

ANNIE MATTSSON:

Komediant och riksförrädare. Handskriftcircularade smädeskrifter mot Gustaf III.

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Encomia in any age are tedious things to endure and printing has ensured that the plethora of adulation applied to Gustaf III is still with us. Censorship and control of the press has seen to it that we, as were his subjects, have been well-supplied with a complete range of pro-

Gustaf admiration. Expressions of disapproval of that king, however, are much harder to come by, and Annie Mattsson's new dissertation does us the great service of putting before us the opposite case. Drawing on the bibliographic work of Ingemar Carlsson with respect to political manuscripts of the time, she has given us useable editions of and commentaries on a range of manuscript libels against Gustaf III from 1778 (the earliest known) to 1792. Usefully, she gives us all the bibliographic information and a brief description of each of the 120 + 31 known libels, as well as editions of eleven of them, covering the whole period, with readable photographs of the first pages of ten of these.

Though Gustaf III was indubitably one of the most public of Swedish monarchs, a neutral understanding of his acts is difficult to come by. Erik Lönnroth, Beth Hennings, and Marie-Christine Skuncke have all shed valuable light on his life, education, and context, and Sten Carlsson, H. Arnold Barton, and others have attempted to make sense of his political career. Yet only Charles IX seems to have engendered as much spiteful public controversy about himself as a person and a ruler.

The twenty-six year old Gustaf became king at a constitutionally rocky moment in Swedish history. Though his political views were not completely unknown, it was in no way clear what form they would take when put into action. His inaugural speech to the Riksdag, on July 25 1771, was rhetorically brilliant in placing himself among rather than above the parliament. He subtly reminded them that he was the first Swedish-born monarch in fifty years and then called himself 'the first citizen'. It would not have been unknown to his listeners that he was without a drop of Swedish blood in him, so it was important to stress his Swedishness. Indeed, apparently his first political act as king, some months before, was to fire his mother's French theatre troupe. This was in itself a rhetorical gesture, as it signalled Gustaf's patriotism and saved money. (That it was also a signal to his mother of who was now in charge was not as public a fact.) Rhetoric is the art of persuasion and reaction to the speech was generally favorable; he enjoyed broad popularity in the first seven or eight years of his reign.

But he had learned his political lessons well from his parents and was well aware they had failed to bring about the enlightened

despotism that was his political model. He was well aware, too, that it was the Estate of the Nobility and its privileges that he needed to master. This began with a bloodless palace *coup d'état* in August 1772, was reinforced by a parliamentary manoeuvre in September 1778, and significantly bolstered by the move to absolutism in the parliament of 1789, when most of the privileges of the nobility were circumscribed or abolished. He was assassinated in March 1792, in a plot hatched by some members of the nobility and carried out by one of them.

Mattsson's choice of libels to submit to extensive discussion shows, among other things, a certain shift in their character from those in 1778 which portray Gustaf as a "ridiculous and incompetent" monarch to those from 1789 on, in which the criticism is that he is a crafty and power-hungry tyrant. One also notes a rise in the sheer vitriol poured upon the king, not least after his death.

'Rhetoric' is one of the guide-words of this thesis (it is a special interest of the literature department at Uppsala). Each of the libels Mattsson discusses is preceded by a fine survey of the political situation in which it is found: she has a welcome good sense of their context. She then submits the text to a naming of its rhetorical parts, and has useful observations about its generic and attitudinal expression. Looking at her reproductions, for instance, one of the things which stuck me strongly, and which she deals with only in passing, is how aesthetically elegant most of these pieces are, or are intended to be. This is not hastily-scratched *samizdat*, where it is only the content that is important, but rather carefully-produced objects whose import lies not only in the words, but in the visual form in which they are placed. The rhetoric embraces more than the words themselves.

For almost all the libels, she makes it clear that their anonymous authors and, presumably, their recipients and transcribers are noble, a conclusion supported by their visual presentation, and this chimes well with the attitudes and compositional abilities we associate with that class. There is, alas, almost no evidence available of whether or not this rhetoric succeeded in persuading its readers, and there is a strong sense that it was essentially reaching the already-converted.

That Gustaf III had enemies, that they were mostly noble, that the opposition was greater in the last decade of his life than in the first, and

that he was assassinated by a disaffected nobleman are all cold facts, long known. What Annie Mattsson has done is to put color and flesh onto those facts which articulate the growing dissatisfaction of one cohort of the Swedish population at the end of the eighteenth century. This is a dissertation and it is subject to all the inherent, but inevitable, compositional expectations and drawbacks of such a document. But it needs to be read by everyone interested in the social history of the Gustavian period and it is welcome on my bookshelf.

ALAN SWANSON

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN