

The Structure of Pelikanen

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EGIL TÖRNQVIST

The Structure of *Pelikanen*

Pelikanen, Strindberg's chamber play opus IV, written, published and produced in 1907, has a fairly simple plot and a fairly complex thematic pattern. In this respect it is a characteristic product of the aging Strindberg, who is a theme-oriented rather than a plot-oriented playwright.

The structure of the play can be schematized as follows:¹

PELIKANEN

(Part)	Sequence	Page/line in SS 45	On stage
I	1	215/1	
	2	215/5	E
	3	215/10	E M
	4	221/7	E F
	5	228/15	E
	6	228/18	E A
	7	234/5	E A G
	8	236/1	
	9	236/7	E A
II	10	242/1	G
	11	242/5	F G
	12	254/23	F A G
	13	256/21	E F A G
III	14	259/1	G
	15	259/4	E G
	16	261/7	E A G
	17	262/1	E A
	18	264/6	E
	19	264/12	E F
	20	271/1	E

¹ For an alternative, to my mind less surveyable way of schematizing character appearances, see the "Konfigurationsstruktur" in M. PFISTER, *Das Drama*, München 1977, p.236f.

PELIKANEN (suite)

(Part)	Sequence	Page/line in SS 45	On stage		
	21	272/1	<i>E</i>		<i>G</i>
	22	277/23	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>
	23	278/21		<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>

Abbreviations

E/lise/, the mother, a widow.

M/argret/, the cook.

F/redrik/, the son, a law student.

A/xel/, the son-in-law, married to Gerda.

G/erda/, the daughter.

italics = speaking parts.

Like a cross-word puzzle, this scheme can be read either horizontally or vertically. In agreement with this, we may speak of a horizontal and a vertical structure and of a horizontal and vertical structure analysis. By horizontal structure analysis I mean an analysis of how a particular part of a play – an act, a scene, a sequence, a segment – is organized. By vertical structure analysis I mean an analysis of how acts, scenes, sequences and segments are related to one another and how plot, characters, motives and themes develop.²

A *sequence*, in my terminology, is a part delimited by the entrance or exit of one or more characters, in *Pelikanen* usually indicated by means of asterisks. Sequences consist of one or more *segments* (not indicated in the scheme). A segment is a part characterized by a homogeneous subject matter.³

From the scheme various data may be gathered. It informs us of the frequency, duration and order of stage appearances. It informs us of the distribution of 0-character, 1-character, 2-character etc. sequences; notice, for example, that the stage is left empty twice and that there is only one 4-character sequence in the play. It tells us that Strindberg once permits a soliloquy, a non-naturalistic trait. We easily discover that Margret, the cook, appears only once in the beginning – an indication of her expository function – and that Axel disappears for good already in seq.17, an indication of his thematically somewhat peripheral part. All these observations, and many more, may set us on

² The terms are borrowed from B. BECKERMAN, *Dynamics of Drama. Theory and Method of Analysis*, New York 1970, p.36.

³ For a further discussion of this concept, see my *Inledningssekvensen i Dödsdansen I*, Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap, 1978/4, p.238.

the track of essential structural problems. In the following I can pay attention only to a few of these, notably those closely related to the theme of the play.

Outwardly *Pelikanen* falls into three parts, lacking a designation; I shall therefore call them just parts. In a note on the cover of the longhand draft, Strindberg observes that the play can be regarded either as a three-act drama or as a one-acter.⁴ This difference is of significance chiefly to the spectator, who will be confronted with a production either with or without intervals.⁵

Intervals or not – the choice affects our experience of the time-span of the *scenic*, i.e. the visualized, action. Our spontaneous impression is that this action covers a few hours of one and the same evening. This impression is communicated by the unity of environment: not only do we find ourselves in the same room all the time; the storm in Part I is with us also in Part III.

However, with this interpretation the distribution of meals becomes problematic. At the end of Part II, Gerda invites the men to a meal. At the beginning of Part III, Axel tells Elise: «...and since we don't get enough to eat in this house, Gerda and I intend to eat by ourselves.»⁶ But if Axel and Gerda have just eaten, why should they eat again? From Axel's way of expressing himself we must conclude that a certain time has elapsed between Part II and III. Thus understood, various developments – Fredrik's drunkenness, the deterioration of Axel's and Gerda's marriage, Elise's sense of being closed up – become rationally more acceptable.

