

Strindberg and Grillparzer: Contrasting Approaches to the War of the Sexes

Outwardly they could hardly be more different, this mid-century Austrian, who had disappeared into cultural hibernation thirty-five years before his death in 1872, and the Swede, who had gone through metamorphosis after metamorphosis, from historical playwright to novelist to painter to avant-garde playwright to alchemist to creator of modern drama by the time of his death in 1912. Grillparzer's biography is the description of an artist's withdrawal into himself in the face of an uncomprehending society; Strindberg's is the story of a lifelong attempt to escape from that same narrow-minded audience. Grillparzer constructed an ever-tightening circle around his life, with Vienna as the outer limit and his apartment in the Spiegelgasse as the centre. Strindberg wandered across the face of Europe, spent much of his life in exile in Germany or France, and strayed far enough from his mother tongue to write works in other languages. Grillparzer, terribly afraid of the dominance of women, never married and spent most of his adult life in a platonic relationship with his 'ewige Braut,' who lived in the same house as he did. Strindberg, terribly afraid of the dominance of women, married three dominating women, and made his painful relationships with them the source of his dramatic material. German critics tend to see Grillparzer as a weak imitation of Schiller; most critics like to see Strindberg as the transitional playwright in the development of twentieth-century drama. And still they are writing about the same subject matter.

We shall compare two plays by these authors, which are outwardly almost absurdly dissimilar, and attempt to find common themes beneath the surface differences. It is the thesis of this essay that there are indeed striking thematic similarities, despite the formal differences, between the dramas of a playwright who was formally old-fashioned in his final works, which were hidden away in his desk and not published during his lifetime, and those of a writer who barely fifteen years later would begin the moulding of the modern theatre.

Grillparzer's *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen* and Strindberg's *The Father* have a common source: classical mythology.¹ The former is a retel-

1 For a discussion of the classical Greek structure of *The Father* and the relation to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* see 'Strindberg's *The Father* as Tragedy,' Carl E. Dahlström, *Scandinavian Studies* xxvii 2 (May 1955) 45-63.

ling in dramatic form of the legend of Hero and Leander, the latter a modern dramatic version of the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra. Grillparzer's choice of subject matter, taken from the writings of Ovid and Musaios, does not on the surface suggest a power struggle between the sexes. Strindberg's on the other hand is the most obvious mythological parallel to the situation he wished to find in his own first marriage to Siri von Essen. Grillparzer hides behind his myth; Strindberg converts the myth into a statement of biographical interpretation. Grillparzer disguises his fascination with the sexual struggle behind the trappings of pseudo-classical sentimentality: Strindberg displays it viciously and nakedly on the stage, and builds the entire force of his drama on the intensification of the struggle to a point beyond sanity, to the figure locked in the straitjacket. Grillparzer presents his female in the role of a priestess in the temple of Aphrodite, in costumes which remove her as far as possible from nineteenth-century Vienna and any immediate connection with the psychological makeup of the author. Strindberg makes it clear he is telling his own biography; he had in fact already related the major events portrayed in *The Father* in his autobiographical novel, *Le Plaidoyer d'un Fou* (1888). He would go on to dramatize the divorce proceedings of the same marriage in *The Bond* (1892). Grillparzer flees contemporary life in all of his plays, escaping into dream, myth, or history. Strindberg becomes his own main character in many of his most effective plays without any real pretence at disguise.

There is finally the matter of language. Nothing dates Grillparzer so easily as his use of words and his linguistic structures. Nothing makes gripping performances of his plays more difficult than the lines themselves, often scarcely comprehensible syntactically, always in verse form, which sets up one final barrier between the audience and a direct confrontation with the characters and their problems. Even the title *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen*, with its poetic genitive construction, lends an air of aesthetic pretentiousness, and it is easy to feel suspicions confirmed when the first lines come out as:

Hero (ein Körbchen mit Blumen im Arme haltend tritt aus dem Tempel und steigt die Stufen herab)

Nun, so weit wärs getan. Geschmückt der Tempel,
Mit Myrt und Rosen ist er rings bestreut
Und harret auf das kommende, das Fest,
Und ich bin dieses Festes Gegenstand.²

2 Franz Grillparzer, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. August Sauer (Wien 1925) Abt 1, Bd 4, p 81. Henceforth all page numbers following quotations from *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen* will refer to this volume of this edition.

It is indeed an outward form, which one might wish to dismiss out of hand as a late copy of a neo-classical movement, which was itself an imitation. We will have to bear with these trappings and this stilted language if we are going to find common ground with Strindberg here.

In contrast to this complicated artificial language employed throughout Grillparzer's dramatic works, we have in Strindberg a Swedish which is most striking in its simplicity. After his early verse plays (the second version of *Master Olof*, for instance), Strindberg drifted naturally towards prose as the proper vehicle for his dramatic ideas. He is, as Valborg Anderson puts it,

... Swedish in quality rather as Dylan Thomas is Welsh or Synge Irish. In spite of his intellectual sophistication, he is remarkably simple and innocent. His childlike impatience with the vagaries and injustices of life is a folk quality communicated in phrasing, figures of speech, rhythms, and refrains, as well as in theme and situation.³

While Grillparzer keeps us at arm's length with the unnatural speech of his characters, Strindberg draws us closer to his figures by creating a thoroughly convincing and unique language pattern for each one.

Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen and *The Father* have therefore nothing in common on the surface. Setting, costumes, language, closeness of source material to main theme, relationship of the work to the author, in all these aspects and more, including the impression left on the audience at a performance, these plays come from different theatrical worlds. What then do they have in common? To begin to answer this, we will have to return to that dense language of Hero and see what it is that is hidden underneath. Grillparzer's study of the battle of the sexes focusses on adolescence, Strindberg's on middle age. But central to both is the portrayal of the power of the woman to dominate the man, in effect to establish a matriarchy. The Captain and Laura gives us the terminal breakdown of a situation that is basic to the relationship of Hero and Leander.

As Grillparzer's play opens, both of his problem children, Hero and Leander, are fleeing from reality. Hero, about to reject the temptations of sexual fulfillment forever by becoming a priestess of the exclusively female temple of Aphrodite, has never experienced contact with the other sex, except the taboo males of her family. The priest recognizes this, and is reluctant to accept Hero's initiation into the matriarchal society. With the introduction of the family which Hero is now rejecting forever, Grillparzer moves his play into an area far from the myth of the heroic lover, which is the basis of Musaios' and Ovid's *Hero and Leander*. The subject matter he is really

3 August Strindberg, *The Father and A Dream Play*, ed. & trans. Valborg Anderson (New York 1964) xii

interested in is the struggle for dominance in family and personal relations between male and female, and he will only revert to the myth of true love in acts four and five, after Leander has been subdued and destroyed. It becomes clear that Hero is seeking an escape into matriarchy from the patriarchal family she could not endure. More than that, however, she has expanded fear of the male ego of father and brother into universal fear of the male sex:

Mein Vater wollte was kein Andres wollte,
 Und drängte mich, und zürnte ohne Grund.
 Die Mutter duldete und schwieg.
 Mein Bruder – Von den Menschen all, die leben,
 Bin ich nur einem gram, es ist mein Bruder.
 Als Älterer, und weil ich nur ein Weib,
 Ersah er mich zum Spielwerk seiner Launen.
 Doch hielt ich gut, und grollte still und tief. (90)

This sexual sublimation of the final line, this silent resentment of male authority, is what breaks out like an elemental force on Strindberg's stage. For almost twenty years of married life Laura has resented the male position of authority, both in family and sexual relationships. She has loved the Captain only when she was in power, as the mother of the unwanted overgrown child-Captain, which is clearly Strindberg's description of himself at the hands of women.

Weep then, my child, and you will have your mother with you again. Do you remember that it was as your second mother I first came into your life? Do you? You were big of body and strong, but you were lacking in stamina. You were a giant of a child and had either come into the world ahead of time – or perhaps you were unwanted.⁴

But outside of this incestuous psychological view of the family, which, as we shall see, is deeply shared by the Captain, in the realm of husband and wife sexual relations Laura has felt only disgust and repulsion at the imposed role of subservience, for it leaves her the apparent loser in the power struggle which she sees at the basis of human relations.

LAURA: Yes, that's the way it was, and that is why I loved you as if you were

4 August Strindberg, *Seven Plays by August Strindberg*, trans. Arvid Paulson (New York 1968) 39. Henceforth all page numbers following quotations from *The Father* will refer to this volume. The critical edition in Swedish, of which in my opinion this is the best translation is *Samlade Skrifter*, ed. John Landquist, 55 vols (Stockholm 1912–19).

my child. But I don't think you could have helped noticing that each time you approached me as lover, with feelings of another nature, I felt ashamed ... And the joy of being in your embrace turned into a sense of guilt – as if the shame had crept into my very blood. The mother turned mistress! Ugh!

