

# Plato, Spiritual Marriage, and the Disruptive Potential of Queerness in August Strindberg's *Giftas*

## ABSTRACT

Re-reading instances of same-sex desire in August Strindberg's *Giftas* (1884, 1886) and in particular one story in *Giftas II* "Den brottsliga naturen" ["The Criminal Nature"], this article utilizes the tools of contemporary queer theory and a Platonic lens inspired by textual allusions to classical discourse throughout both volumes of *Giftas* to provide new insights into Strindberg's interest in non-normative categories.

The article investigates the possibility that Strindberg perceived non-normative sexualities as useful in attempting to free himself epistemologically from the bounds of heteronormative marital conventions. Understanding this power of queerness to disrupt institutional heteronormativity seems just as relevant to contemporary discourses about rethinking hegemonies and systems of knowledge production.

Throughout both volumes of *Giftas*, Strindberg continually champions what he calls "andligt äktenskap" ["spiritual marriage"], a union that escapes bourgeois marital convention while providing a space that might allow two people to experience each other's true selves. Allusions to Plato and other pre-modern discourse provide Strindberg with a transcendental model of homoeroticism which may assist in understanding Strindberg's concept of "spiritual marriage" and provide a potential way of placing "Den brottsliga naturen" – a story of same-sex desire – in the context of a larger framework of stories focused on opposite-sex marriage.

This article does not argue that the deconstruction of heteronormativity itself is ever truly Strindberg's aim, nor will the paper seek to recuperate either the

misogyny or the appropriation of queerness to wrestle with heterosexual desire. Strindberg filters this exploration of queerness through a privileged position of a white, cisgender male who can appropriate a queer lens when convenient to his project of reconstructing a more satisfying version of heterosexual marriage. However, Strindberg's possible recognition of the potential of queerness to disrupt heteronormative conventions and to imagine contemporary futures free from those conventions is just as controversial today as it was in his own time.

**Keywords:** Strindberg, *Giftas*, queerness, queer theory, heteronormativity, Plato, pre-modern

**ON SEPTEMBER 27, 1884,** August Strindberg published his controversial collection of short stories entitled *Giftas I* [*Getting Married I*], followed two years later by a second volume of stories *Giftas II* [*Getting Married II*]. In these works, Strindberg seeks to explore one of the most controversial social issues of that time: the so-called “kvinnofrågan” [“the woman question”] (Strindberg 1986, 10).<sup>1</sup> Strindberg organizes his stories according to a naturalist case study model for investigation into male subjectivity in relation to the female, and the two collections have contrasting tones, particularly in terms of Strindberg's portrayal of women, which is at times offensively misogynistic, and at others fairly progressive. In addition to Strindberg's obsession with “könspolitiken” the stories frequently examine questions regarding same-sex sexuality (Borgström 2008, 186). Several stories contain instances of same-sex desire, and one story in *Giftas II* “Den brottsliga naturen” [“The Criminal Nature”] deals openly and frankly with male same-sex desire, going so far as to make a spirited defense and leaving the reader to question not only the author's motivation but how to interpret the story in the context of the collection as a whole. Re-reading this story with the tools of contemporary queer theory and a Platonic lens inspired by textual allusions to classical discourse provides new insights into Strindberg's interest in non-normative categories. Such a re-reading may also offer an opportunity to explore the possibility that Strindberg made a remarkably unconventional perception that non-normative sexualities might play a useful role in attempting to free himself epistemologically from the bounds of heteronormative marital conventions.

AUGUST STRINDBERG

# Giftas

ÄKTENSKAPSHISTORIER

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BERTIL LYBECK



ALBERT BONNIERS FÖRLAG  
STOCKHOLM

*Swedish edition of Giftas from 1928*

Understanding this power of queerness to disrupt institutional heteronormativity seems just as relevant to contemporary discourses about rethinking hegemonies and systems of knowledge production. I employ the lens of “queerness” in this paper not as a concept Strindberg would have recognized, but as a way to refer to a spectrum of non-normative sexualities and desires, which fascinated Strindberg. Strindberg himself used a range of classical, Biblical and medicalized terms to refer to non-normative sexualities and even problematizes the medicalized sexual discourse of his own time in “Den brottsliga naturen.” Since the terms “hetero-” and “homosexuality” were also not in popular use, queerness as a concept provides a contemporary, epistemological analytical lens.

### **Theoretical Approaches to a Unique Text**

Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century analysis of “Den brottsliga naturen” tends to make psychoanalytic attempts to draw connections between Strindberg’s interest in the subject and latent homosexuality (Borgström 2008, 187), where others such as Hans Lindström’s 1952 book, *Hjärnornas kamp*, argues that Strindberg’s approach to homosexuality in the story merely falls into line with that of the German and French sexologists of the day who medicalized and pathologized same-sex desire (Roy 2001, 7). In his impressively comprehensive and groundbreaking dissertation, “August Strindberg’s Perversions: On the Science, Sin and Scandal of Homosexuality in August Strindberg’s Works,” Matthew Roy (2001) ultimately offers an unsatisfying thesis for Strindberg’s fascination with homosexuality, arguing:

Strindberg and his fiction acted as a catalyst to convey European streams of thought on homosexuality to Scandinavia, causing his countrymen to grapple with a phenomenon that had suddenly gained a voice in a most unlikely candidate. (Roy 2001, 17)

Strindberg no doubt relished being that “candidate” standing at the center of a firestorm of public controversy, preferably one of his own making. But to relegate Strindberg’s interest in, or inclusion of, male

same-sex desire in *Giftas* to mere provocation, even as a catalyst for challenging bourgeois morality regarding homosexuality, misses an opportunity to fully understand the importance of Strindberg's interest in non-normative sexualities.

In *Att röra en värld: En queerteoretisk analys av erotiska trianglar i sex verk av August Strindberg*, Ann-Sofie Lönnngren (2007) explores Strindberg's use of same-sex desire in erotic triangles, observing that these various constellations, and in particular, that of two men – one woman illuminates the way sexuality and gender is constructed through such “positioning” based on activity and desire directed toward either men or women. In her analysis, Lönnngren (2007, 239) argues: “This means that it is possible to be more or less of a man or a woman, and that these categorizations are subject to change due to external circumstances.” In a more recent article, “The Pre-Modern Strindberg: Sex, Gender, Sexuality,” Lönnngren (2015, 9–10) builds on this argument, advocating for interpreting gender categories in Strindberg's works within a pre-modern one-sex paradigm which viewed acts as determinative of gender, rather than a more modern two-sex model which considers gender innate. Referencing Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* (1990), Lönnngren (2015, 10) compares the newer two-sex system formulating in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which viewed gender as “primary rather than sex, and identity was subjected to acts rather than notions of essence.”

Strindberg avoided the newly minted term “homosexuality” in favor of a variable array of categories including “Sodomit,” “buger,” “pervers,” and described same-sex desire as “grecicism,” “tribaderi,” “pederasti,” and “perversitet” (Roy 2001, 11; Borgström 2008, 187). By using a word such as “Sodomit” instead of the more modern “homosexual,” Strindberg illustrates a fundamental difference between viewing sexuality as based on acts vs. identity (Lönnngren 2015, 7). Lönnngren (2015, 13–4) identifies such changeable sexuality in “Den brottsliga naturen” as forms of same-sex desire spurred by lack of members of the opposite sex leading to cases of incest or bestiality, situations in which “sexual preference is not essence, pre-disposition and identity, but rather forms out of social circumstances that make individuals commit certain sexual acts.”

“Den brottsliga naturen” presents what Eva Borgström (2008, 202) describes as the “lack-of-a-better-option theory of same-sex desire. The story concludes with a reasoning that relativizes the heteronormative view of gender/sexuality and opens for an even more radical approach.” (my translation)<sup>2</sup>

### **Using Queerness and the Classical to Challenge Marriage Conventions**

Descriptions of sexuality in Strindberg’s work are often linked to perceptions of gender, making an explicit connection between gender identity and performed sexual acts (Roy 2001, 12; Lönngren 2007, 15; Borgström 2008, 188). But this also begs a critical question: Why would an author so paranoid about the loss of established gender roles utilize non-normative sexualities and classical discourse in a manner that works *against* maintenance of gender roles?

The answer may lie not merely in Strindberg’s ambivalence toward and contradictory viewpoints on the construction and deconstruction of gender roles, but also in the deconstruction of heteronormative institutions that enforce such roles. In a letter to Albert Bonnier in June of 1885, Strindberg describes his progress on the stories in what will be *Giftas II*: “The new stories in Getting Married are horrible, except in the expressions, about pederasti and tribadi and all the less common cases of ‘marriage,’ so it is not worth sending them to you.” (Söderström 2013, 174; my translation)<sup>3</sup> Use of the word “marriage” [“äktenskap”] demonstrates that Strindberg may have viewed non-normative sexualities and the changeability of sex-gender roles as upsetting paradigms in a way that might also apply to entrenched forms of bourgeois marital convention.

Throughout both volumes of *Giftas*, Strindberg continually champions what he calls “andligt äktenskap” [“spiritual marriage”] (Strindberg 1972, 143), a union that escapes bourgeois marital convention and monogamy while providing a space that might allow two people to experience each other’s true selves, not just their socially performed roles of man and woman joined in bourgeois matrimony. But what does such

a “spiritual marriage” look like and how does one achieve it? Queerness and pre-modern discourse may once again provide possible answers, and in particular, an intertextual allusion in “Den brottsliga naturen” in which a character confesses that an older man has loved him “as Socrates loved Alcibiades”<sup>4</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 252). This allusion to the *Symposium* and Socrates’ speech in the second half of that work offers a non-physical and even transcendental model of homoeroticism which may assist in understanding Strindberg’s concept of “spiritual marriage.”

