

Late Nineteenth-Century Radical Utopias in Theatre Reviews

Stagings and Reception of Anne Charlotte Leffler's *Sanna kvinnor*

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ABSTRACT

Anne Charlotte Leffler's *Sanna Kvinnor* (True Women 1883) is one of many gender-critical plays by Swedish women playwrights during the 1880s which linger in the shadows of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. *Sanna kvinnor* certainly asks for a change of the prevailing gender norms in the 1880s, in other words, for a transformation into a better world, but how was this utopian drive staged at the theatres and how was it received by the theatre critics? By taking the theoretical point of departure in Slavoj Žižek's notion of a radical utopia (2003), the aim of my article is to illuminate the reviewers' perception of the stagings in the first production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in 1883 and in Albert Ranft's touring production 1884–86. My archival sources mainly consist of reviews from which both the stagings and the reviewers' reactions will be traced through a systematic method developed from the semiotics of Jurij Lotman.

KEYWORDS

utopia, the Scandinavian modern breakthrough, gender, 19th-century-theatre, women's playwrighting, mise-en-scène, theatrical reviews

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Anne Charlotte Leffler was considered by her contemporaries a leading figure among Swedish modern-breakthrough writers and was a successful playwright. Her *Sanna kvinnor* (True Women 1883) was staged at many Nordic theatres and was translated into English, Finnish, and Danish. In theatre histories, the play is often overshadowed by Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, being mentioned as one of many late-nineteenth-century plays by Swedish women playwrights debating gender and marriage.¹ Like many of these plays, *Sanna kvinnor* earnestly requests a change of gender norms and notes the power imbalance in marriage and in society in general. Belief in the possibility of a better world is a driving force of Leffler's gender-critical playwriting.

Leffler furthermore supported the need for urgent change in the theatre, as expressed by Georg Brandes and his brother Edward, who proclaimed in the late 1870s that the theatre was in a state of "absolute decline" and predicted that the theatre as an art form would die if nothing was done.² She was particularly inspired by new ideas about literary truth and nearness to life in her playwriting. Analyses of her plays and biographical research give a fairly good picture of the dramaturgy in *Sanna kvinnor* and its underlying ideas, but we know less about the theatrical productions of the play and their reception.³ Questions about how theatre practitioners and reviewers treated the dramaturgy and gender critique, and consequently the utopian belief in the possibility of a better world, remain to be answered. This is true also of the gender-critical plays by other women playwrights that appeared on Swedish stages at the time. As Susan Bennett has noted, contemporary academic references to feminist theatre in history have not led to any widely inclusive accounts of women's contributions to the theatre: women's work is commonly "ghettoized" in single chapters on period-inscribed phenomena of feminist theatre.⁴

In my current research, Leffler's *Sanna kvinnor* is cited to illuminate the role of a modern-breakthrough play by a woman playwright in various contemporary theatrical environments across national and theatrical boundaries. In this article, I treat the question of how *Sanna kvinnor* was staged in two Swedish productions, focusing on the three leading roles and the actors' creations of them, and on what ideas about gender these performances provoked in contemporary spectators. The analysis includes the first production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm in 1883 and the production by Albert Ranft's travelling company in south-west Sweden, 1884–1886. In doing so, the reception of the gender critique is emphasized and analysed by deploying Slavoj Žižek's notion of "radical utopia".⁵ This notion is closely connected to a prevailing order, which usefully allows for interpretation of the reviewers'

1 See Nordin Hennel 2007; Wirmark 2000.

2 Marker & Marker 1996, 162.

3 See Sylvan 1984; Lauritzen 2012; Wilkinson 2012; Johansson Lindh 2019.

4 Bennett 2010, 70.

5 Žižek 2003.

reactions within the discursive boundaries of the late nineteenth century, or in Žižek's words, "the given symbolic coordinates" of bourgeois society in the 1880s, which Leffler intended to problematize with her play.⁶ By doing so, one can compare and discuss the radical utopias in Leffler's play and in the reviewers' reception and how the role presentations in the stagings may have affected the latter.

In the well-known and widely distributed recording of the lecture "The Reality of the Virtual" (2003), Žižek proceeds from Lacanian theory and presents three levels of the virtual: the imaginary, symbolic, and real virtual. The real virtual is an abstract form that structures real existing elements, and this is the level at which Žižek positions utopia. Consequently, utopia is a structural principle connected to an existing material reality rather than a free imagining or the product of iconoclastic upheaval. It entails doing what seems possible within the prevailing order by changing the given symbolic coordinates that structure the real.⁷ Žižek's idea of utopia is radical, because it can be turned into practice now, as opposed to being postponed in the future. The radical utopia grows out of an inner urge and a necessity to invent something new when one cannot go on as before.⁸ The following aspects of Žižek's ideas will be vital in analysing the reviewers' reception of the two examined stagings: (a) acceptance of the need to invent something new, i.e., awareness that a problematic social situation exists; (b) what symbolic coordinates of the prevailing order need to change; and (c) the radical utopia resulting from moving these symbolic coordinates.