THE CAPTAIN: Yes – I noticed that, but I did not understand. And somehow I – I got the impression that you despised my lack of manhood – and then I made up my mind to win you as woman by being the man.

LAURA: That is where you made your mistake. The mother was your friend, you see, but the woman was your enemy; and love between the sexes produces, strife, dissension, conflict. And do not think I give myself to you! I took – whatever I wanted. (39–40)

Both Laura and Hero share a stance towards the dominating male, and particularly towards the dominating husband, which fit the Captain's description of Laura's feeling as being 'like race hatred' (41). In the brief meeting with her parents preceding her initiation as priestess, Hero rebuffs her mother for suggesting that a woman can only be happy at the side of a husband. The reason is basically the same as Laura's, although Grillparzer would never permit the sexual act itself to be discussed so bluntly. This theme, in keeping with the theatrical and moral tradition before Strindberg, must be muted, disguised, hidden behind words like 'Blick.'

HERO: Das darfst du sagen, ohne zu erröten?
Wie? Und musst hüten jenes Mannes Blick,
Des Herren, deines Gatten? Darfst nicht reden,
Musst schweigen, flüstern, ob du gleich im Recht,
Ob du die Weisre gleich, stillwaltend Bessere?
Und wagst zu sprechen mir ein solches Wort? (98)

Another crucial example of this linguistic suppression of sexuality is found in the third act love scene where the victory of Hero over Leander is portrayed through gesture and tableau rather than language.

Hero's decision to become a priestess of Aphrodite is clearly based on her desire to escape the subservient role which was her mother's lot in the patriarchy outside the temple grounds. Hero is quick to point out to her mother that the power structure will be different in her new society, that 'Im Tempel hier hat auch die Frau ein Recht' (96). When the high priest orders that Janthe must go, he is overruled by Hero, who quickly realizes the relative strength of her position in the temple compared with her mother as wife.

Verzeih! Du weißt, das kann nicht ohne mich,
Die Mädchen sind der Priesterin befohlen,

Und meine Rechte kenn'ich so wie meine-
 Ich kenne, Herr, mein Recht. (184)

Like Laura, Hero specifically relates this abhorred subservient role to sexuality, and her decision to become a priestess of Aphrodite is based largely on her desire to escape her sexual role. For this temple to the goddess of love is ironically a refuge from the act of love. We see this in such episodes as the removal of the brooding pigeon's nest, and the priest's subsequent explanation that 'All was sich paart bleibt ferne diesem Hause' (101). Once again direct discussion of the human sexual act is avoided, this time by using rather obvious animal imagery. The high priest, suspicious of Hero's readiness to join such a sexless society before having had any experience with males outside the family, describes the rules in terms which would please Laura. For Laura, the male's role as father and family supporter is 'a function that unfortunately is a necessary one. You are no longer needed ... and so you must go!' (41-2).

Nicht ehrt man hier die ird'sche Aphrodite,
 Die Mensch an Menschen knüpft wie Tier an Tier,
 Die Himmlische, dem Meeresschaum entstiegen,
 Einend den Sinn, allein die Sinne nicht,
 Der Eintracht alles Wesens hohe Mutter,
 Geschlechtlos, weil sie selber das Geschlecht,
 Und himmlisch, weil sie stammt vom Himmel oben. (101)

This then is a religion devoted to a goddess of love completely devoid of connection with physical love, which is identified with the animal kingdom. Laura needed the Captain once as a lover, in order to procreate and gain his inheritance rights as well as the crucial weapon in the battle of the wills which we witness in *The Father*. Hero too will know a lover only once, in the transforming love scene in her tower room, the taboo entrance of the male into the female realm. While this scene brings about a change in the direction of the play towards a poetic description of the power of love which is outside the scope of this study, it takes place as we shall see, only after a symbolic establishment of matriarchal rights which is much like Laura's final triumph.

In both plays, the final victory of the matriarchy over the patriarchy can be brought about only by a combination of a strong-willed woman and a weak man. In Strindberg's nightmare vision of sexual relations, the will is in fact the only character attribute which really counts, for it is the will which determines who wins the power struggle that is marriage. The Captain only discovers this in the climactic scene in which Laura drives him to throw the lantern at her and thus prove his insanity.

THE CAPTAIN: I can see now that one of us must go under in this struggle.

LAURA: Which one of us?

THE CAPTAIN: The weaker one, of course.

LAURA: And the stronger one is in the right, eh?

THE CAPTAIN: The stronger are always in the right because they have the power!

