

INGER LITTBERGER CAISOU-ROUSSEAU:

***Över alla gränser. Manlighet och kristen (o)tro hos Almqvist, Strindberg och Lagerlöf***

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*Över alla gränser* is a study of masculinity and Christianity in three Swedish works of prose fiction: Carl Jonas Love Almqvist's *Drottningens juvelsmycke* (1834), August Strindberg's *I havsbandet* (1890), and Selma Lagerlöf's Löwensköld trilogy, especially *Charlotte Löwensköld* (1925) and *Anna Svärd* (1928). The study was carried out as part of an interdisciplinary project, 'Kristen manlighet – en modernitetens paradox: män och religion i en nordeuropeisk kontext 1840-1940' (Christian masculinity – a paradox in modernity: men and religion in a northern European context), with Littberger Caisou-Rousseau opting to focus on three literary characters: Azouras Lazuli Tintomara, Axel Borg, and Karl-Artur Ekenstedt. Her analyses, in three separate sections,

of these characters in relation to masculinity and Christianity, lead to the conclusion, in her English summary, that there is 'little doubt that literary texts can illustrate the full complexity of both masculinity and Christian faith'.

This is a well-written study, and Littberger Caisou-Rousseau explores her chosen texts in considerable detail. Her analyses benefit from extensive and useful contextualisations – historical, cultural, ideological – and from a wide range of theoretical material on theology and on gender studies, the latter category including works by Judith Butler, R.W. Connell, Thomas Lacqueur, George L. Mosse and Peter N. Stearns. She also draws on a very wide range of existing studies of her three texts and their authors.

Littberger Caisou-Rousseau's boldest analysis is that of Tintomara, whose androgynous characteristics are read in the context of Almqvist's notion of an alternative Christian society, with Tintomara ultimately positioned above or beyond the conventional gender categorisations thanks to her/his 'divine dimension'. In Strindberg's novel with its prominent foregrounding of masculinity and denial of Christianity, the text about the atheist Axel Borg is found effectively to undermine masculinity while providing increasing space for biblical narratives and elements of Christian faith, with the central character eventually emerging as having much in common with Jesus Christ. Karl-Artur Ekenstedt in Lagerlöf's two novels is found to be trapped in an infantilising relationship with his parents and especially his mother, while his efforts to assert his independence by means of his mission as a Christian, first within the state Lutheran Church and then outside it, are repeatedly thwarted, notably by the novels' female characters; and so it is only towards the very end of *Anna Svärd* that Karl-Artur, reduced to an impoverished anti-hero, achieves similarities with Christ.

While there are interesting and rewarding sections in Littberger Caisou-Rousseau's study, I am puzzled by her overall approach. How can literary characters, decades after 'the linguistic turn', be extracted from their texts, discussed separately and, moreover, treated as if they were full-scale human beings? Surely, in this day and age, it is generally accepted that characters in a novel are verbal constructs whose functions and implications we cannot begin to understand

unless we assess how they are narrated, who narrates and for whom? While Littberger Caisou-Rousseau makes occasional references to *berättaren*, 'the narrator', this narrator appears to be synonymous with Almqvist, Strindberg and Lagerlöf respectively, as a phrase such as 'Lagerlöfs berättarröst' (Lagerlöf's narrative voice) would seem to confirm. Consequently she also analyses gender without taking into account the destabilisation of the notion of identity fundamental to poststructuralism.

Littberger Caisou-Rousseau's reluctance to develop a clear and firm line of argument is also troubling. In its efforts to pay attention to everything written about these four novels (as emphasised by the excessive footnotes), her discussion frequently becomes woolly and lacking in direction; it is symptomatic that it is also marred by extensive plot summaries. Interesting and relevant though the subject matter may be, Littberger Caisou-Rousseau's study leaves much to be desired.

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