

## REVIEW

**Birgitta Johansson Lindh.**

### **Som en vildfågel i en bur**

Identitet, kärlek, frihet och melodramatiska inslag i Alfhild Agrells, Anne Charlotte Lefflers och Victoria Benedictssons 1880-talsdramatik

*[Like a wild bird in a cage: Identity, love, freedom and melodramatic elements in Alfhild Agrell's, Anne Charlotte Leffler's and Victoria Benedictsson's 1880s drama]*

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The global impact that #MeToo had in 2017 shows the potential political power that arises when women share experiences linked to sexuality and gender. However, the debate was not historically unique. During the 1880s, the so-called 'morality controversy' (Sedlighetsfejden) was a public discussion about gender and sexuality that dominated the Nordic countries. Since this debate took place at a time when media such as the internet, television, and radio were not available, it occurred in lecture halls, in the newspapers, in literature, and in the theater.

The 'morality controversy' coincided with, and contributed to, the modern breakthrough in the Nordic region. It was during the 1880s that a new kind of realistic drama made its entrance in the theaters, which put gender issues on display. The theater became the arena where these discussions were embodied

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by actors that the audience could be touched by, sympathize with or be chocked by. This style soon began to be called naturalism, but the modern breakthrough did not happen overnight. It continued to develop into the twentieth century and lived side by side with other older styles of drama (62).

In the history of literature and theater that was written in the twentieth century, the plays of the authors Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg were chosen as a kind of template for how this new realistic drama should be constructed to be considered artistic and relevant to later audiences. During the 1880s, however, they were far from alone in making their voices heard on theater stages. Plays by female writers were frequently produced, especially by Alfhild Agrell (1849–1923), Anne Charlotte Leffler (1849–1892) and Victoria Benedictsson (1850–1888). These plays usually had a woman as the protagonist in a conflict-filled situation, through which a female emancipatory message was advocated by the authors. This had the consequence that they were placed in a compartment that was condescendingly called indignation- and tendency drama. Despite this, the plays were popular amongst the audience and were translated and staged regularly in theaters throughout the Nordic countries and also in Germany and England.

Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson were considered to be among Sweden's most radical writers and belonged to the literary phalanx called "Young Sweden" (Det unga Sverige). They were modern writers who also lived modern and exciting lives, but on first reading of their dramas, literary and theater researcher Birgitta Johansson Lindh suggests that she was disappointed. Their plays appeared "as far more cautious than their way of life and appearance as writers" (14 –15). She wondered what was at stake in the plays and asked herself if they should be interpreted differently than the canonized dramas of the modern breakthrough? These questions made Johansson Lindh examine the dramaturgy of the plays on the basis of current theater conventions.

The questions have resulted in the book *Som en vildfågel i en bur: Identitet, kärlek frihet och melodramatiska inslag i Alfhild Agrells, Anne Charlotte Lefflers och Victoria Benedictssons 1880-talsdramatik (Like a wild bird in a cage: Identity, love, freedom and melodramatic elements in Alfhild Agrell's, Anne Charlotte Leffler's and Victoria Benedictsson's 1880s drama)*. Although research on the authorship of Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson has increased in recent decades, their drama has been under-researched. One may ask why, but their plays have been perceived as less innovative than their novels, as Johansson Lindh suggests that she herself experienced when she first read them, and their radical emancipatory message have been regarded as tainted by sentimentalism. This makes *Like a wild bird in a cage* an important contribution to both literary- and theater research. But the book does more than analyze the plays, it puts them in relation to its original purpose, to be the foundations for effective theatrical productions that appealed to an audience that, at the time of the first performances, was accustomed to the prevailing morality, dramaturgical style, and theatrical conventions of aesthetic idealism.

The aesthetic (and ideological) style of idealism, also known as ideal realism, originated in German idealism in the eighteenth century. Johansson

Lindh explains the term as the “ideal that was connected with the idea that literature and theater should be morally uplifting and that was characterized by religious and social conservatism” (62). Theater performances would support prevailing social morality and have a didactic constructive effect on the audience’s state of mind. It prescribed that those with morals should always prevail, and that immoral behavior should always be punished. Morality was often reinforced with melodramatic elements, which were cosmopolitan drama conventions throughout the nineteenth century with roots in the eighteenth century’s bourgeois tragedy, popular theater tradition, and romantic adventure culture. The radical writers of the 1880s questioned the norms of idealism, albeit in different ways. Johansson Lindh emphasizes how the theater, during the 1880s, became an arena for contemporary female writers to discuss not only women’s subordination, lack of independence, and identity problems, but also suffrage, the vision of freedom and the utopic idea of an equal love relationship between man and woman. Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson also succeed in portraying women with their own sexuality, a subject that was taboo in the theaters of the 1880s.

Johansson Lindh’s starting point is that Agrell, Leffler and Benedictsson were skilled playwrights and therefore deliberately framed their gender-critical message in a dramaturgy that they considered would be best received by the audience of the time. The book is structured in seven chapters. In the first, Johansson Lindh explains her theoretical tools selected from a phenomenological feminist tradition based on, among others, Simone de Beauvoir, Sarah Ahmed, and Adriana Cavarero. Key concepts are melodrama, emotions, experience, identity, love, and freedom. The following chapter is the theatrical back drop of the prevailing ideals of theatrical idealism in the 1880s, contemporary female playwrights, and a review of the three playwrights’ respective positions in the theater. Although these two chapters provide a solid background to the analysis, as a result of the traditional academic composition of the book, the theoretical part is perceived as somewhat tail heavy.