LAURA: Then I am in the right! (41)

But her brother's description of her conduct as a child tells us where she gets the determination to force the Captain over the brink of insanity in order to gain her will and prove herself to be indeed the stronger of the two.

THE PASTOR: So-o? Laura refuses absolutely!

Well, in that case, I fear for the worst.

As a child she would lie prostrate, as if she were dead, until she got what she wanted.

And when she succeeded in getting it, she gave it back – whatever it was she had feigned being dead for – with the explanation that it was not the thing itself that she wanted, but simply to have her own way. (11)

She is from birth determined to dominate the surrounding world with her will, no matter what the stakes. She feels only revulsion at the father-dominated family structure and determines, at any cost, to raise her daughter in her own way. The fatal struggle in *The Father* takes place precisely at that point where the father decides to send the daughter out of the patriarchal house, in which the father is barely tolerated. But the Captain is from birth unfitted to match wills with his wife; in the contest between the 'little boy' and 'the master in the house' it is easy to predict a winner.

THE CAPTAIN: Yes – I am afraid you are right. My father and mother did not want a child; and so I was born without a will of my own. Then when you and I became one, I felt myself strengthened by your will, and so I allowed you to be master in the house. I – who was used to giving commands to my troopers – I now became the one to take orders; and I grew to be part of you – looked up to you as to a superior intelligence – listened to you as if I were your foolish little boy. (39)

The Captain, who, as we have seen, only destroyed the mother-child relationship with Laura because of his mistaken impression that he could win her as a woman by being a man (pp 40–1), by taking over the traditional dominant male role, saves his most affectionate words for the nurse, Margret, who has played the mother role to the Captain's lifelong child role. He accuses her of being a traitor for joining the other women in the house⁵ in the conspiracy against him, but in the end it is she, who has mothered him into the straitjacket, who gets his blessing. 'Goodnight, Margret, and blessed be you among women' (55). It is entirely appropriate that the Captain succumb at the curtain to the mother figure, for as he admits, he prefers the female as soothing mother to the female as sexual partner, implying his desire for Laura in these terms and his inferiority in a battle of sexual wills. Just before blessing Margret, the Captain, locked in the straitjacket, asks if he may put his head in her lap, for 'It's so nice and warm! Lean over me so that I may feel your breast! – Oh how wonderful to fall asleep at a woman's breast – whether mother or mistress ... but most wonderful at a mother's' (55).

Leander, Grillparzer's male representative in the uneven struggle, has much the same relationship with women as the Captain. As the play opens and Hero is about to enter the sexless sanctuary, Leander has been incapable of action since the death of his mother. Here it is Grillparzer who carries an aspect of his own strange biography, namely his relationship with his mother, onto the stage. Leander's passivity is so strong that his companion Naukleros must recapitulate the biography of Leander without his help. Until the meeting with Hero, Leander is incapable of speaking more than muttered phrases of self-pity. Led around like a blind man (112) by Naukleros, he is the epitome of the man without a will. Naukleros has the feeling there is something slightly perverse in this total paralysis, which the death of the mother has brought about in the son over an extended period.

Wenn deine Mutter starb, wer kann da helfen?
 Wars gut und recht, dass du, ein wackerer Sohn
 Und ihr, der Tiefbekümmerten zu Willen,
 Am Strand des Meeres wohntest, fern der Stadt
 Und Menschen fern, nur Kindespflichten ühend;
 Nun, da sie tot, was hält dich länger ab
 Den Gleichen als ein Gleicher zu gehören
 Mitfühlend ihre Sorgen, ihre Lust?

5 In addition to Laura, Strindberg included the following women in the household, all working against the Captain: a mother-in-law, who wants the child to be a spiritualist; a governess who wants her to be a Methodist; Margret who wants her to be a Baptist; and the servant girls, who want her to be a salvationist.

Wein um die Gute, rauf dein braunes Haar,
 Allein dann kehre zu den Freuden wieder,
 Die sie dir gönnt, die du ihr länger gönntest. (112-13)

He thus suffers from the same psychological burdens as the Captain, the inability to free himself from the real or imagined comforts of the mother. In neither case, however, do the protagonists really understand it. Here Naukleros, the objective analyzer who is no longer necessary nor present in Strindberg, specifically describes the problem to Leander, without apparent reaction.

Und denk-an deine Mutter, die noch eben
 Zur rechten Zeit dich, sterbend, frei gemacht. (114)

Sigmund Freud, in his twenty-first introductory lecture, analyzes quite accurately the psychological break which our two male figures fail to make.