I do not argue that Strindberg has intentionally modeled his entire story on Plato’s *Symposium* or that this precludes other ways of reading queerness in the text. This paper contends that this allusion to the Socratic view of homoeroticism may help understand Strindberg’s use of “spiritual marriage” throughout *Giftas* and the ways that problematizes bourgeois marriage convention. It also provides a potential way of placing “Den brottsliga naturen” – a story of same-sex desire – in the context of a larger framework of stories focused on opposite-sex marriage. Though there is a single allusion to Plato in “Den brottsliga naturen”, both parts of *Giftas* contain references to Plato in several stories. In “Mot betalning” [“For Payment”], the story that immediately follows “Den brottsliga naturen,” Strindberg explores the struggles of an unmarried woman. In one instance, she attends a lecture on Plato and Aristotle in which the ethics lecturer argues: “[O]nly if two souls are compatible, will marriage bring forth through their reciprocity a new spiritual self which cannot be differential to self.”<sup>5</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 266) The ethics lecturer directly connects this notion of a marriage of “spiritual self” to “the harmony of souls that Plato speaks of”<sup>6</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 266).

Strindberg makes another explicit connection between Plato and the notion of soul or spiritual marriage in “Ett dockhem” [“A Doll’s House”] one of the final stories in the first volume of *Giftas*, connecting his interest in such a concept over the span of both collections. When the character of the captain, Pall, receives a letter from his now estranged wife, he asks himself: “Has our marriage been a true marriage? I have to admit with shame and remorse that it has not... Have our souls lived in the harmony of which Plato speaks (Phaedo, Book VI ch. II para.9)?”<sup>7</sup>

(Strindberg 1972, 172)<sup>8</sup> Strindberg (1986, 154, 202) also uses other classical references to Socrates to set in motion a similar constellation, referring to him several times in *Giftas II*, as well as to classical Greece in a way that connects gender, sexuality, and marriage.

Of course, Strindberg does not afford female same-sex attraction with the same potential “naturalness” as that between men, as evidenced in “Ett dockhem” by Pall’s rant against the character Otilla, the woman he blames for corrupting his wife. He exclaims: “Plato! Plato! To hell with Plato! Yes, if you’re at sea for six months, there’s Plato for you!”<sup>9</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 175) Evidence of this gender disparity is on display most famously in the forward to the first part of *Giftas* in which Strindberg (1972, 41) declares the ideal, modern woman to be “a horrible Hermaphrodite, with a pretty close affinity to Greek practices. Children are what holds a marriage together.”<sup>10</sup> While none of these examples support the use of Plato as an exclusive overarching model for the collections, the consistent presence of Plato throughout the stories in relationship to changing notions of marriage, gender, and sexuality, I would argue supports what Lönngren (2015) has identified as the importance and interpretive usefulness of pre-modern theoretical frameworks of sexuality in Strindberg’s authorship.

It is important to note that for Strindberg, this male homoeroticism is continually viewed as an epistemological exercise in re-imagining the problems he encounters with heterosexual marriage conventions. “Den brottsliga naturen” filters its exploration of queerness through a privileged position of a white, cisgender male who can appropriate a queer lens when convenient to his project of ultimately reconstructing a more satisfying version of heterosexual marriage conventions, and when inconvenient, return to a privileged position. Moreover, both Strindberg’s *Giftas* and Plato’s *Symposium* are focused on reinforcing male self-image and subjectivity, regardless of hetero- or homosexual desire as the methodology. Whatever noble aims Strindberg had for thinking beyond bourgeois convention, they ultimately must satisfy male self-image. This paper does not argue that the deconstruction of heteronormativity itself is ever truly Strindberg’s aim, nor will the paper seek to recuperate either



the misogyny or the appropriation of queerness to wrestle with heterosexual desire. However, Strindberg's recognition of the epistemological potential of non-normative sexualities to imagine contemporary futures free from heteronormative conventions is just as controversial today as it was in his own time. For example, the resurgence of hetero-supremacy in response to gains in same-sex equality in places such as the USA makes understanding the disruptive potential of queerness a vital and still very much political project in its own right.

### **Problematizing Bourgeois Marriage Convention**

As Linda Rugg (2009, 8) argues, it is critical that analysis of *Giftas* consider Strindberg's more immediate concern "that gender roles for both women and men are perverted by the power structures of society as it exists." Throughout the two volumes of *Giftas*, this "power structure" manifests in late 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois marriage convention, which mediates both male and female subjectivities. Throughout the preface to *Giftas I*, Strindberg problematizes heteronormative marriage by positioning it against scientific and "natural" discourse. As stated earlier, this follows a pattern in Strindberg's authorship in which he employs pre-modern discourse of desire related to individual acts rather than more modern views of desire as fixed identity. Challenges to the "naturalness" of bourgeois marriage provide the groundwork for his stories that will present male same-sex desire as implicit alternatives. For example, Strindberg explains that the animal world lacks compulsory monogamy:

Let us look at what motherhood is for "other" animals. Among those of the larger mammals who live as long as man motherhood lasts for one or two years... There is consequently something natural about the dissatisfaction of the cultured woman with her prolonged motherhood, and her apparent opposition to nature is really an opposition to culture.<sup>11</sup>  
(Strindberg 1972, 42)

Strindberg surprises with, what we would now call, a Butlerian claim that gender roles are culturally constructed, and in "Den brottsliga na-

turen” establishes a competing discourse with bourgeois marriage. In other stories in *Giftas*, Strindberg (1986, 221, 235, 236) describes marriage as a “mytologi” [“mythology”], “mänskoäteri” [“cannibalism”], or “omakar” [“misfits”]. For Strindberg, women, like men, have a “natural” state outside the domain of “culture” and bourgeois marriage convention. This “natural” state outside marriage convention involves not just the ability to express physical desire, but the notion of a full individuated subjectivity both physical and psychological, an individuality Strindberg believes should apply to men and women equally (or so he says, at least, in the preface to *Giftas I*). Strindberg uses non-monogamy to redefine the “natural” more in line with classical notions of changeable desire and sexuality.

The preface concludes with “Kvinnans Rättigheter” or a manifesto of the rights of women, which includes “The right to the same education as men,” “The girl shall have the same freedom to ‘run wild’ and choose what company she pleases,” and “Women shall have the vote”<sup>12</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 45). Not only does this list include legal and social equality, but it also insists on a notion of free will and individuality, a “wildness” that both transcends and reverts back to a time before modern constraints. That wildness and choosing of one’s company ties notions of individuality to a sexual freedom, again, more reminiscent of pre-modern views than modern. This individuality Strindberg assigned to women in his manifesto of rights plays a major role in an epistemological broadening of notions of marriage:

But now comes the great unfathomable question; is it the duty of the individual to surrender his individuality from the moment he reproduces himself, and live only for his children? In nature, if we seek the answer there, we shall not find what we call individuality.<sup>13</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 41)

Not just monogamy but the procreative instinct is the enemy of “individuality.” This remarkable assertion in many ways is echoed by contemporary queer theoretical notions of futurity. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman (2004, 46) argues that the figure of

the child “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics,” so it makes sense that Strindberg would attempt to undermine marriage convention with this line of reasoning. Strindberg contemplates what contemporary queer theorists like Edelman (2004, 68) have called “reproductive futurism” or,

terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations. (Edelman 2004, 70)

For Strindberg, same-sex desire provides a way of escaping that reproductive discourse and “organizing principle” and uses non-normative sexualities to get beyond these “political symptoms” (Edelman 2004, 77).

It comes as little surprise then, that Strindberg titles his short story “Den brottsliga naturen,” the criminal nature. In Strindberg’s view, bourgeois convention is the crime against one’s true nature and individuality. In attempting to recuperate the “natural” individual instinct, Strindberg views a deterministic view of “nature” and its relentless and indifferent drive toward reproduction as justifying bourgeois morality and inevitability, whereas the changeability of non-monogamy and non-compulsory reproduction as more in line with individuality.

### **Homoeroticism As an Alternative to Bourgeois Marriage**

Having made his case in the preface to *Giftas I* for the “unnaturalness” of bourgeois marriage and monogamy, Strindberg sets about presenting male same-sex desire as a potentially “natural” alternative. In “Den brottsliga naturen,” he begins by placing such same-sex desire in direct opposition to newly medicalized discourse used to diagnose sexuality. By doing this in concert with arguments about the changeable nature of same-sex desire, Strindberg relies upon more pre-modern notions of same-sex desire, a paradigm exemplified by later intertextual reference to a pre-modern text.

“Den brottsliga naturen” takes place on a ship, and its lieutenant at first refers to the “unhealthy” and “shady” practices on board a ship. Yet he quickly qualifies that statement, saying that at sea: “Your thoughts go their own way, your will acts independently, it crawls over your sense of right and wrong, it leaps over your conceptions of morality, honor, and all the rest of it.”<sup>14</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 246) In “Den brottsliga naturen,” Strindberg portrays same-sex desire as Nature itself “finding a way out.” “Den brottsliga naturen” opens on the deck of a ship (a homoerotic setting). A doctor is being ferried on a steamer out into the Stockholm archipelago by a lieutenant. As the two men begin talking, it becomes clear that the doctor is interviewing the lieutenant about life on board the ship. In the course of their conversation, the lieutenant makes a pointed remark hinting at the commonplace presence of male same-sex eroticism on board ships: “But there are other shady sides to a sailor’s life that are decidedly not healthy.”<sup>15</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 245) This comment intrigues the doctor, placing homoeroticism under the auspices of objective investigation by one who carries the authority to diagnose pathology or health. The doctor replies: “I see, you’ve that sort on board too, have you? It’s a thing one knows very little about, although it’s one of the most remarkable phenomena of our times, and has always existed.”<sup>16</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 246) As if suddenly freed from the required social conventions of disgust and now able to express how he *really* feels, the doctor advocates for a level of innocence and implied “naturalness” achievable through same-sex desire. The doctor argues:

