

¶ Michael Robinson. *Studies in Strindberg*. Norwich: Norvik Press, 1998. 244 Pp. ISBN 1-870041-37-2

The latest work in a long and distinguished career, Michael Robinson's most recent contribution to Strindberg studies consists of a collection of essays "originally written [...] for conferences and inaugural lectures" (22) that aim at "facilitating a re-evaluation of Strindberg in the English-speaking world" (19). The considerable erudition and insight that characterize much of Robinson's work are showcased to best effect in three of the essays subsumed under the rubric "Narrative, Plot, and Self." Not surprisingly, given the fact that he previously has written a book on the subject of Strindberg and autobiography, his handling of the same issue in this context is both informed and suggestive, as he asserts provocatively and rightly the "complex intertextuality of the discourses through which [the autobiographer's] identity is assembled" (36). Unfortunately too little of the piece is actually devoted to Strindberg; in the copious adductions of Diderot, Rousseau, Racine, Henry James, Goncourt, Munch, Zola, Wedekind, Huysmans, Mallarmé, Balzac, Keats, Janet Achurch, St. Augustine, Barthes, Nin, Beckett, and Roman Jakobsen (to name but a few!), the issue of Strindberg and autobiography tends to get lost in the shuffle. And this development is indeed unfortunate because the concept of the mutability of identity is absolutely central to Strindberg's notion of himself and to his authorship, and a nuanced treatment of the matter

would be a most welcome addition to Strindberg scholarship.

A related issue surfaces in the next essay which deals with the subject of how Strindberg “stage-managed” his life, of how he saw life as essentially theatrical. Using such concepts as *peripeteia*, *mise en scène*, inner dialogue, emplotment, and acting, the author argues that Strindberg made of his own life a theatrical piece. Again, this is a provocative thesis and one could only wish that Robinson had taken the issue a bit further. What are the ramifications for Strindberg’s notion of subjectivity? How do those notions change throughout the authorship? What exactly does it mean to engage in theatrical self-representation?

The third in this series of essays, “History and His-Story,” examines Strindberg’s life-long preoccupation with history and its connection with the autobiographical as well as his sense of both history and his life as alternately a kind of naturalistic “raw, cynical spectacle” and a providentially designed plot. Here Robinson points to the metatheatrical dimension not only of the post-Inferno works but also of such purported models of naturalism as *Fordringsägare*, concluding that “there is properly no history, only biography” (71). This is, to be sure, a compelling issue in the playwright’s work but to emerge from this discussion with little more than a rather simplistic equation between the playful artistry of providence and the playful artistry of the author is somewhat disappointing.

Another of the essays that is likely to be of genuine interest to the audience Robinson says he is addressing is “Prisoners at Play,” a detailed comparison between *Dödsdansen* and Beckett’s *Endgame*. By investigating surface detail, dialogue, ritual, language, infernality, guilt and expiation, and location, Robinson is able to move beyond Anthony Swerling’s treatment of the two texts to posit the relationship between them as paradigmatic for the development of drama between the late nineteenth century and the present. His rich and penetrating analysis of these issues is extremely helpful in locating Strindberg in the larger context of the evolution of modern drama (and therefore in defining his contribution thereto) and in isolating the radical deployment of technique and representation of subjectivity that constitute his authorship.

But the major difficulty with this text lies in its very purpose and structure. If, as it avows, it strives to facilitate a re-evaluation of Strindberg in the English-speaking world (and the author presumably means the educated general reader in that world), why, one asks, does it include so many essays that are almost sure to be of no interest to that world? The essay on "P-aris," a one-page outline that Strindberg never pursued and which Robinson found in the Nordiska Museet collection, along with his essays on Strindberg's correspondence with actors and directors, on the development of Strindberg's language from naturalism to symbolism, on his painting, and on his impact on the musical expressionists are all almost surely matters of relative indifference to anyone but the Strindberg scholarly community. Yet, if the essays are, despite claims to the contrary, directed towards Strindberg scholars, then one wonders why is there so much repetition of material and information that has long since become common critical currency in that group (and here I am thinking of the essays on Strindberg's letters to actors and directors and on Strindberg's language and also of the presentation in almost all the essays of individual bits of information that virtually every Scandinavian Studies graduate student knows). In brief, Robinson's text is troubled by a pervasive confusion as to precisely who its audience is.

The volume concludes with a piece that has virtually nothing to do with Strindberg at all (with the exception of nine lines out of a twenty-page essay), "Acting Women or the Performing Self" which Robinson claims he includes "as a kind of penance for devoting so much time to Strindberg, the 'woman-hater'" (20), a justification that is both condescending and unconvincing. The essay explores the nexus actress/prostitute in the late nineteenth century from the vantage point of the mutability of identity and the representation of the body. But ultimately there is not much terribly new here. These issues have been discussed and frequently. One might further add that women readers do not seek "penance" from male critics, only discernment. Furthermore, the notion implicit in Robinson's remarks that women readers are so narrowly fixated on Strindberg's reactionary views on gender that they cannot perceive or value his extraordinary talents and visionary

dramaturgy is unworthy of so distinguished a scholar.

*Studies in Strindberg*, then, offers moments of original insight into central and exciting issues in Strindberg scholarship, but, sadly, it suffers from a kind of “osammanhängande” quality and an almost fatal inability to decide on who its audience really is. As he has shown so often in the past, the author is possessed of the judgment, the skill, the erudition, and the sheer penetrating intelligence to be capable of much more than this volume offers. This reviewer has no doubt whatsoever that these qualities will surface again, as bright as ever, in his future scholarship.

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