From the time of puberty onward the human individual must devote himself to the great task of *freeing himself from the parents*; and only after this detachment is accomplished can he cease to be a child and so become a member of the social community. For a son, the task consists in releasing his libidinal desires from his mother, in order to employ them in the quest for an external love-object in reality.⁶

In both cases, however, the women have converted this into hatred of all things male.

The strength of Hero's will-power is not presented as the same elemental force as Laura's. Nevertheless, it is clear from the first meeting with Leander that she will dominate this passive lover. While she has had the will to throw off her family roles, he has been paralyzed by his. The high priest realizes the extent of her egocentricity and warns her of the danger of such an individual will in a prospective priestess of Aphrodite.

Nur hüte dich, dass so beschränktes Streben
 Ein Billiger nicht möge selbstisch nennen!
 Es hält der Mensch mit Recht von seinem Wesen
 Jegliche Störung fern; allein sein Leben,
 Ablehnend alles andre, nur auf sich,
 Des eignen Sinns Bewahrung zu beschränken,
 Scheint widrig, unerlaubt, ja ungeheuer,
 Und doch auch wieder eng und schwach und klein. (88)

6 Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (Garden City 1956) 345-6

In the climactic scenes of both plays, when the conflict between the passive male and the aggressive female is resolved, we find the male in the subservient role. In Grillparzer's version, where the love scene is handled so delicately that Hero, a very Viennese classical heroine, puts the lamp on the floor so it cannot witness the first kiss, it is easy to overlook the conclusion of the struggle of the wills. This love night will occur only once, and then Grillparzer will return to the safety of the myth about the power of love. However, in the brief scene which precedes the discreet fall of the curtain before the return of Hero to Leander, we see Hero forcing Leander onto his knees, his arms folded behind his back 'wie ein Gefangener, der Liebe, mein Gefangner' (150). In another context this might be interpreted as a romantic relic of courtly love, the lover showing his complete willingness to serve his lady. However Hero has joined a matriarchal society in order to escape from the male dominance of the patriarchal family. When she demands of a lover that he beg on his knees like a prisoner, not finally a prisoner of love, but 'mein Gefangner,' then we feel the presence of Hero's drive for sexual power. By the end of the scene, Hero has replaced Leander as the aggressor, though he was the one who had swum the straits. The marvel of this encounter is that Grillparzer manages to keep it below the surface of one of his most successful love scenes. The overall impression left on the audience is usually one of tender romantic love totally alien to the culmination of a power struggle. This theme of true love is then developed further throughout the two final acts of the play. Back in that secure territory both the author and his heroine will be safe.

Strindberg's struggle is resolved much more openly and brutally. In his undisguised sexual battle of the wills, it is necessary to have an absolute victor, it is essential that there be a stronger and a weaker. Laura is of course right when she says she will win, because she is the stronger, and the downfall of the Captain is complete. He, too, is down, not on his knees but on his back lying on the sofa. His arms, too are folded backwards, not a voluntary prisoner of his lover, but a straitjacketed victim of a houseful of women. The straitjacket itself has been slipped onto him not by Laura, who dares not approach him, but by old Margret, the mother-nurse, who completes the play-long transformation of the Captain from an orderer of men to a whimpering child. The play opens with the Captain, dressed in his full cavalry uniform, jerking the bell-pull which summons his orderly. It closes with the Captain paralyzed in his straitjacket, letting his head fall onto Margret's lap.

There is of course a startling dramatic distance between these two scenes, but it is a difference based on the outer structure of dramatic and theatrical conventions rather than the inner structure of the myth itself. Mythically the conclusion is identical; man is vulnerable to the rising power of woman; he is threatened with destruction at the hands of the power-seeking female.

The patriarchy may fall before the matriarchy. It is the peculiarly modern nightmare of two neurotic males which is worked out in these two scenes, a nightmare which found its expression in vastly different forms, but which displays the same *Angst* in the final gesture of submission. Grillparzer disguises his terror by drawing upon a classical tale which does not deal with this fear at all, and by deflecting our attention in the latter part of the play with an apparently related theme which is basically very different.

Strindberg, distilling the problem from a classical myth which contains the nucleus of a matriarchy-patriarchy clash, presents a naked struggle for power, one of the most brutally obvious psychological dismantlings in the history of the stage. One hides securely behind the old theatrical traditions; the other begins the development which leads to the transformation of those same traditions. Strindberg's view of drama became radically new, but his view of the battle of the sexes had a reluctant predecessor in Grillparzer.

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