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Fostering civic virtue

Johannes Messenius and Swedish school drama

Tania Preste

Abstract
This chapter investigates the ways in which early seventeenth-century Swedish student theatre was used to educate pupils in civic virtues. The period was characterized by major changes in the educational system as a result of the Reformation, but the pedagogical ideas of the Jesuits were also of central importance in Sweden, despite the confessional divide. Using theatre for educational purposes was an old tradition, which was put to novel uses in fostering Christian virtues as well as practising concrete skills such as rhetoric. The chapter investigates the historical drama of Johannes Messenius (1579-1636) in particular. His plays used ancient (mythical) Swedish history for the purpose of inculcating the virtues of governance during a crucial period of state-building.

Keywords: school drama, civic virtue, Gothicism

Using theatre as a means of representing social ideals and moral values is as old as using the theatre as part of a pedagogical strategy in educational establishments. As an educational tool, it satisfied two fundamentally important needs in the society of the Ancien Régime: on the one hand, it was a teaching method which aimed to teach students the contents of the texts performed, and on the other it offered educational opportunities to an often illiterate audience.¹ The same educational tools were amply used in Lutheran Europe and in its German-speaking areas.²

¹ Zanlonghi, Teatri di formazione; Gesuèi e università in Europa; Brizzi, Strategie educative; Brizzi, La formazione della classe dirigente. All translations in this chapter are my own.
² Lidell, Studier, pp. 163-246.
Subject matter could differ widely: if medieval scholastic dramatic performances favoured works with openly religious content taken from biblical texts, in the Jesuit colleges subjects ranged from ancient classics to new productions with more commemorative aims and, at times, explicitly political ones. Moreover, Jesuit theatre stood out from medieval drama by the lavishness of its set, which was an integral part of the performance.

The use of acting as an educational tool in the Swedish context is associated with two professors from the University of Uppsala in particular: Johannes Rudbeckius (1581-1646), professor of theology, and Johannes Messenius (1579-1636), professor of law. Both ran private colleges in their homes where they pledged to prepare students even in subjects which were not taught at the university. The two were in competition for students who, paying the teachers from their own pockets, enabled the latter to supplement the small salaries that the university bestowed upon them. Hence the open and bitter rivalry which emerged between them, a rivalry which eventually unleashed the wrath of the university chancellor who was often obliged to pacify the two warring professors. The use of theatre as an educational tool was one of the terrains over which Rudbeckius and Messenius clashed.

For the benefit of his students, Rudbeckius staged Terence's plays *Andria* and *Eunuchus*, both in Latin and in Swedish, and Euripides' *Cyclops* in Greek and Swedish. The works chosen demonstrated the virtues deemed necessary for a young man and good citizen, a citizen respectful of laws and authority but still capable of listening to the voice of his own heart. Such virtues corresponded to those deemed indispensable for a good Christian. While the aim of Rudbeckius did not differ from that which was traditionally ascribed to pedagogical theatre, the means used by Messenius were much more complex and were very much in line with what Jesuit pedagogues were fostering through their educational drama at the time.
In the introductions to his dramatic works, Messenius offers some important, if not entirely original, reflections on dramatic performance as an educational tool and he specifically concentrates on the reasons why he considered the theatre a fundamental instrument in his pedagogical method. Having studied at the Jesuit college of Braunsberg, Messenius was a proponent of acting not only as a privileged means to study literature and to exercise memory, but also as an indispensable method of learning rhetoric: ‘Through acting in comedies the youth acquires skills and a rapidity in the art of speaking and responding.’ In Messenius’s view, one of the most important educational aspects of the use of dramatic performance was its potential as a method for teaching Swedish history: ‘The youth learn, just as the audience does, the ancient, wonderful, and strange history of their Fatherland.’

Messenius saw in history an indispensable tool for forming loyal subjects and civil servants. Hence, he wrote a large number of texts describing the unknown and distant past of the country. His intention was to ‘write the whole story of the kingdom of Sweden in 50 works (comedies and tragedies) and to perform them publicly’. His main source of inspiration came from the work by Johannes Magnus, *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque regibus* (The history of all the kings of the Goths and Swedes), and like this work, many of Messenius’s historical truths are part of that ‘learned poetic construction’ (*en lärd diktning*), which was Gothicism, that is, the collection of myths which trace back the origins of the Swedes to the Goths.

He grafted this tradition on to his desire – which he shared with Rudbeckius – of teaching the ideals and virtues through dramatic performance: ‘it has always been a praiseworthy custom, taken up both by Christians and pagans, to have comedies through which youth can be taught every virtue and honour. Youth can learn good customs and the treachery of the world in such a play. They can learn from this warning not to be deceived by the

world. Indeed, even though such virtues and ideals may rather have been inherited from the classical world and Christianity, Messenius named these virtues ‘Gothic’ and described his own role as that of ‘a special inculcator of noble Gothic virtues in the young men who would someday use these virtues in the service of the Crown and their Fatherland’. 

Gothicism, constructed as an ‘incredible genealogy’, to supply the young and fragile monarchy with a glorious past, was, amongst many other things, a tool for legitimizing the usurpation of Duke Charles and the accession of his son Gustavus Adolphus in opposition to the aims and claims of his cousin Sigismund of Poland. Furthermore, it legitimized the Swedish territorial claims in the German lands and in the Baltics.

We Berig, victorious sovereign of the ancient and unvanquished Goths, wish every prosperity and happiness to the nobles gathered here, and we have no doubt that among you there are many who, like us, are roused by their reading of the ancient Goths and are made keen with an earnest zeal and an intent to make us and our subjects famous and recognized in the entire world, thanks to our and your heroic hearts, eager for the glory that the land of our fathers (even with its vast borders) cannot enchain nor contain.

It was with these words that Gustavus Adolphus opened the tournament, held as a form of knightly joust, to celebrate his coronation as King of Sweden on 14 October 1617. The text continued, listing the conquests of the ancient Goths, pointing out that the task of completing the work begun by Berig

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16 Messenius, *Samlade dramer*, p. 147: ‘Ty thet har alltid varit loflig sed, Christne och hedinger tagit then weedh, hålla comoedier, hwilka lära unge personer all dygdh och ähra. Skicklige seder och wärldzens sweek förnimmer ungdomen i sådan lek. Thär aff the sigh en warnagel taga af wärlden sigh ey låta bedraga.’


18 Bizzocchi, *Genealogie incredibili*.

19 For more about the legitimacy of the accession to the throne of Charles IX and Gothicism see Johannesson, ‘Gustav II Adolf som retoriker’, pp. 11-30; Bennett, ‘Gothic Justice’, esp. chs. 1 and 2.

20 In Schück, *Kgl. vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademin*, I, p. 36: ‘Wij Berik, thee gamble och oöfwerwinnelige Giöters segherfulle konungh, önske thänne Höglåfflige församlingh all lycko och wälfärdh och hållat för intet twifwell, at iw mångom ibland eder utaff thee gambla Giöters Historiers läsande skall wetterligt wara, huru såsom wij, upptående aff Een synnerlig läfflig nijt och begiärelsselis till at gööra oss och wåra undersår igenom dygdh och manlige bedriffter öfwer hela wärdenne nampnkunnoge och berömbde, Befinmandes at wårt och theras manlige och ähretorstige hierter sigh innan fädernesslandzens (ehuru wäl älliest och ganska widtbegripne gräntzer) icke kunde inkiätta och stängia låta.’
and his warriors fell to ‘our successors’, that is to the Swedes under the rule of Gustavus Adolphus, and thus unequivocally stating his intended foreign policy aimed at expanding into continental Europe. The matter next addressed was that of the legitimate nature of Gustavus Adolphus’s coronation, decreed by Odin or Mars themselves and by the ‘unanimous approval of all classes of the Realm of Sweden’.  

Gustavus Adolphus claimed for himself the Gothic legacy, a legacy which consisted of good government, a respect for the laws of the forefathers, and an ability to dispense justice in an impartial manner. The sovereign’s departure was itself marked by the Gothic past: when Gustavus Adolphus was preparing to leave Sweden for war in Germany in 1630, he gave a famous speech at the Riksdag (Parliament or Diet), claiming a continuity between the current Swedish war effort and the Gothic conquests of the past. He invited the nobles of (purported) Gothic ancestry to play the part that justly awaited them on the European stage. The significance of the Gothic imagination in Sweden in the time of Charles IX and Gustavus Adolphus can, as these examples clearly demonstrate, hardly be overestimated. Through his plays, Messenius played a central role in providing heroes who could rival those of classical antiquity in terms of virtue and grandeur.

Moreover, as professor of law Messenius had the task of teaching not only Roman law but also native Swedish legislation, a legislation which fully embraced Gothicist rhetoric. Indeed, in the early years of the seventeenth century, the state administration and the chancellery of the realm made an enormous effort to salvage and modernize medieval laws both at a national (Magnus Erikssons landslag (Land law of Magnus Eriksson)) and Magnus Erikssons stads slag (City law of Magnus Eriksson)) and at a regional

21 The outcome of the tournament was not a happy one for the young sovereign: he was thrown from his horse by his brother-in-law and everyone interpreted this fact as a bad omen. According to Schück, *Kgl. vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademin*, I, pp. 31-39, and Almquist, ‘Tornérspelet vid kröningen 1617’, pp. 1-7, this is the reason for the reticence about the event, a silence which lasted until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the librarian of the Royal Library, Gustav Klemming, in his archival researches discovered the posters for the event. Dean Bennett, speaking of the Knightly joust, has underlined how ‘Few events in Swedish history show more clearly the implicit and explicit connections then being made between Swedish-Gothic identity and noble identity’ and how the nobility at which it was aimed wasn’t exclusively based upon blood ties but considerations of virtue too (Bennett, ‘Gothic Justice’, p. 173).

(landskapslagar) level, because they enshrined a de facto legislative corpus regulating the relations between different powers within the kingdom, but also because they were considered important evidence of continuity between the ancient Goths and modern Swedes. These laws were written down between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, but it was commonly believed that they could be traced back to the time of the ancient Goths. Therefore, they could be said to provide the foundations of modern legislation in Sweden.23

Reinstating the ancient laws and declaring them to be a source of inspiration for modern reforms also gave the laws themselves a strong sense of legitimacy and an almost sacred aura. For Gustavus Adolphus, invoking ancient legal systems also meant that the modern form of government, which he and Axel Oxenstierna were constructing, actually represented a return to the past, to the mythical golden age of the kingdom. It was a return to the laws of their forefathers, not an innovation.25 Extremely important and useful for Gustavus Adolphus and for his father, Karl IX, before him, was the idea that the Goths were masters in good government. It was this Gothic legacy they were hoping to restore more than anything else. Thereby, they could also claim for themselves the merit of having allowed ‘a return to the original pristine Gothic liberties that had always prevailed in Sweden’.26

Consequently, good government is at the centre of most of the works of Messenius, seemingly linking his role as professor of law to the need to ensure the teaching of rhetoric and national history in the Gothicist vein. In his first dramas, Disa and Signill, Messenius depicted this very Gothic past and highlighted the role of the virtues and of laws in ancient Swedish society. Characters who symbolize this link with the Goths assume highly prominent roles in both works. Penthesilea in Disa and Starkoter in Signill represent, in the first case, the link with the myths of classical antiquity, and in the second, the creation of a suitable national hero who could rival Hercules not only in terms of his courage and strength but above all in terms of his virtues.