Impeding research on theatrical productions in history is the shortage of what has traditionally been categorized as "direct sources" of stagings. Often the only remaining traces of historical theatrical events are "indirect" sources such as reviews.⁹ Willmar Sauter indicates the importance of reviews for tracing stagings by stating that reviewers' eyewitness reports give fairly clear descriptions of what could be seen and heard from the stage.¹⁰ The main body of my archival sources comprises reviews, but also short articles and advertisements from daily papers, supplemented with playbills, letters, biographies, and a prompter's manuscript. These are interpreted using a semiotic method, focusing on what they signal about the stagings and on the reviewers' reactions to them. My aim is not to describe in detail what could be seen and heard on stage, as the archival documents do not permit that, but to produce a general impression of the stagings, particularly of what roles and actors dominated the stage and what aspects of the roles the actors highlighted. My analysis uses the reviews to document the stage presentations and the spectators' perceptions and interpretations of them. The radical utopias are to be found in the reviewer's interpretations provoked by the staging. Accordingly, I first attend to what the reviews signal about the presentations of the three roles and then what radical utopias they provoked in the reviewers' interpretations.

Inspired by David E. Nye's use of Greimas's model of actants, which he has applied to various historical sources in biographical research, my model is based on Jurij Lotman's semiotic ideas of "equivalence" and "plural external recoding" articulated in *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1971).¹¹ As Lena Hambergren has noted, Nye's method requires abundant sources, and in the case of productions of Leffler's plays the situation is, as mentioned, quite the contrary, which is why another model is needed.¹² According to Lotman, meaning arises from the equalizing of diverse elements in semantic systems and "plural external recoding" refers to the converging of elements from more than two independent systems. Meaning arises as a result of different systems' projection against each other.¹³ In my analysis of the body of reviews, different singular reviews are regarded as semantic systems whose similarities and contradictions projected against each other signal something about what has occurred on

6 Žižek 2003.

7 Žižek 2003. The true radical utopia, according to Žižek, is not a different order; rather, it is the idea of changing the coordinates of an existing order that can function indefinitely.

8 Žižek 2003.

9 Balme 2008, 98-9.

10 Sauter 2019, 41.

11 Lotman 1977, 36-9.

12 Hambergren 2019, 93.

13 Lotman 1977, 36, 38-9, 43.

stage. The observations of different critics of performances of one production can reinforce each other in indicating something particular about the staging, or they can diverge, either indicating differences between particular performances or differences in the reviewers' perceptions and evaluations of the staging. Similarities and contradictions between reviewers' narratives about the two productions of *Sanna kvinnor* also produce meaning and indicate the designs of the stagings, so too do convergences and divergences between narratives about productions of *Sanna kvinnor* and narratives about productions of other plays with a connection of some sort. Lotman notes that the codes making a text meaningful are related to "extra-textual relations" that affect the probability of some meanings.¹⁴ In my analysis, such important extra-textual structures are the prevailing theatrical norms and conventions, which will be regarded as codes limiting the semiosis. As Lotman proposes, the audience "finishes" the text and, as in all aesthetic approaches, my historiographic construction, although strongly anchored in archival evidence, must be stressed as part of the narrative.¹⁵

The Urge for Change and Radical Utopia in Leffler's Play

Sanna kvinnor is a play in three acts. The protagonist Berta is in her late teens and the youngest daughter of Mr and Mrs Bark. Berta's father is a gambler who has dissipated most of the family's fortune. Berta supports the family with her hard work at a bank. Mr Bark wants to lay his hands on some bonds that his wife has inherited, but Berta has protected the family from her father's ravages by persuading her mother to sign a deed of gift, giving Berta control over the bonds. Her submissive mother cannot resist her husband's persuasiveness, though, and gives him the deed. After having settled his debts, Mr Bark comes home with Berta's colleague from the bank, Mr Lundberg, to arrange a celebration of wedding anniversaries in the family. At the gathering, Mr Bark reveals that he has destroyed the deed of gift and Berta is overcome by her mother's treachery. She blames Mr Lundberg for participating in the demeaning party, but it turns out that he has come to propose to her. Berta declines his proposal on the grounds that her mother now needs her more than ever. There is also a secondary plot concerning Berta's elder sister Lissi and her husband Wilhelm. Lissi has caught Wilhelm red-handed with a prostitute and their marriage is at risk, but right before the party, Lissi forgives her husband, and the spouses are reconciled.¹⁶

The play draws on a law from 1874 giving a married woman the right to administer her earnings and private property.¹⁷ It furthermore reflects a social debate in the 1880s about "*sedlighet*", a concept similar to decency, mainly connected to sexual behaviour, but also referring to a wider range of bourgeois norms and values.¹⁸

Monica Lauritzen and Mona Lagerström claim that Leffler put great effort into basing the characters on a true analysis of human nature, letting the psychological truth of the characters' actions dominate dramatic effects and implausibly constructed plots. She specifically strove to create new female characters differing from the stereotypes based on bias and double standards that she found in the many French plays performed on Scandinavian stages.¹⁹ Berta exemplifies Leffler's new female characters and, according to a basic contemporary dramaturgical analysis, she is definitely the play's protagonist. She propels the plot by arranging the deed of gift, which is countered by her father's striking back. Berta furthermore is the character who appears most frequently, and the relationship between her and her mother is foregrounded in the exposition, which is followed up by an interior plot concerning Berta's need for proof of her mother's loyalty and sense of right.²⁰ Moreover, biographical notes attest to Berta being the protagonist and a representation of "the new woman". The character was originally modelled on a friend of Leffler's, Kornelia Pålman, who belonged to Leffler's bluestocking circle and was unusually openhearted, speaking her mind in accordance with what she saw

14 Lotman 1977, 50.

15 Lotman 1977, 288.

16 Edgren Leffler 1883.

17 Leffler 2004, 46.

18 Gedin 2004, 387-91.

19 Lagerström 1999, 58-61; Lauritzen 2012, 175.

20 Johansson Lindh 2019, 113-14.

as truthful and right.²¹ Leffler wanted her protagonist to represent feminine qualities but to assume “positive duties” by actively intervening and interacting in life.²² Berta’s sense of right, her concern and responsibility resulting in her actions to prevent the financial destruction of her family, is contrasted to the feminine ideal of passivity, silent endurance, and subservient unconditional devotion to a husband, represented by her mother and sister. Berta’s behaviour and the tragedy of her fate is the key to the radical utopia of the play, while her mother and sister represent the given symbolic coordinates of femininity in the gendered social space of the 1880s. The situation needing urgent change is men’s immoral and irresponsible behaviour combined with their superior position in marriage and women’s subordination and willingness to accept it. Through the good example of Berta’s behaviour and the negative example of her family, the radical utopia of the play is produced as a power structure balanced between the sexes, allowing men and women to act responsibly guided by their own strong moral sense. A marriage between two independent and coequal partners is outlined.

Utopia Inhabited by Dependent or Independent Moral Beings

Sanna kvinnor premiered at the Royal Dramatic Theatre on 15 October 1883 as the very first production of the play. It provoked strong emotional responses among both reviewers and the audience in general.²³ The play was performed along with Leffler’s one-act comedy *En räddande engel* (A Redeeming Angel) in the evening programme.²⁴ The prompter’s manuscript mentions a Mr Fredrikson as the director of the play.²⁵ This likely refers to the actor Gustaf Fredrikson, who was manager of the Royal Dramatic Theatre, 1879–1884.²⁶ The empirical foundation for my analysis is six reviews, of which five are from the opening night of the production.²⁷

The Staging

The reviews reflect a production in which the female roles were the most prominent ones, and the two contrasting kinds of femininity – represented by Julie Bark and her eldest daughter Lissie Bark, on the one hand, and by Berta, on the other – were stressed by three critics, while a fourth emphasized the false ideal of femininity as the core of the play.²⁸ These related observations, made from very different ideological standpoints, reinforce each other and are complemented by objections from two of these critics regarding the unsympathetic male roles, indicating that the female roles were played to attract the audience’s sympathy.²⁹ In particular,

21 Lauritzen 2012, 266.

22 Lauritzen 2012, 275.

23 Johansson Lindh 2017, 26.

24 Johansson Lindh 2017, 28.

25 Pjässamlingen. “Sanna kvinnor”, id. S218, ex 2. 1883. Kungliga Operans Arkiv.

26 Anon. 1932. Svensk Uppslagsbok.

27 A.F. (as Anders Flodman signed his texts), *Aftonbladet* (AB) 16 October 1883; E-dt (as Frans Eugene Fahlstedt signed his texts), *Göteborgs Handels och Sjöfartstidning* (GHT) 18 October 1883; Anon. *Post och Inrikes Tidningar* (PIT) 16 October 1883; Anon. *Stockholms Dagblad* (StD) 16 October 1883; Hj. Sdg. (as Hjalmar Sandgren signed his texts), *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* (NDA) 16 October 1883; Teatervän (pseud), “Nyare svensk dramatik. ‘Sanna kvinnor’. Af fru A. Ch. Edgren”, *Tidskrift för hemmet* (TfH) 1883/6, 321–28. Scholar and conservative Anders Flodman belonged to an aesthetic school called “The Signatures”, which supported and theoretically elaborated on the aesthetics of idealism (Lagerström 1999, 33–35). Liberal Frans Eugène Fahlstedt was a littérateur who also reviewed music (Hildebrant 1956). Hjalmar Sandberg was a doctor of philosophy, a frequent writer and subsequently chief editor of *NDA*. The journal was conservative but Sandberg probably did not share its views. Like his colleague Fahlstedt, he was a good friend of August Strindberg (Berglund 13; Eklund 186). *TfH* was a periodical considered an important organ of the women’s movement of the time, although a rather conservative wing of it. This review is much longer than the others, but it mostly describes the story and plot of *Sanna kvinnor*. The reviewer uses the pen name “Teatervän”, which literally means “friend of the theatre”. I do not know for sure who is behind the pen name, so I will use “Teatervän” and s/he when referring to the author of the article. Teatervän might very well have been a woman, as *TfH* was a periodical edited by women mainly for female readers.

28 A.F. AB 16/10 1883; E-dt. GHT 18 Oct. 1883; Anon. PIT 16 Oct. 1883; Hj. Sdg. NDA 16 Oct. 1883. The anonymous critic in StD 16 Oct. 1883 finds that male frivolity and iniquity is the major theme, and in the review by Teatervän in TfH 1883/6, 326, the guilt of all the characters is stressed.

