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Anne Charlotte Leffler and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's *De nygifte*

On March 13, 1876, Anne Charlotte Leffler's two-act comedy *Under toffeln* [*Her Little Slipped Foot*] premiered at Dramaten in Stockholm. Submitted and performed as the work of an unidentified author, *Under toffeln* was her second play to be performed at that theater, following her theatrical success, *Skådespelerskan* [*The Actress*], which had premiered, also anonymously, in December 1873.¹

In a letter to her mother written while she was composing the play, Anne Charlotte Leffler noted that the play depicted the plight of a man at the hands of several domineering women, including not only his wife and her mother, but also his sister:

Hvad stycket skall heta, vet jag ej ännu; det handlar om en tarflig beskedlig landtbrukare, som blir gift med en vacker och förnäm men fattig flicka, som tyranniserar honom; vidare tyranniseras stackaren af en högfärdig, otäck svärmor, samt en rättänkande

¹ *Under toffeln* did not appear in print until after Anne Charlotte Leffler began publishing under her own name in 1882. It was then issued in *Skådespelerskan. Dramatisk teckning i två akter; Under toffeln. Komedi i två akter* [*The Actress: Dramatic Sketch in Two Acts; Her Little Slipped Foot: Comedy in Two Acts*](Stockholm: Z. Hæggström, 1883). All references are to this edition. Neither work has been translated. Translations are my own.

men skarp syster. Fruntimren äro osams, han får jemt sitta emellan, vill göra alla till viljes och råkar därför ständigt illa ut.²

[I don't know yet what I'm going to call the play; it's about a humble but good-natured farmer, who marries a beautiful and well-born but poor young woman, who tyrannizes him; as if that's not enough, the poor thing is also tyrannized by a horrible haughty mother-in-law and his fair-minded but sharp-tongued sister. The women quarrel, he's always in the thick of it, wants to be agreeable to everyone and has a terrible time of it.]

But several scholars have noted a second plot and its resemblance to that of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's drama *De nygifte* [*The Newlyweds*] (1865), one of the first Scandinavian prose plays with a contemporary setting.³ The situation of the male protagonist in *Under toffeln* recalls that of the young wife Laura in *De nygifte*, who has great difficulty transferring her affections from her parents to her husband, for Henning in *Under toffeln* has lived with his sister in their parents' house since the death of the older couple twenty years earlier and it is difficult for him and his sister to adjust to his engagement and marriage.

Anne Charlotte Leffler's letters and diaries make frequent references to Bjørnson and his plays. In her diary, she mentions reading *De nygifte* aloud to her mother on April 23, 1873, a year and a half before she began work on *Under toffeln*. The two plays were also on her mind in 1876, when both *Under toffeln* and *De nygifte* were performed in Stockholm. That November, she and her husband saw a performance of *De nygifte* at Nya Teatern that she disliked.⁴ But earlier that year, she had given private readings of both plays to friends and family.⁵

² Letter from Anne Charlotte Leffler to Gustava Leffler, October 10, 1874.

³ All references are to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, *De nygifte*. [*The Newlyweds*], vol. 8 of *Samlede Værker*, Folkeudgave, (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901): 133-188. Translations are my own.

⁴ Diary entry for November 15, 1876.

⁵ In her diary entry for March 9, 1876, Anne Charlotte Leffler notes, that she

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Henrik Schück suggested that Bjørnson's *De nygifte* was a crucial formative influence on Anne Charlotte Leffler's plays, especially in the 1870s.⁶ Recently, Mona Lagerström has taken a closer look at the parallels between the two plays. She notes that both *De nygifte* and *Under toffeln* have two acts and feature protagonists torn between marriage and other family bonds, but Bjørnson's play affirms a gender contract according to which women are entirely subordinate to men, whereas *Under toffeln* undermines this arrangement. It does not idealize patriarchal family life and its representation of the capricious young wife Ebba's insistence on getting her own way suggests a breath of fresh air. Lagerström notes that open-ended conclusion of the play may cast doubt on the longevity of Ebba's victory over her husband, but argues that *Under toffeln* banishes the old gender contract along with her sister-in-law Agnes, who of all the characters most clearly represents the past. (105)