It’s all perfectly innocent, there’s no doubt of that, but all the same the symptoms closely resemble what we call love. It’s just as innocent as the emotion that prompts parents to take their children into their arms and kiss them.<sup>17</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 253)

The doctor makes another defense of homoeroticism, saying: “Don’t tell me that there’s anything new or unnatural about these manifestations. They’re all part and parcel of Nature who, when denied a free passage, will find another way out.”<sup>18</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 253)

Part of this defense includes an allusion to Plato's *Symposium*, which would have been the safe choice for a discourse on homosexuality, a text valorized by its classical status. When the lieutenant in "Den brottsliga naturen" claims that an older man has loved him deeply, the doctor replies, "as Socrates loved Alcibiades" (Strindberg 1972, 252). This reference to ancient Greek homoeroticism lends classical and cultural gravitas to the notion, a gravitas further enhanced by the doctor's sarcastic comment: "Do you think you made a new discovery?"<sup>19</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 252) By implying that "everyone knows" that this kind of relationship exists, Strindberg tries to demystify and denature any potential negative impact, even dismissing it from a naturalist perspective as an unremarkable "discovery." Invoking Plato as supporting evidence would have carried a good deal of weight for Strindberg's reader, and brought to mind perhaps the most well-known tale from the *Symposium*, that of Aristophanes' legendary myth of the separated halves (Plato 2001, 252).

It is also on this very point that Plato's *Symposium* potentially provides another interesting lens, following Aristophanes' speech on physical eroticism with a speech by Socrates extolling the virtues of same-sex eroticism that transcends the physical to the sublime. Quoting a woman named Diotima, Socrates' speech elevates the ancient Greek pederastic system to a spiritual level:

"Now there are those who are pregnant in terms of their bodies," she said: "and they turn rather to women and are erotic in this way, furnishing for themselves through the procreation of children immortality, remembrance, and happiness (as they believe) for all future time. But there are others who are pregnant in terms of the soul – for these in fact," she said, "are those who in their soul even more than in their bodies conceive those things that it is appropriate for soul to conceive and bear. And what is appropriate for soul? Prudence and the rest of virtue; it is of these things that all the poets and all the craftsmen who are said to be inventive are procreators." (Plato 2001, 271)

Socrates emphasizes the notion of the “soul” over the physical body. Interestingly, the speech uses a metaphor for male birth for the creative act, arguing that those men whose subjectivity and sense of self is “pregnant in terms of their bodies” turn to women and focus on the less noble act of procreation. Their legacy is carried on in the physical bodies of future generations. However, for the more transcendent and noble form of creation by “poets and all the craftsmen who are said to be inventive,” they are pregnant not in the physical body, but in the *soul*. The implication here, then, is that to reach this height of spiritual and poetic creativity, to truly “birth” something meaningful, one must look not toward women and biological reproduction, but men. Again, it is interesting to note the ways in which Strindberg wrestles with discourse of reproductive futurity, still trapped epistemologically by reproductive metaphors for self-determination.

Socrates’ speech elevates the ancient Greek pederastic system to a spiritual level; one designed as a method of turning teenage boys into future citizens and deemphasized the physical in favor of mentorship for the boy and spiritual inspiration for the older man. One only had to glimpse the beauty of a youth to begin a transformation of the soul, a process Socrates emphasizes must be non-physical:

So that even if someone who is decent in his soul has only a slight youthful charm, the lover must be content with it, and love and cherish him, and engender and seek such speeches as will make the young better; in order that [the lover], on his part, may be compelled to behold the beautiful in pursuits and laws, and to see that all this is akin to itself, so that he may come to believe that the beauty of the body is something trivial.  
(Plato 2001, 273)

It becomes the duty of the older man to see beyond the physical and facilitate the transformation of a young man’s “soul.” Socrates’ speech (ironically mostly a quotation of a wise woman) shares many similarities with Strindberg’s “spiritual marriage” concept; one that removes the burden of the physical from the development of male subjectivity. In

“Den brottliga naturen” Strindberg suggests that what is physical can become something spiritual: “Can you tell me what is pure and what is impure; what is physical and what is spiritual?”<sup>20</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 253) Strindberg again invokes the “andligt” or spiritual, while also emphasizing the freedom of the individual will.



