

Strindberg, Bergman and the Silent Character

Since the breakthrough of the sound film in the late twenties, theatre and film are both audiovisual media. It is therefore unusual to have silent characters appear in either medium. But it happens. Strindberg provides interesting examples in two of his plays, Bergman many more of near-silent characters in his films. In the following I shall limit myself to four such characters: Strindberg's Miss Y in *Den starkare/The Stronger* (1890) and his Milkmaid in *Spöksonaten/The Ghost Sonata* (1907); Bergman's Girl in *Det sjunde inseglet/The Seventh Seal* (1957) and his Elisabet in *Persona* (1966). The reason for choosing this quartet will soon be evident.

Bergman's film *Persona*, it has often been said, has a strong affinity with Strindberg's monodrama *Den starkare*. In either work we deal with two women, both actresses, one of whom refuses to speak. Miss Y, the silent character in *Den starkare*, has had or possibly still has an affair with the speaking character's, Mrs X's, husband Bob. When the play opens, Mrs X is not aware of this. In her long monologue she therefore misinterprets both her husband's and Miss Y's behavior in the past. But as she is recapitulating past events, she gradually grows suspicious of Miss Y, a suspicion that is nourished by Miss Y's silence: "Varför tiger du? Du har inte sagt ett ord på hela tiden, utan bara låtit mig sitta och tala!"¹

Why is Miss Y silent? Is she silent, as Mrs X finally suggests, because

¹ Strindberg (1914), p. 221. The reference to this edition rather than *Samlade Verk* (1984) is motivated by the fact that the latter was not available when Bergman made his films. In English: "Why don't you say something? You haven't said a word all this time, but just let me keep on talking!" - Strindberg, 1970, p. 196.

she has nothing to say? Is she silent because Mrs X's stream of words does not give her much chance to say anything? Is she silent because she wants to keep her relationship to Bob secret to Mrs X, feeling that whatever she would say might reveal her? Does her silence express a hostile attitude to Mrs X? Or an honest one, something like: Why should I pretend that we are friends, when I know we are not? Or even a sympathetic one, a wish to spare her. Is it perhaps motivated by a hope that Mrs X will get weary of her, Miss Y's, unresponsiveness and leave her in peace? Or is it a way of making Mrs X insecure? Is it a relaxed or a tense silence, a genuine silence or the silence of someone playing a role? After all, Miss Y is an actress by profession.

There are certainly many possible explanations for Miss Y's silence but the one that Mrs X favors is not one of those I have mentioned. In her eyes, Miss Y's silence is not momentarily strategic. It is indicative of her fundamental nature. Comparing her to a worm, a crab, a snake and a stork, Mrs X makes it clear that Miss Y's silence is inhuman. Animals cannot speak! Moreover, she suggests that Miss Y's silence is an expression of vampirism: "Du har suttit med ögonen och nystat ur mig alla dessa tankar [...]"² However, we must not take for granted that Mrs X is right in her accusation. Whether Miss Y's silence is or is not an expression of vampirism is an open question - just as the question who is the stronger of the two women.³ All we can say is that Mrs X apparently experiences Miss Y's silence as vampirism.

Bergman's *Persona* deals with an actress, Elisabet, who suddenly stops talking. A woman psychiatrist makes it clear that "this silence she imposes on herself is unneurotic. It's a strong person's form of protest"⁴ - not only against acting, role-playing, on- or off-stage, but also against speech itself seen as a verbal *persona*. Elisabet's dilemma was Bergman's own at the time. In a TV interview he said that his distrust of words was then so deep that he felt that "the only form of truth is silence."⁵

² "You've sat there staring, twisting out of me all these thoughts." - Strindberg, p. 17.

³ Concerning this, see Törnqvist, 1970, pp. 297-308.

⁴ Bergman's comment in Björkman et al., 1993, p. 211.

⁵ *Movie*, 16, Winter 1968-69, p. 6. Quoted from Gado, 1986, p. 322.

Susan Sontag's view of the silence in *Den starkare* and in *Persona* ties in with this when she writes that "the one who talks, who spills her soul, turns out to be weaker than the one who keeps silent. Language is presented as an instrument of fraud and cruelty."⁶

But John Simon, commenting on the two works, comes to the opposite conclusion:

silence is, in the final reckoning, vampirism: a vacuum into which the other person's, the speaker's, lifeblood ebbs as surely as if it were being sucked.⁷

Either standpoint can be defended. Both works are highly ambiguous on the issue of silence. This is perhaps especially true of *Persona*, since there the psychiatrist at the end of her speech offers the view that silence, too, is a mask, a *persona*. "Jag tycker du ska hålla på med den rollen," she tells Elisabet, "tills du finner den ointressant, färdigspelad och kan lämna den liksom du undan för undan lämnar dina andra roller."⁸ This agrees with Bergman's own view at the time. In the interview just referred to he said: "going a step further, I discovered that it [the silence], too, was a kind of role, also a kind of mask."⁹

Viewed in this way, speech and silence are no real contrasts. They are merely different *forms* of role-playing. But if this is true, genuine or authentic behavior is nonexistent. This is a standpoint that is hard to accept and both earlier and later Bergman has tried, as he puts it, "to find a step beyond" the equating deadlock.¹⁰ Authenticity, he believes in his more hopeful films, does exist. It may be rare. But it can be found. And again it is a Strindberg character, the Milkmaid in *Spökesonaten*, who serves as his paragon.

⁶ Sontag, 1975, p. 268.

⁷ Simon, 1972, pp. 306-307.

⁸ Bergman, 1966, p. 36. "I think you should keep playing this part until you've lost interest in it. When you've played it to the end, you can drop it as you drop your other parts." - Bergman, 1972, p. 42.

⁹ Gado, 1986, p. 321.

¹⁰ Gado, 1986, p. 321.

Spöksönanen, which Bergman has staged three times, has one of the most intriguing play openings in world drama. In front of a modern house we see to the left an old man, Jacob Hummel, in his wheelchair, reading a paper and to the right a milkmaid - you had milkmaids in Stockholm in 1907 - and a student by a street drinking-fountain. The Student tells the Milkmaid how on the preceding night he has helped to save the victims of a collapsing house. She remains silent. Hummel's asides reveal that he does not see the Milkmaid. Later when we learn that the Student - like Ingmar Bergman - is a Sunday child and that therefore he "kan [...] se, vad andra icke se" (can see what others can't),¹¹ we understand that the Milkmaid is a vision. Still later we learn that Hummel has once lured her out on the ice, because she had witnessed something he wished to keep secret. As a result she has drowned. We now understand that the Milkmaid is an incarnation of Hummel's guilt feelings. In the beginning he is still repressing his guilt. That is why he cannot see her. When she returns later, he does see her and is horrified. He now recognizes his guilt.

It is perhaps natural that the Milkmaid, being dead, does not speak - although death does not prevent the Ghost in *Hamlet* from speaking. By making her mute, Strindberg could immediately indicate her mental nature as well as the contrast between Hummel and the Student with regard to her. But there is another, thematic aspect involved here. The Milkmaid is the polar opposite of the Cook appearing toward the end of the play. With her milk bottles, she is a maternal giver and nurturer just as the Cook, who has grown fat on the nourishment she has stolen from the family she serves, is a taker and bloodsucker.

Rather than milk, the Milkmaid gives the Student water to drink. He then tells her that his eyes have become inflamed from touching the injured and the dead the night before. He therefore asks her:

Vill du ta min rena näsduk, fukta den i friska vattnet och badda
mina arma ögon? - Vill du det? - Vill du vara den barmhärtiga
samaritanskan?¹²

¹¹ Strindberg, 1917, p. 160; Strindberg, 1975, p. 199.