The following seven chapters examine nine dramas by Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson that are selected on the basis of themes, such as identity problems in the patriarchal society of the 1880s where a woman is reduced to what she is instead of who she is, the woman’s subordinate position in marriage, the desire to expand the boundaries of the bourgeois woman’s social situation, but also the vision of freedom as projects in relation to other people such as that between parent and child, and especially that between mother and daughter. Birgitta Johansson Lindh repeatedly reflects on differences and similarities with Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, but also popular plays of an older generation like Friedrich von Schiller’s *Kabale und Liede* and the much-played French boulevard comedies by, for example, Alexandre Dumas fils and Victorien Sardou. These dramas also often discussed the relationship between the sexes with melodramatic motifs such as the fallen woman and the sacrificial virgin, but from an ideological gender perspective of idealism.

A recurring common feature in the plays of Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson is the dramaturgical position of the female protagonists as “inferior, outsiders

or vulnerable”, women who experience some deficiency in their life (87). The problem for the protagonists is that they are prevented from fulfilling their own potential as human beings and be regarded as equals in their relationships due to the gender norms of the bourgeois society of the 1880s. Their main function is to live through or for others, as wives, mothers or daughters. The woman as a commodity in the patriarchal structure is also a recurring theme with for example girls who must fulfill their parents’ ambitions on the marriage market.

Johansson Lindh shows how Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson deliberately used the dramaturgical conventions of idealism, such as the conversion of the dubious character and the sacrificial wife, which dimmed their radical message and made it more ambivalent. According to Johansson Lindh, they used the melodramatic motifs, like the orphaned child and a strong polarization between different characters, to strengthen their gender critique by highlighting the protagonists’ (women’s) vulnerable situation.

These conventions and stylistic features were recognizable to the audience of the time, which meant that they could easily be understood and received positively in spite of their radical message. Though Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson gave them an unexpected twist that reinforced the dramas’ emancipatory rhetoric, there was not, for example, automatically a redemptive happy ending that followed the pattern of the plays of aesthetic idealism, where the failing character in the drama received his punishment and the heroic her reward. According to Johansson Lindh, the melodramatic elements of Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson should be seen as a strategy in which the protagonist’s experience and emotional deficits were made more obvious for the audience. The compositions balanced between seemingly following the moral norms of idealism and at the same time arguing against them. This ambivalence contributed to their popularity and not least to the fact that they went through censorship. But it made them, at the same time, vulnerable to later generations of readers who saw these theater conventions as obsolete.

Even though this strategy was one of the reasons why the dramas were excluded from the canon of the modern breakthrough, it seems, in hindsight, necessary for the limited space that was provided to these female writers during their lifetime. Johansson Lindh emphasizes that the 1880s norms of masculinity and femininity were decisive for how women could write plays that criticized the gender norms of the bourgeoisie, especially if they wanted them to go through the eye of the censor and be produced by the theaters. Their male colleagues had a much wider framework to move in, or as Leffler puts it in a letter: “You should be called Ibsen for daring to so defy the taste of the audience” (83) A statement that signals both resignation and irritation and that has given name to one of the chapters of the book.

In the analysis, the theoretical framework gets to work, though the linguistic style is easy and captivating. The analysis is in-depth in a way that feels exclusive. Although I was familiar with these plays beforehand, I have benefited from new valuable perspectives. Johansson Lindh’s readings of the dramas stands firmly against the foundation of contemporary theater conventions, which situates the book at the crossroads between literary studies and theater studies.

When I put down the book, it was not without a longing for a second part, which would examine how these dramas were played and interpreted in the 1880s, and what reception they received. Furthermore, in-depth study for future research could be to place the dramas in the context of Nordic cultural life during the 1880s and not least to the 'morality controversy'. For those readers who feel similarly, I suggest a prologue with Johansson Lindh's article "Affective Economies in the Tug of War between Idealism and Anti-idealisms: Reviewers' reactions to Anne Charlotte Leffler's *Sanna kvinnor* (True Women)" in *Nordic Theater studies* (Vol. 29 no.1, 2017). For readers of Swedish, I would also recommend her chapter in the anthology *I avantgardets skugga. Brytpunkter och kontinuitet i svensk teater kring 1900* (2019), where she examines the actor Emil Hillberg's portrayal of the character Pontus Bark in Leffler's *Sanna kvinnor* and the influence his interpretation had on several productions of the play.

With this project, Birgitta Johansson Lindh has made a significant contribution not only to the history of the modern breakthrough in the Nordic countries and to theater history, but also to gender history. The theater was a central arena for the first wave of feminists in the Nordic countries and all three writers were important voices in this movement. Birgitta Johansson Lindh's efforts have thus deepened our knowledge of the driving forces and complexities of the dramas of Agrell, Leffler, and Benedictsson. Their relevance prevails to this day, not the least when put in context to the stories that continue to surface in the aftermath of #Metoo.