## Undermining Homoeroticism in “Den brottsliga naturen”

Plato’s *Symposium* represents a struggle between physical and spiritual models of same-sex intimacy and subjective self-formation. In Strindberg’s homoerotic stories in *Giftas*, this struggle can both encourage an epistemological broadening outside heteronormative bourgeois marriage convention and also fall prey to an inability to fully escape these late 19<sup>th</sup> century heteronormative pressures. How does the reader, then, reconcile Strindberg’s paradoxical impulses to both investigate and distance himself from male homoerotic desire? I would first suggest resisting a teleological approach to Strindberg’s use of Plato and homoeroticism. Unlike other writers and later filmmakers who have used Plato’s *Symposium* to disregard the differences of the past and use the past for self-fashioning in the present, Strindberg complicates this by keeping his text firmly in the present. For example, Strindberg reminds the reader several times throughout *Giftas*, that he is interested in “nuvarande förhållanden” [“the present conditions”] of marriage (Strindberg 1986, 70). All of the ancient Greek figures referenced in these stories are historical and it is important to remember that Strindberg, as Roy (2001, 11) demonstrates, “molded their fates to serve his own literary purposes.” Strindberg’s relationship to these ancient texts as well as their messages about homosexuality change radically over time (Roy 2001, 142). It is undeniably risky for Strindberg to take up the topic of homosexuality, but it is important to remember that Strindberg’s focus remains on heterosexual marriage conventions.

To mitigate the riskiness of homosexuality and keep the focus on heterosexual marriage, Strindberg employs a formal structure built on multiple levels of narration, distancing and insulating authorial voice from the textual narrator, one similar to that found in Plato’s *Symposium*. Freddie Rokem (2010) observes:

Through this narrative technique – having one narrator present a report he has heard from another narrator – the dialogue is actually twice removed from the banquet [...]. This corresponds to how Plato relates to works of art as being twice removed (just like the second night) from the truth, being copies of copies. (Rokem 2010, 23)



In the opening scene in “Den brottsliga naturen,” an interlocutor, a doctor, is interviewing the lieutenant about life on board the ship. Though it is the interviewee and not the interlocutor who has raised the subject of same-sex eroticism, the format provides the framework for Strindberg to situate this interview as more of a confession, one that begins to intrigue the interlocutor, who has finally caught on, and now wants details. Strindberg’s interlocutor begins to coax a further confession out of the lieutenant by portraying himself as a naïf. Strindberg then introduces yet another level of distance as the lieutenant’s tale of same-sex eroticism is told as a flashback. Just as in Plato’s frame narrative, Strindberg becomes twice removed from his text.

Plato’s transcendental model of homoeroticism also conflicts with Strindberg’s other firm belief in the necessity of physical intimacy for a positive male self-image, and throughout “Den brottsliga naturen” it becomes increasingly difficult for Strindberg to portray this pederastic system as “natural” physical intimacy in relation to bourgeois marriage. Plato’s *Symposium* is based on an ancient Greek pederastic system far out of step with anything Strindberg can reconcile with the present, and as discussed earlier, Strindberg had an ongoing aversion to the concept as demonstrated in other works.<sup>21</sup> In “Den brottsliga naturen,” Strindberg allows physical desire to expose what Strindberg considers flaws in male same-sex relationships. The lieutenant confesses that as a young cadet on the frigate *Thor*, he received the attentions of the vessel’s chief. The chief tries to fulfill the pedagogical role of the *erastes*, and in language that echoes ancient Greek pederastic discourse, says that he intends “to supervise the boy’s education.”<sup>22</sup> He asks the cadet: “Will you become my pupil?”<sup>23</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 249) Things seem on track as the boy accepts and spends many hours in the chief’s cabin doing mathematics and logarithms, positioning this homoerotic relationship in the realm of science and reason. But the situation soon intensifies as the chief confesses: “You’ve a pleasing exterior, which should be a recommendation for you in your career. Do you know that you’re good looking?”<sup>24</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 251) The chief tries to get the cadet drunk and the chief’s desire for physical contact begins to run counter to Socrates’ vision of the ultimate

goal of a pederastic relationship. The tension between the chief and the cadet reaches its breaking point when, during a trigonometry lesson, the chief kisses the cadet, and the cadet laments: “Life, Nature, everything seemed to have turned black. Ugliness stood revealed and evil lurked behind her.”<sup>25</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 252)

### **Queer Failure and the Mimetic Fallacy**

If neither woman *nor* man reflect back the necessary self-image – even without the physical – then perhaps it is mimicry itself that is standing in the way of something greater? Strindberg may sense that whether one attempts to mimic self-image in a man or a woman, one remains trapped in gender binaries that separate rather than unite. There can be no “spiritual” union if one performs differentiated gender roles, or at least, the late 19<sup>th</sup> socially constructed bourgeois versions that Strindberg rejects in his preface to *Giftas I*. Undeniably, the discourse Strindberg uses to undermine same-sex desire is repugnant and harmful. It also appears as if Strindberg uses this available normative discourse to generate what contemporary queer theorists such as J. Halberstam (2011, 109) might identify as a presentation of “queer failure” in an attempt to think outside heteronormative “static models of success and failure.”