¹² Strindberg, 1917, p. 151. -"Would you take my clean handkerchief, dampen it in fresh

The Milkmaid does so. Like the Student the night before, *she* now acts like the good Samaritan. In their altruism they are related.

Their meeting by the drinking fountain is patterned on the meeting between Jesus and the woman of Samaria by Jacob's (!) well. When Jesus asks this woman for a drink of water, she is surprised and wonders how he, being a Jew, can ask her, being a Samaritan, for water. Jesus answers:

If thou knewest [...] who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. (John 4.10)

The parallel is closer in Swedish, where Jesus and the Student both refer to "friska vattnet" (fresh/living water). The biblical story contrasts Jacob's earthly water with Jesus' "everlasting" water. "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him," Jesus says, "shall never thirst" (John 4.14).

In Strindberg's variety, Jacob Hummel is the prime representative of worldly values, while it is the Milkmaid who is the provider of healing, "living" water. What is interesting in our context is that she combines muteness with good deeds. She verifies both the saying that deeds speak louder than words and Hummel's surprisingly perspicacious remark at the ghost supper that "silence cannot hide anything - but words can." Silence is equated with honesty, authenticity.

In his film *Det sjunde inseglet*, set in the Middle Ages, Bergman includes a character, nameless like the Samaritan woman and the Milkmaid. She is simply called "flickan" (the girl). Although she appears fairly early in the film and is seen in no less than seven sequences, she has in the original script - which has never been published¹³ - merely six speeches. In the English translation of the script,¹⁴ this is reduced to four. And in the film she has only one. There she is, in other words, a nearly silent character.

water, and bathe my poor eyes? - Would you? - Would you be a good Samaritan?" - Strindberg, 1975, p. 195.

¹³ The script is preserved in the library of the Swedish Film Institute in Stockholm.

¹⁴ Bergman, 1960.

The Girl in *Det sjunde inseglet* is the only survivor in a village that has been haunted by the plague. Like Strindberg's Milkmaid, she witnesses how a man, Raval, makes himself guilty of a crime, but unlike her she manages to escape being killed through another man's, Jöns', intervention. When Jöns, in his turn, is about to kill Raval, she stops him from doing so by screaming. The Girl, in other words, shows her concern - even for her enemy - not through words but through a sound. In this she is inhumanly human.

"Egentligen kom jag för att få min vattensäck fylld," Jöns tells her after the Raval incident. She takes him to "en djup brunn med kallt friskt vatten," where he "dricker sig otörstig och fyller säcken med vatten. Flickan hjälper honom."¹⁵ Again we are reminded both of the biblical well with its living water and of the Strindbergian variety of it in *Spöksönanen*.

From now on the Girl is Jöns' companion. She follows him "som en skugga" (like a shadow). The simile indicates that she is, somehow, linked to him. Unlike the egocentric knight, Antonius Block, who is a thinker and a dreamer, his squire Jöns is a man of action and compassion. The Girl possesses these qualities to an even greater extent.

This appears especially when she and Jöns again come across Raval who, now suffering from the plague, in imitation of Christ's "I thirst" (John 19.28), asks them for "lite vatten" (a little water). The Girl is immediately prepared to let him drink from Jöns' waterskin but Jöns prevents her. Whereupon she "sjunker ner i sittande ställning och döljer ansiktet i händerna."¹⁶ By risking her life for the man who nearly killed her, she again behaves according to Christ's "love your enemies" (Mat. 5.44) in an even more extreme way than before. Jöns falls short of this. Giving the dying Raval water is to him "meningslöst" (meaningless). The Girl's sensitivity to Raval's suffering is further strengthened in the film, where she picks up Jöns' waterskin and heads for Raval even before he has asked for

¹⁵ Bergman, 1956, p. 40. - "What I really came for is to get my waterskin filled. Girl: We have a deep well with cool, fresh water. [...] Jöns quenches his thirst and fills his bag with water. The girl helps him." Bergman, 1960, p. 118.

