

## STRINDBERG IN TRANSITION. INTRODUCTION

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In 2012 the Swedish author, painter, photographer and journalist August Strindberg (1849-1912) was celebrated both in Sweden and abroad. On 12 December 2012 the Department of Scandinavian Studies in Groningen – founded in 1947 and thus celebrating its 65th anniversary – organised a symposium titled ‘Strindberg in Transition’ in cooperation with the Groninger Museum. The symposium’s point of departure was the reception of Strindberg in a Nordic and European context, specifically how Strindberg was perceived in the Dutch-speaking region. A fine example of this is found in the reflections of K.H. Miskotte. On 26 February 1919 this Dutch scholar wrote in his diary that Strindberg’s play *The Father* (1887) had left a deep impression on his son: “This is drama that the modern human being experiences and understands”. Strindberg was introduced into the Low Countries in the 1880s. The first Dutch translation was that of the novel *The People of Hemsö* (1887) in 1890. More translations followed in the twentieth century: *The Red Room* (1879) in 1917, the plays *The Father* (1887) and *Miss Julie* (1888) in 1919 and *A Dream Play* (1901) in 1921. Strindberg’s plays were staged and reviewed in Dutch media and became part of the Dutch literary landscape in the early decades of the twentieth century. Miskotte regarded Strindberg as a modern writer, but there were also scholars who viewed Strindberg as a misogynist. How is Strindberg’s versatility reflected in his reception in the Low Countries? The reception of Strindberg in the Dutch-speaking region was accompanied by debates and ideologies.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars and masters students from the Scandinavian departments of the University of Groningen and of Ghent University in Belgium investigated Strindberg’s image in reception documents in the Dutch-speaking area. Did this image change over time? What influence did cultural transmitters have? Special attention was paid to Strindberg and women cultural transmitters and the importance of Strindberg as an innovator of language was also studied. Other topics were Strindberg’s drama and the image of women in his plays. In course components in Ghent and Groningen students looked at Strindberg as an artist. This side of Strindberg was also highlighted in the exhibition “Nordic Art. The Modern

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<sup>1</sup> See P. Broomans, “Reception and Ideology. ‘Wild Volcanism’ and Other Varieties on Strindberg”, in: Ton Naaijkens (ed.), *Event or Incident*. Special Issue, *Genèses de Textes/ Textgenese(n)*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 107-120.

Breakthrough” at the Groninger Museum (9 December 2012 to 5 May 2013) which included a number of his paintings. In a museum salon at the end of the conference, Janke Klok elaborated on how Strindberg’s paintings “Storm in the Skerries. The Flying Dutchman” (1893) and “A Coast II” (1903) are good illustrations of the transition that happened in Nordic Art in between 1880 and 1920, when a shift took place from national romantic paintings and realistic representations of Nordic landscape and life, to more symbolist and expressionist art. In these paintings of Strindberg we encounter a romantic motif – a coastal landscape with a lot of attention for the Northern Sky’s light, the Northern Light, said to be one of the main features of Nordic art at the time – combined with a kind of existential menace that shows itself at the painting’s darkening rims. As if the darkness is gnawing at existence itself. There almost seems to be an explosion of an internal experience, one of modern art’s main characteristics.

A sea of raging waves almost becomes one with the grey clouds above. This painting shows us a portrait of the artist’s soul. August Strindberg. The title ‘The Flying Dutchman’ refers to the lonely captain on his ghost ship, cursed to sail the seas for all eternity. Strindberg used a palette knife to apply the paint and did so with firm strokes. A method that makes this painting seem like a precursor of expressionism.<sup>2</sup>

Strindberg in another transition so to say!

The “Strindberg in Transition” project carried out in Groningen and Ghent in 2012 revealed August Strindberg’s versatility, ambiguity and topicality in the twentieth and twenty-first century. This volume begins with three contributions from scholars of the University of Uppsala (Ann-Sofie Lönngren) and the University of Groningen (Ester Jiresch), and from Egil Törnqvist professor emeritus the University of Amsterdam. Our dear colleague Egil Törnqvist passed away 9 March 2015. We remember him as a scholar and colleague who was active long after retirement. Törnqvist is considered an expert on the work of Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen and Ingmar Bergman. In his dialogues with the masters students who presented the results their research at the symposium he was an inspiring and encouraging mentor. The collaboration between the departments in Ghent and Groningen resulted in four contributions by students Gonda Verhofstadt (University of Ghent), Ida Jonsson (exchange student from Uppsala in Groningen), Lily Kruijer (University of Groningen) and Caroline Morris (University of Groningen). These contributions make up the second part of this volume. We would like to express our gratitude to the sponsors of the “Strindberg in Transition” project: August Strindberg 2012, the Swedish Institute and the University of Groningen.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.groningermuseum.nl/nordic-art-johan-august-strindberg-%E2%80%98storm-de-scheren-%E2%80%9Cde-vliegende-hollander%E2%80%9D%E2%80%99>, 2015-12-21.