Strindberg recognizes in homoeroticism the same troubling gender dynamics and battle of wills that preoccupy him with regard to heterosexual relationships. Two of Strindberg’s favorite hyper-masculine figures – the military man and the doctor – find themselves not engaged in mutually beneficial self-reflection, but in a lopsided power dynamic in which one interviews the other and extracts a confession. There is the emasculating power dynamic between the chief and the cadet, further exacerbated by the chief’s surveillance and the cadet’s suspicion that “someone had his eyes fixed on me”<sup>26</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 248). All of these complications interrupt the ability of Strindberg’s male protagonist to mimetically self-construct using the reflection of another man, a failure literally represented by an actual mirror in the story. At the end of the lieutenant’s tale he describes the horror of this realization of mimetic failure as he is being hit on by the chief, saying: “At the same moment

I looked in the mirror opposite me. What I saw inspired me with as much horror as if I'd seen Nature turn herself inside out and show her repulsiveness."<sup>27</sup> (Strindberg 1972, 252) The homosexual relationship becomes as threatening to male-subjectivity as heterosexual marriage.

## Conclusion

It is possible to view the mimetic failure of same-sex attraction in this story not as a setback for Strindberg, but as a way toward his primary goal of a "spiritual" union that somehow transcends the limitations of bourgeois gender binaries and marriage convention built around those binaries. Queerness may provide a kind of tipping-point that reveals for Strindberg an over-reliance on mimicry in subjective self-construction and not enough emphasis on the notion of union or merging of souls. And in this observation, Plato's *Symposium* may provide one last crucial paradigm for Strindberg. Plato finds a way to transcend the tension between Aristophanes' and Socrates' opposing erotic speeches in the *Symposium*'s final lines, which take place the morning after the party. Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates have stayed up all night drinking and talking, and Aristodemus does not remember much except Socrates compelling them to learn to reconcile the arts of tragedy and comedy (Plato 2001, 286). Plato's *Symposium* implies that Socrates figures a way to "align and integrate the performative practices of both the tragic and the comic – represented by Agathon and Aristophanes – in order to reach totality and fullness" (Rokem 2010, 39–40), the impact of which is humorously lost on sleepy Aristodemus, but is a Herculean intellectual feat nonetheless in which the "riddle can be formulated in terms of an ongoing, dynamic dialectic between unity and multiplicity" (Rokem 2010, 45). Strindberg may have been wrestling with this dynamic throughout both volumes of *Giftas* as he attempts to construct his concept of "spiritual marriage" and the "union of souls."

Of course, in Strindberg's work, such success is invariably heterosexual and like many benchmarks, "measured by male standards" (Halberstam 2011, 134). Though Strindberg recognizes a mimetic failure in same-sex attraction, he uses this perceived "failure" not as a beginning

point for deconstructing hegemonic categories but as a reason for returning to the dream of an idealized version of heterosexuality. Queerness is an ideal that can only function through heterosexual, male terms of successful subjective self-perception. Despite these flaws, it appears at least as if Strindberg recognized the disruptive potential of non-normative sexualities and for envisioning deconstruction of discourses limited by heteronormative reproductive pressures, both of which continue to be critical nodes of contemporary analysis.

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## NOTES

1. All English translations from *Giftas I* and *II* are by Mary Sandbach (1972).
2. I-rist-på-bättre-teorin om samkönat begär. Novellen avslutas med ett resonemang, som relativiserar den heteronormativa synen på frågan om kön/sexualitet och öppnar för ett än mer radikalt synsätt.
3. De nya novellerna i *Giftas* äro grymma, utom i uttrycken, handla om pederasti och tribadi och alla mindre vanliga fall af “äktenskap”, så att det ej är värdt att sända Er dem.
4. Som Sokrates älskade Alcibiades. (Strindberg 1986, 191)
5. Äktenskapet endast under villkor av själarnas kompatibilitet, skall genom reciprocitet alstra ett nytt andligt jag, som icke kan differentieras såsom sexus. (Strindberg 1986, 203)
6. Själarnas harmoni, som Plato talar om. (Strindberg 1986, 203)
7. Har vårt äktenskap varit ett rätt äktenskap? Så måste jag ånger och blygsel erkänna, att det icke varit så!... Ha våra själar levat i denna harmoni om vilken Plato talar (Phaidon Bok VI kap. II para. 9). (Strindberg 1986, 127)
8. Though his citation may contain an error, Strindberg was familiar with the *Phaedro* and includes a citation to emphasize the importance of its contents (Strindberg 1972, 366).

9. Plato! Plato! Fy fan för Plato. Ja, när man är på sjön i sex månader, då är det Plato! (Strindberg 1986, 129)
10. En otäck Hermafrodit med icke så liten anslutning till Grecicismen. Det är sålunda barnen, som hålla hop äktenskapen. (Strindberg 1986, 19)
11. Låt oss se huru de "andra" djuren ha det. Hos de större däggdjuren med lika livslängd som människan, varar moderskapet ett eller två år... Kulturkvinnans missnöje med det långa moderskapet har sålunda något av natur i sig, och hennes skenbara opposition mot naturen är en opposition mot kulturen. (Strindberg 1986, 20)
12. Rätt till lika uppfostran med mannen. Flickan skall äga samma frihet att "gå lös" och välja sällskap var hon vill. Kvinnan skall hava rösträtt. (Strindberg 1986, 22–3)
13. Men nu kommer den stora bottenlösa frågan, om individen i samma stund han fortplantat sig, har skyldighet att uppge sin individualitet, att bli allt för barnen! I naturen, om vi skulle söka ett svar där, finnes väl icke vad vi kalla individualiteter. (Strindberg 1986, 19)
14. Tankarne ta sina egna vägar, och viljan går på egen hand, kryper över rättkänsla, hoppar över begrepp om moral, heder och allt det där. (Strindberg 1986, 186)
15. Men det finns andra skuggsidor i sjömannens liv, andra och alls icke friska. (Strindberg 1986, 186)
16. Jaså, ni har sådant ombord också. Man får så litet veta om det oaktat det är ett av det märkligaste av tidens företeelser, och ehuru det har funnit i alla tider. (Strindberg 1986, 186)
17. Det är alldeles oskyldigt, inte frågan om det, men symptomen likna bra mycket vad man kallar kärlek. Det är lika oskyldigt som den känsla vilken driver föräldrar att taga sina barn i famnen och kyssa dem. (Strindberg 1986, 192)
18. Säg icke att det är något nytt, onaturligt element som uppträder, det är samma natur, men som i brist på tillgång tar sig andra utvägar. (Strindberg 1986, 192)
19. Tror du att du har gjort någon upptäckt! (Strindberg 1986, 191)
20. Kan du säga vad som är rent och orent, kroppsligt eller andligt? (Strindberg 1986, 193)
21. The Greek pederastic model of homosexual desire goes terribly wrong in Strindberg's stories. In fact, the homoerotic situation deteriorates quickly in *Plato's own text*. At the conclusion of the *Symposium*, the figure of Alcibiades arrives, drunk and looking for a fight with Socrates. Jealous of the relationship between Socrates and Agathon, Alcibiades confesses that it is he, the *eromenos* or object of the beloved who has unashamedly pursued Socrates through his "plottings" (Plato 2001, 280) and desires an overtly sexual relationship, violating the ancient Greek pederastic code and opening himself to charges of being a *kinaidos* or feminized man.
22. Ta hand om denne gosse. (Strindberg 1986, 189)
23. Vill du bli min discipel? (Strindberg 1986, 189)

24. Du har ett yttre som skall rekommendera dig på din bana. Vet du att du ser bra ut? (Strindberg 1986, 190)
25. Livet, naturen, allt låg svart för mig... en skymt av det onda. (Strindberg 1986, 191)
26. Någon hade ögonen fästade på mig. (Strindberg 1986, 187)
27. I detsamma föllo mina blickar på spegeln mitt emot. Det jag då såg, ingav mig en sådan fasa som jag plötsligt sett naturen vända ut och in på sig och visa sig avig. (Strindberg 1986, 191)

## SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln använder samtida queerteori och ett platoniskt perspektiv, inspirerad av hänvisningar till klassisk diskurs i bägge volymerna av *Giftas*, som verktyg för att göra en omläsning av beskrivningar av samkönat begär i August Strindbergs *Giftas* (1884, 1886), i synnerhet en novell i *Giftas II*, ”Den brottsliga naturen”, för att ge ny förståelse för Strindbergs intresse för icke-normativa kategorier.

Artikeln undersöker möjligheten att Strindberg uppfattade icke-normativa sexualiteter som användbara i sina försök att frigöra sig epistemologiskt från de heteronormativa äktenskapskonventionernas band. Att förstå queerhetens förmåga att störa institutionell heteronormativitet tycks vara precis lika angeläget för samtida diskurser runt omvärderandet av hegemonier och system för kunskapsproduktion.

I bägge volymerna lyfter Strindberg fram det han kallar ”andligt äktenskap”, en förbindelse bortom borgerliga äktenskapskonventioner, som skapar ett utrymme där två människor kan få uppleva varandras sanna jag. Anspelningarna på Platon och annan förmodern diskurs ger Strindberg en transcendent modell av homoerotism, som kan bidra till förståelsen av Strindbergs begrepp ”andligt äktenskap” och förse oss med ett tänkbart sätt att placera in ”Den brottsliga naturen” – en berättelse om samkönat begär – i en större kontext av berättelser med focus på olikkönat äktenskap.

Artikeln hävdar inte att dekonstruerandet av heteronormativiteten som sådan någonsin var Strindbergs verkliga mål, inte heller söker den rehabilitera vare sig misogynin eller appropriering av queerhet för att brottas med heterosexuell begär. Strindberg filtrerar detta utforskande av queerhet genom sin privilegierade position som en vit, ciskönad man som kan appropriera ett queert perspektiv när det passar hans projekt att rekonstruera en mer tillfredsställande version av det heterosexuella äktenskapet. Emellertid är Strindbergs eventuella erkännande av queerhetens potential för att störa heteronormativa konventioner och föreställa sig samtida framtider fria från dessa konventioner, lika kontroversiellt i dag som det var i hans egen tid.