¹⁶ Bergman, 1956, p. 113. - "[...] sinks down and hides her face in her hands." Bergman, 1960, p. 156.

water.

For a long time the Girl's status in the film remains puzzling. On one hand she is a subordinate character both cinematically and socially: she is usually seen briefly and kept in the background of the frame; and just as Jöns is Block's servant, so she is his.¹⁷ On the other she nevertheless appears in closeup at strategic moments. In the witch-burning sequence, for example, she "provides a silent but intensely engaged visual contrast to the debate between Block and his squire."¹⁸ Precisely the combination of closeup and silence should make us sense that in her case we deal with someone whose 'language' is neither verbal nor spiritual but sensual and therefore authentic. In this respect the Girl in *Det sjunde inseglet* is a direct predecessor of Anna, the servant in *Viskningar och rop/Cries and Whispers* (1973).¹⁹

At the end of *Det sjunde inseglet* six characters are confronted with the figure of Death who has come to fetch them. One of them is the Girl who, now appearing in the foreground, becomes the central figure. Face to face with Death, she kneels. And now for the first and only time she speaks. Repeating Christ's last words on the cross, she says: "Det är fullbordat" (It is finished).²⁰ Her humble position of acceptance and her *consummatum est*

¹⁷ The small 'f' in "flickan" (the girl) seems to indicate both her low social station, her modesty and her representativity. The latter, however, is ironically erroneous. Being Christlike, the girl is in fact utterly unrepresentative.

¹⁸ The remark is Mark B. Sandberg's, p. 20, in his penetrating analysis of the Girl in *Det sjunde inseglet*.

¹⁹ "Anna," it says in the script for *Viskningar och rop*, "är mycket tystlåten, mycket skygg [...]. [...] hon talar inte, kanske tänker hon inte heller." Bergman, 1973, p. 156. - "Anna is very taciturn, very shy [...]. [...] she doesn't speak; perhaps she doesn't think either." Bergman, 1977, pp. 61-62. The last statement should not be taken as criticism. It is rather an implication that Anna is able to feel strongly. - For a comparison between Anna and the Milkmaid, see Törnqvist, 1976, p. 82.

²⁰ Bergman, 1956, p. 127. - The biblical allusion is obscured both in the English translation of the script, where she says: "It is the end" (p. 163) and in the English subtitles of the film which read: "The time has come." - Like the Girl, Elisabet only speaks once toward the end of *Persona*. In her case, too, we deal with a 'quotation,' a repetition of Alma's word "Nothing." The difference is, of course, that while Elisabet's single speech sounds like a negation - she is resting in Alma's arms, pietà-fashion - the

complete the impression we already have of her, namely that she is a figure conceived *in imitatio Christi*. Toward the end her face is strongly lit from the side, leaving part of it in shadow, a visual icon of her longing for and fear of death - this, too, a Christlike ambivalence.

Det sjunde inseglet is thematically related both to Bergman's *Dagen slutar tidigt/The Day Ends Early*,²¹ one of three plays published in 1946 under the title *Moraliteter/Morality Plays* and, more closely, to his *Trämålning/Wood Painting*, published in 1954 and subtitled "En moralitet" (A Morality Play). Bergman's interest in this dramatic subgenre helps to explain why his Girl - like Strindberg's Milkmaid, she too frequently called "flickan" (the girl) - is more an incarnation of an idea or an attitude than a realistic figure. In a morality play they would both have appeared under the designation "Good Deeds."²²

More explicitly, this designation fits a figure appearing in Pär Lagerkvist's novelette *Bödeln/The Hangman* (1933), later turned into a play by the writer himself. I refer to the figure, called "Kvinnan med ljusglorian" (The Woman with the Halo). Not appearing until the end, she is dressed (I quote from the play)

*som en tiggerska men det står en gloria av ljus omkring henne, hennes ansikte strålar. När hon inträder sprider sig en stillhet över scenen. Ingen av publiken uppmärksammar henne likväl på något sätt. - Hon lägger sakta sin hand på Bödelns - och han vänder sig mot henne, ser på henne. Hela tiden sitter hon sedan med glorian av ljus omkring sig.*²³

Girl's single speech, the way it is framed, is an affirmation. But a rejection of life rhymes, of course, very well with an affirmation of death.