## Overview of contributions

In “The pre-modern Strindberg. Sex, gender, sexuality,” Ann-Sofie Lönngren claims that some of the representations of “sex”, “gender”, and “sexuality” in Strindberg’s authorship point to the influence of pre-modern discourses rather than modern ones. First, there is a discussion about the pre-modern influences on the sex-gender distinction in *Creditors* (1888) and *There Are Crimes and Crimes* (1899), an analysis which shows that in these texts, “sex” is perceived as one rather than two, and, moreover, organised hierarchically rather than dichotomously. Furthermore, it is argued that in these texts “gender”, in fact, supersedes “sex”. Something that is understood within the theoretical frameworks provided by Thomas Laqueur, Maja Bondestam, Carol Clover and others. Secondly, it is argued that in *Playing with Fire* (1892) and other texts, the definition of gender is intimately linked to the sexual desires represented in Strindberg’s authorship. This points to influences of what R.A. Nye for example has claimed to be pre-modern understandings of gender and sexuality as a unit rather than two distinct concepts, adding a historical perspective to the play between norm and subversion in the fictional texts. Also on a more general level, for example in *Getting Married, Parts I and II* (1894, 1896), “sexuality” seems to be phrased according to the difference previously pointed out by Michel Foucault, as acts (pre-modern discourse) rather than identity (modern discourse). In addition it is argued that when discussing the question of feminism – which for Strindberg was a burning one – pre-modern and modern discourses are simultaneously employed. The conclusion finally is that the coexistence, collision, conflict, and merge of different paradigms concerning sex, gender and sexuality are part of the complexity and enigmatic attraction of Strindberg’s authorship. Lönngren also notes that the interest in the relationship between body, matter and discourse that motivated this article is in line not only with contemporary perspectives in posthumanism, transgender studies and new feminist materialism but also with Strindberg’s own concerns.

In her article “Strindberg's misogyny revisited - the author and his female translators” Ester Jiresch describes the cooperation and relationship between the Swedish author August Strindberg and two of his translators Mathilde Prager and the Baltic-German Laura Marholm. Both women were of crucial importance to Strindberg’s introduction into both the German-speaking countries and German literary circles. They excelled not only as translators, but acted as literary agents as well, supporting Strindberg enormously in situations of personal crisis. Despite achieving great successes together and putting Strindberg on the map, both partnerships ended less than amicable. Although money issues played a role in both cases there were significant differences in how the two relationships ended. In Prager’s case the feminist’s reluctance to translate some of Strindberg’s more unambiguously misogynist plays led, among other things, to the author’s decision to grant his sole authorisation to a younger German translator. In case of Laura Marholm the friendly relationship turned in a big disappointment for her and even into deep hatred on Strindberg’s side. Marholm herself was a very extrovert and energetic woman used to handling all her husband’s affairs. When she tried to help

Strindberg in the same way the paranoid author considered it ill-willing and dominating meddling and broke off all relations with her.

Egil Törnqvist (1932-2015), in his article “Strindbergs Delade Scenrum”, discusses the different ways Strindberg used the stage in his plays and to what extent he was influenced by Henrik Ibsen and later by Maeterlinck. Contrary to Ibsen, Strindberg liked to write one-act plays. Around 1890 Strindberg was writing naturalistic plays and had to solve the problem of how to create a story set in multiple locations, that could still be performed as a one-act play.

In “August Strindberg: kvinnohatare eller Kvinnorättsförespråkare?” Gonda Verhofstadt wonders if she could analyse Strindberg’s work without involving his personal life, because one should never forget that literature is pure fiction and that the narrator is not the writer. She therefore examines Strindberg’s plays *Herr Bengts hustru* (1882), *Fadren* (1887) and *Pelikanen* (1907) based purely on content and disregarding Strindberg’s personal life and the many existing misogynistic interpretations. But after identifying numerous contradictions in Strindberg’s own quotes about women and their place in society, Verhofstadt starts to wonder whether Strindberg’s work can be interpreted as a feminist effort to support women in their struggle for equal rights, whether he tried to create more attention for this debate by making both feminist and misogynistic statements, so he himself could not be identified as either a misogynist or a feminist. She also wonders whether this ambivalence was intentional, so that his readers could not base their opinions about women and their place in society on Strindberg’s opinion, compelling them to reflect on the matter themselves. She concludes that one can interpret the conspiracies, maltreatments and death in the plays *Fadren* and *Pelikanen* as a warning: tragedies like this happen and will continue to happen until men and women have equal rights! Based on that conclusion, one can read Strindberg’s work as a feminist effort instead of as an expression of misogyny.

Ida Jonsson studies how Strindberg is perceived in the media in Denmark and England, two neighbouring countries in north-western Europe. She carries out a critical discourse analysis of selected newspapers in Denmark and England in 2012. Questions she deals with are in what kind of texts Strindberg was mentioned and discussed, whether he was positioned as an European author or a Swedish one and whether or not his person and/or works are discussed.

Lily Kruiger investigates the image of Strindberg in the Netherlands one hundred years after his death. Strindberg is still alive in Sweden in 2012, but is that also the case in the Netherlands? By interviewing Dutch audiences at various literary events, Kruiger carried out a survey of Strindberg image. Were Dutch audience still familiar with Strindberg, and if so, in what way and to what extent?

Caroline Morris looks at Strindberg’s work from a linguistic point of view and tries to establish whether the author was a rebel or a conformist when it came to grammar. Her case study focuses on head shift in phrases with *slags* (“kind of”) and *sorts* (“sort of”) in Strindberg’s writings. Both these words are generally preceded by a determiner and followed by a noun. In a corpus investigation that looks at gender agreement between the determiner, *slags* or *sorts* and the noun Morris establishes to

what degree head shift occurred in Strindbergs work and private letters. What patterns emerge in Strindberg's use of *slags* and *sorts*? Is his use of language closer to that of his contemporaries or to modern usage? And was Strindberg influenced by the prescriptivist guidelines of the early twentieth century?

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