While the time of scenic action, in other words, seems spread out over two non-consecutive nights, separated by a time lapse of unknown duration, the unity of mood and environment creates a feeling that everything happens in one and the same evening. This clash of two time concepts results in a sense of unreality, or better, half-reality. It adds to our feeling that the play is both a realistic drama and an existential parable, both a description of everyday people and of archetypal figures, an impression communicated also by the fact that the charac-

⁴ SS 45, p. 345.

⁵ In Olof Molander's 1922 production there were, for example, two intervals, in Ingmar Bergman's 1945 production there were none.

⁶ All quotations are from AUGUST STRINDBERG, *A Dream Play and Four Chamber Plays* (tr. WALTER JOHNSON), Seattle-London 1973, pp. 239–275.

ters bear both a Christian name – i.e. have individual status – and a socio-biological designation: the mother, the son, the daughter, the son-in-law, the servant. The dead husband/father is the notable exception. Like the Count in *Fröken Julie*, he is ominously nameless.

As a consequence of the central role played by the dead husband, the *prescenic* action, i.e. the action belonging to the period preceding the opening of the play, is fairly extensive. When the curtain rises the following has happened:

1. Elise has profited from her husband's good income, while the rest of the family has led a bare existence.
2. Elise has become Axel's mistress and has lent him money.
3. Gerda has fallen in love with Axel and he has pretended to return her love.
4. The husband, knowing that Axel is his wife's lover, has turned hostile against him.
5. Gerda, unaware of the relationship between Elise and Axel, has sided with the mother and him against the father.
6. Fredrik, more aware of Elise's true nature, has sided with the father.
7. The husband has died from a stroke, provoked by Elise and Axel.
8. Axel, hoping for an inheritance, has married Gerda.

This list raises a number of questions. Why does Axel go so far as to marry Gerda, once Elise's husband is dead? Why does he not, eventually, marry Elise instead? After all, this would only improve his financial situation. And how can Elise accept his marrying her daughter, when she herself is in love with him and free to remarry? The great difference of age, we must assume, prevents marriage – but not adultery.⁷ So Elise and Axel settle for a *ménage-à-trois*. More difficult to accept is the fact that the wedding takes place shortly after the death of the bride's father. The months separating funeral and wedding in *Hamlet* are here reduced to days. Granted that Gerda is eager to marry Axel and Axel eager to share in the inheritance – even so, it is not likely that they would dare to break so radically with a firmly established convention.

I mention these circumstances mainly to indicate that this kind of reasoning, which is legitimate when we deal with purely realistic drama, is not very rewarding when applied to Strindberg's post-Inferno plays, where almost everything has primarily a metaphorical significance.

⁷ The ages of the characters are mentioned in a MS list of the *dramatis personae*. Elise is 45, Axel 23. Preliminary annotations for the play are found in the Strindberg Collection of the Royal Library, Stockholm, Box 4.

The *scenic* action revolves around two discoveries: Axel's discovery that there is nothing to inherit and Fredrik's discovery that Elise has committed adultery and spiritual murder. Both discoveries are connected with the letter which the dead husband/father has left for his son. For the development of the plot this letter is thus of central importance. Strindberg's handling of it is as follows.

The letter is discovered by Axel in seq. 6. While Elise learns of its entire content, Axel and the recipient (r) are informed only of the part centering around the murder, let us call it *a*. In seq. 11, similarly, Fredrik gets to know the entire content, while Gerda and the recipient are informed not of the 'murder' but of the adultery, let us call it *b*. To secure a sense of progression and suspense, Strindberg in other words informs us step by step. With his *a + b* knowledge the recipient at the end of seq. 11 knows as much about the content of the letter as Elise and Fredrik, and he knows more than Axel and Gerda. Moreover, aware that Fredrik and Gerda are familiar with the letter – let us call this knowledge *c* – he knows more at this point than Elise. His knowledge is in fact equivalent to the son's. Fredrik's accusations against the mother in seq. 19 therefore do not come as a surprise to the recipient – as they do to Elise. When she, the protagonist, is as fully informed as we are, the play virtually reaches its conclusion. What remains are the consequences of the newly gained information: a triple suicide.

