

Marie-Christine Skuncke (ed.). *Gustaf Wasa och andra pjäser från svenskt 1700-tal*. Helikonbiblioteket 24 (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1994), pp. 185. ISBN: 91-44-33461-3.

The modern appearance of *any* theatrical texts from the golden age of Swedish theatre is as rare as it is welcome. To have them published in a series devoted to the production of standard texts for classroom use is doubly welcome (though, if the price given in one Swedish review, Kr. 240, is correct, there may be few students who can actually afford this volume).

The four theatre-pieces in this collection are Kellgren's (and Gustaf III's) libretto for Naumann's popular opera, *Gustaf Wasa* (1783/86), Carl Envallsson's wildly successful "lyrisk komedi," *Slätterölet eller Kronfogdarne* (1787), Lenngren's translation of Marmontel's libretto for Grétry's much performed opera, *Zemire och Azor* (1778), and Bellman's (probably never-performed) *Lustspel den 17 juli 1790*. The texts for these pieces have been lightly modernised by Carina and Lars Burman and are preceded by a short introduction by Skuncke and followed by a glossary of words whose meanings have changed since the eighteenth century. The sources are declared, the respelling is respectful, and Skuncke's introduction, though containing a few (minor) contestable points, is a model of informative concision.

I am pleased to see this kind of book appear, though, inevitably, a collection of this sort will provoke disagreement about the contents chosen. If this book really is intended for modern students, I think the choices here will prove problematic in practical terms. The question is whether or not these are the pieces to introduce students to the eighteenth century Swedish theatre. This grouping, in any event, rings all the nright commercial bells: we have here the libretto of the most-played Swedish opera (one recently the object of a controversial revival), a piece by a woman, a popular comedy, and something by Bellman. Now it is true that there *is* a certain sense in which they are representative of the Gustavian stage. Yet, it strikes me that, with the exception of *Slätterölet*, most of these, especially the libretti, pose significant teaching problems. Let me illustrate.

*Gustaf Wasa* was Kellgren's fourth (possibly fifth) libretto and the third one actually set. The first, *Proserpin* (1779, Kraus), received one performance, at Ulriksdal palace, and probably clinched the commission for *Æneas i Carthago* (1781-92, Kraus), the opera intended to open the new theatre then under construction in Stockholm. *Æneas* was never

performed in either Kellgren's or Kraus' lifetime. Though *Gustaf Wasa*, the next commission from Kellgren's pen, was finished in 1783, it was not performed until 1786. When finally staged, its unabashed patriotism, its many spectacular effects, and its first-rate music made it a great hit, and one of its choruses, "Ädla skuggor, vördade fäder," even became something like a national anthem. Surely this libretto, by one of the indubitably great poets of the period, deserves inclusion in such an anthology.

The problem comes in that it *is* a libretto and that Kellgren by this time knew how a libretto worked and how a libretto differed from the text of a spoken play. What Kellgren had learned in the writing of *Proserpin* and *Aeneas i Carthago* was that there are many times when the words have to make room for the music, that there are moments when the "meaning" must be carried by the music and not the text. To have only the libretto, then is to have but a part of the whole theatre-piece. To be sure, this is in principle true for spoken theatre, as well, for we need plays literally embodied. But most readers can imagine the utterance of language as action on a stage (or can be taught to): imagining one's way into language shaped for music and action on a stage is much more difficult.

The problem is especially complicated with *Gustaf Wasa* because Kellgren and Naumann did not agree over the libretto. Naumann, an experienced theatre composer, demanded (and apparently got) many cuts in Kellgren's text, about which Kellgren complained bitterly. As the text for the edition here, Skuncke has chosen the printed libretto of 1786 instead of the version Kellgren prepared for his own *Samlade skrifter* (1796). The former version is shorter by about 200 lines (which, in the latter version, may, in fact, represent the cuts demanded by Naumann) and has some smaller revisions, as well. There is a good reason for choosing a version actually heard, I think, but it can be successfully argued that, for reading, the later, fuller version gets us closer to what Kellgren understood by this text.

The greater problem in using a libretto, of course, is that the reader gets no chance to confront the music for which these words were intended. This is to deprive them of their natural context. Kellgren's necessary formality is not consistently attractive shorn of its music. The same is also true for Lenngren's most genial translation of Marmontel's libretto. It is the case here, however, that Lenngren's relaxed style is more appealing to

read than Kellgren's elegant, but intense, heroics, which simply demand their musical accompaniment. Further, it is the habit nowadays to print even poetic libretti in as unpoetic-looking a form as possible. I suppose this is thought to look less-frightening, but I have always found the typographic disposition originally used, based on centering each line rather than pushing it over to the left, makes the structure of the text easier to see and, thus, easier to get around in.

It is unfortunate that there are no illustrations of any kind to help the reader visualise these theatre-pieces. This would have been especially helpful for *Gustaf Wasa*, for which, in fact, a great amount of visual material still exists. The drawings of various sets and moments in the last act fracas, for instance, would have productively stimulated the imagination of any reader. Then, too, Chiewitz' illustration of Lars Hjortsberg as Polycarpus in *Slätterölet* could help set the tone for this delightful play. All these words need a context, and part of that context is the stage on which they were uttered. It is hard enough for modern people to get the feel of any past times and the farther back they need to reach, the more help they can use.

The central difficulty in using this book as a classroom text is that it will need a great deal of extra material to make it understandable and appealing to modern readers. This is no great cause for alarm, as there are certain sources that can provide this supplement. For instance, I understand there is a recording of *Gustaf Wasa* on the way, and that will surely be a big help in understanding how this text works. There are also plenty of illustrations for this opera available in Gunnar Larsson's and Hans Åstrand's *Gustavian Opera. An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Stockholm: Royal Swedish Academy of Music 1991). For a look at a theatre of the time, there is a new picture book (in Swedish or English) of the Drottningholm theatre by Ove Hidemark, Per Edström, Birgitta Schyberg, and others, *Drottningholm Court Theatre. Its advent, fate and preservation* (Stockholm: Byggförlaget, 1993), though a visit is even more revealing. There are stage paintings of *Zemire et Azor*, and there is a Belgian recording of it (on EMI), though its text does not conform in any useable way to Lenngren's, albeit the music is delightful. I am not myself enthusiastic about Bellman's plays. Skuncke makes a vigorous case for the one here, but I think his *Iustspel* will take considerable historical and political apology to be convincing. Yet, perhaps the play will be a good excuse to explore the political temper of the times.

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In short, though the theatre-pieces here present a modern reader with some practical problems, this is, nonetheless, a welcome beginning to a longed-for revival of interest in the theatre of Sweden's most intensely theatrical period.

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