

**Publisher's Note to the English Translation of *Theories***

The first Swedish edition of *Theories* was the result of the amiable cooperative efforts in Sweden of literary scholar Christina Sjöblad at the University of Lund and Bokförlaget Jungfrun in the Stockholm suburb of Tullinge. It was published in 1988 and was followed by a world premiere of Victoria Benedictsson's own text at a Stockholm student theater on April 14, 1989.

Since then other amateur theater groups in Sweden have also done the play, which however still awaits its premiere in a professional theater.

We are still of the opinion that this comedy is well worth playing today, with its sharp wit and disillusioned -- and comic! - view of the relationship between women and men, in different ages and social classes.

Finally, it may be worth pointing out that *Theories* is set in a time more than thirty years before women got the right to vote in Sweden!

Sara Granath/Lilian Goldberg

## ***Theories* - Victoria Benedictsson's "Some Words to My Dear Daughter..."**

It doesn't happen every day that a forgotten text of one of our classics is rediscovered. And that such a text proves to exist in practically publishable condition is surely even more uncommon. But Victoria Benedictsson left a great number of sketches, drafts, and half-finished manuscripts at her death in 1888. Axel Lundegård, her friend and author colleague, inherited these drafts and the right to use them in any way he saw fit. After he reworked and published a great number of them, the collection was acquired, with the help of Fredrik Bök, by Lund University Library, where it serves the basis of the Ernst Ahlgren Archives.

It was during my years of work editing Benedictsson's diaries, *Stora boken* (The Big Book), volumes 1-3 (1978-1985), that I found the manuscripts for the farce *Theories* and started to investigate the reasons for the play's fate, its conception, writing, and ultimate assignment to oblivion. It is a story that is closely linked to Victoria Benedictsson's own life during her last year.

In the Ernst Ahlgren Archives two manuscripts of the play are preserved:

-- one with Benedictsson's handwriting and with a great many changes by Axel Lundegård. His changes primarily affect Act One and are fortunately made in violet ink so they can be distinguished from Benedictsson's own corrections and cuts.

-- a second manuscript in a fair copy by Mrs. Horten, Benedictsson's Danish translator. This manuscript contains some Danishisms and writing errors, but it has been possible to use as a check for Act One -- in which it seems to agree with Benedictsson's own text, before

Lundegård got at it. It is this first version that is the basis for this printing.

Axel Lundegård states very briefly in a note in his edition of Benedictsson's *Dagboksblad och brev* (Diary Pages and Letters), volumes 1-2 (1928), that "The farce *Theories* was revised by me into *Pyramus and Thisbe* which was presented by the Swedish Theater in 1890." Lundegård, whose comments are usually extensive, is uncommonly terse in mentioning this. It is difficult to sense what lies behind this, except the disappointment one suspects over the lack of success.

However, it is possible to establish a few more facts: the plays was performed at the Swedish Theater at Blasieholmen in Stockholm from August 26 to September 7, 1889 (not '90). Georg Nordensvan reports briefly in his history *Svensk Teater* (Swedish Theater) that the theater season of 1889 was introduced by two Swedish pieces, *Pyramus och Thisbe* (Pyramus and Thisbe) by Ernst Ahlgren and Axel Lundegård and *Biltog* (Outlawed) by Edvard Fredin, neither of which was successful. The circumstances at the theater, which was to be used as a provisional opera stage during the construction of the new Stockholm opera, were evidently exceptionally muddled. "It happened that the theater's management and others in charge stayed away, and the rehearsals came to a halt.

The preserved manuscript for *Pyramus and Thisbe* also shows that it was a completely revised play that Lundegård had presented. The play *Theories* was not printed in Benedictsson's *Samlade skrifter* (Collected Writings), volume 1-7 (1918-20), and the scholars -- insofar as they have noted it at all -- have ignored it. This silence, in my opinion, can be attributed to the fact that the comedy is in several respects difficult to place in Benedictsson's oeuvre during the last years of her life. It doesn't agree with the image of "the genius of the 1880s," "the Ibsen heroine," or "the tragic Muse" -- the image that her contemporaries were already starting to paint and which later was completed by the scholarship and writing of literary history. And it certainly may appear

remarkable that this author who was occasionally deeply depressed would write a farce during the last year of her life. She pokes fun here at the marriage question and the women's cause at the same time that, in her diary, *The Big Book*, she complains about her feelings of inferiority and about the misfortune of being born a woman and curses the uncertainty in her relation to Georg Brandes, the man she loves. The farce is written just before she begins the dark drama *Den bergtagna* (Spellbound) and the problem novel *Modren* (The Mother). This may appear contradictory, and, undeniably, it does seem remarkable to go from the painful and touching outbursts of *The Big Book* to the light, playful dialogue of the farce.

*Theories* is set in the summer of 1887 in a little Swedish bathing resort. The action, that is, occurs in the same year that the play was written. Under the playful surface there are variations of three main themes: "He believes in Strindberg and she believes in woman," as Dr. Sanderson says of Möller and Miss Widerman. "A new religion appears to have developed here in this country!" Benedictsson is calling attention here to what she sees as an unfortunate division of men and women into two hostile camps.

"Dick has enlightened me," says Hortense to her rediscovered father -- i.e., about the realities of love. Hortense doesn't believe in the stork, as her mother did, when she got married. And thirdly: honesty. "Dick has told me everything" about possible earlier love relationships, especially significant during the 1880s, when syphilis, this AIDS of the 1880s, was so widespread and not seldom brought to the marriage by the husbands, as often, in middle age, they married young girls. These three themes appear throughout Benedictsson's authorship; time and again they are expressed in variation and reappear in a new light.

When Benedictsson selects the dramatic form to discuss issues of women and marriage, she is completely in accord with the times. The drama during the 1870s and 1880s had of course, as never before, become the place where social discussion was conducted. Ibsen, Bjørnson, Strindberg, Anna Charlotta Edgren Leffler, and Alfild Agrell

were far from the only Nordic authors who took up the problems of contemporary society in dramatic form. And she herself had already written drama earlier, for example *Final* (Final) and *I telefon* (On the Telephone).

In this connection it can also be pointed out that Benedictsson's prose is largely dialogical, and she was aware that she had a strong point in her swift, natural dialogue. On the other hand, it may seem surprising that she selects the comedy form to deal with a question that she viewed with great seriousness, when one knows too that she sometimes was profoundly depressed during the last years of her life. We also know that the remainder of what she wrote during the same period has a predominantly dark tone.

But surely one of her reasons for choosing the comedy was that she wanted to reach out to as many people as possible -- and to ordinary folks, not only book-reading intellectuals. In several places she has emphasized that she wanted to write for those who go to the theater in order to find diversion from daily labor. This was certainly one of the reasons that she wanted to get the play performed at the Swedish Theater rather than at the Royal Dramatic Theater.

Benedictsson had been increasingly interested in the theater during her visits to Stockholm and Copenhagen starting in 1885 and after, when for long periods she could go to the theater every evening. "If I'm not invited out or have company, I go to the theater," she writes to Georg Brandes.

In the spring of 1887 she visited Paris for two months, and in her calendar one can determine that during this time she saw twenty-three plays and two opera performances. During this spring she also read Shakespeare's comedies.

Among her favorite authors in Paris were Molière and Musset. She writes in her calendar:

- 21 April We saw *L'Avare* plus *Il ne faut jurer de rien*. Funny, beyond all description, funny.
- 22 April Saw *Francillon* by Dumas. As long as I go to the theater, I am happy, just fine.
- 24 April Saw *Numa Roumestan* by A. Daudet. Numa was excellent. I really enjoyed it. One of the most pleasant evenings.

It can be pointed out that the unusual female name Hortense, given to the leading character in *Theories*, appears in Daudet's play. Here too it is the name of a young woman who achieves a union between two spouses who had separated on account of the husband's infidelity.

Victoria Benedictsson, in other words, has an extensive fund of positive theater experiences behind her in the summer of 1887 when she begins her first draft of *Theories*. And it is largely comedies and French salon pieces that she had enjoyed in the last six months.

When, after great hesitation, Benedictsson ventures into the sexual morality debate with this comedy, she enters into a dialogue with the Nordic authors of the day. Are there any direct or indirect allusions then to others' works?

In the first act Miss Widerman goes in to Mrs. Bertold and tells of her admiration for her in the following way:

[Admiration] is exactly the word. Your moral requirements, the sense of your own human value -- Tell me, weren't you a *Nora* before Ibsen's *Doll's House* was written? Oh! Why, you were a *Svava* before we got Bjørnson's *Gauntlet!* Then why shouldn't I say I admire you!

Of course, it was in Bjørnson's drama *En handske* (A Gauntlet) that Svava stated the requirement that men should be as pure sexually as

women when they enter into marriage -- precisely the requirement that the moral purity ladies in the play advocate. And, of course, Mrs. Bertold got a divorce from her husband on account of his earlier way of life.

In her play *Theories* Benedictsson writes in the main tradition of the problem literature of the 1880s, but the seriousness is gone -- at least on the surface. The moral purity ladies are a ridiculous troop who base their theories on arguments alien to reality: we are faraway from the indignation and pathos of Ibsen and Bjørnson. And rather, Benedictsson, with her savage humor, enters into dialogue with Strindberg, especially the Strindberg who had written *Getting Married I and II*.

Benedictsson's chief spokesperson in *Theories* is Hortense, and it is her final words that linger, when the curtain falls: "Dinner is served -- with *my* menu." She stands for the wholesome and positive alternative that is close to reality, it is she who, together with Dick, represents the future. This is also alluded to in one of her replies to her mother: "Yes, for I am a little duckling, and the dearest, most precious little hen has hatched me." She is to be turned into a swan and to leave the duck pond.

In the first act there is an enlightening discussion between her and her mother, who has got into the claws of the sexual morality league. (HORTENSE: Poor little mother! Sit down here now. -- *Places her at the breakfast table and serves coffee.* -- MRS. BERTOLD: Thank you, child. How the mistress of the house spoils me. Have some yourself. - - *Pause* -- You ought to read something, Hortense. There are so many good books coming out these days. That elevate the morals of woman, etc, etc.) Behind this dialogue echoes a well-known Swedish poem. Anna Maria Lenngren's "Some Words to My Dear Daughter, If I Had One," from the end of the 1700s.

With reading do not waste the time,  
Our gender scarcely needs it,

And shall you read, do make it short  
To keep the sauce from boiling o'er

A polished wit, enlightened soul,  
Oh, would that books could give it!  
My child, do study well the world,  
It gives you ample food for thought.

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See this mother ensconced at home,  
Who knows to guard her one true call,  
She's quite content with the ambition  
To be a worthy mother and mate.

Work. Be happy and diligent. Tend to your husband and your house.  
Don't brood, speak happily and be clear! This is how one can  
summarize the domestic advice in an often discussed poem.

Victoria Benedictsson represents a Lenngren-like ideal daughter to our  
eyes, and here instead it is the mother who tries to get her to read more  
of the period's problem literature and who finds the daughter a little  
too energetic at the sauce pot and baking board.

One can compare this with an episode in the third act, when Miss  
Widerman asks Hortense if she reads Max Nordau, the German-Jewish  
culture critic whose book *Konventionella nutidslögner* (Conventional  
Contemporary Lies) was translated into Swedish in 1884 and a  
chapter of which is entitled precisely "The Marriage Lie." But the  
answer Miss Widerman receives is impudent:

I don't concern myself with society's problems. --  
I don't need to get my opinions out of books.  
*Life* has something to teach us too. It's *Hagdahl*,  
Sweden's favorite cookbook, that's going to help me  
keep my husband's love.

Hagdahl had in 1879 published the cookbook that quickly became a classic: *Kokkonsten som vetenskap och konst* (The Art of Cooking as Science and Art). Hortense does not waste her time on reading, she is completely satisfied educating herself to be a wife and mother, and one can pose the question: Is *Theories* Benedictsson's "Some Words to My Dear Daughter...?"

A third area of intertextuality is to be found in Benedictsson's other writing. How can *Theories* be fit into this context, how does the comedy relate to or stand in opposition to Benedictsson's other works? Thematically the links backward and forward are evident. *Theories*, like both *Money* and *Madame Marianne*, deals with

- love and marriage
- relations between mother and daughter
- relations between engaged individuals and married spouses
- the upbringing and education of girls
- the woman's role.

These themes are also taken up in the spring of 1888 in *Spellbound* and *The Mother*.

In *Madame Marianne* the spoiled, novel-reading main character is obliged after her marriage to learn from her mistakes and to start to build up a life more suited to reality.

In *Theories* we meet a young woman who already knows from the start what she wants and who stands up for it. In fact, she shares many qualities with the candid and self-assured Selma in the novel *Money*. It is no thanks to the mother that Hortense is so reasonable; on the contrary, the young woman has learned everything about baking and cooking by allying herself with the housekeeper Sanna. "Since the mistress has got it into her head," says Sanna in the first act, "that she wants to learn to cook, we're supposed to experiment with everything, just so she can see it."

These two industrious, clever women are placed partly in opposition to the passive and sickly mother, in part to the silly discussions and theorizing of the idle moral purity ladies. Hortense is also naturally humorous sometimes with her youthfully confident statements. But at the same time she radiates self-esteem and the joy of life. Benedictsson has made her the central figure and driving force of the play.

The apron that Marianne eventually ties on in the novel -- the symbol for her active new life -- Hortense already has on when we first meet her in Act One: "*HORTENSE dressed in a white apron and with rolled-up sleeves. Tips a dish of granulated sugar in the bowl, while Sanna goes on stirring.*" In the first act she bakes buns and sponge cake, in Act Two she waters flowers and prepares and serves a sumptuous dinner, in Act Three she sits crocheting lace and plans and prepares the final banquet. Benedictsson has programmatically indicated certain areas in which young girls should be active. In the period that Gunnar Ahlström appropriately called "the sad golden age of antimacassars," Benedictsson has the main character refrain from such traditional young women's occupations as piano playing, watercolor painting, and novel reading and learn useful things instead. Here is an evident criticism of bourgeois girls' upbringing and an affiliation with the values of the working and peasant class.

In *Theories* Benedictsson presents two types of women and two types of men. On the one hand we have Hortense. She is life-affirming and wholesomely sensual. Jette Lundbo Levy has pointed out that Benedictsson distinguishes between wholesome and unhealthy sensuality. In opposition to Hortense is Miss Widerman, the man-hating woman who is hostile to life, who with her theories about pure men and women tries to control the threat of a life of the instincts. The motto of the women's league is: "The superiority of woman will subdue the inclinations of man." She represents the negative pole to Hortense, "the angel of the house."

It is in the polarization between the affirmation of life and denial of life that one of the main motifs of the farce, food and eating, has its place. Good food becomes a symbol for the enjoyment and sensuality that life has to offer, and it is affirmed by the young people while Miss Widerman denies that it is anything essential. At the same time, through her preoccupation with cooking and baking, Hortense is bound to a traditional woman's role. Mrs. Bertold is also described at first as a "nun" and a "heathen," being skinny and dressed in black, but when she has come under the salutary influence of the massage doctor, Sanna is pleased to comment that she looks young and attractive. About Miss Widerman, on the other hand, there is a funereal air: she "looks like she doesn't begrudge herself food." Through the joint contributions of Hortense and Sanderson, Mrs. Bertold is rescued to the right side, affirming life.

Among the men both of these types are also represented. Dick and Sanderson both stand for wholesome sensuality. Dick's closeness to nature and animals reinforces this. He is going to be a farmer, of course, and is tormented by the idleness at the bathing resort. Sanderson, by virtue of his profession, has power over nature. "If I just look at him, it seems to have a calming effect," says Mrs. Bertold. And he observes with pleasure that his ex-wife is much changed, "and now, she obeys -- she does everything I tell her!" Sanderson breaks down the walls of his ex-wife's defense, and she leaves her ascetic life relieved.

But there are also two manly counterparts to Miss Widerman, and one of them is old Möller who has become a woman hater since he overindulged in women. He has driven away his housekeeper who tyrannized him and now sighs his way through the failed attempts of his incompetent cook. Möller reinforces himself with quotations from Strindberg's *Getting Married II* and exclamations of the sort: Bread is dough, "just dough that rejects of cooks have sunk their fists into!" But his gourmandise makes him a pickpocket, and he steals buns and steak from his nephew's pockets. Here too food stands for enjoyment

and sexuality: Möller may repudiate them outwardly, but he cannot refrain from them.

There is another man who is hostile to life. Mr. Appelman stands on the side of the women's league and praises morally pure men. He is portrayed as a sluggish, unmanly, comical figure and stumbles about, to everyone's amusement.

Then is Hortense to be seen as a male fantasy, staged by Benedictsson? Certainly she is the happy, active angel of the house, which she actually calls herself at the end of the farce. But she is indeed far too active and too full of initiative to be able to represent an uncomplicated ideal for men in the 1800s. And she is far too anti-intellectual to be interpreted as Victoria Benedictsson's own ideal woman.

Which values is it then that Benedictsson is defining here? She presents a young woman who in many ways is a utopian figure for what womanhood can and should be. Hortense succeeds at both of her projects, getting married to Dick and saving her mother from the web of the women's league and bringing her together with her father. She is enlightened and self-aware. She is a clearly positive counter-image to the doomed women of contemporary literature such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Amalia Skram's *Constance Ring*, and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, and also in Benedictsson's own authorship, the women in *The Mother* and *Spellbound* or in the stories "From the Dark" (*Ur mörkret*) and "Weary of Life" (*Livsleda*). The fact that she is a new type is emphasized not least by her "unwomanly" way of expressing herself: "Graphically and drastically! It's the custom of the times," she says herself when her mother reproaches her. She uses slang expressions like "that was killigt" (that was fun), and "not ett muck" (not one word). Her language is direct, to the point. She wants a clear message, when Mrs. Bertold answered with half-truths, lies, and silences.

Hortense is created as a possible role model for young women in the 1880s, just as Mrs. Bertold in her new development may be for somewhat older women.

Why is it then that Benedictsson renounces her principles and actually, with the farce *Theories*, attempts to make a contribution to the debate on sexual morality? Participation in this public debate was by no means conflict-free for her, and this is evident in many places in her correspondence: for example, in the following two quotations from letters of the spring of 1887. The letters are written to Gustaf af Geijerstam and signed: "Your old mole Ernst Ahlgren."

But to 'step forth' in order to 'make' a 'confession of faith' would be extremely unwise. I leave it to others to reform; I am nothing but a reporter. (22.3.87)

It's good to get away from the small-town bickering here at home. "The Young Sweden" -- "The Sexual Morality Question" -- "the woman's cause"! Why, it's so 'threshed over', that not even the wheat remains! Let's brighten up, start anew, with sunshine, good humor. We're all longing for it. (27.3.87)

It was a sensitive matter for a woman in the 1880s to take a public stand in the sexual morality question, one risked being connected with various conflicting groups, being stamped as immoral, ill-mannered. But one of the reasons that Benedictsson works with enthusiasm on her farce during the autumn of 1887 is probably that Georg Brandes asked in a letter of September 5 for her contribution: "Dear! Let your troops charge against the camp of crazy womenfolk." Among these crazy women were, among others, Elisabeth Grundtvig, who in a polemic with Brandes maintained Björnson's requirement for moral purity, just as the moral purity league in *Theories* must do.

Three days later Benedictsson sends Brandes the composition "Moral Purity Terrorism on Swedish Ground," which he translates and has printed in his newspaper *Politiken*.

If I may express myself helpfully, I would like to emphasize how the moral purity terrorism can become one of the worst hindrances for the woman question, I mean the question of the woman's ownership, her economic and social dependence. -- So I think that Strindbergian hatred of women and the women's "requirement" is too good to let it go to waste, it may well become a comedy. What? But I can't be alone with it, I must have a couple critical eyes to look at it, plus someone to bawl me out cleverly. There was once a gentleman who said that he wanted to. Does he want to?

I don't believe that Georg Brandes ever read *Theories*.

In calling attention to this correspondence, I do not wish to claim that *Theories* is a work commissioned by Georg Brandes, but I do venture to believe that Benedictsson hoped that both the form and subject would win his approval. And certain oddities and contradictions in the play can certainly be attributed to the fact that she sometimes assigns a male perspective to the characters; this is surely evident as Dr. Sanderson and Mrs. Bertold come to terms with each other in a scene in the last act. Here is "the double perspective" that Jette Lundbo Levy pointed out in Benedictsson.

During the autumn of 1887 she works on the play now and then. In November she writes in a letter to her friend Gustaf af Geijerstam:

In these days I am finishing my little 3-act farce. Will get it rejected naturally. Why, I dare to laugh at the Gauntlet theories.

But when her friend the theater man Nordensvan advises her in December '87 not to publish the play in its current state, she thanks him for his honesty and says that the play was just an attempt to write for money. But, she adds: "The girl and the father are two good

roles. Voilà tout." She cannot imagine reworking it -- is no longer in the mood for comedy."

It is true, she feels the break and the ambiguity and her inability to fuse together all the fragments into a whole.

"I can't get interested in the farce," she writes to Lundegård in April 1888, but reports a bit later to Gustaf af Geijerstam that Axel Lundegård is in the process of a revision "from which the most baroque elements of farce will be cut." But both of her advisers are not in agreement. Geijerstam resolutely advises her against this in his letter of reply: "Do not by any means let yourself be persuaded by any ideas or people to remove the farcical in the play. For what will it be then? With a bit of retouching here and there the play is funny and good as is."

No doubt another reason that he wanted to bring out her play in 1887 was that its subject was of course actually one of the issues that engaged her deepest personality as a result of her own life experience. Perhaps it was the feeling that her time was short that removed the hesitation. To her future son-in-law Karl af Geijerstam she had written in the fall of 1886:

I have always been anxious that my daughters would not go out into life as blind and unknowledgeable as I was, to my misfortune, and therefore I have attempted to win their confidence and above all to educate them about how people live their lives outside the salons.

But during the spring of 1888 it is instead *Spellbound* and *The Mother* that she works on. The plays *Theories* remains lying there. And thus an important piece for the understanding of Benedictsson's late view of women and social criticism has been missing from the discussion of her work.

Christina Sjöblad