As both Schück and Lagercranz acknowledge, the portrayal of the brother and sister here and elsewhere in Anne Charlotte Leffler's works recalls her own relationship to her brothers, especially the mathematician Gösta Mittag-Leffler. In *Under toffeln*, Henning is an amateur botanist who publishes his discoveries from time to time, and Agnes supports him in his work. The character Ebba, his energetic and demanding young fiancée and wife, also presents parallels to other characters in Anne Charlotte Leffler's plays, such as the young fiancée and wife in *Skådespelerskan* and *Elfvän*. It would

read *Under toffeln* aloud for her English friend Merelina Stanley and on April 7 [1876], she records that she and her friends had participated in a dramatic reading of *De nygifte*: "Bertha, Tekla, Corn. till middagen; vi läste Björnsons "De nygifta" med rollfördelning. Gulli S. och Märtha Fr. kommo på e.m. och voro åhörare." [Bertha, Tekla, Corn(elia) to dinner; we gave a dramatic reading of *The Newlyweds*. Gulli S. and Märta Fr. came in the afternoon and were the audience.]

⁶ See Schück, 550. Quoted in Lagerström, 13.

thus be foolish to insist too much on the debt of *Under toffeln* to *De nygifte*. Rather than influence, however, it makes good sense to see *Under toffeln* as a response to *De nygifte*, one, moreover, that brings into focus some of the radical tendencies only suggested in the earlier play. *Under toffeln* constitutes an interpretation of *De nygifte* that suggests how Anne Charlotte Leffler and other intelligent young women born around 1850 read Bjørnson's play, why they found it attractive, and what it allowed them to see. The relationship between the two plays, moreover, brings into focus one aspect of the literary dramatic field in Scandinavia during the decades 1870-1900, often referred to as the Modern Breakthrough.

The notion of the literary field was first developed in a series of essays published in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, who traces the emergence of the literary field in France back to the decade following the revolutions and coup d'état of 1848 and 1851, when avant-garde artists turned their backs on politically engaged art. What began as the heroic refusal of individual writers such as Baudelaire and Flaubert developed into a kind of secondary economy parallel to that of the marketplace for commodities, a "field" in which writers and artists competed with one another for rewards that took the form of prestige and recognition by their peers rather than money. In his major collection on the subject, *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu offers several maps of the French literary field that despite their detail point to two striking absences: women and writers who aren't French, curious omissions for maps that purport to cover a period in which French literature was more open to foreign influences – German, Russian, and Scandinavian, above all – than ever before and when issues of gender and women's political rights played a strikingly prominent role in literature and politics.

David Gedin's dissertation, *Fältets herrar. Framväxten av en modern författarroll: Artonbundraåttiotalet* [*Lords of the Field: The Emergence of the Modern Author: The 1880s*], takes Bourdieu as its point of departure

for an examination of the Swedish literary field in the 1880s and early 1890s that not only discusses the ways in which Swedish literary history has “edged out” women writers (to use Gaye Tuchman’s phrase), but also attempts to put women writers back into the picture – or on the map. Leffler figures prominently in his discussion, assuming the central role she held for many of her peers in the 1880s. Viewing Anne Charlotte Leffler’s *Under toffeln* as a response to Bjørnson’s *De nygifte*, however, brings into focus additional aspects of the literary field in Scandinavia at this time, showing it to be not only an international or at least Scandinavian phenomenon, but also remarkably open to women. However much Scandinavian literary historians have disliked the women writers of the turn of the last century, they have never been able to omit them entirely, as have many chroniclers of the same period in France or elsewhere. The ongoing international conversation suggested by the echoes of *De nygifte* in *Under toffeln* also undercuts the myth of originality that informs one account of the emergence of modern drama as the creation of a series of father figures, beginning with Ibsen and Strindberg. At times, one situation recalls another – with a difference – as when the young wife who won’t leave home becomes in Anne Charlotte Leffler’s hands a confirmed bachelor all too attached to his sister and their parents’ estate. At others, names circulate from one text to another. The Aksel and Laura of Bjørnson’s play also crop up in Strindberg’s writing in the late 1880s, in *Plaidoyer d’un fou* and *The Father*, where they also suggest the limits of late-nineteenth-century marital roles.

Understanding a literary text, Bourdieu argues, includes situating it within the field of its production. Which works does it refer back to? Which writers does it aim to displace? Is it part of a movement? If so, with which works does it express solidarity or enter into dialogue? It seems clear enough in Bourdieu’s analysis that earlier works shed light on later ones. But situating a work within a field of other competing literary productions can also show how a later

work not only develops, criticizes, and transforms elements of a predecessor but also transforms our understanding of the work itself.