29 A.F. AB 16 Oct. 1883; Anon. PIT 16 Oct. 1883.

the actress Helfrid Kinmansson's Julie Bark seems to have been foregrounded on the stage. Among the actresses and actors, she and the role of Mrs Bark attracted most of the reviewers' attention.³⁰ In contrast, neither the actress Lotten Dorch Bosin nor her character Berta is mentioned at all in two of the reviews.³¹ In a short article announcing the production, Helfrid Kinmansson and the role of Mrs Bark are mentioned first in the list of actors and roles, while Lotten Dorch Bosin in the part of Berta comes in third place.³²

Kinmansson is described as the only actor on the stage who could give her role the kind of life needed to engage the audience. The review by the pseudonymous Teatervän gives a long description of her portrayal of Mrs Bark, in which s/he has taken pleasure: "One rather extends one's warm compassion to Mrs Bark, who in her sacrificing, forgiving love, her endless patience, despite the character's general roughness, has a certain touching amicability that makes us accept her weakness. Possibly, this is largely due to the excellent performance of the role. Mrs H. Kinmansson is an artist one watches with pleasure and who lets her natural delicate tactfulness and *real* true femininity guide her judgement; particularly in this role, she has managed to evade the morbid or plaintive exaggeration that would have made her daughter's blind devotion completely inexplicable."³³ This description suggests that Kinmansson balanced weakness with amicability in interpreting the role. The connection between the actress's "*real* true femininity" and her creation of the role suggests that weakness and amicability are parts of the feminine quality, in turn indicating that Kinmansson kept her portrayal of the role of Mrs Bark within the frame of an ideal femininity.

Another observation signifies that the other roles seem to have been one-dimensionally presented: The characters appear in a hard and unsympathetic way that makes them more into types than living personalities.³⁴ Teatervän observes that a few typical features are exaggerated in Ferdinand Thegerström's creation of Mr Bark and Victor Hartman's creation of Wilhelm. S/he cannot detect any trace "of the natural kindness" in Mr Bark that his wife asserts: "He is just absolutely repulsive".³⁵ S/he furthermore finds Victor Hartman unable to handle the "many different impulses" that drive Wilhelm.³⁶ Both Mr Bark and Wilhelm are described as "bad and undutiful".³⁷

Berta's righteousness, moral strength, and concern for her mother seem to have been stressed at the cost of her rebellious side. Cuts in the prompter's script support this assumption. For example, in a long crossed-out passage in the final scene, Berta rejects the accountant Lundberg's offer of marriage, claiming the same economic responsibility for her family as he, as a man, has for his mother and sisters. The modifying effect is to make Berta appear more as a caring daughter than a woman questioning gender norms.³⁸ The reviews describe her as "industrious", "practical", "sacrificing and strong-willed", with an "unprejudiced sense of justice" and with the facility of "seeing clearly".³⁹ Only one critic mentions that she "indignantly rises up against (...) oppression".⁴⁰ This image of Berta as a right-thinking, strong, clear-sighted person, able to set aside her own needs, is further supported by the fact that she arouses no heated

30 A.F. *AB* 16 Oct. 1883; E-dt. *GHT* 18 Oct. 1883; Hj. Sdg. *StD* 16 Oct. 1883; Teatervän *TfH* 1883/6.

31 Anon. *StD* 16 Oct. 1883; Hj. Sdg. 16 Oct. *NDA* 1883.

32 Anon. *NDA* 1 Oct. 1883.

33 "Heldre skänker man då detta åt fru Bark, som med sin uppoffrande, förlåtande kärlek, sin aldrig tröttnande tålmodighet, dock har en viss rörande älsklighet som försonar oss med hennes svaghet. Möjligen är dock detta i väsendtlig grad att tillskrifva det i sanning utmärkta sätt på hvilken rolen återgifves. Fru H. Kinmansson är en konstnärinna som man alltid ser med nöje och hvars naturliga fina takt och verkligt sanna qvinlighet leda hennes omdöme; särskildt i nu föreliggande rol har hon lyckats undvika den sjukliga eller larmoyanta öfverdrift som skulle ha gjordt dotterns blinda hängifvenhet alldeles oförklarlig." Teatervän *TfH* 1883/6, 327. All translations of quotations in this article are mine.

34 Teatervän *TfH* 1883/6, 327.

35 "av den naturliga älskvardheten" "han är endast och obetingadt motbjudande" Teatervän *TfH* 1883/6, 328.

36 "många olika impulser" Ibid.

37 "dåliga och pligtförgätna" A.F. *AB* 16 Oct. 1883.

38 Pjässamlingen. "Sanna kvinnor" 1883. Kungliga Operans Arkiv.

39 "arbetssam", "praktisk", A.F. *AB* 16 Oct. 1883; "uppoffrande och viljestarka" Anon. *PIT* 16 Oct. 1883; "oförvillade rättskänsla", "se klart" Teatervän *TfH* 1883/6, 327.

40 "som med harm reser sig mot (...) förtryck" Anon. *PIT* 16 Oct. 1883.

emotions in the reviewers, except for one who strongly objects to her disdain for her father.⁴¹ These fairly positive descriptions, expressed across the ideological spectrum, indicate that the part of Berta was portrayed so as not to violate the way a young woman could be represented on stage.

