STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXV, 3, 2020, p. 125 - 136
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2020.3.09

THE PORTRAIT OF AN ENLIGHTENED MONARCH: STRINDBERG'S GUSTAV III

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ABSTRACT. ***The Portrait of an Enlightened Monarch: Strindberg's Gustav III***. A defining feature of Strindberg's historical drama is that history is only the background, while the individual is the one around whom the play is built. This article maps the three planes (human, political and cultural) on which Strindberg constructs the image of the enlightened monarch Gustav III, both in the play from 1902 and in the volumes *Svenska folket* and *Svenska öden och äventyr*. The character traits and historical events highlighted in Strindberg's play are compared to memoirs from the eighteenth century.

Keywords*: Gustav III, Strindberg, Swedish Enlightenment, Swedish 18th century, Swedish History, Theatre, Historical drama.*

REZUMAT. ***Portretul unui monarh luminat: Gustaf III în viziunea lui Strindberg*****.** O trăsătură definitorie a dramaturgiei istorice strindbergiene este aceea că istoria constituie doar fundalul, în timp ce individul este cel în jurul căruia este construit textul dramatic. Articolul de faţă cartografiază cele trei planuri (uman, politic şi cultural) pe care Strindberg construieşte imaginea de monarh luminat a lui Gustav III, atât în piesa omonimă din 1902, cât şi în volumele *Svenska folket* şi *Svenska öden och äventyr*. Trăsăturile de caracter şi evenimentele istorice evidenţiate în piesa lui Strindberg sunt comparate cu surse memorialistice din secolul al XVIII-lea.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Gustav III, Strindberg, Iluminismul suedez, Secolul al XVIII-lea în Suedia, Istoria Suediei, Teatru, Dramaturgie istorică*

In the wake of an Inferno crisis marked by artistic and scientific quests interrupted by and mired in suffering, Strindberg returned to playwrighting, completing no fewer than 26 plays over less than five years, between 1898 and 1903.[2] Not entirely purged by the flame of self-inquiry, he now went on

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[2] Vioreanu 2016:59-60

trying to achieve self-understanding by turning his attention to a number of Swedish historical figures. Thus, each common feature he found with the fate and the mental and moral qualities of such historical figures, equally misunderstood in this regard by their contemporaries and by posterity, fulfilled a therapeutic role. By shaping them in his well-documented but subjective vision, filtered, moreover, by his genius of playwrighting and directing, Strindberg strove that his historical plays should redeem the image of personalities such as Magnus Eriksson, Gustav Vasa, Erik XlV, Olaus Petri or Queen Christina. To do this, he dared consider everything that, in their self-absorbed search for recreating the historical truth, chroniclers and historians never had. Furthermore, he created a gallery of authentic and fascinating characters and "became Sweden's Shakespeare in terms of history plays"[3].

Few have noticed the humility with which Strindberg worked on his historical plays. Some of these he wrote for financial and personal reasons[4], but to him, historical playwrighting was the perfect arena revealing his conviction that this theatrical subgenre can be addressed to everyone through lines written in a rich, beautiful Swedish language and through an accessible way to approach the history and culture of Sweden.

Strindberg understood that one cannot write historical plays without rigorously exploring the work of one's predecessors. In the same way one cannot understand the society one lives in and one's role in it unless one knows one's national history, one cannot create for the stage without going back to the classics.

Ur några Förord till Historiska Dramerna and *Det historiska dramat*[5] are two of the dramatic theory works where Strindberg explains the influence that Shakespeare and Schiller had on the structure and shaping of characters in his historical plays. Already in his first historical drama, *Master Olof* (1872), Strindberg had not placed the Father of the Swedish Reformation, Olaus Petri, on a pedestal of historical facts: these ones serve just as a background.[6] Two decades and a half later, when he took up historical drama again, Strindberg

[3] Prideaux 2012:38

[4] The Middle Ages, for instance, were a popular theatre topic in Paris at the end of the 19th century. *Gustav Vasa* he wrote on the occasion of the 400-year commemoration of the Swedish king's death (Vioreanu 2016:63). The powerful character Queen Kristina he created mainly for his young wife, the Norwegian actress Harriet Bosse (1878-1961), as it appears from his correspondence from the autumn of 1901.

[5] These essays were written and published by Strindberg over the course of almost two years (1908-1909) and contain explanatory notes to his historical plays. The notes were later published in the volume generically called *Teatern och Intima Teatern*, also comprising his documents regarding Intima Teatern (his beloved project, founded together with August Falck în 1907), "open letters" to the artistic teams, articles and texts featured in the brochures of the respective performances.

[6] Strindberg 1999:193, 207

developed the idea and, like Shakespeare before him, set out to depict people's lives as rich in small and large events, leaving history in the background once more. To avoid the undramatic chronicle style and adapt the historical play to the spirit of his times, Strindberg considers time compression as essential and never follows the real time sequence of the historical events.[7]

One of the Swedish kings who aroused Strindberg's interest and curiosity was Gustav III (1746-1792). From Strindberg's correspondence, we understand that he worked on the play dedicated to the enlightened Swedish monarch from September 1901 to March 1902.

As with other historical plays, Strindberg did some serious preliminary research on Gustav III and the Gustavian era. According to Lamm and Ollén[8], his main source seems to have been *Berättelser ur svenska historien* (1886) by C. Georg Starbäck and P.O. Bäckström. In addition, Kullberg's study on Gustav III and his court (*Gustaf III och Hans Hof*, 1838) had a certain influence on the playwright, as indicated in a letter he sent to Harriet Bosse.[9] To round off his perspective on the Swedish monarch, Strindberg also considered some existing speculations about Gustav III's both androgynous[10] and tyrannical personality features. Even though he never approved of the king's politics, especially in the last years of the latter's reign, Strindberg identified himself with the king and sympathised with his views, especially on the question of marriage and couple relationship. Moreover, Strindberg himself was a kind of actor, according to Ollén.[11]

In his open letters to Intima Teatern, Strindberg sums up his opinion of Gustav III as follows:

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[7] ibid. pp.195

[8] Ollén 1982:471

[9] In a letter addressed to Harriet Bosse on 28 September 1901, Strindberg mentions having started to do some research for a play about Gustav III, finding, in the pages of Kullberg's *Gustaf III och Hans Hof* (*Gustav III and His Court* (1838), answers about himself (Gunnar Ollén, in Strindberg 1988:323). The time of writing the play about Gustav III was marked by mixed feelings, on the one hand about his failed premiere of *Engelbrekt* (Svenska Teatern, December 1901) and on the other, of joy at the success of *Karl XII*. In March the following year (1902), Strindberg writes his German translator that he feels tired because he had just finished writing something. From his diary entry on 16th March 1902, we understand that he had been trying hard to finish the play by 16th March, the date when Gustav III had been shot at the masquerade ball at the Royal Opera House. The play was rejected by the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, as it was considered defamatory, injurious and disrespectful towards the founder of the theatre, Gustav III. (Brandell 1989:221). Strindberg did not give up hope that the play would be performed. In a letter from 22nd February 1908 to August Falck, Strindberg wrote: "I have redesigned Gustav III as a Chamber Play, and that can be played on the Molière (rococo) stage too." (Robinson 1992:765; Törnqvist&Steene 2007:121). The first performance of the play was to be staged at Nya Intima Teatern only as late as 1916, on 15th January.

[10] Brandell (1989:223) suggests that Strindberg dismissed Gustav III's androgynity which is vaguely addressed in his play.

[11] Ollén 1982:471

> "The enlightened despot who carries out his own French Revolution at home in Sweden, that is to say, crushes the aristocrats with the help of the third estate – this is a paradox that is hard to depict! And as a character he is full of contradiction, a tragedian who plays comedy in life, a hero and a dancing master, a despotic friend of liberty, a humanitarian, a disciple of Frederick the Great, Joseph II and Voltaire. He is almost likeable, as the Revolutionary who falls into the hands of the Revolutionaries (…)."[12]

Over the course of the play's four acts, Strindberg creates an environment typical of the second half of the Swedish eighteenth century by placing the action in settings that are representative of the Gustavian era (the king's audience room in the Pavilion at Haga, the Huvudsta estate on the shore of Lake Ulvsunda, the Kina Castle on the royal domain of Drottningholm), by elements of interior design – busts of Rousseau and Voltaire, along with French newspapers in Holmberg's bookshop – and last, but not least, by drawing a list of characters embodying cultural figures such as the philosopher Thomas Thorild (1759-1808), the troubadour and entertainer Carl Michael Bellman (1740-1795), or Gustav Badin (1747-1822). The characters often use Gallicisms in their regular conversations and the humanistic ideas typical of the Enlightenment, expressed throughout the play, complete the general picture.[13]

Corresponding to the last few years in the life of Gustav III, the period selected by Strindberg to illustrate the Gustavian era was a troubled time not only in Sweden, but all around the world. Gustav had been on the Swedish throne for 17 years now, long enough to justify a retrospective survey meant to analyse his actions. Bearing in mind the historical truth, the choice of the moment is quite appropriate as it offers an explanatory view of the events that were to take place on 16th March 1792 at the Royal Opera House in Stockholm.

Every time Strindberg wrote historical plays about Swedish monarchs, he chose to set the action at a very difficult point in time, not only so as to be able to start the play in a dynamic manner, but also to give the character gallery the chance to debate the existing situation in the kingdom. This time, too, the main character finds himself in a key moment: the summer of 1788, when Gustav III had just returned from Finland, right after the Anjala uprising and after Denmark had declared war on Sweden.[14] Besides the two wars, the king has

[12] Strindberg 1999:204, translated in Törnqvist&Steene 2007:161

[13] "Why are you insulting your black brother, man?" Thorild asks, referring to the African Diasporan Badin. "Is he not born of woman, with rights as any man, like you or like me?" Badin is also called a child of nature "spoilt by a rotten civilisation on the way to its grave" (First Act, p.177)

[14] According to the memoirs of Duchess Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta, Gustav had arrived in Stockholm completely unannounced on the morning of 1st September, leaving immediately to see the Queen at Ulriksdal castle.[14] (Bonde 1903:328)

specific plans to change the form of government in order to limit the social and economic privileges of the nobility and to grant more power to the other social estates.[15]

It is a well-known fact that, despite some antipathy, Strindberg is a defender of his historical characters. This holds true in the case of Gustav III as well. An idea that permeates the play is that, like any other human being, Gustav was inherently kind and honest, before being corrupted and damaged by society, a concept that leads back to Rousseau and his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (*Discours sur les sciences et les artes*, 1750) and *Discourse on Inequality* (*Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, 1755)[16].

The environment that Gustav III has been brought up in is one pervaded by lies and slander. "Here at the court they never question if it's true; that's surely why they are lying dreadfully!" Armfelt concludes in his conversation with Munck.[17] The hatred of the aristocracy, emphasised by Strindberg in his play, would lead, three-four years later, to the assassination of the king. The first step was their boycott, which Gustav was well informed about. In a letter to Elis Schröderheim on the first day of 1790, Gustav III mentioned that he did not think he would experience *les délices de la société* ever again.[18] In Strindberg's play, the nobility are relentlessly plotting against the king, seeking to keep the royal prerogatives within certain bounds. The conspirers do not hesitate to use any available means of assault, including personal defamation, as exemplified by Lady Schröderheim who is trying to turn the queen against the king.[19]

In the spirit of Voltaire, Gustav III believes that an autocratic monarchy is the best political system of government, as long as the king takes into account the needs of the people and follows the basic principles of the Enlightenment. Strindberg's character Gustav III speaks about himself as "the first citizen of a free country, a man of the people and the defender of the oppressed."[20] Talking to Olof Olsson, the representative of the peasantry, Gustav III maintains that his major duties as king are freedom and the people.[21] This aspect is in fact the supreme contention of the Swedish nobility in Strindberg's play: that Gustav III sides with the commoners. Anckarström tells the king that he hates him for his autocracy, since "more eyes can see better than two, more minds can fulfil more

[15] The Riksdag (Parliament) in Sweden retained a four-estates system: nobles, clergy, burghers and peasant.
[16] see Cole 1923:125-246
[17] Strindberg 1988:182
[18] Artéus 2013:137
[19] Strindberg 1988:190
[20] Strindberg 1988:207
[21] ibid. p. 208

wishes and more needs!"[22] Some of the aristocracy led in fact a smear campaign against the king, spreading false rumours about him, as, for instance, about his insensitivity to the people's rough living conditions, to their needs and suffering.[23]

Gustav was raised and educated as a prince and a citizen. The aversion and negative attitude towards the autocracy would constitute the basis of the crown prince's education, as established by the Riksdag (Parliament) ever since Adolf Fredrik had been elected as heir to the Swedish throne, in 1743.[24] Some of the key figures on the Swedish political scene at that time, such as the Scheffer brothers and Fredrik Axel von Fersen, would nevertheless realise that the inherent corruption of the political parties was more dangerous than an increased royal power.[25] While Scheffer was Gustav's governor, the future monarch understood that people were equal by nature and that the duty and mission of the rich was to extend a helping hand to those less fortunate.[26] Already by the age of six, the crown prince was expected to participate in the philosophical readings organised on the royal domain of Drottningholm,[27] and encouraged to read extensively. Several of the literary, philosophical and political works he studied thoroughly as a teenager and in his early twenties, such as Voltaire's *The Henriad* or Lemercier de La Rivière's *L'Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* would influence his decisions to act as an autocratic monarch.[28] Another considerable influence on Gustav's childhood and adolescence was his mother Lovisa Ulrika's active interest in the culture and science of the Enlightenment.

Very often, those in charge of the crown prince's education had to appeal to allegory for instilling moral values, turning to comparisons with drama and theatre, which the prince loved more than anything else. An extract from Tessin's letters *En gammal mans brev till en ung prins* (*Letters from an Old Man to a Young Prince*), written between 1751 and 1754, provides a telling example of this aspect:

> "An actor who wants to succeed must necessarily be familiar with the scene. He ought to know how his predecessors played, in which manner and by what means they earned the favours and applauses of their audience. What is man other than such a thespian? The Earth is his theatre."[29]

[22] ibid. p. 272

[23] Among them Count Adolf Ludvig Hamilton (1747-1802), whose memoirs and letters were published by Oscar Levertin in 1901.

[24] Karle 2011:26

[25] Anderberg 2009:53

[26] Anderberg 2009:53

[27] Molander Beyer 2017:21

[28] Later on, Scheffer would state that one could discern traces of Mercier's ideas in Gustav III's coup d'état of 1789 (Anderberg 2009:55)

[29] Karle 2011:24 (my translation)

In Strindberg's work, Gustav III appears to be caught in a constant struggle between the Swedish tradition – as he was the third Gustav, he had to follow in the footsteps of the other two before him and thus act as a warrior king – and the European tradition, requiring that he should act as an enlightened European monarch would.

It was common behaviour for the Swedish monarch to hide his melancholy and worries by displaying joy and good cheer in front of others. In his memoirs, Axel von Fersen mentions that, from the very start of Gustav's reign in 1771, whenever he was planning something new or unusual, the king used to close himself off from others and write comedy, opera or tragedy, so as to mislead everyone into thinking that he was serenely contemplating lyrical subjects; it was, in fact, the silence before the storm.[30] In Strindberg's play, Gustav III is just as skilful in hiding his worries about the very difficult political situation he finds himself in, not by writing plays or opera, but by getting intensely and energetically involved in arranging a party at Drottningholm. On his return from the Dalarna province, he spends his time before the ball in the grand hall of the Chinese Pavilion doing needlework. Asked by the queen "What's with the needlework, sire?", the king answers: "My mother taught me how to do it, and later on I found solace in it! I can think so clearly when doing needlework and holding all those threads in my hand!"[31]

The Enlightened Swedish monarch was often claimed to master the art of dissimulation, and Strindberg unequivocally exploits this defining personality trait as well. While waiting for people to enter the audience room at the Haga Pavilion, the king is exercising grimaces and affectation, seemingly shifting between masks.

This two-facedness, acquired and permanently practised since childhood, was justified, in his case, not only by considerations related to his love for the theatre. By adopting such behaviour, the crown prince was trying to please not only a very controlling mother and his own teachers, but also the court and the people. In the play, the king's enemies think of him as duplicitous in the extreme. The character Fersen claims that "the king has already learnt to lie as a child – especially during the failed coups d'état."[32] "And later on he got so caught in his own web of lies that he no longer knows who he is, and, since he makes fun of everything, he can no longer distinguish between seriousness and joke."[33]

Even after he became king, Gustav did not abandon theatre, his greatest passion; on the contrary, the social and cultural life of the court was one of his

[30] Klinckowström 1871:10
[31] Strindberg 1988:257-258
[32] Strindberg 1988:289
[33] ibid.

priorities. Under Gustav III's directorial supervision, the Swedish court enjoyed a rich theatrical activity. The Swedish courtiers were themselves acting in performances with plays by Corneille, Racine or Voltaire. Gustav himself was a very keen and appreciated performer until his personal and political advisers, but also the French ambassador, persuaded him to abandon this passion they saw as unsuitable for his position as king and extremely offensive to his subjects."[34] Forced to leave acting aside, Gustav III began investing time, energy and enthusiasm in theatre directing, costume and stage setting, translating plays and writing his own plays and libretti.[35] Besides drama, the court members also practised a kind of amateur theatre called *divertissement*. Such artistic activities, almost ceremonial in nature and defining for the Gustavian court culture, involving many characters and a script allowing for improvisation, were also organised under the direction of Gustav III, being occasioned by events in the royal family – name days, birthdays, christenings, marriages or funerals – but also by the reception of foreign diplomats or by national celebrations.[36] Besides entertainment, Gustavian cultural life was aimed at imparting knowledge, educating the court, forming and refining taste, all this by setting up themed readings – on history, memoir, fiction or foreign publications – organised in the evenings, but also by arranging academic colloquia on a regular basis during the 1770s – as many opportunities for debate between Gustav and a select circle of writers, artists and scholars.[37]

As early as 1882, some of the socio-political aspects of the Gustavian era had been the target of Strindberg's disapproval. In the second volume of the historical work *Svenska folket* (*The Swedish People*), Strindberg criticised "the despotic Gustav III"[38] for his decrees and measures of 1780 regarding freedom of the press.[39] The king had not delivered press freedom to the nation as a well-meaning gift, but out of fear of the French Revolution, which was about to break out.[40]

This time, too, Strindberg condemns Gustav III for his disregard for the administration and financial problems of the realm. Two of the issues he emphasises in the play, which reveal Gustav's despotic trait, are freedom of the press and the national distilling monopoly. By revision of the decree on freedom of the press, no fewer than three times (in 1774, 1780 and 1785), many

[34] Artéus 2013:119
[35] see also Sauter & Wilis 2014:7
[36] Such events are mainly depicted in the memoirs and diaries of Duchess Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta and the letters of Carl August Ehrensvärd to Gustaf Johan Ehrensvärd.
[37] Artéus 2013:94
[38] Strindberg 1912:315
[39] ibid. p. 319
[40] ibid. p. 320

of the provisions of the law enforced in 1766 law were subsequently limited. Among other things, the law now implied that an author and his editor could face the death penalty.

A line spoken by Halldin, one of the characters, according to which he had felt "the bitter taste of death, while Holmberg the bookseller had tasted bread and water"[41] alludes to the well-known episode in 1779 when journalist Johan Gustaf Halldin had been condemned to death for an article published in Stockholms-Posten criticising the king's decision to ban private distillation of *brännvin*. While he was sentenced to death and imprisoned (before being pardoned), Holmberg, the editor, also spent eight days in jail on bread and water only.

According to Strindberg's perspective, freedom of speech is limited: whoever writes a stanza against the king incurs his displeasure. Thus, Anckarström is accused of lese-majesty for having cheered for the treacherous Anjala-officers as they returned home, right on the pontoon bridge outside the Stockholm Royal Palace, with people spitting on them as traitors.[42] Also, Baron De Geer, who had offered to protect the Anjala traitors, was attacked and beaten up by the crowds[43], an act attesting to the Swedes' love for and faith in their monarch.

Another aspect of the war against Russia outlined by Strindberg in his play is the context surrounding the start of the conflict, a further eloquent feature of enlightened autocracy. Thus, Horn considers the war to be "illegal, unconstitutional and, above all, insane!"[44] According to Sweden's Constitution of 1772, the king needed the agreement of the Riksdag (Parliament) chambers to declare war. However, he found a way to set things in motion without the Parliament's approval. Moreover, in order to arouse the population's hatred against the enemy (the Russians), he ordered counterfeit Russian bills and coins forged on the Drottningholm domain to be put into circulation in Finland.[45]

In Strindberg's play, the king is also condemned for deliberately suppressing information about Baron von Nolken's letters, in which Russia expressed its "peaceful intentions, as well as the Empress' direct wish to avoid going to war against Sweden or persecuting any Swedish citizen."[46]

The trip to Dalarna, taken by Gustav only days after his return from Finland and meant to gather an army to oppose the Danes outside Gothenburg, is briefly mentioned at the beginning of the Third Act. Strindberg emphasises King Gustav III's manipulative power over the common people and his undeniable charm.

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[41] Strindberg 1988:153
[42] ibid. p. 178
[43] Strindberg 1988:179
[44] Ibid. p.155
[45] Munck intends to use such currency in Holmberg's bookshop. (First Act, p. 15)
[46] Klinckowström 1871:30

This scene is also based on historical fact. In his memoirs, Axel von Fersen noted that, before setting out for Dalarna on 13th September, the king had secretly sent there his close companion, Baron Armfelt, to survey the general state of mind and prepare the arrival of the king.[47] From the same memoirs of von Fersen we also know that Gustav III showed up on a Sunday outside Falun church, dressed in traditional folk costume, and delivered a persuasive, tearful speech explaining that, in the middle of the war against Russia, Denmark had mounted a cowardly attack against Sweden and that his duty, like that of his ancestor, Gustav Vasa, was to save the fatherland, which was only possible with the help of the brave Dalecarlian peasantry. This campaign led to 2400 people enrolling and was continued in the neighbouring province of Värmland, with the same measure of success.[48] Furthermore, Gustav III's letters confirm that there were moving moments during this campaign in the western region of the realm.[49]

In Strindberg's play, it is the conspirators that sum up the king's visit to Dalarna. According to them, the king then proceeded towards Gothenburg, by which time the war with Denmark had been avoided, thanks to the intervention of the English and Prussian ambassadors. Back in Stockholm, the king summoned the Parliament. "The coup d'état is launched, and so is autocracy" is Horn's conclusion.[50]

The fact that the king "publicly appears to be a man of the people and a freedom-fighter, that he overthrows the nobility with the help of the other estates just as he reveals himself as an autocratic ruler of the four estates",[51] is considered to be perverse by Anckarström, while Pechlin maintains that the king is "a really skilful player", difficult to deal with precisely because he has no regard for rules.[52]

The same idea, only in kinder terms, was to be taken up again by Strindberg three years later, in the new edition of the short story collection *Svenska öden och äventyr*, in the piece *En kunglig revolution (A Royal Revolution)*, where he again portrays "Frederick the Great's nephew, the disciple of Voltaire and Rousseau."[53] His enemies among the high aristocracy describe him in

[47] ibid. pp. 65-67
[48] ibid.
[49] King Gustav's words were: *"Jag har i detta landskap blifvit emottagen med de lifligaste uttryck af vänskap och tillgifvenhet samt med nitälskan, som aldrig i så hög grad visats mig alltsedan den minnesvärda tidpunkten år 1772, hvilket så mycket mera rört mig (...)*." (from a letter quoted by Ducess Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta in Bonde 1871:352)
[50] Strindberg 1988:239
[51] Strindberg 1988:240
[52] ibid. p. 245
[53] Strindberg 1990:347

detail as unfaithful, confused and unscrupulous[54], a version of Caligula, since "everything he does is perverted." Whenever they speak well of him – by admitting, for instance, that he saved Sweden from "the deepest humiliation", that he abolished torture and the excess of law courts, that he banned domiciliary visits and provided press and economic freedom"[55] – they only do so in order to underline "how deep he had fallen".[56] Strindberg's depiction of Gustav III's entry into the room where the conspirators are waiting reveals clearly a conciliation with the king:

> "(...) the de facto liberator and saviour from the yoke of oppression by foreign subsidies, a poet regarding life as a theatre play, casting himself in every role; raised among rancour and court intrigue, accustomed to dissimulation from an early age, with no other guidance in his actions except an inherent goodness and a lot of benevolence; a man who was not evil, who could forgive his enemies and forget injustices, an enlightened despot who, in fact, constitute alone the entire political opposition, a paradox whose best actions felt like pranks and whose worst features seemed like the outcomes of a good heart; but above all, an actor and a skilful orator. The stage he was witnessing now was his own; his entrance was carefully prepared; he himself spoke his first line and was now getting into the role."[57]

Conclusions

Strindberg constructs the image of Gustav III as an enlightened monarch from a three-angle perspective: political, cultural and human.

In the eyes of the nobility, Gustav III is a tyrant because of his policies limiting their privileges and because he takes decisions on his own, without consulting them. The fact that the monarch protects the people, even the commoners, makes him an "enlightened despot"[58]. Strindberg's character appears to be a victim of the court education, a product of the principles expected to define a prince in the Age of Enlightenment.

Although not being staged and translated so often as other popular Strindbergian plays, the controversial manner in which Strindberg portrays Gustav III allows a genuine glimpse into the Gustavian era, recreating the atmosphere of the turbulent times at the end of the 1780s.

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[54] ibid. p. 341
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Strindberg 1990:347 (my translation)
[58] Strindberg 1988:287

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