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Ancient Greece:
*Hermione and Hellas***

**Christopher Joseph Mitchell, PhD
Department of Theatre Arts
Eastern Illinois University
USA**

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
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Christopher Joseph Mitchell, PhD
Department of Theatre Arts
Eastern Illinois University
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Abstract

While August Strindberg is hardly the first name one would associate with Greek tragedy, in actuality the great naturalist/expressionist made two little known journeys into neoclassicism, with mixed but nevertheless provocative results. His first, a five-act play called *Hermione* (1870), is a heavily Shakespeare-esque tale of the titular would-be assassin of Phillip of Macedon whose life is required of her after she falls in love with him. Clearly the youthful outburst of a playwright experimenting with historical drama (in blank verse, no less!), it was nevertheless sufficient to garner attention from the austere Swedish Academy, giving Strindberg encouragement in his early career. He would return to Greek themes with the late career play *Hellas, or Socrates* (1903), although this time he opted for an episodic scene-study featuring a cavalcade of ancient figures, from Aristophanes to Socrates. Reflective of his longtime fascination with the 'woman question,' this play attempts to delve into the supposed views of his characters on the issue and, in the balance, offers a highly personal engagement with the source material that is not always present in his other historical ventures. Neither of these plays tends to find much production interest outside of Sweden, but nevertheless they serve as fascinating bookends to a career dedicated to experimentation and controversy. In addition to examining Strindberg's treatment of these legendary figures, this article will contextualize the plays within two distinct phases of Strindberg's career, as well as reconciling them with the styles he became most famous for in later years.

Contact Information of Corresponding author:

The year 2012 is a special year for August Strindberg: it is the centennial of the great Swedish playwright's death, which is being marked with celebrations around the world. After 100-plus years, Strindberg's reputation as a pioneer and experimenter with dramatic form still holds firmly. His dramatic output runs the gamut from Blank Verse to Naturalism to Expressionism, even though that latter term did not really exist during his lifetime. His lesser-known experiments included two forays into Greek-inspired tragedy: one, *Hermione*, written in his earliest days as a playwright, and another, *Hellas*, written soon after his exit from his so-called 'Inferno' period during which he was on the brink of madness and gave up theatrical pursuits in favor of diversions such as alchemy and absinthe. While flawed in many ways, the two plays are nevertheless captivating in their characterization and offer interesting reflections of his lifelong fascination with the so-called 'woman question,' for which he is also well-known throughout the world. As such, in this article, I offer a brief examination of the structure and characterization of these plays inspired by ancient Greek myth, and will attempt to contextualize them within the more famous aspects of Strindberg's career.

On the cusp of his twenties, as an itinerant schoolteacher and Uppsala University student, Strindberg was fascinated with (and identified with) characters like Ibsen's titular character in *Brand*, who was, as Strindberg put it, 'a fanatic who dared to think that he was right and the rest of the world wrong. No half-measures, just press on, break and wench everything down that stands in your way, because you alone are right.'¹ In his first attempts at the craft, he styled himself as an actor, attempting an apprenticeship at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm, with the hopes of playing bravado roles like Karl Moor in Schiller's *The Robbers*, but that petered out after barely a season. This frustration catapulted him back to (an ultimately failed) student life at Uppsala for a brief period, during which time he completed two plays, *The Freethinker* (which features a Brand-like character who dares to challenge establishment religion), and *In Rome* (a comic study of the frustrations of a 19th century artist saved in *deus-ex-machina* style by the sudden appearance of a rich benefactor). While the exact germ of *Hermione* is not clear, it emerges within this period, in a time in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe when it was fashionable to attempt Greek themes.² Originally a three-act play titled *Greece in Decline*, *Hermione* is a textbook case of youthful trial and error—to say nothing of audacity. In one of his many autobiographies, this one entitled *Son of a Servant Woman*, Strindberg called the play his 'first true "work of art" ... since it did not deal with anything that actually happened to him.'³ Establishment opinions at the time, however, were quite divided. The Royal Dramatic Theatre rejected the original three-act form, which has not survived, as a submission. But his second attempt, to an 1870 competition funded by the austere Swedish Academy, merited an honorable mention, with the members citing Strindberg's 'good individual portraits and...vivid appreciation of the conditions then prevailing.'⁴ It took funding from Strindberg's cousin Oscar to help the play see publication, and anonymously at that, but it marked the beginning of Strindberg's association with the Bonnier family, who would become his primary publisher in the flowering of his career. The newspaper *Aftonbladet*, while somewhat

¹ Meyer, M. (1985). *Strindberg: A Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 25.

² Ollén, G. (1972). *August Strindberg*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 21.

³ Lamm, M. (1971). *August Strindberg*. New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 14.

⁴ Meyer, M. (1985), 37.

critical of the play, warmly prophesied in late 1871 that the author of this work 'would be heard from again.'¹

Hermione's action centers on the title character's attempt at assassination of the conquering Philip of Macedon. Perhaps predictably, she ends up falling in love with the invader and ultimately must pay the price for it, courtesy of her father Kriton. (Here, a point of clarification, for classical scholars, I think, is warranted: the play is not dealing with the Hermione who is the daughter of Menelaus and Helen and the betrothed of Orestes!) From the outset, Strindberg paints an admiring portrait of the heroine. She is described as the 'the most beautiful woman under the sun' by her fiancé, Kallimakos,² and, despite her father's exhortations to avoid the 'crowd of men' gathering to hear news of battle, she indicates that she is aware of what's expected of her gender but will not avoid 'important matters' of state.³ She forcefully attempts to reverse Kallimakos' decision to avoid confronting Phillip's armies, fearing Hellas' fate in very poetic terms: 'Now Hellas' sun went down— in blood... Soon, the entire town is in darkness.' She realizes that she cannot love a coward, and refuses him.⁴ Hermione becomes increasingly militant when reports of Phillip's armies come in and the people decide to go to war, resolving to take on Phillip singlehandedly:

Gods, have I not enough power / to crush his arrogance? . . .
 He's a mortal as I am . . . is his heart not of flesh and blood? . . .
 Is his thread of life not as weak as others?
 Yes, of course! . . . It can be cut quite easily
 With a little thing called a dagger!
 A lovely thought! He shall die... yes, die!⁵

In the time passage between Acts 3 and 4, however, Hermione, who has been forced to retreat and take refuge among kindly Macedonian citizens, has come to admire Phillip after learning of his beauty and his true nature, that of a 'hero.'⁶ But, in a subsequent conversation with her father, she attributes it to 'a moment of weakness, caused by the troubles I've endured these last few days'⁷ She renews her commitment to defeat Phillip, swearing an oath of the Styx that if she were to fail she should 'wander restless throughout eternity.'⁸ When she at last discovers the Macedonian king, asleep, she is overcome once again with wonder at Phillip and articulates in a powerful monologue the struggle she is experiencing between desire and duty:

O Selene, enviable goddess, as his eye I may kiss!
 I want to remove your radiating from his face. . .

¹*Ibid.*, 44.

²Strindberg, A. (1921). *Hermione*. In: A. Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter, vol. 1 ('Ungdomsdramer')*. Stockholm: Bonniers. Web version via Projekt Runeberg: <http://runeberg.org/strindbg/ungdram/>, Act I. All *Hermione* translations in this article from Swedish to English are mine.

³*Ibid.*, Act II.

⁴*Ibid.*, Act III.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, Act IV.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

Alas! I forget why I called here.
 Away! Away from my eyes, beautiful image!
 I hate you, you villain, thief of my country.
 Yes, you must die!¹

In the midst of this he awakens and learns why she is there, becoming in awe of her even as she acknowledges her failure to act, declaring: ‘Do you think I want to stain my hands . . . and alienate the noblest among women I have met?’² Hermione’s internal conflict persists through the final act, as her bold admission to her father of her love for Phillip is tinged with guilt. Nevertheless, she is still audacious enough to challenge the primacy of Phillip’s wife Olympia, calling her someone who does not understand love.³ In revenge, Olympia calls Phillip on his promise to give her any prisoner of war of her choice as a slave, and she chooses Hermione, much to Phillip’s dismay. Kriton, then, re-emerges with a dagger and stabs his daughter, saying that she is now ‘saved,’ a sentiment to which she agrees as she dies. She laments Greece’s demise at the hands of Phillip in her death-speech, and is followed, in typical tragic fashion, by her former fiancé drinking a poisoned wine-cup and her father taking his own life.⁴

While one can certainly sense here the perhaps ham-handed Shakespearean and Racinian overtones in the quotes above, in his later, more original works, the theme of strong women hating cowardice and restrictions on freedom would be one Strindberg would return to quite often. For one of his first hard-fought production successes in 1881, *Master Olof*, he created a character, Christina, who laments her Reformation-era society’s restrictions on women, refusing to be treated as a ‘statue on a shelf’ by her husband and wanting to participate in the revolution surrounding them.⁵ In his two famous Naturalistic plays, *The Father* and *Miss Julie*, we see two very different women with that common thread. Laura, in *The Father*, reacts against her husband’s controlling (and, in her view, cowardly) ways, and deftly engineers a sort of *coup d’etat* that ensures her freedom and agency as a woman and a mother. Miss Julie, the aristocrat who has a love-hate relationship with her station in life, lives boldly and by her own rules, although, somewhat like Hermione, she wavers within the possibility of freeing herself and it ultimately costs her own life, though this time (it is suggested) it is by her own hand.

Although he would at times enthusiastically acknowledge a debt to Aristotle in his letters, Strindberg’s return to Greek topic matter in the drama took some time, and much transpired in his life, professionally and personally, between the time of the two plays. The best known to the English-speaking world, are, of course, *The Father* (1887) and *Miss Julie* (1888), the “marriage-as-hell” archetype *The Dance of Death, Part One* (1900), and the still-intimidating-to-stage *A Dream Play* (1901). In Strindberg’s life, two tempestuous marriages disintegrated, and a third was on the verge. He had endured a dramatic dry-spell of six years, which included an over two-year period in which he very nearly descended into madness, a journey he vividly

¹*Ibid.*

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, Act V.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Strindberg, A. (1986). *Master Olof*. In: E. Sprinchorn (trans.), *August Strindberg: Selected Plays, vol. I*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 97.

recounted in the novel *Inferno* (1897). During this time, he abandoned theatre completely in favor of painting, pseudo-science, and the occult. Upon recovering, his perspective had changed somewhat. Paramountly, he had come to embrace the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, an Enlightenment-era mystic who, in Strindberg's view of him, saw 'correspondences' between earthly and spiritual realms. Yet much of his core technique remained—the creation of characters often coming into conflict with the *status quo* of the worlds they occupy. (Indra's Daughter, the goddess character in *A Dream Play*, comes to mind.)

Hellas, subtitled *Socrates*, came in a flurry of writing in 1903, bookended by attempts at portraying Martin Luther (*The Nightingale of Wittenberg*), Moses (*Through Deserts to Ancestral Lands*), and Jesus Christ (*The Lamb and the Beast*). While he had written previously, in letters of 1884 and 1889, of a desire to do a sort of literary pilgrimage through world history, he set upon the task in 1902-3 after he had, in his own words, 'read right through world history,' 'as a way of killing time.'¹ While he was more enthusiastic about the Luther project, *Socrates* and his world had long held a special place in his heart: 'Have been seized with an ardent sympathy for Socrates and am today dreaming of writing a play about him in contemporary form and language,' he wrote way back in 1887.² Written in a week— typical for Strindberg— this multiple-scene study of the philosopher and his compatriots as he transitions from respected teacher to pariah never was published or performed during his lifetime but stands as an interesting take on the man, who Strindberg seemed to admire as a kindred spirit. Socrates' final words to his student Plato, as Gunnar Ollén has observed, seem to mirror Strindberg's vision of himself at that point in his life:

You shall teach humanity to look with sober restraint upon
the things we see with our senses— to look up to the unseen
with reverence— to pay homage to beauty— to cultivate virtue
and to hope for our deliverance— through labor, sacrifices,
and the performance of our duties...³

In the play, Socrates is surrounded by a cavalcade of classical figures, from the political to the literary. Intrigue abounds among them, and the topic of worshipping the gods of the state in its declining years is prominent. Socrates himself is painted as a rather aloof, even callous figure at times, particularly in scenes with his wife Xanthippe. In fact, he seems to be at odds with everyone, even his friend Pericles, who, despite Socrates' denial of being a sophist like Protagoras, warns him forebodingly on his deathbed that his manner is that of one who is a 'libertine' and a 'hater. . . [of his] city and country.'⁴ It is perhaps logical, then, that the play ends in the prison cell of Socrates, but by this point he has come around to calm acceptance of his fate, praising the gods for— perhaps ironically— 'giving [him] humility— and a sense of justice.'⁵

¹Strindberg, A. (1992). *Letters, vol. II*. London: Athlone Press., 699.

