

MICHAEL ROBINSON (ed.):

The Cambridge Companion to August Strindberg.

Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xxxvi + 187.

ISBN: 978-0-521-60852-7.

Cambridge has taken its time to get around to accompanying James McFarlane's 1994 Ibsen companion with one on Strindberg, the only two Scandinavians in their list. It is a brave scholar who attempts to compass Strindberg in a series of slim essays. Robinson's volume, however, makes a good introduction to current concerns with this knotty writer. Its thirteen topical essays, by many of the scholars who have been writing in English about Strindberg today, give us a broad survey of the main material and contemporary issues around it.

The volume opens with two compilations. The first is a fairly detailed chronology of Strindberg's life, which can be recommended as a most useful review before one undertakes the essays themselves. The second is a generically organised chronological list of Strindberg's writings, a list which must always give anyone pause at its sheer prodigality, its breadth, and its astonishing quality. And this doesn't even reckon a dozen or so volumes of his letters. Robinson then divides his collection into three parts, Strindberg in Context, The Works, and Performance and Legacy.

The initial essays, by Linda Haverty Rugg, 'August Strindberg and the art and science of self-dramatization,' and by Margaretha Fahlgren, 'Strindberg and the woman question,' come at once to what seem to be the most persistent issues in Strindberg scholarship, the relation of his life to his works—especially, as here, the use Strindberg makes of autobiography—and his depiction of women. Strindberg as himself the subject of his writing is an old thread in scholarship on that writing, and Strindberg's attitudes toward women on the one hand, and the women in his plays on the other, is still a subject of corrosive debate.

The following eight essays, by Ulf Olsson, on the novels, Per Stounbjerg, on Strindberg's autobiographical writings, Ross Schideler on *Miss Julie*, Hans-Göran Ekman on Strindberg and comedy, Göran Stockenström on Strindberg's modernism, Eszter Szalczer on the dramaturgy, Lynn Wilkinson

on the chamber plays, and Matthew Wikander on the history plays, survey the main areas of Strindberg's writing and offer some approaches to it.

The closing three essays deal with Strindberg on stage, possibly the way in which most no longer meet him. Frederick Marker and Lise-Lone Marker give us an interesting survey of ways in which the plays have been performed inside, but also outside, Scandinavia, touching on some of the most famous productions. Egil Törnqvist surveys how Ingmar Bergman has presented and interpreted Strindberg in the theatre, most notably at Dramaten, and Freddie Rokem takes on the difficult task of trying to show Strindberg's lines of influence on our contemporary theatre.

With respect to Strindberg's theatre and his fiction, then, this volume offers no dissent from the common assumption that autobiography and misogyny are at its core, out of which everything comes. The result of such a starting-point is that it is easy subsequently to read each piece as representing something other than itself, a novel, a play. Rugg, however, sees the autobiographical strain as representing material with which Strindberg made aesthetic experiments, and this is a good step forward which can get us to questions of how it works and what the result is.

There are, inevitably, some gaps, principally the lack of an essay on the letters, a selection and translation of which Robinson has published, or about Strindberg and music, an ever-present aspect of his plays, texts which have also generated at least thirty operas. There is nothing, too, about him as a writer on political and scientific subjects, or as a short-story writer, or as a poet, and nothing about him as a painter and photographer (these last two, areas in which he was something of a pioneer in Scandinavia). An essay on Strindberg's extraordinary and virtuoso use of language would also have been welcome, as would an index of more than just names. Nonetheless, the collection fairly represents what are probably the most-recurring topics in the study of Strindberg today. To be sure, this book could have been many times larger and still never gotten around to all the aspects of Strindberg's work in front of us.

Strindberg's texts rarely offer an easy reading or a simplistic point of view. It is no negative criticism of the authors here, therefore, that many of the positions in these essays can be argued about: indeed, that is one of their

strong points. The academic bibliography about Strindberg is massive. Here, in addition to the works given in the chapter end-notes, Robinson provides a brief, annotated, list of standard studies probably generally available and this is a good starting point for those willing to be provoked. For a conspectus of current views of the core of August Strindberg's work, this volume is to be recommended.

ALAN SWANSON

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN