Christian Masculinity

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A n unbaptised heathen whose sex is vague, but whom critics, even those who are usually alert to gender issues, invariably call a woman; a programmatic atheist, certainly a man, but more feminine than masculine; and a clergyman from a “monumental work on the breakdown of faith and patriarchy”, to quote one critic: these are the three protagonists - drawn from classical Swedish novels - whom I wish to consider in this chapter. And while my point of departure does not seem the best given, since the task here is to highlight aspects of masculinity and religion in Swedish fiction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I hope all will soon appear in a rather different light.

A ‘CROSSPIECE’ NAMED AZOURAS LAZULI TINTOMARA

The unbaptised heathen in question is Azouras Lazuli Tintomara, the enigmatic key figure in a work by Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (1793-1866), Drottningens Juvelsmycke (The Queen’s Diadem) (1834). A romantic Gesamtkunstwerk, The Queen’s Diadem combines epic narrative, drama, monologues, poetry, and song. Almqvist himself hesitated to call the book a novel, preferring the word konstverk (artwork) or ‘romaunt’. A central event in The Queen’s Diadem is the assassination of the Swedish King Gustav III during a masked ball at the Stockholm Opera on 16 March 1792. Ballet dancer at the Opera and half-sister of the crown prince, Tintomara first ‘steals’

1 Wivel, Snödrottningen, 314.
2 Marilyn Johns Blackwell considers this book not only the brilliant culmination of Almqvist’s literary career, but also of the entire European Romantic movement. Blackwell, “The Queen’s Diadem: A Romantic Novel”, 235.
the queen’s diadem, and is then accused of being involved in the murder of the king. Amongst the conspirators are two young officers, Ferdinand and Clas Henrik, who fall in love with Tintomara, as do their fiancées, the sisters Amanda and Adolfine. The plot alternates between the aristocrats’ amorous adventures and the intrigues of powerful men at the highest political level. Tintomara flees passionate love and high politics alike. Condemned to death for several offences in what was intended to be a mock execution, Tintomara dies, shot by her admirer Ferdinand. The saviour desired by everyone finally escapes their clutches.

Where critics used to be reasonably certain that Tintomara was a woman, their more recent colleagues have leapt to apply all the available theoretical tools to the matter of the figure’s problematic sex. Yet even they have a conspicuous tendency to use ‘she’ as the proper pronoun for this character. Inspired by Jacques Derrida’s concept entre, a Danish professor of Scandinavian, Karin Sanders, now employs the term ‘crosspiece’ to indicate the many vague and indefinite characters favoured by Almqvist. This vagueness is multifaceted, but especially prominent when it comes to sex. Sanders maintains that the characters reveal how complicated ascriptions of sex can be. Many scholars have followed suit, and Tintomara has become a convenient object in reflecting on the prerequisites of the ideas of gender and sex dichotomies. Tintomara seems to be an all-too appropriate illustration of Judith Butler’s theories of gender as a masquerade. “With Tintomara, Almqvist created a queer theory 150 years before the very concept was invented”, to quote a striking formulation by the Swedish journalist and scholar of literary criticism, Magnus Jacobson.

A fresh and radical approach has been suggested by the Swedish director Björn Melander, who is convinced that Tintomara is a man. His production of a stage adaptation of The Queen’s Diadem was given its first performance on 16 February 2008 in Gävle in Sweden. “To me, Tintomara has always been a man”, he said in an interview at the time. It was even a precondition to his working on the play that the figure was given a male identity. “What is female, what is male?” Melander asked, continuing, “We have different sexes and sometimes sex cannot even determine our sex-identity ... So who am I? What does it mean to be androgynous? Such models can get it completely wrong, pigeon-holing us. I can convey so much more by making this androgynous creature a boy.” Like many others, Melander finds Tintomara magical, and he is certainly right that a wealth of complex gender matters is actualised by Almqvist’s character. At the same time he has declared that he is not interested in queer theories, and perhaps that is the reason why he preferred to cast “a boy as dangerous as could be” as Tintomara. As Melander remarked, it is not easy to find a beautiful boy who can be a girl without being an embarrassment. The newspaper article compares the actor Niklas Riesbeck’s Tintomara to the artists David Bowie and Boy George, both of whom have cultivated an androgynous image. The same was true of Michael Jackson, who also comes to mind in this connection as something of a modern Tintomara, a perfect, almost angelically androgynous figure, attractive to women as well as men. Melander’s reflections may not be overly specific, but his

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3 Sanders, Konturer, 205.
4 Jacobson, Almqvist, 155 (my translation).
5 Sundin, “Tintomara i Gävle” (my translation).
attempts to come to terms with Tintomara is interesting in themselves. Although Tintomara alternates between playing the role of a woman and a man in the narrative, I have never encountered anyone proclaiming Tintomara’s male identity as peremptorily as Melander does. On the contrary, the male potential of the figure has been largely invisible in the literature.

THE CREATION OF A NEW MAN

In 1816, Carl Jonas Love Almqvist joined Manhemsförbundet (literally, Men’s Home Association), a male club devoted to the study of the Nordic past, with its membership of Romantic-minded men with a strongly nationalist, Christian, and pedagogical agenda. Almqvist, whose task it was to frame the club’s programme, had far-reaching utopian ambitions to remould the Swedish nation by ensuring its citizens had a Christian upbringing. His was a more radical brand of mysticism than most, and his insistence on an idealised agrarian lifestyle - in 1824 briefly put into practice by himself and some of his fellows in the county of Värmland - had a democratic accent that went generally unnoticed by his fellow intellectuals. In 1817 Almqvist started another, more esoteric fraternity, MannaSamfund (literally, Men’s Society) (1817-1824), provoking official ire by providing a group of young men from the rapidly expanding middle classes the opportunity to construct an alternative to established society, searching for a new way of life. The aim was to develop their inner spiritual life by reading. For the closed circle of initiated, the activities of MannaSamfund were part of a network of homosocial relationships and institutions such as the Swedish Academy of Military Science at Karlberg (where Almqvist worked as a teacher between 1826 and 1828), putting into practice the educational principles of medical gymnastics advanced by Per Henrik Ling (1776-1839).6

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the notion of manliness had strong idealistic implications. Man was supposed to do his utmost to realise his potential as an image of God. He should be trained in warfare, but at the same time he was expected to be mannerly and poised. Courage and physical strength were considered signs of manliness, but so were friendliness, humbleness, and peacefulness. Ling’s gymnastics were intended to recreate a lost manliness by making the best use of man’s ability to be ‘a man’, though adapted to modern society, and thus acknowledging not only strength and discipline but also spirituality and a passion for nature.7 Likewise, the main purpose of MannaSamfund was to fashion a new male subject, to “create a new man” as the Swedish literary historian Jakob Staberg puts it. By disciplining the body as well as the soul, a new individual would emerge. Yet while this new male subjectivity was formed in middle-class institutions and practices such as the bourgeois family, the new pedagogy, and the exercises of the military academy, at the same time there was a readiness to defy the established order. Eager to transcend boundaries, the future military commanders and senior politicians that made up

6 Ljunggren, Kropps bildning, 253, concludes that Per Henrik Ling “expressed a masculine ideal that contained both primitivism, idealism, and values for modern soldiers and citizens”.
7 Ibid., passim.
MannaSamfund for a short time pursued activities that bid fair to end in revolutionary upheaval. Despite their declared intention to be a wholly spiritual organisation that rejected the exterior world and not only politics, both political and social motives were very much at work. The revolutionary power inherent in MannaSamfund should not be overlooked.\(^8\)

Being the site of the formation of a new Swedish individual that was hoped would be one and the same time universal and male, broadly human and specifically middle-class, the Romantic era fraternities were thought important components in the construction of a new society. According to Almqvist’s proposal for \textit{Manhemsförbundet}, its members were to progress through nine stages, their education remoulding each individual into a ‘new’ man, a new creation, ‘a different human being’.\(^9\)

The crusader was held the ideal of manliness; the woman was considered the means by which man could realise his inherent potential, and approach eternity. Yet to overcome the dependence on woman, man’s desire must be sublimated. No longer an object of man’s desire, woman disappears, and sexual dualism is overcome in a Romantic unity; and where woman’s disappearance becomes the prerequisite for a godlike life, man must reconcile himself to being an autonomous individual.\(^10\)

As the grandson of a dean and professor of theology, and the nephew of a bishop and another professor of theology, Carl Jonas Love Almqvist was already destined to take a religious path, and this was compounded by the fact that his maternal grandfather, the pious and learned publisher Carl Christoffer Gjörwell, who had considerable influence over the young Almqvist’s upbringing, was a Moravian. At an early age Almqvist’s religious mind was thus shaped by a Moravian spirit, and later he was drawn to Emanuel Swedenborg’s theology. These influences were to be combined in the ideology of MannaSamfund, described by the Swedish literary historian Henry Olsson as an inextricable unity of Swedenborgian metaphysical speculation, Moravian emotional religiosity, and a Rousseau-inspired idealisation of nature.\(^11\)

Christ had a prominent position in MannaSamfund. The second paragraph of its statutes or ‘law’ states that Jesus Christ, the God of Heaven and Earth, is the one and only Lord, whose orders the members of MannaSamfund must obey.\(^12\) Almqvist’s ideal of manliness consisted of a radical obedience of God’s commandments, ignoring conventions and worldly concerns. A man should thus have the courage to be Christ’s holy fool, uniting goodness and strength; a lamb as well as a lion. Condemning all kinds of exterior authorities, Almqvist became an advocate of a radical religious subjectivity, an ideal of \textit{imitatio Christi}, where inner religious experience would guide a man’s spiritual life.\(^13\) Certainly these ideas shared little with the doctrines of the Church of Sweden, and although Almqvist was ordained in 1837, the only appointment available for him was as a low-paid regimental pastor.

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\(^8\) Staberg, \textit{Att skapa en ny man}, passim.
\(^9\) Ibid., 69.
\(^10\) Ibid., 74-75.
\(^11\) Olsson, \textit{C. J. L. Almqist före Törnrosens bok}, 77.
\(^12\) Ibid., 70.
\(^13\) Ibid., 82-83.
A UTOPIAN CREATION

It is my contention that in his construction of the literary character Tintomara, Almqvist was attempting to grasp a vision of an alternate Christian society, in accordance with the utopian ideals unfolding in the fraternities in which the author was so active. An unsolved conundrum, Tintomara appears in chiaroscuro, bringing death and illness to those unprepared for this epitome of the utopian vision. As an empty reflection, or pure look, desired by both men and women, Tintomara exposes society; the masked ball becomes the very emblem of artificiality, at the same time exposing sex roles as a masquerade. A sexual ambivalent crusader, like Joan of Arc, Tintomara eludes all social inscriptions, taking the shape of a dissident, constantly moving between sexes, social classes, and settings. Transgressing the dichotomy male-female, Tintomara is the exemplification of the genealogy of sex and gender as social constructions. A transitional object as well as a prototype for the new creation of man produced by the inner development of the mind, Tintomara’s outward sexual attributes become unimportant. This utopian creation has a divine dimension as well, and like Christ, according to certain interpretations, is thus beyond gender.

Just as the Platonic myth held that man and woman were created out of an androgyne, so the unified whole that is androgynous Tintomara represents a dialectically higher unity that surpasses gender dichotomies. Yet regardless of whether the young Almqvist believed woman was the disappearing sex in the ideal formation of man, his creation Tintomara evokes female associations. Certainly an ironic paradox, worthy this most ironic and capricious work, that the very symbol of a utopian world beyond gender turns out to be an illustration of our inability to imagine humanity in any other terms than sex dichotomies.

As several scholars have noted, the cross is a recurrent theme as well as a structuring principle in *The Queen’s Diadem*, with Tintomara at its heart. A symbolic crusader, Tintomara’s path is lined with social obstacles and opponents in the guise of desire. Christ, the main authority in MannaSamfund, has an equivalent in Tintomara, who has not once heard about him and is only informed of his existence in the course of the story. An *animal coeleste*, a participant in both heaven and earth, a lion as well as a lamb, Tintomara harbours two realms at once: the pure, ethereal and ideal, and the cruel and brutal. Tintomara the ultimate hero is disguise and crime

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14 See Joan Riviere’s classic 1929 article, “Womanliness as a Masquerade”; cf. Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, 11, who contends that “even normative masculinity is typically asserted as an unending performance”, and that the masculine “is as much a spectacle as the feminine”. Though Adams concentrates on middle-class Victorian male writers’ representations of masculinity, he refers to anthropologist David Gilmore’s cross-cultural survey of norms of masculinity, concluding that manhood “almost universally assumes the form of a pose that is deeply conflicted, pressured, and forced, a mask of omnicompetence and almost obsessive independence.” The theatrical tropes speak for themselves. For Adams the “challenge is to move beyond the deconstruction of gender”.
personified, but at the same time pure as pure can be.\textsuperscript{15} It does not seem unwarranted to read into Tintomara’s arrival a prefiguring of the second coming of Christ.

Attaining unity of self was one of the goals for the young men of MannaSamfund. Representing the realisation of this ideal in a most unexpected way, Tintomara, devoid of specific sex, can be read as a utopia, a consolation for the brethren striving to cultivate idealistic friendships in their own ‘androgynous’ ways. Being just a teenager (seventeen years old), called both ‘girl’ and ‘young man’, the pubertal androgynous Tintomara’s conjectural death is symbol of the entrance into the same society the young men of MannaSamfund were about to enter.

\section*{THE THIRD THING, OR CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES}

Tintomara is cruelly punished for transgressing the rules of gender. Duke Carl, the voice of society, is not as taken by cross-dressing as the late Gustav III, the ‘theatre king’:

\begin{quote}
Even though you are a woman, you have assumed a man’s dress and in this guise committed the crime for which you are being punished. In death, therefore, you will stand in a dress which does not mark your sex but which, by its indistinctness, will constitute a sign of your own ambiguity in this respect. It’s a thin, ankle-length cloak with big sleeves ...! - It reaches all the way to her feet. That’s right. Now pull it tight around her waist with the buckle, and then it will resemble a man’s coat and a woman’s skirt at the same time.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The duke is categorical. Tintomara’s identity as a woman is unquestionable to him. On more than one occasion he exhibits male desire for this figure. If ‘she’ were a man, this would imply that he himself had homosexual tendencies. And if Tintomara is not a man, ‘she’ must be a woman! \textit{Tertius non datur}! The authoritarian Reuterholm seconds this: “Consider this ambiguity in your dress as a great and public disgrace”.

As a complement to the prisoner’s shaming attire, a wreath of briar roses is put on Tintomara’s head. The associations are with Christ, who was punished by death for transgression - just like Tintomara.\textsuperscript{17} In an article on representations of Christ in Victorian art, the British theologian Sean Gill concludes that “if women as well as men were to be able to identify with representations of the human Christ, these would have to embody the highest attributes of both femininity and of masculinity as they were understood in a society in which gender identities were sharply polarised”.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Interpretations of Tintomara abound, ranging from Goethean \textit{schöne Seele} (beautiful soul), the image of a Kantian \textit{freie Schönheit} (free beauty) that is pure form, a Rilkean angel, to inexpressible secret and dread Beauty itself, while comparisons have been drawn with as varied a crew as Balzac’s Séraphita, Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin, Goethe’s Mignon, Kaspar Hauser, and Fenella in Scott’s \textit{Peveril of the Peak}.

\textsuperscript{16} Almqvist, \textit{The Queen’s Diadem}, 221.

\textsuperscript{17} Tintomara’s Christ-like quality is the theme of a chapter in Anders Persson’s study \textit{”Försonarn vid sitt bröst, en stjernkrönt Qvinna”}, 82-130.

\textsuperscript{18} Gill, “Ecce Homo”, 166.
There was a delicate balancing act in endeavouring to represent Christ as the model of all humanity, amply illustrated by artist William Holman Hunt, who used both female and male sitters for one of his portrayals of Christ.\(^9\)

In his interpretation of *The Queen's Diadem*, the Swedish literary historian Johan Svedjedal concludes that the crux of the work is not gender trouble but the relationship between man and God. Tintomara's task is to challenge the idea of what it means to be a human being, and the greatness as well as the tragedy of the figure lies in its fate as a link between man and God.\(^{10}\) Yet does the one really exclude the other? “Not man, not woman, but simply [a] human being”, the second surgeon says of the androgyne.\(^{21}\) Applied to Tintomara, this would mean that while the other characters are men or women, Tintomara alone is a human being in a qualified sense, as a unity of earthly and heavenly, of human and divine.\(^{22}\)

Judith Butler has argued that “the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the ‘human’”; the ‘activity’ of gendering is the matrix that enables the cultural condition. The “construction of gender operates through exclusionary means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation.” Those who do not appear properly gendered, “abjected beings” in Butler’s Kristeva-inspired vocabulary, are thus excluded, and it is “their very humanness that comes into question”. The construction of the human, according to Butler, is thus “a differential operation that produces the more and the less ‘human’, the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the ‘human’ as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and re-articulation.”\(^{23}\) Almqvist makes the outsider and ‘humanly unthinkable’ Tintomara a human being whose very existence implies a questioning of boundaries, religious as well as human.

Inspired by Butler, the Norwegian theologian Halvor Moxnes, who has focused on Jesus’ puzzling words on eunuchs (Matt. 19: 12), suggests queer - “a term that breaks with definite binary oppositions and clear definitions, and that questions established identities” - as now the most adequate way to translate eunuch. Although not proposing that Christ was actually a eunuch, Moxnes concludes that if the eunuch passage “identifies Jesus with the image of the eunuch it destabilises all male images of Jesus Christ”. Referring to eunuchs, Christ’s intention, according to Moxnes, was to evoke gender trouble by “opening up possibilities that fixed gender divisions had closed”.\(^{24}\) In creating Tintomara, Almqvist exhibited the same courage.

“This ‘transvestite’ Jesus makes a human space where no one is out of place because the notion of place and gender has been transformed”, writes the cleric

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\(^{9}\) Gill, “Ecce Homo”, 168-169; cf. Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*, 146, who maintains “Victorian religious painters such as Holman Hunt and apologists of Christian manliness such as S. S. Pugh stressed both the masculine strength and the womanly tenderness of the Christ”.

\(^{10}\) Svedjedal, “Något alltför djuriskt?”.

\(^{21}\) Almqvist, *The Queen's Diadem*, 42.

\(^{22}\) See Almer, “Korset och medskapandet”.


\(^{24}\) Moxnes, “Jesus in Gender Trouble”, 32-33.
Eleanor McLaughlin in discussing the non-fixed, non-definable characteristics of Christ using the hermeneutics of cross-dressing. For McLaughlin, “God who is incarnate must be seen as neither essentially male, nor essentially female, but as both, and therefore as a Third One, who opens the eyes of the beholder to something more than the expected: a torn and dying fanatic named Jesus or Blandina.” The gender-bending transvestite is ‘a Third Thing’ who makes people aware of society’s permanent crisis of category, according to Marjorie Garber. This expression ‘Third Thing’ is reminiscent of the Swedish critic and author Horace Engdahl’s characterisation of the non-definable Tintomara as ‘a third’, beyond all categories. For McLaughlin, the ‘Third Thing’ is “a conundrum through which to re-vision the Jesus of orthodox Christology, Child of God, a scandal and a stumbling block”. Destroyer of dualities, boundaries, and categories, breaking the wall between heaven and earth, “the Trickster who peels us open to new depths of humanity, divinity, femaleness, maleness” - this is Christ revised. Simultaneously it is a Christ who embodies “the scandal and transgression which is the Gospel”. It is no coincidence that the description fits Tintomara well.

A LITERARY DILEMMA

Turning to the programmatic atheist, undoubtedly a man, but more feminine than masculine, the character in question is Axel Borg, the main protagonist in the novel I havsbandet (By the Open Sea) (1890) by August Strindberg (1849-1912). Although inner complications abound, the storyline of Strindberg’s novel is simple enough, as the cover description of the Mary Sandbach’s English translation makes clear:

Axel Borg is sent to one of the outermost islands of the Stockholm archipelago to help the inhabitants safeguard their dwindling fishing industry. But the highly strung inspector soon discovers himself at odds with the local people with their primitive and sometimes brutal ways. Not even the woman he loves - a newcomer like himself - is untainted by the animal cunning of the islanders and eventually adds her animosity to the general oppression he feels. Set against the background of the islands themselves and the constantly changing sea ... this is a deeply moving story of one man’s confrontation with nature and his fellow men and, ultimately, with the contradictions of his own soul.

25 McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies”, 144. Inspired by Marjorie Garber’s study Vested Interests, McLaughlin (138) concludes that a transvestite is “a revealer of the cultural construction of gender categories”. Hence Jesus acts as a transvestite when he kneels like a slave girl to wash his disciples’ feet.
26 McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies”, 136-137. Blandina was a female martyr.
27 Engdahl, Den romantiska texten, 207.
29 Strindberg, By the Open Sea.
If Almqvist was associated with his figure Tintomara, the same has been said to be true of Strindberg and Borg. Perhaps Axel Borg should be considered Strindberg’s putative male response to Almqvist’s supposed female, Tintomara? A comparison between Tintomara and Axel Borg seems off-beat to say the least. However, they both represent the isolated hero’s romantic role, being ‘titans’ caught oscillating between their positions as superman and naïf. Borg and Tintomara represent the unruly condition of the savage, though Borg furiously rejects this position. The passion of Christ is actualised in both narratives, and there are parallels between both Tintomara’s and Borg’s deaths and Christ’s. The fourteen chapters of Strindberg’s novel have been compared to the fourteen scenes of the author’s drama Till Damaskus (To Damascus) (1898-1904), itself constructed to echo the fourteen stations of Christ’s Via Dolorosa. It has even been proposed that Christ functions as Borg’s lodestar, his object of identification, in his quest for a new identity, when his old and worn-out universe begins to fall apart and something new is anticipated. Both Tintomara and Borg find their true identity in a fusion with nature, and they are both associated with whiteness and nothingness. If Tintomara is positioned ‘before’ religion, Borg’s position is ‘after’ religion, but paradoxically this is also their meeting place.

Both Almqvist’s and Strindberg’s works focus on boundaries and how they are transcended, their androgynous protagonists illustrating the collapse of sex categories. Yet Almqvist’s playful attitude and cheerful questioning of those boundaries stands in sharp contrast to Strindberg’s plagued approach. For Strindberg, boundaries constitute a burning problem - a fact that can be attributed to personal reasons as well as the historical context. Clearly, masculinity, or rather the supposed lack of it, was to Strindberg’s mind the most central complex. His was a high-strung ideal of masculinity, and he had an inferiority complex because of he sensed he was not a ‘real’ man.  

By the Open Sea appeared in 1890, during the much-acclaimed crisis of masculinity of the turn of the twentieth century. The liberation of woman struck panic in Strindberg, who recruited all available arguments as to the urgency of demarcating the lines between the male and female sex. Yet equally it was vital for Strindberg to be in the literary front line, which was why decadent attitudes were to have such an impact on him.

Sensitive, nervous, artificial, and aesthetic as the decadent hero was, his counterpart, the sexually provocative woman, was considered a femme fatale, evoking fascination as well as condemnation. With Axel Borg, Strindberg created one such decadent hero, thereby inviting a conflict between his own strong masculine ideal and the effeminate decadent one. A male hero as preoccupied as Borg when it comes

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30 See, for example, Eklund, Tjänstekvinnans son, 109. Other critics have confirmed this view, reflecting on the female weakness and nearly abnormal delicacy of Strindberg’s nature. His contemporaries’ accusations of effeminacy had a deep impact on Strindberg, and in a letter to his publisher, Albert Bonnier, on 17 December 1883, he declares his love for the conspicuously manly Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, the man Strindberg has been searching for a long time probably because he is so unmanly himself (Strindberg, Brev, III, 379).

31 Tjeder, “Konsten att bilfva herre öfver hvarje lidelse”, 178-179, argues that masculinity has always been problematic, and that the theory of different crises of masculinity should be substituted for a more complex picture that takes masculinity’s permanent redefinitions into account.
to his appearance could best be described as an androgynous creature, a counter-type of masculinity. At the same time, he looks upon himself as a superman. Complications and ambiguities reign.

THE EFFEMINATE SUPERMAN AXEL BORG

The new ideal man of Renaissance Humanism, engaged in restless action, his life characterised by repeated ruptures, breaking with his home, established knowledge, and God - this characterisation of Faustus is equally applicable to Strindberg’s Axel Borg. When the reader first meets him, he is in the midst of a fresh upheaval. He has just left mainland, intent on conquering new knowledge, leaving God behind as an old, rejected fabrication. The scene is the far reaches of the archipelago, indicating that the narrative will continue to oscillate on the border between land and sea, known and unknown, nature and civilisation, heaven and earth, male and female, great and small, humour and tragedy. Axel himself is described as “the little gentleman sitting crouched by the mast, who seemed both frightened and cold, and who, from time to time, drew his shawl closer about his stomach and lower body”. He seems cold, but this coldness has little to do with a cool male attitude. On the contrary, the narrator concludes that the customs officer must have found him ridiculous. The description of his clothing is designed to confirm this image:

The little gentleman was wearing a beaver-coloured spring coat beneath which protruded a pair of wide trousers made of moss-green tricot, and below them a pair of crocodile shagreen boots with rows of black buttons on the uppers of a brown material. You could see almost nothing of what he was wearing underneath, but round his neck he had wound a cream-coloured foulard handkerchief, and his hands were protected by a pair of salmon-coloured glacé gloves with three buttons.

Furthermore we are told that Axel is wearing “a thick gold bracelet in the form of a serpent biting its tail” and that under his gloves “there were lumps on his fingers that seemed to be made by rings” (p. 2). His face is described as “lean and deathly

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32 An effeminate preoccupation with one’s appearance made a couple of moralists at the end of the eighteenth century conclude that masculinity was experiencing a crisis (see Tjeder, The Power of Character, 173); Mosse, The Image of Man, 9, maintains that the word ‘effeminate’ came into general usage in the eighteenth century “indicating an unmanly softness and delicacy”. Mosse’s well-known thesis is that the construction of modern masculinity defined itself against a counter-type of despised unmanliness as well as in conjunction with the differences between the sexes.
33 For the characterisation of Faustus, see Ambjörnsson, Mansmyter, 155.
34 Strindberg, By the Open Sea, 1. Henceforth references to this volume appear in the text.
Cover for *By the Open Sea* by August Strindberg
pale” and he has a pair of small thin black moustaches giving him “an exotic appearance”. No wonder the helmsman finds him strange.

By now the reader is certain that Axel Borg is a weakling, badly equipped to cope with life at sea. But Strindberg is in a playful mood, eager to prove that intellectual strength outdoes bodily strength. When the dark, wrathful water threatens to overwhelm the crew, it is the ludicrous little man with the effeminate attire who takes the command of the herring boat. With great reluctance the seamen, all built like giants, have to admit his skillfulness in rescuing them all from death. When Borg takes command of the boat his right glove is split down to the base of the thumb, which may be read as the bursting of the pupa enabling the birth of the man, his female attire giving way in this manly tour de force. Yet at the same time, the argument can be reversed, for while Borg certainly overcomes the forces of nature using his supreme intelligence, he has to pay for it with a breakdown. After the risky journey, he subsides into a helpless “little bundle” dependent on the customs officer’s benevolence to be carried ashore as a “wet burden” (p. 8). One is reminded of a baby in need of a new nappy. “The inspector cut an absurd and miserable figure” (p. 9), the text confirms, and his exclusive attire is wrecked: “His white stand-up shirt collar was twisted round his neck like a dirty rag” and “his sodden cuffs hung down, stuck together by dissolving starch”. The sexual connotations imply impotence, and Borg’s masculinity certainly has been wrecked. The strongman Hercules his ideal, his true identity is as a pigmy - a “Tom Thumb” (p. 8) in a realm of giants. Borg’s ambiguous position thus manifested, he will retain it until the last scene of the novel.

It remains remarkable, contradictory even, that Strindberg, the strident advocate of the masculine principle, makes an effeminate Axel Borg the hero of his narrative. Certainly Borg adheres to the decadent ideal of the dandy and the ambivalence seems to be built into the character. He is a Hercules whose task it is to bitterly defend a principle of masculinity, but by the same token is effeminate and weak. The question remains whether this narrative should be read as an apotheosis of masculinity or as a parody of masculinity. The ironical tone of the book is unmistakable, yet it is indisputable that the androgynous Borg is described as a hero and an ideal. Paradoxically, Borg’s well-articulated pretension to be a superman seems to presuppose his androgynous appearance, since the very completeness of the superman postulates both male and female components.

In his investigation of the androgynous ideas in the formation of the German elite before, during, and after the First World War, Swedish historian Jens Ljunggren concludes that an integration of male and female aspects was considered to be of vital importance for a man’s wholeness. One of the ideologists behind this was Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophy had also had an impact on Strindberg by the

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35 The references to France, the supposed home of decadence, have a variety of overtones. Even in the eighteenth century - another period characterised by crisis of masculinity according to some scholars - French influences were considered injurious, resulting in emasculation, sensuality, and the dominance of women. See Liliequist, “Från niding till sprätt”, 85; Ekenstam, “Manlighetens kriser & kransar”, 58.
36 Ljunggren, Känslornas krig, 51 passim. Of equal account for this class of men was the formation of a special male character.
time he wrote *By the Open Sea*. Experimentally, Ljunggren applies the concept ‘androgy- 
nous masculinist’ to Nietzsche.\(^{37}\) Nietzsche’s seminal importance is explained by 
Ljunggren by the fact that he formulated a concept of masculinity characterised by 
its concurrent strengthening and transgression of sexual boundaries. Strindberg’s 
aporia in creating Axel Borg - another androgynous masculinist - shows important 
similarities with how Nietzsche grappled with the ideal of a man who was man and 
woman in one, yet totally manly.\(^{38}\)

Moreover, Strindberg’s modern pretensions and determination to prove he was 
an author on the literary frontline made his creation of a modern, decadent, androgy- 
nous hero quite logical. Yet at the same time this inevitably leaves Borg transgressing 
the boundary between the sexes, whose existence, self-created as it was, he so stub-
bornly defends. The problem inherent in Strindberg’s construction of Borg develops 
into a venture, for masculinity is just as much at stake as the very perfection implied 
by the ideal of superman. Is it even possible to create a character who is simultane-
ously manly and perfect? Or will such a figure inevitably oscillate between the super-
human and the effeminate or childlike?

‘WHAT ARE YOU? A MAN?’

In one episode in the novel Axel Borg’s fiancée Miss Maria, acting as a true femme 
fatale, turns things upside down by taking what was ostensibly a male initiative in a 
sexual invitation. Borg’s confusion is marked; momentous gender issues are at stake:

He imagined that what he experienced under her burning gaze and from the 
pressure of her hands must be something like what a young girl feels when 
attacked by a fiery seducer. He became confused, and there arose in him a feel-
ing of insulted modesty and wounded masculinity. He disengaged his hands, 
drew back, and said in a calm voice, sharp with an assumed coldness: ‘Control 
yourself’. ‘Stay, or I shall come to you in your room’, was the girl’s impassioned 
answer, which seemed to signify a threat against which there was no appeal. 
‘In that case I shall lock my door.’ ‘What are you? A man?’ came her ringing 
challenge, with a hard laugh. (p. 107)

Maria’s bold accusation that Axel Borg is not a man obviously strikes him down, 
his wounded masculinity spelled out in the preceding lines. To reveal his true reac-
tion though would be an utter humiliation. Therefore Borg - his surname meaning 
stronghold in Swedish - maintains his cold and seemingly controlled distance, exert-
ing himself to prove his utter masculinity. His answer to what in his eyes is Maria’s 
impudent accusation amounts to: “Yes, and in such high measure that I must be both 
the chooser and the attacker. I do not like being seduced.”

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 82.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 87.
For Borg and the majority of his middle-class contemporaries, that is what a man is: someone who chooses and attacks, while the woman waits passively for his activities to be completed. Borg’s masculinity challenged, his response is a reinforced masculine attitude. To begin with Maria is portrayed as a young, plain, and lovable woman, a *femme fragile*; in the scene in question she turns femme fatale: two conflicting though united notions of women characteristic of both the period in general and Strindberg’s conception of women in particular, for his misogynistic attacks on emancipated women are notorious in Sweden. Soon Maria’s fragility is reinforced. Her hysterical reaction is immediate - she collapses, striking the furniture as she falls to the ground, another frail woman fainting from pure shock. Finally the gender order seems to have been restored, the man proving his strength and the once rebellious woman pushed back into her position of subordination.

Yet there is more to it than that. Immediately after he has left the scene, Borg hesitates, about to turn back. The narrator explains that as “a result of his mental exertions he was in a weak condition, which made him very susceptible to the sufferings of others” (p. 108). Some seconds of solitude though are enough for Borg to recollect himself: “his strength returned, and he felt determined to break off a relationship which threatened to encroach upon the whole of his intellectual life”, concludes the narrator. This is not the end of their relationship, for Maria’s allure is not easily overcome, yet she eventually contributes to his breakdown.

**HORROR VACUI, OR THE INELUCTABLE RELIGION**

There is nothing wanting in Axel Borg’s claim to be a man, though. After all, self-restraint is one of the most recurrent themes in the construction of masculinity, irrespective of time and place. Referring to Norbert Elias, the German sociologist Klaus Theweleit tracks the development of middle-class man back to “the outbreak of self-dissociation” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, implying a break in the emotional connection between man and his surroundings. Key words in this context are self-control - that is, the mastering of the passions - and armour. The outer world is considered an object, and man’s attitude is one of penetration and a desire to dominate the world of objects. What scholars have called the new human being is properly speaking the new man, Theweleit maintains, and the self-same activity of setting boundaries is what characterises man. This is a perfect delineation of Strindberg’s character, the self-distanced Axel Borg, ever eager to retain borders, a systematic organiser of the objects around him. Ironically, in his armour and his stubborn
insistence on what Theweleit calls the central perspective, ordering the world from Europe’s point of view, are the germs of his final breakdown.43

However, the last scene of the novel is ambiguous in the extreme. Borg desperately clings to Hercules, the masculine emblem, to the very end, even as “the sea, the mother of all, in whose womb the first spark of life was lit, the inexhaustible well of fertility and love, life’s source, and life’s enemy” (p. 185) is invoked. Is Borg a feminised lunatic prepared for death at sea, or has he recovered to a new and strengthened masculinity, characterised by an integration of masculine and feminine values? One thing is certain: manhood is not a stable entity, and the formation of masculinity is both rigid and fragile.

As an atheist, Borg’s predicament closely resembles that of the American Free-thinkers (prominent between 1880 and 1920) who rejected Christian belief as incompatible with strong, vital manhood. Like them, he opposes Christian superstition, and believes that irrational, unscientific beliefs must be repudiated, and that atheism is a more manly option than Christian belief.44 Like them, he also finds himself at the head of nature, making everything yield to him.45 Axel Borg wants to be his own centre. He is the celestial axis - *axis mundi* - that disintegrates in Strindberg’s experimental creation of a world without central values. Yet in this breakdown Borg’s escape to old, religious ways of thinking is a seemingly inevitable consequence, despite the ambiguity of this escape as he rejects religion at the very moment as he affirms it. His deeply rooted *horror vacui* reveals itself as the underlying motivation for all his deeds. In his dialogue with the preacher, Borg describes God as,

> the fixed point outside ourselves, desired by Archimedes, with which he would have been able to lift the world. He is the imaginary magnet inside the earth, without which the movements of the magnetic needle would remain unexplained. He is the ether that must be discovered so that the vacuum may be filled. He is the molecule, without which the laws of chemistry would be miracles. Give me a few more hypotheses, above all the fixed point outside myself, for I am quite adrift. (pp. 180-181)

Borg’s deep-rooted identity as a scientist is quite evident in his attempt to delineate the function of God in terms of magnets, vacuum-filling ether, and molecules. As the narrative approaches its end, Borg is fully aware that he is ‘quite adrift’, in need of a fixed point outside himself. Ironically, Borg’s scornful remark that Christ is “the invention of revengeful slaves and wicked women. He is the God of the molluscs as opposed to the vertebrate” (p. 181) can hardly conceal the fact that Borg’s predicament, being desperately in need of a prayer addressed to a patriarchal heavenly ‘Our Father’ (p. 180), resembles Christ’s own.46 Axel Borg cannot escape Western history’s

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44 For Borg, Christ is “a virgin boy, whose birth was celebrated by milk-drinking shepherds and braying asses”. Strindberg, *By the Open Sea*, 185.
45 Kirkley, “Is It Manly to Be Christian?”, 80-82.
46 Though his blasphemous intention is obvious, his talk of Christ mixing with customs officers and whores like Borg himself is on the mark.
idea of God as an infinite and absolute centre - *logos* - the origin of all creation, all meaning, and all values. His is a need for absolute truth, for a holy *logo*-centre; his search doomed to be everlasting, even at the risk of his own destruction.

In *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957), Mircea Eliade maintains that the transcendent dimensions of existence are not obliterated whenever modern secularised man wants to get rid of them. Instead they take on another guise, and obsess their repudiator in different ways. Axel Borg should also perhaps be seen in the light of Lucien Goldmann’s idea of tragic man unwilling to accept either human weakness or the world’s ambiguity and confusion, because it would imply giving up the endeavour to provide life with meaning. Borg’s rejection of a life devoid of meaning accounts for his readiness to countenance frequent new departures.

**KARL-ARTUR EKENSTEDT: A CHRISTIAN MAN’S DILEMMA**

“The dilemma of Western masculinity effectively begins with Christianity”, concludes the American historian Peter Stearns. He maintains that Christianity’s prescribed self-restraint opened an important avenue of expression for the men who rejected more popular Western definitions of masculinity as an aggressively warlike mentality. Yet Christianity also influenced common man by leading him to consider whether his own expressions of masculinity were totally wrong, and if the clerical attitude characterised true male heroism after all. When the Reformation reduced the seclusion of the clerical function even further, men started to wonder if domination over one’s self was not the true expression of masculinity. Stearns maintains that Western men still wrestle with this problem. As noted above, a disciplinary principle governed Almqvist’s MannaSamfund, involving both body and soul, whereas Strindberg’s protagonist made his own stab at self-control. One who definitely wrestles with the task of controlling his self and his passions is my third protagonist, the clergyman Karl-Artur Ekenstedt, from the novels *Charlotte Löwensköld* (1925) and *Anna Svärd* (1928) by Selma Lagerlöf (1858-1940). In one perspective Ekenstedt’s crisis is generated by the fact that Christianity, in his pietistic interpretation, amounts to an attitude of disavowal and control of the self and its obscure desires.

Selma Lagerlöf’s trilogy *The Ring of the Löwenskölds* is made up of *The General’s Ring* (1925), *Charlotte Löwensköld* (1925), and *Anna Svärd* (1928). The plot of the two later novels, mostly set in the 1830s in the Swedish province of Värmland, is propelled by the death in *The General’s Ring* of major general Bengt Löwensköld in 1741. The clergyman Karl-Artur Ekenstedt is a young man noted for his high seriousness and severity. His is a strong vocation, and he wants to be a strict Imitator of Christ. After a breach with his fiancée Charlotte Löwensköld, caused by Karl-Artur’s complete misunderstanding, he decides to wed the first unmarried woman he meets on the road, letting God select a wife for him. The woman he meets is a poor woman from the county of Dalarna, the peddler Anna Svärd, whom he duly marries.

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48 Stearns, *Be a Man!* , 18.
His high-minded religious zeal and idealism notwithstanding, Karl-Artur is ruled by egotism, and his deeds tend to turn out badly, though his talent for rhetorically effective sermons initially brings him many adherents. Under the influence of the hypocritical Thea Sundler, an organist’s wife who is secretly in love with Karl-Artur, he leaves Anna, and his successive degradation culminates in having to make a living entertaining at fairs together with Thea. Eventually Charlotte, his former fiancée, rescues him by dispatching him to Africa as a missionary. Eight years on, Karl-Artur returns to his former parish church to deliver a lecture on his missionary experiences. The reader is left with the question of whether Anna will take him back as her husband: will ‘the masculine plot’ converge with ‘the marriage plot’?

It has been suggested by Herbert Sussman that Thomas Carlyle, one of the young Selma Lagerlöf’s favourite authors, in wrestling with ‘the condition of manliness question’ sets out to show that the

heroism of the modern Man of Letters ... is to confront the essential disorder of the male psyche: ‘You do walk hand in hand with sheer Madness, all the way, - who is by no means pleasant company!’ Ideally, then, the heroic, the mythic task of the male writer is to return from that ‘Inferno’ ... of the male self and transform the hellish chaos of the male interior to the psychic regulation that defines manliness.49

A ‘Man of Letters’ in the same vein, the preacher Karl-Artur Ekenstedt has his own adventurous path to beat, his own inner demons to confront, before he is regenerated as a reformed man. Though the reader is not allowed to follow him there, the regeneration takes place during his time as a missionary. If the sexually indeterminable Tintomara and Axel Borg are a heathen and an atheist respectively, Karl-Artur Ekenstedt is unquestionably both a man and a Christian. In one of the key scenes he talks about “the path of duty and renunciation which it behooves a servant of Christ to tread”.50 As Karl-Artur’s religious passion reaches its climax, his masculinity is explicitly stressed:

It could not be denied that the young clergyman by this bold stand - even though, for obvious reasons, it was inexpedient - gained general sympathy. His courageous recognition of the lowly bride he had chosen, like his impassioned words, won favour with many. His pale, fine-featured, sensitive face was stamped on this occasion by a manly strength one would not have attributed to him, and some of the men present had to concede that he was now treading a path which they would have resisted to take.

49 Sussman, Victorian Masculinities, 68, quoting Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (Boston, 1965; the book first appeared in 1843). Talking about “her undiscovered, boundless, bottomless Night-empire”, Carlyle denotes ‘Madness’ as a feminine entity. In Lagerlöf’s narrative the personification of madness is the undoubtedly female Thea Sundler, who systematically guides Karl-Artur towards his own chaotic inner self. The subtext is that if man projects his inner anxieties onto a woman, she will tend to be the catalyst of his own inner development through his encounter with the turmoil of the deeply repressed masculine energies underlying his controlled persona.
50 Lagerlöf, The Ring of the Löwenskölds ... Charlotte Löwensköld, 252. Hereafter page references to this volume appear in the text.
There is something remarkable about this statement, though. In the Swedish original it is even more salient, for the formulation runs “unusual masculinity and strength”. Why is it essential to drive home the point about the clergyman’s masculinity? Masculinity is obviously an uncommon quality in Ekenstedt, which is why his action in this scene seems the bolder and more daring. Therefore his apparently older colleagues have to admit that they would hesitate to marry a lowly woman and so follow the way of Christ.

“Exposed to a mid-Victorian hermeneutic of gender, the figures of gentleman, dandy, and priest begin to circulate amongst one another, as each incites suspicion of ‘effeminacy’”, writes James Eli Adams. The priest Karl-Artur Ekenstedt has the same paleness as Strindberg’s ‘deathly pale’ hero; another link between them is their fine-featured features. Yet while Strindberg exalts in Borg’s masculinity at the same time as he impugns it by ridiculing the dandy-like hero’s effeminate characteristics, Lagerlöf attributes all beautiful outward appearances to her romantic hero, simultaneously utilising all opportunities to fool the priest.

If there is a clear discrepancy between Axel Borg’s superhuman ideology and his failures in real life, it is matched by the divergence between words and deeds discernable in Karl-Artur Ekenstedt, who is described as a man utterly unable to keep his many promises. Strong as his rhetorical power is, he has tremendous problems transforming his beautiful and idealistic sermons into reality. He is a man who speaks eloquently of love and the Imitation of Christ, yet is afflicted with a fatal inability to love his fellow beings. Thus from a Christian perspective his is the worst sin of all. If there is a touch of the black angel about Tintomara, and of the Faustian devil about Axel Borg, Karl-Artur Ekenstedt’s evil takes on superhuman dimensions. Although there are certain aspects of genius evident in them all, at least Strindberg and Lagerlöf endeavour to problematise these aspects in interesting ways.

THE BIRTH OF A CHRISTIAN MAN

The narrator in Lagerlöf’s novels takes a downright critical view of the pietistic-influenced worship practiced by Karl-Artur Ekenstedt. Yet we should ask ourselves what is the true target of the sarcasm and irony. Is it the revivalist movement itself, or its self-appointed representatives? Or perhaps it is Karl-Artur Ekenstedt himself, this hypocrite of a man? When it comes to the actual content of his sermons the reader is left in the dark. On one occasion it is said that he preaches an excellent sermon on a troublesome parable - but what does he actually say? Lagerlöf restricts herself to references to the contents of one single sermon. Here Ekenstedt in his emotional way gives an account of his own radical ideal of an Imitation of Christ. Although this achievement is characterised as “an extraordinary sermon” (p. 214) it is obviously considered a representative example of his style. Evidently it is not the content of Ekenstedt’s preaching, but the discrepancy between his words and deeds that is the basis for Lagerlöf’s disapproval.

51 Adams, Dandies and Desert Saints, 208.
Even the missionary lecture delivered by the ‘reformed’ Karl-Artur after eight years in heathen Africa is passed over almost in silence. To Anna’s mind “there was too little of the Word of God in it” (Anna Svärd, 365). Yet perhaps that is the point: “He spoke only of how the people lived out there in the land of the heathen”, reflects Anna. Though these people - whose poverty and privation are much worse than the conditions experienced by people in Anna’s poor home district - “had neither window nor floor in their huts”, Karl-Artur loves them and wants to go back to them. Distrustful as she is, Anna cannot avoid noticing that he is talking “straight from the heart” (pp. 365-366). Social engagement and love are obviously decisive, theological subtleties aside. Above all, the crucial thing is the fact that Ekenstedt for the first time has attained a condition of total accord between words and deeds. His is a solid character.

“A self-regulating will seems absolutely normative in Victorian rhetoric of masculinity. Yet when the discipline it enforces crosses an elusive boundary that demarcates a realm of ostentation, or theatricality, or calculated social role - when, that is, discipline is manifested as public ritual - contemporary observers typically attack it as a form of effeminacy”, maintains James Eli Adams. In Selma Lagerlöf’s narrative, the genuineness of Karl-Artur’s vocation in its inextricable interconnection with his masculinity is a burning problem. Certainly his ascetic regimen is dependent on the approval of the ‘world’ - like Tennyson and Carlyle, in Adams’ description his “professed fidelity to a transcendent, divinely authorised selfhood is exposed as a vain, calculated appeal to an earthly audience” but does this really preclude an earnest and authentic intention? And does it necessarily imply “an emasculating moment of self-conscious theatricality”, as Adams puts it?

The Swedish historian David Tjeder, investigating middle-class masculinities in the nineteenth century, maintains that character is the key word in this context. Only when man had chiselled out his inner potentiality for character, making it an actuality, could man become himself - that is, a man of character. In contrast to the supposedly superficial aristocracy, the middle-class man’s ideal was one of intrinsic value, of correspondence between inner and outer qualities. Ekenstedt’s predicament could be seen in this perspective, his development characterised by a transformation from a hypocritical stance to a genuine one.

From a Christian point of view, his humiliation leaves him a par with Christ himself. The underlying line is clear: the clergyman Karl-Artur’s preaching may have been sound enough in itself, but his thoroughly self-centred mind - his approving of self-denial notwithstanding - is worthy of blame. One of the narrative’s more ironical dimensions is the fact that the supposed paragon of virtue finally sinks deeper than anyone else, because there is no genuine correspondence between his words and his deeds. In all its tragedy, Karl-Artur’s state of utter deprivation - physical as well as spiritual - can be read as a mockery of the “model of the prophet, with its attendant rhetoric of ‘wild’ and ‘savage’ integrity”, described by James Eli Adams. Like the

52 Ibid., 209.
53 Ibid., 45.
54 Tjeder, “Borgerlighetens sköra manlighet”, 54. This theme is expanded upon in Tjeder’s dissertation The Power of Character.
Carlylean prophet Karl-Artur “can only manifest his inspired selfhood by presenting himself as a spectacle to an uncomprehending world”.\(^{56}\) Not until he has reached the bottom, and built his new personality as a man and as a Christian from decidedly new premises, are his sermons worth listening to.

Paradoxically, Karl-Artur seems almost Christ-like at the very moment he ceases explicitly to preach Christ. “His head had grown quite bald, and his face was furrowed by much suffering. He came so quietly and humbly. She felt such a strange desire to weep when she saw him. Yet he did not appear at all sad. There was a smile of serenity on his countenance that seemed to light up the whole church” (p. 365), notes Anna. The description of this new Karl-Artur is telling. He is marked by suffering like Christ, behaving quietly and humbly like a sacrificial lamb. His serenity has the power to light up the church.

**MAN AND COUNTERTYPE, DOMINATED BY WOMEN**

Woman’s role in the construction of masculinity is especially prominent in the case of Ekenstedt, for besides the fact that he is the creation of a woman author, several female characters are active in shaping his identity as a man. The narrator’s ironical attitude towards Karl-Artur seems too flagrant to be questioned. His constant misunderstandings of the amiable Charlotte’s and the skilled and reliable Anna’s good intentions are as comical as they are tragic. His shortcomings are several - witness only his rhetorical benevolence that leads him take a poor family under his wing, leaving all the practical work to Anna. His rigid personality and the discrepancy between his words and deeds are a convenient target for ridicule. His evil genius, the hypocritical caricature Thea Sundler, stands out as being but a few degrees worse than he is himself. Yet Lagerlöf is a treacherous author who leaves the reader constantly uncertain of the inner meaning of the narrative; a healthy suspicion is vital for any interpreter of the narrative.

This is evident when it comes to Karl-Artur’s mother, the charming, amiable, and socially minded colonel’s wife Beate Ekenstedt, who is uncommon for the depth of her love for her son - and is yet another woman to leave her imprint on him. She is strongly against his pietistic sympathies and even views his decision to become a clergyman with concern. True, Karl-Artur accuses his supposedly worldly mother of being a hypocrite, yet his own hypocrisy - exacerbated by Thea Sundler - far outdoes hers.\(^{57}\) Yet how is the reader to interpret Beate’s character? Is she a loving emblem of motherhood, or a deadly threat to the young clergyman’s independence? Expressed differently, should Karl-Artur’s pietistic lifestyle be considered an act of independence directed at his dominant mother?

Charlotte, defending Beate Ekenstedt after Karl-Artur has broken off with his mother, applies Christ as a point of reference: “He would have seen that such a mother could have followed Him to the foot of the Cross, aye, and let herself be crucified in

\(^{56}\) Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, 34.

\(^{57}\) Beate Ekenstedt née Löwensköld is of aristocratic origin. As David Tjeder has pointed out, the aristocracy were the target of choice for middle-class men’s accusations of hypocrisy.
His stead” (p. 276). Like Mary, Beate is imagined following Christ - Karl-Artur to the cross. The next moment she is identified with Christ himself, crucified in her son’s stead. Karl-Artur admits that Charlotte may be right: “I dare say my mother would die for me, but she would never let me live my own life. Charlotte, my mother would not allow me to serve God; she would expect me to serve her and her world; therefore she and I must part.” An explosive claim, indeed. The implication is that the mother in her authorial love will not die in her son’s stead, but instead will kill Karl-Artur’s genuine personality, thereby killing him. It must be borne in mind that the young clergyman’s vocation and piety are genuine, his unfortunate misunderstandings and aberrations notwithstanding. In Charlotte’s opinion, it is not Christ but Thea Sundler who commands him to break with his mother. In any case it is evident that a fatal and controversial insight into the loving mother’s innermost aspirations and motives has been touched upon. Karl-Artur Ekenstedt’s crisis and decay are literally a man’s crisis and decay. The masculinity associated with Christian ideals generates his problems, driving him to the very bottom of existence, a counter-type of masculinity. Unlike those who tend to neglect the genuine spark of humane Christian faith that suffuses the final scene of the narrative, I wish to highlight this aspect. Lagerlöf here delineates the contours of a positively perceived counter-type of masculinity. The reader finds a Karl-Artur transformed, deprived of his rhetorical magnificence; an ugly and aged Karl-Artur who has learnt the Christian lesson to love thy neighbour. He has lost his self in order to gain it; lost his virility in order to find it. In the face of Lagerlöf’s endeavour to highlight the birth of a new faith, true and genuine, the statement that the narrative is about the breakdown of faith and male-governed society seems somewhat lacking.

ENVOI

That masculinity is a changing (social) construction, best described in the plural, is nowadays more or less a truism amongst its scholars. Naturally, the element of construction in all this is even more salient when it comes to fictional characters, invented by an author. It is equally well-established that gender is a relational category, which is why the pattern of masculinity should be defined in relation to one or other models of femininity, or indeed of unmanliness. The examples of Tintomara, Axel Borg, and Karl-Artur Ekenstedt are illustrative in this respect. Where Tintomara’s very existence is a symbol of the transience of gender constructions, Borg and Ekenstedt in their own particular ways illustrate the fragility and elusiveness of masculinity.

Scholars have been eager to identify periods of crisis for masculinity, of which one of the most discussed is that which occurred of around 1900. Strindberg’s novel was certainly affected by this crisis; Lagerlöf wrote her novels at a time when gender

58 Herbert Sussman arrives at the same conclusion apropos Teufelsdröckh in Thomas Carlyle’s Sator Resartus (1833-1834). Sussman, Victorian Masculinities, 52-53.
59 Anthropologists even argue that an absolutely assured masculinity is a contradiction in terms (Adams, Dandies and Desert Saints, 24).
issues were still dynamite, and the liberation of women was firmly on the political agenda. Although the novels are mainly set in the 1830s, Lagerlöf’s contemporary context left its mark on the narrative. Not a feminist herself, Lagerlöf’s sympathies frequently lay with the feminist cause. The strong and self-sufficient Anna Svärd has been put forward as a positive role model of the so-called ‘new woman’, making her own living in Lagerlöf’s time. On the other hand, man’s much-needed reformation could according to Lagerlöf be seen in the light of her own age as well as the 1830s of the narrative. His reformation complete, the narrative leaves Karl-Artur Ekenstedt. Why? Is he uninteresting once he is deprived of his partly demonic appearance, or is he impossible to depict, being utopian like Tintomara or the contradictory Borg, simultaneously regressing or sailing off towards new unfamiliar stars in the final scene?

If women as well as men surround Tintomara - causing chaos and uncertainty amongst them all - Borg’s ambivalent relationship with women is the beginning of the end for him (or perhaps rather the beginning of a new stage). Similarly, Ekenstedt’s life is determined by the women who surround him, his masculinity largely constructed by these women and what they represent. If the depiction of masculinity is complex and multi-faceted, the same is true of the portrayal of religion in Almqvist’s, Strindberg’s, and Lagerlöf’s narratives. The heathen Tintomara appears as a proper Christian, the atheist Axel Borg is a tragic man bitterly searching for the meaning of life, while the clergyman Karl-Artur Ekenstedt becomes a true Christian only when he ceases talking about Christ. There is little doubt that literary texts can illustrate the full complexity of both masculinity and (Christian) religion.