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The presence of the past: ideology and royal power in Strindberg's play *Folkungasagan*¹

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In Sweden's cultural history, the period between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries is marked by a lively discussion of the relationship between the past and the present as part of a process of construction of the national identity. The aim of such cultural operation was primarily the celebration of the national glory, which was backed up at that time by a growing nationalism that interpreted history, and especially the achievements of the ancestors, in ideological terms. The breakthrough of industrial society that took place in Sweden from the 1850s on and brought it to leading positions among industrialised countries was indeed a rapid change, one that was accompanied by a reflection on the roots of the Swedish

¹ The present essay draws partly on a previously published essay (Bampi, 2011) on Strindberg's *Folkungasagan*.

kingdom and its development throughout the centuries². Among the intellectuals that contributed to the discussion on the use of the past to shape and found the present, August Strindberg was without any doubt a major name, surely the most controversial one. As is widely known, history and its role in the present have no doubt been a major theme in his œuvre since his debut as a playwright, when he wrote *Mäster Olof* (*Master Olof*) in 1872, as well as in some of his prose works, among which one should name at least *Svenska Folket* (*The Swedish People*, 1882) and *Svenska öden och äventyr* (*Swedish destinies and adventures*, 1882-1891), which were both devoted to the history of Sweden.

In 1899 he published *Folkungasagan* (*The Saga of the Folkungs*), which inaugurated a series of historical plays (Wikander, 2009; Zander, 2001: 109-115) dedicated to various epochs of national history. This play deals with the so-called *Folkungatiden* (1250-1389), a crucial time in Swedish history, one characterized by fierce internal struggles for power but also by significant achievements regarding the transformation of the country into a well-organized kingdom, ruled by fair laws³. The aim of this paper is to illustrate how royal power is presented in *Folkungasagan* and how its representation relates to the ideological debate on power and national prestige in Strindberg's own time.

When Strindberg, almost twenty years after *Mäster Olof*, returned to the historical drama at the end of the 1890s, his thoughts on Swedish history and on the modalities of its representation had changed quite radically if compared to the ideas he had expressed both in *Mäster Olof* and in some prose works from the 1880s (e.g.: *Gamla Stockholm*, from 1882, and *Svenska öden och äventyr*). Whereas in the 1880s he declared, in

sharp contrast to the position of established scholars such as E. G. Geijer⁴, that his aim was to write the history of Sweden from the viewpoint of its people, rather than from that of its kings, when he started his new project of historical dramas at the turn of the century, he chose to illustrate the main events in the development of the Swedish monarchy through the fates of some of its most relevant representatives, thus bringing again kings and regents to the fore. This radical change of Strindberg's viewpoint on the representation of history should not surprise. It is a well-known fact that he changed his mind on a broad palette of themes throughout his turbulent literary career and it bears witness to his outstanding nature as an intellectual, who was always experimenting with novel – and consciously controversial – viewpoints. His philosophy of history was no doubt one of the pillars of his architecture of ideas and thoughts and, like any other aspect in Strindberg's artistic endeavours, was strictly linked with his own life, which was no doubt one of sharp contradictions and contrasts. As will be shown later on, his interest in the fate of some prominent figures of Swedish history had also autobiographical roots.

In an essay originally published in Germany in 1903, entitled *Ur några förord till historiska dramerna* (*From some prefaces to the historical dramas*), Strindberg made explicit his attempt to describe people in each single aspect of their life, keeping history as background. To him, it was essential to avoid the undramatic form of the chronicle. For this reason, he pointed out, he decided to shorten the historical periods «according to the needs of modern theatre» (*efter nutidens teaterns fördringar*; Stam, 1999: 196). Most importantly, he acknowledged

⁴ Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783-1847) was a key figure in Sweden's cultural history during the first half of the 19th century. In addition to being an admired poet, he was one of the most influential historians of his time. According to him, the history of Sweden was the history of its monarchs. On Strindberg's reaction to Geijer's position see Zander (2001: 77).

² On the ideological use of history in Sweden from the 19th century to the present see Zander (2001).

³ For a presentation of the structure and the major themes of *Folkungasagan* see Lindström (1966).

Shakespeare as a major model for his cycle of historical dramas (Steene, 1959).

Although Strindberg's decision to focus on some major royal figures partly disavows his commitment to write a new kind of history from the perspective of the Swedish people, the later historical plays do in fact retain some elements derived from his earlier thoughts on history. As Massimo Ciaravolo points out:

Strindberg's later historical plays adopt the democratic standpoint of *Svenska Folket* and *Svenska öden och äventyr* as one of their elements, and the voice and position of the lower class constantly accompany the main and, so to speak, royal course of events unfolding on stage. (2009: 159)

This is also true of *Folkungasagan*, where comments – mostly negative ones – on the behaviour of the king and prominent members of the court are put in the mouth of the common people who surround the world of Magnus's court.

It is of crucial importance in order to understand the philosophy of history⁵ underlying Strindberg's historical dramas from the late 1890s-early 1900s the so-called *Inferno crisis*, a deep spiritual crisis that marked Strindberg's existence from 1894 to 1897 and that brought about a revolution in his own worldview, including the ideas about the relationship between the human being and the Other World. In particular, the oeuvre of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)⁶ provided Strindberg with what appeared to him as a revealing explanation of the ties

⁵ For a discussion of Strindberg's philosophy of history and its development see Svensson (*Världshistorien*, especially 69-165).

⁶ One of the most influential Swedish intellectual of all time, Emanuel Swedenborg is known mostly for his writings about his mystical experiences. In his *Journal of Dreams* («Drömboken») he claimed a direct spiritual vision of the spiritual world. He wrote a number of books of religious revelations, among which *Arcana coelestia* (1749-1756) is probably the most relevant one.

between the earthly existence and the world of divine powers, as Strindberg used to call them. Hence, in Strindberg's works from the end of the 1890s, the course of history is determined by the intervention of Providence. The fact that kings and regents regain a central position in his historical plays after the revolutionary plans embodied by the publication of *Svenska folket* can be understood on the grounds that through the representation of their fates the providentialist plan of history becomes most obvious. Furthermore, it is on kings, and through them, that Providence shapes the fate of nations⁷: a topical theme in the cultural debate that took place in Sweden at the turn of the 20th century.

The main figure in *Folkungasagan* is King Magnus Eriksson (1316-1374), known mostly as the king who introduced for the first time a national law code – the so-called *Magnus Erikssons landslag* – around 1350 (Nordberg, 1995). Based on the fierce criticism levelled against the king by Saint Birgitta, the judgement that Swedish historiography passed on his reign was by and large a negative one. The byname *smeke* («carse») by which he became known is indicative of such a negative judgement: indeed, the lack of temperament to which the byname refers does not suit a *rex iustus*, whose main characteristic was, amongst others, that of being firm and resolute in exercising his power.

In writing *Folkungasagan* Strindberg's aim was to re-evaluate King Magnus Eriksson. To this purpose, he used mostly popularizing sources⁸ to portray his own Magnus,

⁷ After the publication of *Historiska miniatyurer* («Historical miniatures», a collection of short stories), in 1905, a clear turn is discernable in Strindberg's interest in history, with the focus moving away from strictly national history to world history.

⁸ Strindberg drew largely on popularizing sources such as *Berättelser ur svenska historien* («Stories from Swedish history», 1885) by Carl Georg Starbäck, Arvid August Afzelius's *Svenska Folkeets Sago-Häjder eller Fädernlandets Historia* («The tradition of the Swedish people or the

referring to such events was important to explain the course of Magnus's fate.

The theme of royal power as articulated in this play can be analysed at two different levels, which are intertwined with each other: on the one side, how royal power is represented in its medieval form (in this play) and on other how this representation contributed to the discussion on the roots of the Swedish monarchy at the end of the 19th century. Two interrelated dimensions are discernable in the representation of power in *Folkungasagan*: a horizontal dimension, which involves the characters surrounding the king and their roles, and a vertical dimension, which regards how the intervention of Providence affects the course of Magnus's reign and his life, both as a king and as a Christian.

Let us start from the horizontal dimension. Following Shakespeare's model, Strindberg paid special attention to describing the net of plots hatched by members of Magnus's court to undermine his power as regent. Those who are most active in scheming against him are his mother Ingiborg and her lover, Duke Knut Porse, and Magnus's own son Erik. Other relevant figures are Queen Blanche of Namur and her lover, Bengt Algotson. Furthermore, Brigitta, a figure clearly modelled after Saint Birgitta, plays a central role as the king's fiercest detractor. In Saint Birgitta's *Revelations*⁹, there are plentiful references to King Magnus's reign in the form of fierce attacks. The play describes King Magnus at the peak of his power¹⁰: the conquest of Scania, the victory over the Russian army and the taking of the Finnish town of Nöteborg, the liberation of slaves and the promulgation of the national law code are amongst his most important

⁹ Saint Birgitta (1303-1373), a medieval Swedish visionary. Her religious visions were collected in eight books in Latin (the so-called *Revelationes celestes*), which were widely circulated in Europe from the end of the 15th onwards.

¹⁰ This is true of other historical plays, e.g. *Gustav Vasa*.

thus taking distance from the position of academic historiography, which he openly opposed. Strindberg, though, does not depict the king only in positive terms. Indeed, some of the traits that are part of the established idea of the king's temperament are present in *Folkungasagan*. Such negative traits, however, are pointed out by some of the characters that surround the king, from common people to members of the king's court. For example, Brigitta says that the king lacks humility (Ollén, 1992: 58), and Ingiborg, Magnus's mother, accuses him of not being able to act (Ollén, 1992: 36). All these judgements are put in the mouth of figures that Strindberg portrays in a negative way.

It must be borne in mind that historical accuracy was no doubt not Strindberg's main goal (Ollén, 1992: 481). Let it suffice to say, by way of example, that the Knut Porse who plays such major role at Magnus's court in *Folkungasagan* is known historically to have died some years before Magnus's birth. As Birgitta Steene points out:

[...] like all good dramatists, both Shakespeare and Strindberg used their sources as seemed most relevant to their artistic purposes. They altered old events, telescoped historical time, and changed biographical facts when this was demanded by dramatic expediency. (Steene, 1959: 211)

The events described in *Folkungasagan* span a period from the 1320s to around 1365. Furthermore, violent events from an earlier period are hinted at in the play since to Strindberg

history of the fatherland», 1839-1842), *Berättelser ur svenska historien* («Stories from Swedish history», 1823) by Anders Fryxell and the *Lämbok i Sveriges, Norges och Danmarks historia för skolans högre klasser* («Handbook of the history of Sweden, Norway and Denmark for high schools», 1880) by Clas Theodor Odhner. However, it has been demonstrated that Strindberg also read scholarly material in order to write *Folkungasagan* (Zander, 2001: 109). For a discussion of all sources of *Folkungasagan* see Ollén (1992: 477-481).

achievements. All of a sudden, fate turns it back on him, and his downfall appears relentless. The king is at a loss to explain the reasons for this sudden turn. He is offered an explanation by two female figures: one of them is a minor character in the play, a woman called «the possessed», the other one is Birgitta:

DEN BESÄTTA – Du har blod i kronan, kung Magnus! men du är utan skuld, att rikets laglige tronföljare Magnus Birgersson blev halshuggen. Du *måste* gå upp på tronen över hans döda kropp, du har Folkungablod i din purpur [...]. Stackars lamm, du lever bland ulvar och drakar, men din oskyldighets ljus bländar dig så du ser endast skenet av din egen. (Ollén, 1992: 35)

THE POSSESSED – You have got blood on your crown, King Magnus! Yet it is not your fault that the lawful heir to the throne Magnus Birgersson was beheaded. You had to ascend the throne over his dead body, you have got the blood of the Folkungs in your purple. Poor lamb, you live among wolves and dragons, but the light of your innocence blinds you to the point that you see only the shine of your purity¹¹.

MAGNUS – Kan du säga mig, varför på en kort tid Herren synes ha tagit sin hand ifrån mig och alla övergiva mig?

BIRGITTA – [...] Den kedja av Folkungabrott som börjar med mordet vid Herrevadsbro och slutar med Håtuna och Nyköping skall med dig utsonas och du skall bli den sista Folkungen på tronen! [...] [D]u är den förste som i det fallet är ren, och försoningsoffret skall vara utan fläck och lyte. (*idem*: 51-52)

MAGNUS – Can you tell me why the Lord in a short time seems to have taken his hand from me, and everyone is now leaving me?

BIRGITTA – [...] The chain of crimes made by the Folkungs that begins with the murder at Herrevadsbro and ends with Håtuna and Nyköping will be expiated with you, and you will be the last Folkung on the throne! [...] You are the first in this story

¹¹ All translations from the Swedish text are mine.

who is pure, and the propitiatory sacrifice must be without stain and faults.

The events mentioned by Birgitta (Herrevadsbro, Håtuna and Nyköping) are among the bloodiest ones in Swedish history between the middle of the 13th century and the first half of the following one (Schück, 2003). In 1251, at Herrevadsbro, Birger Jarl suppressed by way of violence a revolt organised by some of his opponents, known as the true Folkungs (*äkta Folkungar*; Line, 2007: 409-505). In 1306, at Håtuna, the dukes Erik and Valdemar imprisoned their brother Birger. As an act of revenge, years later Birger invited his brothers to a banquet at Nyköping, had them imprisoned and let them starve in the dungeons. The beheading of the rightful successor to the throne, Magnus Birgersson, in 1320, is thus to be understood as an act of revenge for his father's wicked deeds and represents a further link in the chain of violent deeds that mark the Folkung dynasty. To Strindberg, Magnus Eriksson is thus the only one who can expiate the guilt of his predecessor. In this way, Magnus acquires christological traits in Strindberg's portrait (Svensson, 2000: 166). In other words, the king's suffering is made to resemble the sacrifice of Jesus Christ: like him, Magnus has to bear the burden of others' sins¹².

In *Folkungsgagan* it is made clear that the parable of King Magnus and his sudden downfall are thus ultimately determined by divine will. This leads us to the vertical dimension of the representation of power and its ties with the horizontal one. All the people that act, more or less overtly, against the king are in truth blind instruments of a higher will. In other words, they act out the purposes of the divine will on the horizontal level, which has its centre at the court.

¹² The theme of *satisfactio vicaria* is expressed not only in the king's destiny but also, according to Birgitta Steene, «in the very movement of the play – the strong ritualistic elements in the plague scene, the choral singing, Birgitta's and the maniac's prophecies» (Steene, 1959: 214).

The reason behind Strindberg's interest in Magnus's fate is strictly linked to the playwright's own biography and his own concept of history after the crisis culminated in the publication of *Inferno*. Indeed, Strindberg clearly identified himself with him and his fate of suffering and sorrow that was in many respects similar to the one that Strindberg thought was his own. This identification is not limited to the case of Magnus. As Michael Robinson points out, «history offers [Strindberg] a series of plots or scenarios through which he establishes the contours of his life» (1990: 60). If history, both national¹³ and universal, proved on the one side an almost unquenchable source of inspiration and identification for Strindberg, on the other it was conceived by him as a huge play itself. The theatricality of history (Robinson, 1990: 61) thus made the elaboration of stories in dramatic form quite suitable for Strindberg's own purposes. In *Folkungasagan*, the fate of the king is understandable, in Strindberg's eyes, only by looking back at the past, i.e. by considering the whole story of Magnus and the Folkung dynasty. Towards the end of the play, the bloody course of the Folkung dynasty, of which Magnus is the last representative, is summoned up by the King as follows:

Den har visserligen varit ett starkt redskap i Försynens hand och fått ordna riket, stifta lag och göra ett kristet kungadöme av det förut så trasiga arma landet. Men Herren begagnar smutsiga redskap ibland – varför? Det få vi icke veta. (Ollén, 1992: 138)

¹³ «Swedish history as a whole or in its constituent parts as the Vasa Saga or the Saga of the Folkungs, offers him a canvas of some seven and a half centuries through which to explore the possibility of a causal pattern amidst the complex detail of sometimes apparently chaotic and discontinuous events» (Robinson, 1990: 62). Since a thorough discussion of this theme would no doubt exceed the limits of the present article, it is safe to assert, albeit in somewhat reductive terms, that Strindberg's project can be described as an attempt at trying to find a pattern in history.

It [the Folkungs] has certainly been a strong tool in the hands of Providence in that they managed to establish the kingdom, make laws and turn what was a tattered and poor country into a monarchy. Yet the Lord sometimes uses dirty tools – why? This we are not allowed to know.

This is a crucial passage in the play as it provides a link to the present of Strindberg's time. Indeed, Magnus's words interpret the role of the Folkung dynasty as a positive one, despite all the bloodshed, and, above all, traces the origins of the Swedish monarchy to the time of the Folkungs. Before that, according to King Magnus, the country was poor and tattered. Given the identification of Strindberg with King Magnus, we are led to believe that the king's words reflect Strindberg's point of view. If on one side it is true that, as Ciaravolo observes,

the making of Sweden as a united and strong nation, governed by fair laws, appears as nothing less than the fulfilment of a divine will, of which both Magnus Eriksson in the 14th and Gustav Vasa in the 16th century are [...] special tools, (Ciaravolo, 2009: 159)

it is nevertheless interesting to note that Strindberg decided to bring to the fore the difficulties and the tensions from which the construction of the monarchy originated. Furthermore, royal power is represented as depending entirely on divine will, and thus as an ephemeral power which is subject to a superior entity¹⁴. The reflection on royal power

¹⁴ In an article entitled *Världshistoriens mystik* («The mysticism of world history», 1903) God is described by Strindberg as follows: «Den store syntesten, som förenar motsättningarna, löser motsägelsema, uppehåller jämvikten, är ingen människa och kan icke vara annat än den osynlige lagstiftaren, som i frihet ändrar lagarna efter ändrade förhållanden: skaparen, upplösaren och upprätthållaren, han må sedan kallas – vad som helst» (Svensson, 2004: 55) («The great synthesist who unites the opposites, resolves the contradictions and maintains this balance, is no human being and can be no other than the invisible legislator who alters the laws in freedom according to altered circumstances: the creator, the

as embodied by Magnus and his story gains significance especially if one considers the nationalistic impulse that drives the ideologisation of the past at the end of the 19th century in Sweden. Indeed, there is no trace of idealised heroism in Strindberg's Magnus. The very choice of writing a play on a royal figure that had been largely marginalised in Swedish historiography bears witness to Strindberg's intent to keep himself distant from the blindly celebratory tones that characterised much of the cultural debate on the heritage of the past when *Folkungasagan* was published. The heroism of Magnus as depicted by Strindberg is of a different kind: it is about accepting a higher will's design and enduring the lashes of destiny, both as a human being and as king of Sweden. Hence, with *Folkungasagan* Strindberg offers to his contemporaries a story that is, amongst other things, about the limits of royal power and about the frailty of human destiny. At the same time he warns them of the fact that the course of history, the life of individuals as well as the destiny of nations, are still governed by the divine will. The past, then, serves both as a *memento* and as a mirror for the present.

dissolver and preserver he may then be called – what you will» (Wikander, 2009: 123).

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