The situation can be formalized as follows:

seq.

- 6 E learns *a + b*. A and r learn *a*.
- 11 F learns *a + b*. G and r learn *b*.
- 19 F and r know *a + b + c*. E learns *c*.

Structurally significant is also the way in which the characters are emotionally related to one another. When the play opens, Axel and Gerda still side with Elise against the dead husband/father and his 'confidant' Fredrik. When it closes, Elise is completely isolated. Axel deserts her, when he discovers that she has nothing more to offer him. Gerda turns against her, when she becomes aware of her true nature. In Fredrik's case the change is less obvious, since he is hostile toward the mother from the beginning. To him it is, however, important that his suspicions are confirmed. The letter from the deceased father – much as the Ghost in *Hamlet* – provides him with the information he needs to

overcome his passivity and take action. He now puts fire to the house and pronounces judgement over the mother.

From a somewhat different point of view, the main action may be said to consist of the revolt of a number of victims against their oppressor. Margret is the first to revolt, when she declares that she is about to leave for good. The dead husband avenges himself by means of his unusual testament; instead of being a benefactor he turns out to be a creditor. Axel, feeling betrayed, begins to bully his former mistress. Finally Fredrik and Gerda take up arms against their mother.

In agreement with this, we find a striking hybris-nemesis pattern in the play. Elise is punished according to the law of the Old Testament, which demands an eye for an eye. Her isolation at the end is a punishment for the isolation she has forced upon her husband. And Fredrik's 'murder' of her is a retribution for her 'murder' of her husband, his father.

Elise has deprived her family of all the essentials of life. She has always kept her house cold because, as she repeatedly says, "we can't afford to burn up our money". Once her power has dwindled, she is forced to feed the fire – like a servant. But not being used to it, she is not very successful. Left alone in the living room, she is "freezing to death, and the fire in the stove's going out".

Similarly, at the beginning Elise tells Fredrik to turn on "only a couple" of lights, because they must save on electricity, while later, when feeling forsaken, she herself "*turns on all the electric lights*". Now Gerda enters and "*turns off all the electric lights but one*":

MOTHER/–/: Don't put out the lights!

GERDA: Yes, we have to economize!

Gerda here retributively takes over the mother's former role.

Elise has served her family porridge with blue skim milk, while she herself has grown fat on the skimmed-off cream. When Gerda, in seq. 13, refuses to eat porridge and treats Fredrik and Axel to "a sandwich and a steak" in the kitchen, a reversal of roles is indicated. She, not Elise, is now the lady of the house. The men, not the mother, are invited to the hearty meal. The retributive pattern becomes manifest in Axel's remark to Elise in seq. 16: "you should reduce a little for the sake of your health, as the rest of us have had to do". It is now the mother's turn to be invited to porridge and skim milk, while Axel and

Gerda are to have a more substantial meal. The roles have definitely been reversed.

The most obvious example of nemesis is the fact that Elise is forced to sleep on the very chaise longue where she has ‘murdered’ her husband. It is significant that as soon as Fredrik has ‘murdered’ her with words⁸, Elise “*throws herself head first on the chaise longue with her face hidden*”. The son has ‘killed’ his mother on the very spot where she ‘murdered’ his father. The “*purplish red plush cover*”, turning the chaise longue into “a bloody butcher’s bench”,⁹ at the end grows into “*the red glow*” of the fire. The furies have avenged themselves.

In short, just as in the early part Elise denies her environment the essentials of life, so in the latter part she is herself denied these things. The retributive pattern could hardly be more symmetrical. Strindberg has written a tale about a possessor self-dispossessed.

We can now see that the frequent references to food, far from being a testimony to Strindberg’s failure to keep his household problems outside the play, form an integral part of a larger thematic pattern, which structurally helps to keep the play together. Taking these references at their face value means misunderstanding their true metaphorical function. Thus Fredrik’s and Gerda’s hunger is not so much physical as emotional: it is a hunger for love. And their physical shortcomings are above all a frightful evidence of what lovelessness can do to your *soul*. Their constantly feeling cold is caused less by the lack of proper heating than by Elise’s icy nature. And Elise’s “freezing to death” tells us, not that the temperature has suddenly dropped, but that *she* now feels lonely, forsaken, unloved. In these metaphors Strindberg has seen a possibility to express inner processes in a theatrically effective way. Theatre, we must remember, is a physical medium asking for stageable imagery.

The mother, it is usually claimed, is a monster, a witch; in Germany the play is significantly known under the title *Scheiterhaufen. Pelikanen*

⁸ One of Strindberg’s MS annotations from this period reads: “Han mördar henne med ord”. The expression suits not only Fredrik-Elise but also Hamlet-Gertrud and the Student-the Young Lady (in *Spöksonaten*).

⁹ Cf. Strindberg’s MS annotation: “Modren dödas. På chäslongen utanför sängkammaren.” Another annotation reads: “Modren på chäslongen; plockas lefvande.” Here the retributive pattern is applied to the pelican motif: not having sacrificed herself, the mother is sacrificed.

is above all a rejection of the traditional idea of “mother love” – to mention another satirical Strindberg play title.

This is largely correct – though a simplification of the matter – in the sense that Elise is indeed *the* mother rather than *a* mother. To regard her as an exceptional case is to disarm the play of its explosive power. It is true that mothers do not normally murder their husbands, steal money, make their children starve. But since these things are merely theatrical metaphors of an underlying mentality – egotism, lovelessness – Strindberg has actually only made concrete (and exaggerated) an attitude inherent in all mothers. And not just in mothers. Toward the end of the play, in seq. 21, Elise states:

Do you know about *my* childhood? Do you have any idea of what a bad home I had, what wickedness I learned there? It’s inherited, I think, from above, from whom? From our first parents, it said in the children’s books, and that seems to be right... So don’t blame me; then I won’t blame my parents, who could blame theirs, and so on! Besides, it’s like this in all families, but the rest of them don’t show it to outsiders...

Although Elise here, of course, pleads her own cause, her speech bears the stamp of truth and is, in fact, the most significant objective statement in the whole play. It is noteworthy that Gerda does not question it. “If that’s how it is,” she replies, “I don’t want to live, but if I’m forced to, I’ll go through this miserable life deaf and blind in the hope there’ll be a better hereafter ...”

The point I wish to make is that our view of Elise is not the same from beginning to end, not because she changes but because of the way in which Strindberg distributes – manipulates – the information about her.

From the very beginning we tend to take a negative view of her. Gradually our negative impressions multiply until the mother comes close to being an incarnation of evil. Unlike the classical tragic protagonist, Elise appears baser rather than nobler than the average person. We sympathize with her victims, not with her. Strindberg has reversed the traditional situation.

Close to the end comes the big surprise, as we have seen, when the mother is characterized as a representative specimen of homo sapiens. If *she* is a vampire, so are we, all the way back to Adam and Eve. Actually, already in seq. 19 Fredrik alludes to the idea of original sin, when he states that the mother is so evil that “she’s to be pitied”, a

statement which reads like a spelling-out of the key phrase in *Ett drömspel*: “det är synd om människorna”, men are sinful and (therefore) to be pitied.

Let us now return to the beginning of the play, where Elise sits listlessly in her living room, dressed in mourning. Outside it is a stormy night. Inside, in the room behind her, there is a horrible smell of carbolic acid, to obliterate the even more horrible smell of the dead husband. Trying desperately to repress her feelings of guilt, Elise insists that the door be kept closed. Once we see her as a representative of mankind, this situation takes on an existential character, suggesting man’s imprisonment in life, his awareness of his shortcomings and his concomitant fear of death.

MARGRET: Why do you stay here, ma’am? Why don’t you move?

MOTHER: Our landlord won’t let us move, and we can’t ...

‘Moving’ here carries both psychological and metaphysical connotations. Psychologically, it indicates Elise’s inability to free herself from the haunting memories of her own guilt¹⁰. Metaphysically, it indicates man’s fear to depart from life. “Our landlord won’t let us move” can be transcribed: it is not for man but for God to decide when we are to die. Compare this to the following speech by Margret:

... I won’t stay here very long ... I came here as if I were condemned to watch over the children ... I wanted to leave when I saw how the servants were mistreated, but I couldn’t or I wasn’t allowed to ... /-/ my hour of release will soon come, though not quite yet ...

Margret’s situation is much the same as Elise’s. She too voices the idea that life is a condemnation and death a release. Her exit prepares for that of the mother.

We can now see that the unity of place adhered to in *Pelikanen* is primarily determined by the theme of the play. The spatial monotony is an adequate expression of Elise’s feeling of imprisonment.¹¹ It makes

¹⁰ Cf. the Gentleman in *Oväder*: “I can’t leave; I’m bound to this apartment by memories.”

¹¹ Cf. in this respect *Dödsdansen*, to Szondi a prime (existentialist) example of the attempt to save the drama – the dialogue – by forcing people together in a narrow space. See P. Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas (1880–1950)*, Frankfurt am Main 1970⁷, p.96.

her final exit from the living room – from life – all the more striking. Also to Fredrik and Gerda death signifies an escape from the confinement of life; says Gerda: “Everything had to burn up, otherwise we could never *get out of here* ” (my it.).

As a major unifying factor we must regard the many leitmotives illustrating Elise’s vampirism and feelings of guilt: the references to food, temperature, fire and sleep; the constant attention paid to stage properties like the chaise longue and the rocking chair, both connected with the dead husband; Fredrik’s intermittent screaming in the background, recalling the husband’s “horrible cries” outside Axel’s home on another rainy night; above all: the leitmotif found in the play title.

According to a well-established tradition, the pelican nourishes its young ones with its own blood. In medieval bestiaries this circumstance has turned the bird into a symbol of Christ sacrificing himself for mankind.¹² In Strindberg’s play this aspect is not irrelevant but it is overshadowed by another one: the idea that a mother, who figuratively speaking nourishes her children at her own breast incarnates a love similar in kind to that of the pelican. The question is now: Does the pelican symbolize altruistic love in general or does it symbolize the variety known as maternal love? To answer this question we must examine the motif more closely.

Already in seq.3 the idea that maternal love is altruistic is put forward by Elise: “The whole world knows how I have sacrificed myself for my children”, she tells Margret. Yet her son, we have just learnt, has been a bottle baby and when at school he and his sister have not had enough to eat. There is apparently a discrepancy between Elise’s true nature and her own conception of it. Parading as a pelican, she is in fact a vampire, a blood-sucker. Far from sacrificing herself to others, she sacrifices others to herself. This is made clear in seq.6:

MOTHER: Well, how did you like the wedding?

SON-IN-LAW: Absolutely perfect! Absolutely! And the verses – how did you like them?

MOTHER: The verses to me, you mean? Well, I suppose no other mother-in-law has received verses like that at her daughter’s wedding ...Do you remember what they

¹² The basis for this idea is found in the red spot appearing on the breast of the pelican during the brooding period.

said about the pelican, who gives its lifeblood to its young? I wept, I really did ...

SON-IN-LAW: At first, yes, but then you danced every dance. Gerda was almost jealous of you.

MOTHER: That wasn't the first time – she wanted me to come dressed in black – in mourning, as she said, but I didn't pay any attention to that. Am I to obey my children?

Elise's deeds speak louder than her and Axel's words. Again she is revealed as a vampire rather than a pelican. At the wedding she, not Gerda, has been the bride. Instead of sacrificing herself for “ungarne”, as the pelican does, she has refused to obey her “ungar”. Strindberg's choice of identical words, lost in the translation, underlines the ironical contrast between Elise and the pelican.

Equally ironical is Fredrik's observation, in seq. 11, that “the woman who gave us life was a big thief”. The only thing Elise has *given* her children is – life, a doubtful gift in her case, since Elise is a ‘taker’, not a ‘giver’.

Elise may be evil but in the beginning of the play we tend to see her as a deviation from the norm, symbolized by the altruistic pelican. Egotistic mothers exist – and Elise is one of them – but our concept of maternity is hardly affected by this circumstance.

To effect a revaluation of our traditional view of motherhood, Strindberg not only forces us to accept the idea that Elise represents the norm; he also undermines the symbol of love:

MOTHER: /-/ Look at me. I've reached a certain age ... though I've worked, slaved, and done my duty to my children and my house. Haven't I?

SON: Ha! – Like the pelican who never gave its heart's blood – the zoology books say it's a lie.

If it is not true that pelicans love their children, what proof do we have that mothers do – except their own opinion? Or that altruism exists at all? Axel's rhetorical myth-making is destroyed by Fredrik's scientifically grounded description of reality. Neither Elise nor the pelican can be trusted; they are not what they seem to be.

For a brief moment, in seq. 19, Elise sees herself the way she is. She awakens – only to fall asleep again, the truth being too brutal to be bearable. In seq. 21 she echoes her initial illusory view when telling Gerda: “I'm your mother and have nourished you with my blood”. But by now we know that this is a lie. So does Gerda. Unlike her brother

(and the recipient) Gerda does not question the existence of (maternal) love – the pelican –, only the idea that Elise is a pelican.

However, in his final speech Fredrik is to recant:

I think he /father/ was the pelican who stripped himself for us; he always had wrinkled trousers and a worn velvet collar while we walked about like little aristocrats ...

How are we to understand this? Is not Fredrik's earlier rejection of the pelican myth his moment of truth, his awakening? And is he not now deluding himself again? Is his development not identical with Elise's and Gerda's: from sleep through awakening back to sleep? Is his reference to the pelican at this point not a pathetic testimony to his need to believe in the existence of love at all costs? And is he not in this respect a true child of man?

Alternatively, we may regard his statement as a reversal of the traditional roles. As earlier in *Fadren*, the father here turns out to be the true mother. Paternal love is altruistic – this seems to be Strindberg's provocative counter-statement. Both children now realize that their parents represent binary oppositions:

father	~	mother
altruism		egotism

The surprising thing is that this realization does not lead to any rejection of the mother. Fredrik's final words are: "I don't see her – it isn't fun without Mother – there she comes! – Now the summer vacation begins!" Love for the mother seems in the last instance to be biologically determined, a longing, now at the moment of death, to return to the warm protection of the womb. Unless we prefer to see the children's concern with their "poor mother" – the expression occurs three times in the last few speeches – as an indication of compassion and forgiveness, in the spirit of Indra's Daughter and, ultimately, of Christ's words to the repentant sinner: "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise."¹³

¹³ It is in this connection interesting to note that the pelican has also been regarded as a symbol of the resurrection: according to popular belief the bird so lovingly presses her children to her breast that they stifle; after which the mother revives them with her own blood.

If we compare the statement ‘the mother loves her children’ with the statement ‘the pelican loves its young ones’, we notice that ‘the mother’ can refer either to an individual – in this case Elise – or to a class (all mothers), whereas ‘the pelican’ in our context refers only to a class. By introducing the pelican and linking it first with the mother, then with the father, Strindberg stresses the archetypal nature of these characters, widens the scope of the play and involves the recipient. This is the primary function of the symbol.

As we have seen, the pelican motif cannot be reduced to a simple formula: a represents b. The same is true of the other motives. If this were so, there would be no play. The significant structuring of the motives – this is the stuff that the chamber plays are made on.

Characteristic of *Pelikanen* – as well as of the other chamber plays – is the gradual progression from letter to spirit, from outward to inward reality, from the singular to the universal. When we turn back to our point of departure – the opening of the play – we discover that what we first understood literally, has a deeper and more general significance. By structuring his drama in this way, Strindberg makes us share his own view that what we call reality is actually a phantom, a mirage. The true reality is behind the letter and beyond life. Rarely have theme and structure been so happily wedded as in the chamber plays.