What can be concluded from all the reviews, regardless of the reviewers' ideological standpoints, is that they find the construction of the roles problematic: "None of the roles is rewarding to perform."⁴² "The narration is burdened by an unimaginative prosaic weight."⁴³ "There is something heavy about the narration that harms the playwright's intentions."⁴⁴ The reviewers' comments give the general impression of a production of a dull play in "dark grey" with "too much stress on what she [Leffler] wants to say."⁴⁵

The Reviewers' Interpretations

Polarization and exaggeration in the presentation of the roles affect the reviewers' willingness to acknowledge the existence of a situation needing urgent change and thereby the foundation of a new radical utopia. The conservative critic Anders Flodman and his anonymous colleague in *Post- och Inrikes Tidningar* express this by dismissing *Sanna kvinnor* as a truthful representation of reality: Why contrast the revolting leniency of Julie Bark to the righteousness and grit of Berta, and why represent men as immoral when normal men in real life are not, they ask. They accuse the production not only of representing men falsely but also of depicting marriage unfairly.⁴⁶ As supporters of an idealized realism, they ask for representations of reality as it ideally should be.⁴⁷ *Sanna kvinnor* represents immoral men and women, and when the curtain falls nobody's morality has been restored. The distressing situation has not been transformed into the harmonic reconciliation that these two critics require.

The other four reviewers welcome *Sanna kvinnor* as a justified and audacious contribution to an important social question, and as a brave and true treatment of the conditions of marriage. They consider the critique of subservient femininity or, in one case, of male injustice the theme of the production, and acknowledge that it truly represents a troublesome social situation needing change. The main symbolic coordinate of the prevailing order that is moved by the production is the ideal of a subservient and devoted femininity represented by Julie Bark. Hedvig Kinmansson's creation of her as the suffering victim proves the need for change. Teatervän and Hjalmar Sandgren mainly concentrate on the femininity represented in Kinmansson's acting and warn of the fatal consequences of sacrifice and self-denial, but while the former mentions the consequences for men and women alike, the latter mentions the consequences for men in particular.⁴⁸ For Eugene Fahlstedt, the radical utopia resides in Berta, representative of a burgeoning new femininity.⁴⁹ He particularly underscores the notion of female independence, which will bring about new relations between the sexes.

Teatervän furthermore perceives a call for change in the production's critique of the idea that an immoral man can be restored by an innocent woman's devoted love – a widespread idea in cultural artefacts of the time.⁵⁰ S/he observes that the production supports individual responsibility for restoring oneself.⁵¹ The symbolic coordinate of the prevalent complementary view of the sexes have moved for this reviewer. Although s/he does not stress Berta as the instrument of change, her/his radical utopia includes independent individuals driven by righteousness and moral truth relative to other people. This critic, together with Fahlstedt, clearly diverges from the other reviewers, whose utopias are governed by a complementary view of the sexes.

41 A.F. *AB* 16 Oct. 1883.

42 "ingen av rolerna är tacksam att utföra" E-dt. *GHT* 18 Oct. 1883.

43 "framställningen tryckes av en hvardaglig prosaisk tyngd".

44 "Det är något tungt i behandlingen, /.../ som ej så litet skadar hvad förf. velat." Anon. *StD* 16 Oct. 1883.

45 "i mörkgrått" E-dt. *GHT* 18 Oct. 1883; "allt för eftertryckligt betonat åtskilligt av hon velat säga" Anon. *StD* 16 Oct. 1883.

46 A.F. *AB* 16 Oct. 1883; Anon. *PIT* 16 Oct. 1883.

47 Molnár 1991, 199, 108.

48 Teatervän *TfH* 1883/6, 328; Hj.Sdg. *NDA* 16 Oct. 1883.

49 E-dt. *GHT* 18 Oct. 1883.

50 Johansson Lindh 2019, 153-4, 216.

51 Teatervän *TfH* 1883/6, 326-7.

The dividing line between reviewers who acknowledge a social situation needing change and those who do not is of course not very surprising, given the tension in the 1880s between, on the one hand, critics defending elevated, beautified representations of human beings on stage setting moral standards for the audience, and, on the other, critics defending a new naturalistic aesthetics and welcoming social change and social critique. Interestingly, for all the reviewers, whether supporting or dismissing the urge for change, morality in the form of righteousness and inner truth is central. While one group of reviewers claims that human beings in general are already moral beings in the best of worlds, the other maintains that the norms of femininity and masculinity show that they are not or, alternatively, that these same ideals prevent both women and men from acting in accordance with their moral compasses.

A Utopia of Equally Strong Spouses Complementing Each Other's Weaknesses

Albert Ranft's theatre company toured south-west Sweden with *Sanna kvinnor* in 1884–1886, visiting, among other cities, Gothenburg, Malmö, Helsingborg, Borås, and Sölvesborg. In early autumn 1884, the twenty-six-year-old Ranft had just become the manager of the travelling theatre company, Lindbergska sällskapet.⁵² He bought the exclusive rights from Leffler to perform *Sanna kvinnor* in the provinces, a detail he used in advertising the production.⁵³ In the playbills he frames himself as the director of the production and warns the theatregoer who wants to keep up to date with the latest in theatre not to miss it.⁵⁴ I have found three longer reviews of performances in Borås, Malmö, and Gothenburg.⁵⁵