²Ollén, G. (1970) 'Introduction.' In: A. Paulson (trans.), *World Historical Plays: August Strindberg*. New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 7.

³*Ibid.*, 7; primary text from Strindberg, A. (1970). *Hellas, or Socrates*. In: A. Paulson (trans.), *World Historical Plays: August Strindberg*. New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 232.

⁴Strindberg, A. (1970), 189.

⁵*Ibid.*, 232.

Some of the more interesting exchanges in the play come when the playwrights enter Socrates' orbit. Clearly Socrates is sympathetic to Euripides, the critic of Athenian culture, calling him 'the last one of the great'; whereas he frequently directs venom at Aristophanes, classifying him as 'my enemy' and 'my executioner,' even though, he admits, 'our aims are identical.'¹ Strindberg permits Euripides a rather melodramatic exodus scene, in which he laments that the 'tyrants have forbidden . . . [his] tragedies' and then bids the dying Athens farewell forever.² But, as one might come to expect with a Strindberg play, the most interesting scenes are with the two women, Xanthippe and Aspasia. The treatment of the two could not be in starker contrast. While Aspasia, the consort of Pericles, is practically deified, Xanthippe is nearly constantly in opposition to her husband. Of Aspasia, Socrates characterizes her as ' . . . the mother of us all, but she is also the wet nurse who washes our newborn thoughts and wraps them in swaddling-clothes of beautiful veils. . .' and Pericles agrees that she is 'wise' and has 'good judgment.'³ Xanthippe, in a memorable scene with her husband, exchanges some choice barbs with him, including calling his friends 'dissolute creatures.'⁴ She is clearly a wits-match for Socrates, though, and it is her with whom he becomes frustrated and rather comically departs from, saying that he is fleeing her 'as one flees from evil.'⁵ Nevertheless, Socrates and Xanthippe reconcile at the end, with the promise to 'go— together with the children— out into the woods' in the next world.⁶ It is also interesting— but not surprising, with Strindberg, that misogyny also emerges as a topic of conversation, but it is Euripides who is accused of being a 'woman hater.'⁷ Aspasia, no slouch in conversation, confronts Euripides with his own words (from *Hippolytus*) and Euripides grudgingly acknowledges that, in Socrates words, he can 'love and hate a woman at the same time, since she is both good and evil!'⁸

While this is certainly not the only play for which biographers of Strindberg are quick to point out parallels to Strindberg's own life, it is certainly fertile ground for that. (*Hermione*, by contrast, largely escapes this fate.) Ollén, for example, has argued that Euripides in the play was a sort of 'Strindberg of antiquity' whereas Euripides' hatred of Aristophanes mirrors Strindberg's disgust at 'those who made jest or caricatured him.'⁹ Even a casual read of Strindberg's marriage hells would cause one to contextualize the venom in the Socrates-Xanthippe exchanges, whereas the worship of Aspasia is often paralleled to one Dagny Juel, a consort of Strindberg and his compatriots in the 1890s. But perhaps it's best to save the debate over the merits of autobiographical criticism for another article.

More fruitful, like the case with *Hermione*, are the seeds one can see of this play in his other post-*Inferno* works. Two quick examples might suffice to illustrate this. Within *The Dance of Death* (I) it is the easiest to see the evolution of Socrates and Xanthippe in the dysfunctional world of Edgar and Alice, who seem to live to torment

¹ *Ibid.*, 195; 223.

² *Ibid.*, 222-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 178-9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁹ Ollén (1970), 6.

each other, ‘welded together,’ awaiting death, as Alice puts it.¹ The men’s behavior toward the idealized woman, Aspasia, is easy to see in the Student’s behavior toward the Young Lady in *A Dream Play*, which is also rife with references to stripping away the artifices of society, which Euripides is wont to do. For a playwright who was by nature an experimenter with form, Strindberg was remarkably consistent with the themes he introduced.

So, in sum, while it is highly unlikely, in my estimation, that *Hermione* and *Hellas* will rise to the forefront of the Strindberg canon, much less the modern dramatic canon, they certainly contain enough of that Augustian magic that makes his work a delight for actors and directors to attempt, and they certainly deserve turns on the English-language stage.

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¹Strindberg, A. (1986). *The Dance of Death, Part I*. In: E. Sprinchorn (trans.), *August Strindberg: Selected Plays, vol. II*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 587.