

ERIK VAN OOIJEN:

The Mold of Writing: Style and Structure in Strindberg's Chamber Plays.

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Is there such a thing as *l'écriture strindbergienne*? The implicit thesis of Erik van Ooijen's dissertation is that there is such a thing, and it manifests itself especially clearly in the five plays Strindberg published under the title *Kammarspel* or *Chamber Plays*.

Van Ooijen's title, *The Mold of Writing*, draws on a quotation from Strindberg's letter to Ola Hansson of October 1 1890, in which he compares the process of writing to the proliferation of grapes or mold in the head of the writer (Van Ooijen, 14). Mold, which grows on and within other structures, transforming them as it spreads, is a particularly apt metaphor for Strindberg's writing, which derives much of its force from the ways in which it evokes structures, conventions, and meanings, while simultaneously subverting and transforming them. This process comes into focus, Van Ooijen argues, in the many glitches or loose ends in *The Chamber Plays*, such as the old man's reference to people who mispronounce *fönster* at the beginning of *The Ghost Sonata*. These loose ends do not point to a 'counter-position always already at work within a text' (66), but instead to 'what Ulf Olsson calls the abruptive or asyndetic nature of Strindberg's style, according to which the components of a work remain unordered, isolated and simultaneous rather than stratified and hierarchically organized' (66).

The chapters on the individual chamber plays unravel previous

readings, as well as the texts themselves. Thus, the first in the series, *Ovåder*, undermines what Peter Szondi posited as one of the main features of modern drama, the presence of a central subjectivity in the text. Other inconsistencies, as well, work against the unity of this text, which nonetheless is more coherent than the later plays.

Van Ooijen's reading of *Brända tomten* takes as its point of departure the many interpretations that emphasize the incoherence or even failure of this work. This play, he argues, assembles elements from several genres, especially tragedy and detective narratives, but does not fuse them into a whole. The ruin suggested by its title turns out to look remarkably like the rhizome as described by Deleuze and Guattari.

Spöksönnen is a chamber play that could not have been performed within the small spaces of 'chamber theaters' such as Reinhardt's Kammerspiele in Berlin or Strindberg's Intima Teatern in Stockholm. The references within the play to 'parody' and 'sabotage' point to the work's relation to previous forms and conventions, but the play offers a version of parody that is more in line with what Jean Baudrillard has described as 'simulation'. In Strindberg's play, 'simulation would suggest the wraithlike recurrence of form that camouflages its perversion of function by appearing familiarly strange or strangely familiar' (128). The contradictory scenes of this work offer a 'total effect of perplexing complexity'.

Although *Pelikanen* is sometimes described as the most conventional and coherent of the *Chamber Plays*, it too has some notable loose ends, such as characters who disappear or change professions, or furniture that seems to materialize without warning. These glitches, Van Ooijen argues, are not meaningful in themselves. Instead, they point to a particular style in which such inconsistencies are an essential feature.

The Mold of Writing concludes with a chapter on *Svarta handsken*. Is this work a 'chamber play'? Many Strindberg scholars have argued that it isn't – that it is instead a *féerie* or fairy tale play or simply an inferior work that doesn't belong in the same category as the first four *Chamber Plays* – but for van Ooijen, the play's differences point to the dynamism of Strindberg's notion of genre. He writes: 'To treat the plays as a closed system ... is to force closure upon a whole which is itself

founded on principles of openness and disorganized transformation' (206).

In his opening chapter, van Ooijen refers to some apparent glitches in the structuralist studies of Barthes and Genette. Barthes, it seems, could not quite exclude the author from the text; Genette acknowledged in an early study of Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* that some episodes in the novel cannot be accounted for in terms of narratological codes, but represent traces of the author and his experience. *The Mold of Writing* demonstrates that such episodes and traces proliferate in Strindberg's *Chamber Plays*. Indeed, on van Ooijen's reading, the progression of the plays suggests that Strindberg discovered the importance of such traces, such glitches, in the process of writing them. In so doing, he also invented a style in which these heterogeneous elements also found their (uncertain) place.

The Mold of Writing offers a series of compelling readings of Strindberg's five *Chamber Plays* that demonstrate that they are consistent in their inconsistency and strikingly postmodern. I wonder, though, about the context of the kind of writing that emerges here. Van Ooijen's readings bear an uncanny resemblance to Paul de Man's interpretations in *Allegories of Reading*. And any focus on avant-garde writing at the turn of the last century must call to mind Julia Kristeva's *La révolution du langage poétique* with its evocation of a series of male writers whose works bear witness to the discovery or invention of *l'écriture féminine*. What, I wonder, does the latter have to do with 'the mold of writing'?

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