The Staging

The reviews indicate that Ranft made the marriage of Mr and Mrs Bark the centre of the plot. In their descriptions and evaluations of the acting, the three reviewers, regardless of their standpoints on theatre politics, focus on the actor Ludvig Otterström in the role of Mr Bark and the actress Elise Stier in the role of Mrs Bark. Stier and Otterström are also listed first in the playbills.⁵⁶ In particular, Stier's portrayal of Julie Bark's suffering seems to have been a feature of the production: The anonymous critic in *Boråstidningen* regards the test that Julie Bark is put to by her inconsiderate husband as central to the plot.⁵⁷ His likewise anonymous colleague in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* clearly frames Mrs Bark as the suffering victim torn between her youngest daughter's wish to protect the family's finances and her husband's need for money: Stier creates the role with "mute acting", "anxious hesitation" and "slavish fear".⁵⁸ The liberal Karl Warburg in *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* predicts that Elise Stier will have a good future as a "mère noble", testifying to a performance in accordance with the stock role of a woman of noble character, struck by grief or bad luck, in which an actress could specialize.⁵⁹

The reviews indicate that Ranft's directing emphasized the integrated interaction between the actors: The acting was "seamless, everyone in the group was perfectly cast in his or her role."⁶⁰ The interaction between Elise Stier (Mrs Bark) and Ludvig Otterström (Mr Bark) in the heated scenes of the second act, when Mr Bark manipulates Mrs Bark into giving him the deed

52 Anon. *Sydsvenska Dagbladet Snällposten* (SDS) 23 July 1884.

53 Kungliga bibliotekets handskriftssamlingar. Letters from Albert Ranft to Anne Charlotte Edgren Leffler, 24 Aug. 1884, 8 May 1885, 11 Dec. 1885.

54 Albert Ranfts arkiv. Musik och teaterbiblioteket, Musikverket; Teaterhistoriska arkivet, Göteborgs Stadsmuseum; Anon. *Göteborgs Posten* 28 April 1885. In contrast, no director is mentioned in the playbills for the productions of the lightweight farces ending the evening programmes.

55 Anon. *Borås Tidning* (BT) 8 Nov. 1884; Anon. SDS 26 Jan. 1886; K. W-g. (which is how Karl Warburg signs his reviews) GHT 30 April 1885. The theatre critic in the Gothenburg daily paper *Göteborgs Handels och Sjöfartstidning*, Karl Warburg, was a historian of literature and art, critic, and publicist who achieved a leading position in Sweden as a critic of literature.

56 Ibid.

57 Anon. BT 8 Nov. 1884.

58 "Stumma spel", "ängestfulla tvekan", "slafviska fruktan" Anon. SDS 26 Jan. 1886.

59 "mère noblens" K. W-g. GHT 30 April 1885.

60 "samspelet var helgjutet, hvarje af de uppträdande lämpade sig särdeles väl för sin uppgift." K. W-g. GHT 30 April 1885.

of gift, is praised and found “true” and “realistic”.⁶¹ Furthermore, the actors and actresses are praised for the psychological complexity and truth they give their roles: “Mr Otterström’s Bark was in every inch and gesture a truthful representation of the miserable wretch into which the husband had let himself sink.”; and “Miss Stier performed the part of Mrs Bark with excellent feeling and truth, years of repression and weakening of character caused by her position came out perfectly well”.⁶²

In his memoirs, Albert Ranft testifies to the importance of August Lindberg’s theatre practice. He considered meeting Lindberg a turning-point in his theatrical life, stressing his opportunity to study Lindberg’s directing of Ibsen’s *Gengangere* (*Ghosts* 1883) in 1883, a production considered a milestone in Swedish theatre because of Lindberg’s epochal mise-en-scène.⁶³ The production marked a breakthrough for an absorbed acting style inspired by the naturalistic doctrine.⁶⁴ By framing himself as the director of the play in the playbills, Ranft indicates that he was aiming for a modern theatre in Lindberg’s style at this early point of his career. There are also similarities in the observations about the interaction between the actors in the reviews of Ranft’s *Sanna kvinnor* and of Lindberg’s *Gengangere*. Reviews of both productions emphasize the interaction between actors. While Warburg uses the phrase “seamless” to describe the interaction in *Sanna kvinnor*, Peter Nansen, in his review of the premiere of *Ghosts* in Helsingborg in 1883, claims that Oswald and Mrs Alving had “a life together” on the stage.⁶⁵ At a performance at Nya Teatern in Stockholm, Gustaf af Geijerstam found the actors to be “cooperating together” to give life to Ibsen’s ideas and nature.⁶⁶

In the Ranft production, as in the production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, the role of Berta appears to have been contrasted to that of her mother Julie. Although Berta’s force is perceived in different ways, in line with the reviewers’ standpoints on theatre politics and gender sensitivity, the observations support each other. Warburg feels that Berta was portrayed as a “harsh” character “with accurate force” and “a lot of sense”, while the critic in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* finds Berta’s natural sense of right bordering on contempt and hatred.⁶⁷ The latter adds that such a righteous and good daughter would not treat her father with as much spite as Ellen Ädelstam puts into her role. He finds Berta’s behaviour the nastiest aspect of the production.⁶⁸ While Elise Stier appears as the very image of an amiable, kind-hearted, but weak “wife, woman, and mother”, Ellen Ädelstam makes Berta into a firm, practical, undaunted shrew, according to *Boråstidningen*.⁶⁹ All these observations reinforce the impression that Ädelstam, and in the Malmö-performance, Agda Mayer represented Berta as a forceful young woman.

The *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* critic describes the scenery and decorations as depicting “a paltry bourgeois home”, which, together with the complicated relations between the family members, conveys a basic mood of depression dominating the stage.⁷⁰ The reviews of Ranft’s production indicate that, in his staging, the darkness of the play is set off by lighter sparks.⁷¹ For example, Ranft himself in the part of Wilhelm brought “an air from the elegant world outside the depressed home of Bark’s family to the stage – that of merry dinners and elegant pleasures”.⁷²

61 “sant” “realistisk” Anon. *SDS* 26 Jan. 1886.

62 “Herr Otterströms Bark var i hvarje tum och gest en trogen bild av den eländige usling, hvar till mannen sjunkit ned.” Anon. *BT* 11 Aug. 1884; “Fröken Stier återgaf med utmärkt känsla och sanning Fru Barks roll: det under årtal förkuvade och karaktärsförsvagade i hennes ställning kom så utmärkt fram” K. W-g. *GHT* 30 April 1885.

63 Ranft 1928, 7155, 8799.

64 Lagerroth 2005, 107.

65 K. W-g, *GHT* 30 April 1885; “samliv” Lagerroth. 2005, 103.

66 “samarbeta” Lagerroth 2005, 106.

67 “kär”, “med tillbörlig kraft”, “mycket förstånd” K. W-g, *GHT* 30 April 1885.

68 K. W-g. *GHT* 30 April 1885; Anon. *SDS* 26 Jan. 1886.

69 Anon. *BT* 11 Aug. 1884.

70 “ett tarfligt borgerligt hem” Anon. *SDS* 26 Jan. 1886.

71 E-dt. *GHT* 18 Oct. 1883.

72 “en fläkt från den eleganta utanverlden, middagarnes, ’glädighetens’ och de fina nöjenas värld in i det betryckta svärföräldrahemmet” K. W-g. *GHT* 30 April 1885.

The Reviewers' Interpretations

All three reviewers experienced a production in which the main conflict is acted out between Julie and Pontus Bark, with the younger married couple Lissi and Wilhelm as their counterparts. Berta and the accountant Lundberg are perceived as minor parts, except by the critic in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, who pays more attention to Berta than do his colleagues, as he sees Berta as the only character of any moral worth. Nevertheless, he finds the dominant theme of the performance to concern marriage. For this critic and for Karl Warburg, the negative example of Mrs Bark carries the message of the production: Women's laxness makes men bad. From this follows the logic that firmer wives would make husbands clean up their acts. Although the two critics present an ideological contrast, they both acknowledge that a problematic social situation needing change exists, namely, moral degradation among men. Nevertheless, the symbolic coordinate that has moved is the ideal of femininity. In accordance with most of the critics of the production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Warburg and the anonymous critic in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* share an understanding that stays within the boundaries of a complementary view of the sexes. The critic of *Boråstidningen* does not acknowledge any social situation needing change, as he does not approve of the production as a truthful depiction of marriage. He protests against the exaggerations and the contrasting of the roles: A woman in general is neither an "amiable weak creature (...) who lets herself be led anywhere", nor an "unwomanly (...) shrew", and men are neither "scoundrels", "loose-living rakes", nor "decent pedantic grumblers".⁷³

The critics' interpretations of Elise Stier's Julie Bark and Ellen Ädelstam's/ Agda Mayer's Berta reveal the demarcation of what was inside versus outside the limits of an acceptable femininity, for these reviewers. Different femininities were represented in the types of roles in which nineteenth-century actresses could specialize, depending on the femininity of their appearance and voice.⁷⁴ The part of Julie Bark easily fits one type of established female role, namely, the noble mother. The many comments on Berta's unwomanly behaviour reveal that neither the role nor Ellen Ädelstam's/ Agda Mayer's performance of it fitted any of the standard types. Karl Warburg even has to make a detour to Ädelstam's performance in Ibsen's *En folkefiende* (An Enemy of the People) to describe her acting: "In the modern pieces, her talent has at times been fully expressed, roles with a certain coarse and forceful quality, for example, as Petra in *An Enemy of the People*, which she created in a very successful way, or as now in this piece [i.e., *Sanna kvinnor*]. In such roles, her personality comes into its own and lines are delivered with accurate force and much intelligence."⁷⁵ Warburg accepts the appearance of such a femininity on the stage and such a personality in an actress, but he finds Berta manly and coarse and her demand that "a woman should be 'a woman for herself' and 'a man 'a man for himself'" exaggerated.⁷⁶ This indicates that, according to him, in reality such a woman would cross gender boundaries. All the critics ask for a firm, strong woman with a moral backbone, but they cannot accept Berta as the paragon of such qualities as she fails to embody femininity in the right way. For the critic in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, the portrayal of Berta moves the symbolic coordinate of generational superiority and subordination, as he finds that Berta does not show her father due respect as the one who has given her life.⁷⁷

An Alternative to Degenerating Orders

Analysis of the productions shows that a style of acting in accordance with Leffler's in-depth psychological characters affects the reviewers' willingness to accept the truthfulness of the representation and, in turn, that a social situation needing change exists. When the roles

73 "en älsklig och svag varelse", "låter leda sig hurusomhelst", "ett okvinligt /.../ 'rifjärn'", "uslingar", "lätsinnige vällustingar", "hederliga pedantiske tvärviggjar" Anon. *BT* 8 Nov. 1884.