Anne Charlotte Leffler's *Under toffeln* not only responds to and reverses aspects of Bjørnson's *De nygifte* but also offers a reading of the earlier work that brings into focus the radicalism and feminist potential of the earlier play. *Under toffeln*, moreover, was not her only play to respond to *De nygifte*. Her late comedy *Den kärleken!* [*Love Is Strange!*], also a two-act play about newlyweds, harks back, as well, to Bjørnson's early drama but brings to the fore the issues of the relationship of heterosexuality to power, the status of unmarried women, and the potential of writing to change the world or at least the way we view it.

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The two acts of *De nygifte* take place a year apart. The first opens in the richly furnished drawing room in the home of a government official and his wife. Their daughter, Laura, has recently married, and the young couple are living with her parents. Also present is an unmarried woman, Mathilde, who has been Laura's companion for some time and who helped Aksel to persuade her to marry him. In the first scene, Laura's father reads the newspaper, while Aksel fidgets and Laura and her mother discuss the older woman's ill health. Laura thinks that she and Aksel should not attend the ball that evening that friends have arranged in their honor because her mother is not well enough, and the young couple quarrel. Aksel asks Mathilde to help him once again in his relationship to Laura, this time to transfer her loyalties from her parents to him. But Mathilde seems both reluctant and hostile. Aksel tells his father-in-law that he and Laura must move to the capital because he needs to work. The older man disagrees, but Aksel decides that he and Laura will leave in any case and that Mathilde will accompany

them.

A year later, Laura's parents pay them what seems to be a surprise visit. The older couple are on their way to Italy, and their arrival is preceded by the reading of two texts. The first is a short story published in the newspaper. Called, like the play, "De nygifte," it describes a situation remarkably similar to that of Aksel and Laura, in which a young wife does not love her husband. Mathilde, the anonymous author of the narrative, reads it aloud to Laura at the beginning of the act, but Aksel has also read it and it unnerves him, because it seems to foretell the breakdown of their marriage. Then a letter arrives announcing the imminent arrival of Laura's parents. Where will they stay? Aksel suggests that he leave so that they can have his rooms, but Mathilde offers to share Laura's bed so that he can have hers. But Laura blames Mathilde for encouraging the marriage and then criticizing her behavior as a wife. Aksel and Mathilde discuss Mathilde's difficult situation, and Mathilde says she doesn't mind being a victim since Laura's hostility is a sign that she is beginning to love her husband. Mathilde also says that her calling is not marriage, although she did once love a man who taught her a great deal. What she would like is to travel. The parents arrive and Aksel and Laura both represent the other as a loving spouse, an act that seems to become real in the performance. Understanding that all is well – or soon will be so – with the young couple, the older pair depart, taking with them Mathilde, who has secretly arranged for the unexpected visit. As they prepare to leave, she divulges both her authorship of the story she had read aloud and her calling. "Og min næste roman skal bli bedre." [And my next novel will be better.] (188)

Critics have emphasized the play's representation of the conflict between sexuality and mid-nineteenth-century notions of bourgeois marriage and womanhood. Thus for Harald Noreng, the play depicts a young woman who is "terrified by her first encounter with sexuality," but eventually "grows out of girlhood," especially when

her husband reminds her that he has “legal and God-given rights to rule over his wife.”⁷ For Mona Lagerström these so-called rights figure as part of the gender contract that allows the young husband to determine where he and his wife will live and to force her to submit to his sexual desires. She calls attention to the play’s representation of the agonistic behavior of Aksel and his father-in-law and to the older man’s domination of his wife, whose illness reduces her, like her daughter, to a body, an object. Although

⁷ Noreng writes: “Den unge frue er simpelthen blitt vettskremt av sitt første møte med den fysiske kjærlighet. Axel selv har et lystig ungarliv bak seg. Men det var Lauras stille og blyge ynde som først trakk ham mot henne. Slik skulle hans hustru være. Han dyrket henne lenge for hennes kvinnelige uskyld, men hans følelser vokste til noe mer: ”Jeg kan ikke blot beundre, jeg maa elske, ikke blot knæle, men omfavne ... Jeg tog hende op i min Tanke som et Barn; under den daglige Beskuelse er hun voxet ud til en Kvinde, som undselig og uvidende bøjer sig fra mig, men som jeg maa besidde” (SDv. II, 331-332). I slike oratoriske setninger taler Axel i denne opgjørssenen til sine svigerforeldre, Laura og hennes venninne, forfatterinnen Mathilde, om sitt savn. Han tror ikke at det kan bli noe sant og helt ekteskap mellom ham og Laura før hun bryter opp fra foreldrehjemmet og følger ham til byen. Alle blir opprørt ved tanken. Men Axel minner om den rett som både Guds og statens lov har gitt ham til å herske over sin kone, og med blødende hjerte må den gamle lovydige amtmann befale sin datter å følge.” (58-59) [The young wife has quite simply been terrified by her first encounter with physical love. Axel himself led a pleasure-filled life as a bachelor. But it was Laura’s quiet and shy beauty that first drew him to her. That’s the way his wife should be. He worshiped her for a long time for her womanly innocence, but his feelings grew into something else: “I can’t just admire her, I must love, not just kneel, but embrace... I took her up in my thoughts like a child; but now that I see her every day she’s grown into a woman who shyly and unknowingly avoids me, but whom I must possess.” Axel uses such oratorical flourishes in his argument with his in-laws, Laura and her friend, the author Mathilde, about his needs. He doesn’t believe that he and Laura can have a real marriage unless she leaves the parental home and follows him to the city. Everyone is upset at the thought. But Axel reminds them of the right that the laws of both God and the state have given him to rule over his wife, and with a broken heart the law-abiding old official must order his daughter to obey.]

Mathilde does speak and, it turns out, write, for Mona Lagerström, she is an instrument of male domination, helping Aksel marry Laura and then to bend her to his wishes. On Mona Lagerström's reading, *De nygifte* is a nineteenth-century version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which the husband uses persuasion and manipulation rather than blows to control his wife. But elements in the play undercut this reading, above all the scene in which Aksel, Laura, and Mathilde discuss where the parents will sleep. This remarkable scene, which evokes the empty marital bed, suggests that he has not yet managed to consummate the marriage. Earlier, moreover, when he expresses his desire for his wife, he also articulates his awareness of the contradictions between expectations that a bride be innocent and asexual and that a wife be not only physically affectionate but also passionate. When he asked for Laura's hand, he told her parents that he loved the child in her. Now, her father comments, he's impatient because she *is* a child [Og nu er du utålmodig over, at hun *er* et barn. (157)]. Aksel replies:

Ja, ja! Da jeg vilde føre hende til alteret, var det måske bare mit bedre jeg, mine gode forsætter, jeg vilde gi hånden. Hun var for mig, hvad madonna er for den gode katolik; men nu er hun blet mere. Afstanden er borte; jeg kan ikke bare beundre, jeg må elske, ikke bare knæle, men omfavne. Hendes øjne har samme finhed, samme uskyld; men jeg kan ikke mere sidde timevis og se på dem; nu må de sænke sig i mine med alt det, de ejer. Hendes hånd, arm, mund er den samme, men hånden må ligge i mit hår, armen om min hals, munden til min, hendes tanke må omfavne min og som Herrens sol være over mig overalt. Hun var mig et symbol, men det er blet til kjød og blod. Jeg tog hende op i min tanke som et barn; under den daglige beskuelse er hun vokset ud til en kvinde, som undselig og uvidende bøjer sig fra mig, men som jeg må besidde. (157)

[Yes, I know! When I wanted to lead her to the altar, it may have been my better self, my good intentions, I held forth. She was to me what the Ma-

donna is to a good Catholic, but now she's more. The distance is gone; I can't just admire her, I must love, not just kneel, but embrace. Her eyes have the same beauty, the same innocence; but no longer can I sit for hours and look at them; now they have to gaze into mine with all they have. Her hand, arm, mouth are the same, but her hand has to lie in my hair, her arms around my neck, her mouth against mine, her thoughts must embrace mine and surround me like the good Lord's sunshine. She was a symbol for me, but now she's flesh and blood. I took her up in my thoughts like a child; but now that I see her every day she's grown into a woman who shyly and unknowingly avoids me, but whom I must possess.]