²¹ In this play an actor named Peter performs the banquet scene from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann* (1912) in his puppet theatre. According to Bergman himself, his play *Kaspers död/Kasper's Death* (1942) is "an audacious plagiarism of *Punch's Shrove Tuesday* by Strindberg and [Hofmannsthal's] *The Old Play of Everyman*." See Bergman, 1989, p. 141.

²² Significantly, *Gute Werke* in *Jedermann* is a female character.

²³ Lagerkvist, p. 125. - "She is dressed like a beggar but there is a halo of light around her, her face is transfigured. When she enters, it becomes still on the stage. And yet no-one in the audience pays any attention to her. - She slowly puts her hand on that of the Hangman - and he turns to her, looks at

Not until the end of the play, when the Hangman is about to leave for yet another execution, does she say anything:

KVINNAN *reser sig - talar till honom därborta med stilla röst, hennes ansikte lyser av en bemlig, smärtfull lycka.*

Du vet att jag väntar på dig! Att du inte är ensam - att också jag finns i den värld som du tror bara ropar efter dig.²⁴

Bödeln is a kind of morality play, in which the Woman with the Halo and the Hangman are allegorical figures, representing good and evil. The Hangman is dominant, the Woman with a Halo is submissive. The message is clear: evil prevails over goodness in life. Lagerkvist indicates this in several ways: by having the Woman with a Halo appear late; by dressing her simply, even poorly; by showing the environment's neglect of her; and by making her silent - until the end. Bergman follows this pattern quite closely in his handling of the Girl at the end of *Det sjunde inseglet*.

Both women practice the deeds of love. Their silence ties in with this. At the end of Bergman's *Enskilda samtal/Private Conversations* (1996), Jacob, the vicar (we never learn his surname), tells his young confirmee Anna that "kärleken finns som en förbisedd verklighet i våra liv." And with a significant understatement he assures her that "man behöver aldrig säga 'jag älskar dig'. Men man kan göra kärlekens gärningar."²⁵ This is what the silent Milkmaid and the nearly silent Girl and the Woman with a Halo do.

While in these cases, silence is a sign of authenticity and altruism, in Elisabet's case it connotes the opposite: egocentricity, a vampiristic sucking

her. She remains sitting there, all the time with the halo of light around her." My trans.

²⁴ Lagerkvist, 1956, p. 139. - "THE WOMAN *stands up - speaks to him over there quietly, her face luminous with a secret sorrowful happiness.* You know that I am waiting for you! That you are not alone - that I too exist in this world which you believe only cries for you." - My trans.

²⁵ Bergman, 1996, pp. 163-164. - "[...] love exists as a neglected reality in our lives. [...] you never need to say 'I love you.' But you can perform the deeds of love." My trans. - Earlier in the script/TV series, the missionary Märta has handed Tomas, the young theologian, Søren Kierkegaard's *Karlighedens gerninger/The Deeds of Love* (1847).

of words from the speaker - as well as a skepticism of language as a means of true communication. Miss Y's silence is more obscure, since we never see her perform any significant action; since her nonverbal behavior is by definition ambiguous; and since we may question Mrs X's interpretation of her silence.

Strindberg's silent characters obviously have their equivalents, both thematically and formally, in Bergman's near-silent characters. Although Strindberg has hardly been the only source of inspiration for Bergman when he created these characters, the great affinity between the two, working in related media, suggests that he has been the major influence. More important, however, it is to realize that Strindberg within drama and theatre in this area anticipates what Bergman is doing within his medium: the film. With regard to silent characters they are, each in his field, pioneers.

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