74 Ohlsson 2018, 437.

75 "i de moderna styckena har hon någon gång funnit roller, där hennes talang kunnat komma till sin fulla rätt, roller med en något kärf, kraftig anstrykning, t.ex. Petra i 'En Folkefiende' som hon utförde synnerligen lyckadt, eller nu Berta i detta stycke. Där gör sig hennes personlighet gällande och replikerna sägas med tillbörlig kraft och mycket förstånd." K. W-g. *GHT* 30 April 1885.

76 "kvinnan ska vara 'kvinna för sig'", mannen, 'man för sig'" K. W-g. *GHT* 30 April 1885.

77 Anon. *BT* 11 Aug. 1884.

are made into one-dimensional types with a few exaggerated features and set against each other, the reviewers dismiss their truthfulness. This reaction is most evident in the defenders of an idealized realism. Differences in the acting style, the creation of the roles, what roles are foregrounded, and the overall rhythm and mood of the stagings cause minor differences in the reviewers' radical utopias. Interacting actors interpreting their roles informed by psychological understanding and an evenly shared dominance on stage, as in the Ranft production, generate a stronger focus on the relationship between husband and wife, while making Mrs Bark the suffering leading character and Mr Bark a typical scoundrel, as in the Royal Dramatic Theatre's production, puts greater focus on the thematic connection between the femininities represented by Julie Bark and Berta.

The most decisive structure shaping the utopias is the complementary view of the sexes. This symbolic coordinate permeates not only the reviewers' interpretations across ideological standpoints but also the stagings in terms of who is presented as the protagonist and what actors are cast in what roles. It makes the marriage of Mr and Mrs Bark the locus of the reviewer's utopias in most of the reviews. Consequently, the symbolic coordinates of femininity are considered the ones in need of change even when the critics find the problematic social situation to be caused by a degenerated masculinity, as a wife's duty was to support her husband morally, according to the complementary view of the sexes. Only four of the reviewers see independent individuals as something the productions suggest, and two of these dismiss the idea. For these reviewers, Berta represents the idea of independence, but for the other five reviewers, the influence of the complementary view of the sexes seems to make independent coequal women and men, as suggested in Leffler's play, unimaginable.

Strikingly, Berta seems not to be framed as the protagonist in either of the two productions. The critics see her as the contrasting sidekick to the lenient Mrs Bark and thereby operative at the thematic level, but no one sees her as important for driving the plot. Depending on how Berta is portrayed, she may be accepted as a paragon of a new femininity. When this happens, the acting lets the noble aspects of the part dominate the rebellious ones. When the rebellious aspects of the role are incorporated into the actress's performance, the reviews signal that Berta has exceeded the bounds of accepted femininity. Nor does she comply with any of the feminine type-cast roles in the theatre repertory as, for example, Mrs Bark does, which might partly explain the reviewers' difficulty in accepting the femininity that the acting and the part represent. Another striking result is that the question of morality is prominent in all reviews across the ideological spectrum. All the reviewers, except for those who dismiss *Sanna kvinnor* as a true representation of marriage, agree that a new stronger femininity is needed to counter men's loose living or to save the family and, in a few cases, that men must be held responsible for maintaining high moral standards themselves.

The composition of Leffler's *Sanna kvinnor*, particularly the role of Berta, certainly ran counter to theatrical conventions, but as a frequent theatregoer and experienced playwright, Leffler must have been aware of the theatrical conventions, so the play was likely composed with these in mind. By deliberately delineating Mr and Mrs Bark the way they are, she cleverly secured her controversial play for the stages, affording two great roles for two star actors. As the reviews signal, the actors performing these two roles are highlighted in the stagings, making the situation of Mrs Bark or alternatively the marriage of Mr and Mrs Bark more emphasized in the stagings than in the play. Consequently, the bad examples of Mrs Bark's situation and the marriage are more prominent in forming the reviewers' utopias than are Berta's alternative femininity and her depressing situation, allowing the complementary view of the sexes greater space in the reviewers' radical utopias than permitted by a dramaturgical analysis of the play.

The reviewers certainly appreciate the play for the moral stand Leffler takes on the issues of gender and marriage, but for a theatre professional like Albert Ranft, *Sanna kvinnor* was clearly attractive as a modern piece of writing for the theatre as its characters allowed a new kind of psychologized acting and interacting between the actors. At this early stage of his career, being a modern theatre manager and director seems to have been important to Ranft. The controversial modern play *Sanna kvinnor* thus had a certain value in supporting a young upcoming man's ambition to join the theatrical avant-garde. Rephrasing Bennett, *Sanna kvinnor*

was not “ghettoized” in Leffler’s time, neither by theatre professionals nor by reviewers.⁷⁸ While, for Albert Ranft, the play became an instrument for realizing the radical utopia of a new kind of theatre, in line with the Brandes brothers’ rallying cry, most of the reviewers welcomed both the play and the productions as urgent calls for a radical utopia on a social level, pointing to the necessity of an alternative to the moral degradation that threatened marriage and consequently one of the pillars of sane society.

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⁷⁸ Bennett 2010, 70.

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