Elsewhere, he also expresses his sympathy for his wife's point of view, although, of course, it is significant that he does it for her.⁸

One of Mathilde's functions in the play is the role of the *raison-neuse* who allows a character to express intimate thoughts and feelings without resorting to a monologue that directly addresses the audience. She also manipulates people and events so that Aksel and Laura are able not only to marry but also to live together afterwards, although her feelings on the subject seem ambivalent. Aksel says that he pretended to be interested in Mathilde in order to get to know Laura. Mathilde's curtness and hesitation when he asks her to help him overcome his wife's reluctance to leave her parents' home suggests that she may have been disappointed and resented his treatment of her. It is likely that he is the man she refers to in Act 2. Laura has become jealous of Mathilde's apparent friendship with Aksel, and the latter tells him that his wife's feelings are a sign that she is beginning to love him. He asks whether she has ever been in love, and Mathilde responds that she has, but her feelings weren't reciprocated, commenting that "Kjærligheden er altid en indvielse, om ikke altid til det same. (177) [Love is always an initiation, if not always to the same thing.]

Mathilde's experience with the unnamed man taught her that marriage wasn't her calling and that what she wants is to travel and

⁸ See especially his discussion with Mathilde in Act 2, Scene 2.

to write. If Aksel was that man, if in fact Mathilde had been in love with him, then she undergoes a development in the play that runs counter to that of Laura. At the beginning of Act 2, we see her reading aloud a story she has written that is instrumental in making Laura accept the role of a conventional wife. She is also able to arrange for the apparently spontaneous visit of the parents that ultimately brings husband and wife together, and in scripting these performances, Mathilde also learns that she prefers writing about marriage to marriage itself, and that what she most wants is not to settle down, but to travel, to escape.

My calling is not marriage, she tells Aksel. Perhaps she discovers this in the course of the play, which depicts and beginning and the end of the first year of a marriage. But her position allows for other interpretations. The family refer to her as Laura's friend, not a relative, but she seems to have no clear role to play in either household. Most probably, she is a lady's companion, who has no other means of supporting herself. For a woman in such a situation, the discovery that the apparent interest of an eligible young man was really directed toward one's employer would have been extremely disappointing, for marriage provided a way out of an awkward situation.

But unlike Rebekka West's situation in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, Mathilde's status is never made clear. Although unlike Laura, she does speak, her utterances are full of silences, gaps. Does she appear to resent Aksel's request for her help because she is jealous of Laura? Or is she jealous of Aksel? It is significant when the three of them discuss who will sleep where during Laura's parents' visit, Mathilde offers to sleep with Laura. Does she reject marriage because she has seen it from the perspective of a lady's companion or friend of the household? Or is she the only unmarried person in the play because she has already rejected marriage? In any case, she makes only two explicit statements in the course of the play. One is that marriage is not her calling and the other is that she intends to write

another novel.

The character Mathilde, the independent, perhaps androgynous, woman who rejects marriage and wants to travel and write, is an early version of what by the 1890s would come to be called “the new woman.” As a writer whose texts change the views and actions of people around her, moreover, this character suggests not only the empowering potential of writing but also the scripted nature of social life in general. Mathilde is able to get Aksel and Laura to perform the roles she has written for them, while rejecting the scenario entirely when it comes to her own actions.

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Like *De nygifte*, Anne Charlotte Leffler’s *Under toffeln* is also, at least on one level, a version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, but as the title makes clear, what is at stake in this play is the taming of a recalcitrant husband. In contrast to Laura, moreover, the young wife in *Under toffeln* has actively seduced her middle-aged husband and has no problems articulating her desires. Although like Laura, Ebba does not want to leave her mother, she is adamant that her husband must transfer his affections from his sister to her and leave the family home for Stockholm.

The two acts of *Under toffeln* also evoke two moments in the life of a little extended family. The first portrays the middle-aged Henning’s return from a holiday at a seaside resort. While she waits for his arrival, his sister Agnes receives a visit from the mayor, a widower who has proposed to her several times and whom she again refuses because she says she cannot leave her brother. But when Henning arrives, he tells her he is engaged to be married. Before she can recover, the bride-to-be, who lives on a nearby estate, arrives and asks him to accompany her to her home. A tug of war ensues between the two women, each claiming Henning for the evening. Henning doesn’t know what to do, wants to please both,

but eventually gives in to his fiancée Ebba.

