *Nya svenska öden*, cit., pp. 106-39. As to the other plays *Siste riddaren* and *Riksföreståndaren*, the setting of the first act of the former play – the tavern of the town hall in Stockholm, a typical place where voices and social classes mingle – is also the place where the action of the latter one ends. See *ibid.*, pp. 13-50 and pp. 256-68. The national and providential teleology is here, as in *Bjälbo-Jarlen*, strongly marked.

⁸⁹ See Carlson, *Genom Inferno*, cit.; in particular pp. 32-3, 42-8, 84-5, 91-7, 107-11, 128, and Carlson, "Strindberg and the Dream of the Golden Age: The Poetics of History", cit.

⁹⁰ A. Strindberg, *Den världshistoriska trilogin. Dramafragment*, *Samlade Verk*, 63, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1996.

Swedish historical plays, where solidarity and distrust towards the lower class are opposite, coexisting poles⁹¹. We know, by the way, that other radical Scandinavian spirits of the age, such as Brandes and Ibsen, could share a similar ambivalence towards the lower class, the people and the whole idea of modern democracy.

Strindberg was complex and contradictory, and his holy fire and existential struggle compelled him to leave previous standpoints and develop new ones. But it is interesting to see how he very consciously reshaped aspects of old phases into the new one, adapting them to his new needs. Just to mention one example relevant to this study, Strindberg came back to the Swedish monarchs and to the very institution of monarchy even later, in the political essays written during the last two years of his life⁹². And then, with a typical shift in emphasis, he could retrospectively refer to the importance of what he called his “democratic historical plays”, focusing, to be sure, on only *one* of the aspects of the plays, but confirming its role and importance⁹³. Similarly, in his last campaign against rearmament and war during the same years, both his renewed attacks against Charles XII as the destroyer of Sweden and his attempt to have *Gustav Adolf* performed were significant⁹⁴.

Experimenting with viewpoints was a necessary dialectic method for Strindberg in order to penetrate the contradictions of existence. The dramatic form lends itself to this pluralism and Strindberg was a master of dramatic dialogue. Even in those of his historical plays where the religious and patriotic message is strong, truth remains relative and manifold⁹⁵, and the mixture of high and

⁹¹ According to G. Ollén, *Strindbergs dramatik. En handbok*, Stockholm, Radiotjänst, 1949, p. 357, solidarity weighs finally a little more: “Dialogernas rika, oändligt fina samspel med svensk natur och svensk kulturmiljö och den kärva, aldrig panegyriska, aldrig okritiska men heller aldrig döda solidaritetskänslan med svenska folket [...] gör Strindbergs historiska dramatik till något av det friskast och minst bornerat nationella i vår litteratur”.

⁹² See *Tal till svenska nationen* and *Folkstaten*, in Strindberg, *Tal till svenska nationen*, cit., pp. 7-201.

⁹³ See the article against the philosopher C. J. Boström, “Filosofisk Statslära eller Roten och Upphovet”, in Strindberg, *Tal till svenska nationen*, cit., pp. 161-5, in particular p. 164: “Att skriva om en avliden konungs mänskliga svagheter straffades som majestätsbrott eller hädelse, vilket jag fått veta av, när jag skrev *Svenska Folket* och *Svenska Öden*. Mina demokratiska *Historiska Dramer* har man även sökt döda, och har också lyckats med ett par av de bästa: Gustav Adolf och Gustav III, vilka ligga ospelade nu i *tio år!*”. Cf. Meidal, *Från profet till folktribun*, cit., pp. 115 and 149.

⁹⁴ See B. Meidal, “Gustav Adolf i fredens tjänst”, in *Från profet till folktribun*, cit., pp. 233-6, and U. Zander, “Strindbergsfejden”, in *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider*, cit., pp. 125-30.

⁹⁵ Cf. Palmblad, *Strindberg's Conception of History*, cit., pp. 128-9, about the relativity of truth in *Gustav Vasa*, and p. 191, about the relativity of truth as a general feature in several historical plays.

low voices also serves this purpose, increasing the dynamism and pluralism of the plays. As Michael Robinson has pointed out, looking for a plot and a design in history went in parallel, for Strindberg, with looking for a meaning in his own personal story⁹⁶. This applies also to the interaction of the upper and lower classes in the Swedish historical plays, if we consider how recurrent the opposite categories of *underklass* and *överklass* are in Strindberg's works, and how this same opposition is central in the autobiographical explanations of his own destiny. The rehabilitating portrait of Göran Persson in *Erik XIV* shows us something interesting in this respect.

This combination of high and low voices can be finally related to the fundamental problem of Strindberg's opposite views about the meaning of history, which from an early stage circulate in his works: an evolutionary and finalistic view and, on the other hand, the radically pessimistic idea that the only possible liberation is *from* history, that human life is prison and mad repetition and that God is mocking us⁹⁷. Something of this misanthropy runs through *Erik XIV* and is latent also in other plays, where the author's effort is however to detect a direction and a goal.

All these factors increase the complexity of this group of plays, but also their richness, subtlety and fascination. Strindberg could clearly handle historical polyphony – and, why not, cacophony – as a modern writer and playwright.

⁹⁶ Robinson, "History and His-Story", cit.

⁹⁷ Palmblad, *Strindberg's Conception of History*, cit., is an early discussion of this fundamental dichotomy in Strindberg's work. See also: G- Printz-Påhlson, "Allegories of trivialization: Strindberg's view of history", in *Comparative Criticism*, 3, 1981, pp. 221-36; Carlson, "Strindberg and the Carnival of History", cit., in particular pp. 43 and 45; Carlson, *Genom Inferno*, cit., pp. 123-5; Carlson, "Strindberg and the Dream of the Golden Age: The Poetics of History", cit.; Robinson, "History and His-Story", cit.; and Svensson, *Strindberg om världshistorien*, cit.