But what is it that characterizes the Gothic virtues and how do they differ from the Aristotelian virtues? To respond to this question, it is necessary to analyse the dramas in more detail and, in particular, the introductions written for the printed editions of the respective texts. The plays went

24 See the full biography of Wetterberg, Kanslern Axel Oxenstierna.
through several editions in the course of the seventeenth century. Messenius’s first comedy, *Disa*, is the first dramatical work with Swedish history as its subject matter. It was staged for the first time in February 1611, during the annual winter fair in Uppsala. According to legend, this fair was established by Queen Disa herself, and the event also took its name from her (*Distingmarknad*). *Disa* was an immediate success, resulting in Messenius receiving an invitation to perform his second drama, *Signill*, at court. This happened the following year and was part of the celebrations of the marriage between Princess Maria Elizabeth and Duke Johan of Östergötland.

*Disa* is partly based on a folk tale and partly taken from Olaus Magnus’s *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (History of the Scandinavian peoples). The folk tale, through its re-elaboration by Messenius, became a crucial part of Gothic mythology: Disa, the main character, became the personification of Gothic virtues. The plot contains two main narrative elements: on the one hand, the tale of the wise girl who, having resolved the mystery, marries the prince. On the other hand, there is an emigration myth: A serious famine has beset the kingdom of the Goths, and in response to this, the sovereign, after much hesitation, decides to eliminate ‘superfluous mouths’: the old, the crippled, the sick, and all those unable to provide for themselves. The king having decided this, a messenger carries the news to all parts of the kingdom. Disa, the daughter of a noble member of the Gothic Diet, feels a sense of outrage at such a solution and declares to the King’s envoy that she has a better, and more humane, proposition. Informed of this, the king orders the young woman to come to his court, neither on foot, nor on horseback, nor by carriage, neither by day nor by night, neither naked nor dressed. Disa, having found a means of overcoming this challenge, arrives at court, and proposes that the peasants should be sent to sparsely populated Norrland to clear the forests and cultivate the lands there. This will not only alleviate the famine; it will also generate prosperity and welfare throughout the country. The king is so impressed by Disa’s wisdom that he falls in love with her. Like every fairy tale worthy of its name, the two are married and are even praised by Gothic knights long since emigrated abroad in the pursuit of the glory of the Gothic name. Among them is the

27 Messenius, *Samlade dramer*; Lidell, *Studier*.
29 Sauter, ‘Messenii liv och teater’, pp. 27, 35.
Queen of the Amazons, Penthesilea. In Disa the role of the classic heroine is to reinforce the links between Swedes and the Goths. Penthesilea tells of having left Svealand with Berig ‘the great king and hero’ and when her name is revealed, the king exclaims ‘your fame has come to our attention, it rings loud among all the Goths’.31

Disa displays many virtues: she is clearly wise and so possesses the virtue of prudentia (‘prudence’), which was generally considered the main and most important virtue for sovereigns and rulers, both during medieval and early modern times. She also possesses fortitude (‘courage’): when the messenger of the King counsels Disa to be courageous during her meeting with the King she replies: ‘Do not think of me as a sissy, a little fly fearful even of its own shadow.’32

The name of Disa is also linked with another important virtue: justice. Messenius describes how, at the inauguration of the fair at Uppsala, King Sigtrud decides that all those who have suffered an injustice in the course of the year shall be allowed to make an appeal to the sovereign in order to attain justice. The solution to the famine that Disa proposed is likewise an expression of her pursuit of justice.

The story of Signill has its origin in an old popular ballad, which in written form goes back to the sixteenth century. However, a version of the story is also told by Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus in the late twelfth century, Gesta Danorum (Deeds of the Danes).33 The Norwegian Prince Habor and the Swedish Princess Signill are in love. But Hildegissel, the German suitor of Signill, with the aid of Boolwijs spreads word that Habor’s brothers have slandered the brothers of Signill. The latter murder the former and Habor takes revenge by killing the guilty party. Habor is arrested and brought before the Swedish rulers, Cigar and Asta, and is condemned to death. Signill, upon hearing the verdict, commits suicide.

In the first act, we also meet Starkoter, who invites the audience to listen to the story in order to learn the Gothic virtues and honour: ‘Earnestly, I wish to teach you honour and the Gothic virtues.’34 Starkoter, even more so than Penthesilea in Disa, personifies Gothic virtues: he is feared by the whole world but is not a violent man, he has the virtue of temperance and a genuine sense of justice.

31 Lidell, Studier, pp. 42-49; Messenius, Samlade dramer, p. 28: ‘Edhert beröm haffue wij nogsampt hört, Iblandh alla Göthar är thedh uthfört’.
32 Messenius, Samlade dramer, p. 18: ‘Tro ey iagh är sådan mugga som rädas pläger för skugga’.
33 Lidell, Studier, pp. 76-83.
34 Messenius, Samlade dramer, p. 42: ‘Then Göthiske dygdh och ähra/wil iagh edher medh flijt lära.’
If in *Disa* the major virtue is prudence, understood as the ability to govern well, in *Signill* it is justice which is seen as the most important virtue. Act 6 takes place in a courtroom. The judge makes clear what the juridical foundations of the kingdom are: ‘Law and justice are at home in Svealand. Here no offender dies before his case has undergone examination and a fair sentence has been pronounced.’ While not explicitly mentioned, prudence also plays a major role in the tragedy: princes and kings must exercise this virtue in all of their deeds to avoid causing injury to others. Habor pays the highest price for having refused to listen to Starkoter’s advice and for having ignored his duties and disregarded the ways of his forefathers and the advice of his teachers. The Swedish princes die for having given credence to the advice of an impostor. Cigar, the King of the Swedes, trusts an unfaithful servant and, as a result, loses his daughter Signill.

In *Swanhuita*, another work set in the Gothic past, loyalty is the virtue most highly praised along with keeping one’s word. In this case too, the drama is inspired by the work of Johannes Magnus, who in his turn had rewritten a tale (again, originally by Saxo Grammaticus) in a pro-Swedish manner.

The virtues described in the works of Messenius evoke, in a more or less open manner, the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Such virtues are often associated with politics and power: they are virtues which abound in the *specula principum* (‘mirrors for Princes’) and in the political treatises of the entire early modern era.

So Gothic virtues do not differ from Aristotelian virtues: the Gothic ones in Messenius’s interpretation are classical virtues, and in particular those that had been used in a political context since antiquity.

The number of actors and extras involved in the staging of the plays by Messenius was considerable. The drama’s first editions contain a list of *dramatis personae* and the number of understudies who participated in the staging of the play: 32 are named in *Disa*, 44 in *Signill*, and a total of 60 in *Swanhuita*. Messenius’s students were not exclusively from the nobility; on the contrary, the majority belonged to the lower clergy or the mercantile bourgeoisie, for whom education provided the opportunity of launching their offspring into an ecclesiastical, military, or bureaucratic career. Some of them would gain noble status in virtue of those services which they would render the state. Dean Bennett underlines how this ambition conforms to the

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36 Preste, ‘King’s Virtues’.
Gothicist ideology: ‘These students were training for careers in the service of the Crown, and the Gothic History provided ample material for them to use in establishing their effectiveness as promoters of their country’s interests.’

Few traces remain of the majority of these students beyond their university enrolment records. However, there are a few whose biographies can be sketched. I will restrict myself to tracking one student whose individual trajectory demonstrates the possibilities offered by education and an administrative career. Moreover, this student was, like Messenius, engaged in educating the country’s new elite. While not himself a proponent of Gothicism, he did certainly consider civic virtues central to creating a ruling class capable of ruling and managing the country.

Johannes Matthiae Gothus (1593-1670), son of the vicar of the church of Västra Husby, completed his first studies in the city of Linköping and during the first decade of the seventeenth century began his university career under the wing of Messenius himself. He participated in the staging of both Disa and Signill. He was able to continue his education by undertaking two journeys to European universities. During his first sojourn (1618-20) he attended Giessen University. His second voyage (1622-25) saw him travelling through France, Holland, and England. Upon his return in 1626 he was nominated as the dean of the newly established Collegium Illustre, an academic institution specifically created for the education of young sons of the Swedish nobility. In his writings and in his inaugural speech for the opening of the college, he clearly expressed the need for an educational establishment which gave the country’s elite a suitable education adequate to the administrative and political requirements of the country. According to Matthiae, the Collegium Illustre was to prepare the sons of the aristocracy for their university studies in such a way that would make them best able to serve their country.

In the introduction to his Gnomologia (1626), Matthiae writes that he wants with the greatest commitment and dedication […] to promote the study of the humanist disciplines, the subjects, which adorn the flower of your age and which not only add refinement to the traditions which have lain fallow, but are also the most elegant and useful servants of the state.

39 Göransson, Johan (Johannes) Matthiae; Holmquist, D. Johannes Matthiae Gothus.
40 On Collegium Illustre, cf. Runeby, Monarchia mixta, pp. 182-91; Matthiae, Ratio studiorum; Preste, Johan Skytte, Johannes Matthiae och Collegium Illustre.
41 Matthiae Gothus, Gnomologia veterum, p. 6: ‘Dominis ac fatoribus meis benignissimis, quorum consilio & authoritate hic studia nostra diriguntur, Humaniores literas quibus vestrae
He invites his students to

ennoble your language and your character; embellish your soul with knowledge and virtue! Continue and spare no effort in your studies and in conquering honour for yourselves, be the joy of your family, be of use to your friends, and be a blessing to this Nordic country of yours!42

The college also offered physical education and the reason for this, beyond the classical *mens sana in corpore sano*, was the good of the state:

your sons in this noble college will receive good instruction under two aspects, that is they will develop their soul through the study of languages and other noble disciplines, and their body through an instruction such that it will be a defence in times of war and an honour for the Country in times of peace. And since the human being is made of both soul and body, this will mean that the former should be in the service of the country through good counsel, and the latter should defend it with strong limbs during times of danger.43

Matthiae does not list the necessary virtues required to fulfil these functions, but extensively explains the importance of *exempla* in teaching. For this reason, the lives of the authors themselves should be studied attentively as well as their works.44 It is no surprise then, that in the *Ratio studiorum* (Plan of studies) compiled for the Collegium Illustre, a place of prime importance is given to Cicero, not only as an example of the high literary value of Latin literature and the art of rhetoric, but also because

42 Matthiae Gothus, *Gnomologia veterum*, pp. 7-8: ‘Date operam, ut linguam excolatis & mores, animum doctrina & virtutibus exornetis. Pergite, atque in id studium, in quo estis incumbite, ut & vobis honoris, & parentibus gaudio, & amicis utilitati & Reip huic septentrionali emolumento esse possitis.’


of his individual career: an entire life spent in the service of the fatherland and of the republic. 45

Messenius often expressed his view that drama was useful as a pedagogical tool for instilling the Gothic virtues in his young students, virtues which, as we have seen, corresponded to civic and political virtues. The question which arises is why Messenius considered the acquisition of these virtues to be so important for his students. Danneskiold-Samsøe writes: ‘From now on, the only way for Swedish noblemen to assert themselves politically was through service to the state, either in administration or in the army. A new noble ideology and self-perception emerged that was centred on government of the state’. 46

The state needed civil servants and officers who possessed both military and civic virtues. Peter Englund has used another of Messenius’s students as an example to illustrate this. Aegidius Girs was a colleague of Matthiae at the Collegium Illustr. 47 In a treatise with the suggestive title De vera nobilitate (On true nobility), written for the inauguration of the Collegium Illustr, Girs examines the nature of nobility and discusses whether it is innate or acquired. He reaches the conclusion that acquired virtues alone render a man truly noble. Above all, political and civic virtues are characteristic of nobility, as the function of a nobleman is to dedicate his life to the good of the state. 48

To serve the fatherland, courage and fortitude were not sufficient. The virtues which would ensure good government and the administration of justice were those truly worthy of the name. In Messenius’s view, the Gothic legacy was a legacy of civility and legality rather than barbaric brutality. Consequently, the Gothic virtues were primarily the political virtues.

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48 Girs, De vera nobilitate. For a more in-depth study of the reflection of Girs on the nobility see Englund, Det hotade huset.


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