At the beginning of Act 2, Agnes is again waiting, this time for the married couple to return from their honeymoon. Again, she receives a visit. Ebba's mother arrives so that she, as well, can welcome the newlyweds home and also stay on in the household. The young couple arrive and are pleased at the renovations Agnes has supervised in their absence. But a quarrel breaks out concerning whether Ebba's mother will stay with them and where she will sleep. Ebba wants her to sleep in the room that had belonged to Henning and Agnes's mother, and succeeds over Agnes's objections. Ebba and her mother insist on more changes, including spending money that Agnes and Henning had set aside for his botanical experiments. Agnes, who has kept for herself a couple of small rooms with their original furnishings, realizes that she no longer has any place in the household and resolves to marry the mayor. Finally, Ebba extracts a promise from Henning to cut down the row of magnificent old trees that shade the front of the house. She argues that this will let the light in. Laughing, she tells him he'll get used to her and her little slippered foot will step on him so lightly that he will hardly notice.

Ebba's final gesture shows her as a kind of queen of misrule, a carnivalesque reversal of the triumphant husband at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, who in Shakespeare's version also claims that he will temper his authority with love. All three plays – *De nygifte*, *Under toffeln*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* – hark back to the tradition of marital farce that finds its most violent expression in Punch and Judy puppet scenarios. While there is little to laugh at in *De nygifte*, *Under toffeln* develops the comic potential of the theme, especially in the scenes that show the hapless Henning capitulate to Ebba's every whim. One of them also concerns sleeping arrangements. Ebba wants her other to take over the red cabinet that had belonged to Henning and Agnes's mother, but although she meets with resistance on this issue, there is no question that she and

Henning will sleep apart.

For Mona Lagerström, Ebba is the central character in *Under tofveln*. Energetic, sexually self-assured, and stubborn, she takes charge of her husband and new household, displacing his middle-aged sister, who, like other older women in Anne Charlotte Leffler's plays of the 1870s, is a representative of *tantvälde*, the repressive power of middle-aged women.⁹

⁹ Lagerström discusses the role of older women in three of Leffler's early plays on 154-156. She writes: "Om Leffler's unga kvinnliga huvudpersoner har litet väl mycket av yrhättor över sig är de alder kvinnorna desto mera hårdhjärtade, särskilt i förhållande till dramernas yngre kvinnor. Varken fru Stålberg eller prostinnan uttrycker något intresse för barnbarn och därmed glädje inför det stundande eller nyss hållna brölloppet. Inte heller Agnes visar något intresse för syskonbarn. Det är mannen som står i centrum hos alla de tre äldre kvinnorna. Dock är det inte i något fall den äkta mannen. Hos Agnes är det brodern och hos fru Stålberg och prostinnan är det sonen som står i centrum. Alla den äldre generationens kvinnor har en avsevärd makt. Som samlingsnamn på Lefflers kvinnor som är patriarkatets normbevakare och som tar på sig uppgiften att socialisera in en yngre generation kvinnor i en förutbestämd könsroll använder jag, efter min analys av *Älvan*, samlingsbeteckningen "tantvälde". Jag vill betona att det inte är en nedsättande benämning på kvinnor, utan ett uttryck för kvinnors *makt* inom den sfär de tilldelats i ett patriarkaliskt samhälle. Det är inte kvinnans fel att hon i ett patriarkat inte kan få utlopp för sitt maktbehov på ett för mänskligheten gynnsamt sätt i den "stora" världen, utan tvingas till en deformerande variant i den "lilla" världen. "Tantväldet" existerar bara där det finns ett genussystem att upprätthålla och är således direkt kopplat till efterlevnaden av ett samhälles genuskontrakt." (154-155) [If Leffler's young women have something of the gadabout about them, her older women are all the more hard-hearted, especially in relation to the dramas' younger women. Neither fru Stålberg or the dean's wife express any interest in grandchildren or joy at the wedding that's about to be or just has been held. Nor does Agnes show any interest for nieces and nephews. For all three women, it's the man who matters most. But for none is this man a husband. For Agnes it's her brother and for fru Stålberg and the dean's wife, it's a son. All of the older generation's women have considerable power. I have chosen the collective name of *tantvälde* [*old biddy power*], which I used in my analysis of *Älvan* [*The*

But Ebba and Agnes also offer two alternative views of womanhood. They are a dramatic pair that harks back not only to the contrasting characters Laura and Mathilde in *De nygifte* but also to foils in earlier plays by Anne Charlotte Leffler, most notably the two sisters Elin and Agnes in *Skådespelerskan*. Elin, like Ebba, is destined for wifehood, but the younger tomboyish Agnes longs for a career outside the home. It is probably no accident that the independent women in both *Skådespelerskan* and *Under toffeln* are called Agnes or that their married or engaged counterparts bear names that begin with “E.” Juxtaposed to the earlier Elin, however, Ebba appears as a participant in an institution that limits the freedom of men and especially women, forcing the latter to use manipulative means to achieve their ends. Ebba’s triumph at the end of the play is only apparent, her power over her husband quite transitory.

The tug-of-war between Agnes and Ebba, moreover, not only offers the comic spectacle of two women fighting over a bewildered middle-aged man but also suggests the conflict between two different kinds of living arrangements. Where *De nygifte* called into question the naturalness of bourgeois marriage, in which husband and wife form a little household of their own, *Under toffeln* juxtaposes two different kinds of relationships, both unsatisfactory. On the one hand, Agnes and Henning have lived together for twenty years, during which she has kept house and helped him pursue his interests in botany. It is a relationship that resembles the compan-

Eff], to designate Leffler’s women who are guardians of patriarchal norms and have taken on the task of socializing a younger generation of women in predetermined sex roles. I want to emphasize that I don’t mean this as a deprecating label for women, but rather as an expression of women’s *power* within the sphere designated as theirs in patriarchal society. It’s not the fault of woman that she has no reasonable or humane outlet for her need for power in the “great” world, but rather is forced to turn to a perverted variant in the “little” world. “Old biddy power” only exists where there is a gender system to maintain and is thus directly linked to the survival of a society’s gender contract.]

ionate marriage described in John Stuart Mills's *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869 and translated into Danish the same year by Georg Brandes.¹⁰ But the play emphasizes that this is a chaste arrangement. On the other hand, Ebba brings to the household energy and erotic attraction, but as her plans to spend his income make clear, she will not support his botanical work and the couple probably have little in common apart from sexual attraction. Their relationship is and probably will continue to be a struggle for power.

Under toffeln originated as an amateur theatrical written at the request of friends. Anne Charlotte Leffler planned to take the role of Agnes herself.¹¹ It is the second amateur theatrical in her archive

¹⁰ Mill discusses companionate marriage in the fourth section of *The Subjection of Women*, summing up its benefits in a paragraph that pays silent tribute to his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, who had died in 1858 and whose writings contributed much to *The Subjection of Women*: "What marriage may be in the case of two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them – so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and being led in the path of development – I will not attempt to describe. To those who can conceive it, there is no need; to those who cannot, it would appear the dream of an enthusiast. But I maintain with the profoundest conviction, that this, and this only, is the ideal of marriage; and that all opinions, customs, and institutions which favor any other notion of it, or turn the conceptions and aspirations connected with it into any other direction, by whatever pretences they may be colored, are relics of primitive barbarism. The moral regeneration of mankind will only really commence, when the most fundamental of the social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice, and when human beings learn to cultivate their strongest sympathy with an equal in rights and in cultivation. (210)

¹¹ See Anne Charlotte Leffler's letter of October 10, 1874, to Gustava Leffler: "Jag hade tänkt, att Signe skulle spela hans fru, hvilket kunde blifvit mycket roligt, emedan de så fått spela till en del sina egna roller, Tekla hans svärmor och jag hans syster." [I had thought that Signe would play his wife, which could have been very funny, since they would thus in part be playing

that treats the conflict between marriage and intellectual interests. In *Födelsedagsgåfvan*, performed in 1872, Anne Charlotte Leffler played the role of a university student, also called Agnes, who tried to talk mathematics with her brother-in-law, a mathematician played by her brother, Gösta Mittag-Leffler, also a mathematician, who in the play was married to a Agnes's sister, a frivolous young woman called Anna, who burns all his papers.

The Agnes in *Under toffeln* thus recalls earlier characters with the same name in Anne Charlotte Leffler's dramatic production, all with a striking family resemblance: independent women who have a critical perspective on marriage, an outsider perspective shared by Anne Charlotte Leffler. But Agnes in *Under toffeln* also shares significant common ground with Mathilde in *De nygifte*, for both plays suggest the difficult situation of unmarried women in Scandinavia in the 1860s and 1870s. As a friend in the household, Mathilde is less marriageable than Laura and may have to follow the newlyweds to their new home in order to have a place to live. She finds a way out of a difficult situation by becoming a writer, a solution that doubtless appealed to Anne Charlotte Leffler, as well as some of her friends. Agnes in *Under toffeln*, on the other hand, has no recourse but to marry the mayor.

In her later plays, Anne Charlotte Leffler also looks back, comments on, and develops the role of the unmarried woman and her options. Her late comedies are especially important in this respect.¹² In *Moster Mahvina*, the third play in *Tre komedier* [*Three Comedies*], published in 1891, the title character has a daughter who profited from the laws opening some of the lower-paid state jobs to wo-

themselves, Tekla his mother-in-law and I his sister.]

¹² On *Tre komedier*, see Wilkinson. References to *Den kärleken!* are to the version published in *Tre komedier*, which also includes *Familjelycka* and *Moster Mahvina*. Electronic versions of all three plays are available at <http://www.omnibus.se/eBoklagret>. *Tre komedier* have not yet been translated into English. Translations are my own.

men. Having taken a position as a postal clerk in the far north of Sweden, she was so lonely she ran away to the United States with a young man who impregnated and abandoned her there. But it is *Den kärleken!*, the first play in *Tre komedier*, that most clearly harks back to and develops the criticisms of marriage and representations of the situation of the unmarried woman in *De nygifte* and *Under toffeln*. Also a comedy in two acts, it is in many respects a reworking of these two plays. As in *Under toffeln*, Act 1 represents an engaged couple, but here their meeting place is a boarding house in which several unmarried working women live and where they are about to have a meeting to discuss the rights of women and sexual morality. Here again, we find a pair of contrasting women: Gunborg Edlén, whose surname recalls Edgren, Anne Charlotte Leffler's married name, is a teacher of about thirty who is more interested in women than men; her friend, the younger Vendla, becomes engaged to and eventually marries, Rudolf, master of the hunt, leaving behind her friends and the city to live with him in the forest. When Gunborg and another woman from the boarding house come to visit after the marriage, Rudolf and Vendla quarrel over sleeping arrangements in a scene that brings the marital bed, a presence only alluded to in *De nygifte*, to center stage. Here the bed is anything but empty. The problem is whether Vendla will share it with Rudolf or Gunvor. Before the issue can be resolved, the husband threatens his wife with violence, it turns out not for the first time. Vendla is able to ward off his threatened blow with a kiss, however, and the play ends with Gunvor's exclamation: "Den kärleken!" "Such is love!"

In *Den kärleken!*, the implicit criticisms of marriage and the evocation of the difficult situation of the unmarried woman come, like the bed, to center stage. The play links the physical violence a husband had the right to use to discipline his wife to the softer violence of what it portrays as the ideology of romantic love. And Gunvor, who earns her living as a teacher, lives out her erotic de-

sires in the form of her love for and attraction to Vendla.

Den kärleken! brings into sharp focus the subdued criticisms of the violence of marriage and the representation of the plight of the unmarried woman in *De nygifte*. Reading Bjørnson's play through the lens of Anne Charlotte Leffler's interpretations, it seems highly questionable that the pain that Laura experiences in learning to be a good wife is either natural or attributable to her youth. And Mathilde's offer to give up her bed to Aksel so that she could share Laura's no longer seems innocent, if it ever did. Her declaration of her intent to become a writer at the conclusion of the play seems to provide a solution to her dilemma as perpetual outsider in the houses of others, but leaves entirely open the issues of her erotic or emotional needs. *Under toffeln* and *Den kärleken!* suggest that Anne Charlotte Leffler was an excellent reader of Bjørnson's work and that she took the challenges posed by *De nygifte* very seriously, becoming a writer herself, a career that allowed her to become increasingly independent, and writing plays that responded to and developed issues that were only implicit in the Norwegian playwright's work. Her reworkings of *De nygifte* reveal her as a highly self-conscious and gifted writer, able to read literary models for their hidden potential and to turn on their heads the conventions of a genre such as marital farce. And they send us back to Bjørnson's play with a new understanding of the richness of its dramatization of the underside of nineteenth-century sexual arrangements, as well as the potential of literary and dramatic texts to change our understanding of other texts and also, possibly, the worlds they represent.

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