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Strindberg's *Leka med elden* as a Comedy

If we can take Strindberg's word for it, he never strove to become an author: authorship came to him. It came for the first time in 1869, the day after he had failed as an actor and as a suicide. It arrived in the shape of a comedy in two acts, which he called *En namnsdagsgåva,* now unfortunately lost.

As we know, after this many works came in a similar fashion to Strindberg, but never another comedy. When on several later occasions Strindberg did apply the label "comedy" to certain of his plays, these bear clear traces, in the opinion of critics, of having definitely not appeared to the author voluntarily.

There is, however, an exception: *Leka med elden* from 1892. In the case of this play, which Strindberg did indeed call a "comedy", Strindberg experts have been unanimous in stating that it is his most successful – or *only* sucessful – attempt within the genre of comedy. According to the critics, here Strindberg has exerted himself and really succeeded in constructing a comedy. For, if there is any dramatic genre that seems to require working at artistic polish rather than merely receiving inspiration, it is certainly comedy!

But it must be said that after a close reading of *Leka med elden* it seems high time to re-evaluate this opinion of the play, current since Martin Lamm, that it is, in technical respects, a highly successful comedy. Strindberg has simply been given too much credit as a constructor of conventional comedy. This is not to say he failed: he didn't *want* to write a conventional comedy. *Leka med elden* is a comedy on Strindberg's own terms and it would perhaps be more fitting to call the play a comic parody, or, even better, an anti-comedy.

If you believe that comedy technique consists primarily of the mechanics of a skillfully arranged *intrigue,* then there is of course a great temptation when first reading the play to agree with those who have said that Strindberg has at least on this one occasion employed an

elaborate plot intrigue. As for example Martin Lamm has said: "And more than anything, this play has, in contradiction to Strindberg's theories, a fully developed plot intrigue"[1]. But in my opinion, it can be shown that the case is quite the opposite: the play has, in accordance with Strindberg's theories, an only adequately developed plot intrigue. True, he borrows elements from French salon comedy, but he never submits to its conventions.

The skillfully constructed intrigue is without a doubt one of the characteristics of a comedy, but additionally we must deal with something more difficult to judge, that is, the *tone* of comedy. Now, to speak about *tone* in a play written for the stage may seem to be rather a hazardous undertaking, but nonetheless I would like to make an attempt – after an examination of the dialogue – to develop our observations in order to demonstrate that this play, not only in question of *intrigue* but also in terms of *tone,* presents an interesting conflict with the conventions of comedy. Naturally we cannot begin such a discussion without first giving operational definitions of what is meant by *intrigue* and by *tone,* respectively.

To consider the *intrigue* first, the accepted view is that the most typical comedy is that in which the action begins in relative tranquility, only to be whipped up into a storm and then – after various more or less plausible events – returns to a calmer level. The overhanging threat is removed, misunderstandings are cleared up and order restored in a fashion that makes it more natural to speak of a triumph for Justice or Morality rather than any triumphant ability of the involved characters to solve their own problems. In the light of the happy ending there is a reconciliatory haze which tones down the foregoing differences, the threat of catastrophe is reduced to mere misunderstanding and thus – the intent is, at least – that a lesson has been learned. But if all ends well, then as a rule, everything is indeed well.

This can be described more briefly with the phrase given by A.C.Bradley à propos Shakespeare's comedies: "In the same way a comedy will consist of three parts, showing the 'situation', the 'complication' or 'entanglement' and the 'dénouement' or 'solution'."[2] The

[1] See Martin Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer I,* Stockholm 1924, p.399.

[2] Andrew Cecil Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy. Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth,* 2nd ed. London (1905) 1949, p.41.

moral message of a comedy can of course be conveyed with different degrees of intrusive obviousness; one method is to give the play the character of a proverb, so that the audience is aware from the beginning of the moral truth to be demonstrated, and thus finds itself in collusion with the author. Strindberg does in fact give his play the nature of a proverb, partly in relation to the French comedy tradition. But as will be shown, his aim is, originally enough, quite the opposite: what Strindberg demonstrates is the complete absence of those things usually exhibited as moral truths. At the conclusion of *Leka med elden* we certainly do find a number of moral adages but they are meant to be taken ironically, and the psychology they represent seems to be rather antiquated.

So comedy also has a moralizing aim. Regarding the *intrigue,* it is most clearly distinguished from a tragedy in that it has a happy ending – so prescribe Horatius and Donatus and thus it has usually been since their time even if for example Molière's *Le Misanthrope* and Musset's *On ne badine pas avec l'amour* are interesting exceptions.

If we turn now to the *tone* of comedy, this can most simply be pinned down in a formula which has been established through continued usage, with variations in many languages, but which in the work of Horatius reads «ridentem dicere verum"[3]. Comedy is then a form of truth-telling, but the truths shall be presented with a smile. The *tone* is to be found in the dialogue and signifies the degree of exposition with which the truths are put forth.

If you accept these requirements in question of *intrigue* and *tone* as necessary for a successful comedy, you are also forced to state that *Leka med elden* stands in conflict with both of them – put perhaps not in such a manner as to evidence failure. It is most likely that Strindberg was aware that he was actually and quite obviously violating both of these rules. That he persisted in calling the work a comedy can perhaps be seen instead as an attempt at implicit genre criticism or at least as an attempt to give new life to the genre. What he actually does is that he allows his comedy to end in total hopelessness, and most importantly: *he takes up discussion of the problematic of truth-telling itself.* Thus it is not altogether surprising when Strindberg the satirist overwhelms Strindberg the writer of comedy.

[3] Horatius, *Sat.* I.I, 24.

How do we arrive at the conclusion that *Leka med elden* does not in fact have a typical happy ending? If by "happy ending" you only mean that order is restored and that a danger has been warded off so that life can once again proceed as if nothing had happened, then at first glance *Leka med elden* may seem to end happily. The only problem with this is that the person who should in this case have learned a lesson is at the same time the most psychologically reasonable of the characters and moreover is the one who has just before been the victim of what is no more nor less than a moral execution! Additionally, what happens is that Axel, who can reasonably be considered to be the main character, has suddenly left the area – and the stage. This exit is in itself a typical comedy finale, under one condition: that Axel, who so ignominiously flees, does not convey a weighty moral pathos, but is mostly a foolish figure or an intriguer who with malicious cunning stirred up trouble for the married couple and now flees when he sees that he himself is about to be ensnared in matrimony. But in this case *Leka med elden* would quite simply be the account of how the wife of the house learns not to flirt with the friend of the family, and thus her marriage would emerge stronger, or at least undamaged, from the crisis.

With such a reading, which really reduces the play to a mere trifle, an erotic comedy of the simplest design and with a half-hearted moral message, it is of course also extremely difficult to claim that Axel is in reality Strindberg's alter ego. Lamm does not seem to be aware of this problem when at one and the same time he does call Axel Strindberg's representative and also labels the play a comedy of love: Lamm writes: "The fire that is played with in the Strindberg play is of course love, and Axel, Strindberg's alter ego in the play, expresses its theme when he states: 'Yes, you play with matches, hunting knives and sticks of dynamite. I think it's horrible'."[4]

When Strindberg claimed in his well-known statement that he possessed the greatest fire in the realm, this was not an assertion of erotic potential: it referred of course to a pathos in a wider sense, of a concern for truth and a disinclination for compromise and moral humbug. And I feel that this is also the meaning behind his comedy *Leka med elden,* which should therefore also be translated, "playing loose and easy with serious matters". The setting and atmosphere, the *tone* of the play is

[4] See LAMM, op. cit., p. 398.

indeed loose and easy, and it is this that Axel finally strongly opposes. When he finally turns his back on his former friends, it is not to avoid a new marriage but to escape from a morally rotten atmosphere. The situation is one in which Axel, a young man severely bruised by life and matrimony is introduced into a home as the friend of the family. The family consists of the artist Knut, his wife Kerstin and also Knut's father, who is of independant means, as well as the 20 year-old Adèle. The wife in this home, for want of anything else to occupy her time, decides that she has fallen in love with Axel, who thereby finds himself in a conflict situation vis-à-vis his friend Knut. From the very first, Axel appears as an honest individual who wishes to avoid any sort of clandestine romantic flirtation, but at the same time feels it is dishonest to conceal straightforward and empassioned emotions. So as we will see a situation arises in which the husband is hurt, but still states that he is prepared to give up his wife, on the condition that Axel marry her. Now, here Axel hesitates, but it is hardly fear of being shackled to another wife that motivates his flight: he is repelled by the heartlessness and cynicism he feels his friend has shown, and which is in fact characteristic of the generally rotten moral atmosphere in the home. Indirectly, however, it is also the wife Kerstin who is accused: her husband Knut has been gradually infected through his all too lengthy involvement with her. Axel flees, and takes with him all of his unresolved problems: he is homeless, unable to work, and he waits for the verdict in a legal action. Kerstin has been rather roughly unmasked even if in the light-hearted tone of comedy it is said only that "She's just had a cold shower»[5]. As the play concludes, then, everything returns to the way it was.

All this takes place during an early morning. People saunter on and off stage, they talk of a morning dip or stroll to whet their appetite for breakfast. Just before the curtain falls, the gong sounds and everyone gathers for breakfast with an air of comfortable "Gemütlichkeit". The characters now allude indirectly in their dialogue to what has actually happened; the final scene is filled with similar allusions and insinuations.

If you just consider the surface action, obviously there could be no

[5] Most quotations from Michael Meyer's translation, *Playing with Fire. A Play in One Act,* London 1963. See p. 33.

more typical resolution for a comedy than this one. If, however, you consider Axel's qualities not as a disturber of the peace but as a moral critic, then it is clear that Strindberg has instead ironically employed a standard convention of comedy. In *The Argument of Comedy* Northrop Frye describes the convention: "In the last scene, when the dramatist usually tries to get all his characters on the stage at once, the audience witnesses the birth of a renewed sense of social integration. In comedy as in life the regular expression of this is a festival, whether a marriage, a dance or a feast."[6]

Now, if we accept that Axel cannot be considered only as a mere trouble maker who is justly driven to flight, then we are indeed led to the conclusion that Strindberg has consciously and indeed quite obviously sabotaged the most typical of comedy conventions when he has his comedy end not in a joyful celebration commemorating some sort of renewal, but rather in a direct parody of such a celebration!

We must of course turn to the dialogue in order to form a judgement of Axel's character. We must consider what he says and how he speaks in order to determine his character and his relations with the other persons with whom he interacts. The dialogue in this play is very skillfully and ingeniously composed, a fact which is not made any less interesting when we consider that much of *what* is said is concerned with *how* people say things, how the truth is presented and how one shows self-control. We can see, then, that this comedy, which should or might seem to consist of humorously presented truths, does in fact concern itself with the problematic and ethic of the utterance of truth. The author's extreme zeal for exposure or revelation is all too clear. In the play it is Axel who possesses the greatest fire, the sharpest vision and the best sense of what is moral humbug. Therefore his lines are quite unlike those of the others – if you make an exception for Adèle, who becomes the second teller of truth in the play.

To put it quite simply, people talk on completely different levels in this play. The father has his own language, as does Knut, and Axel has another. As I have said Adèle is at the same level as Axel, while the wife, Kerstin, seems to lack a more fully developed language and mostly responds to questions, or repeats or comments on the words of

[6] Northrop Frye, *The Argument of Comedy*. See *Shakespeare's Comedies. An Anthology of Modern Criticism,* ed. L.Lerner, London 1967, p.317.

others. Therefore she thinks that her surroundings are somehow strange and that people speak strangely. In this way she appears to be naive but honest; she takes people at their word. In a line that is just as much an example of tragic irony as of comic humor she comments on her milieu: "Yes, if I didn't know Knut so well, and hadn't already learned that artists are a different species, I'd hardly know what to think half the time."(p.4) These word, "If I didn't know", or "hadn't already learned" preface many of the replies in the play, from soon after the curtain goes up so that from the very beginning this formula gives an indication of a discrepancy between actual relationships on the one hand, and the way people usually talk about them on the other.

But this discrepancy is quite typical for comedy, just what we expect, that serious truths are told with a smile, that is to say with a certain entertainment or amusement value but still intended to make us think. This is indeed so to a certain extent, and it is precisely this that Axel so strongly objects to: the playful and irresponsible way of confronting life's most important questions.

Let us first study the language of *The Father*. He is the oldest of the play's personages; according to the stage directions he's 60 years old. He appears primarily at the beginning and conclusion of the play and is also seen on two occasions in the middle of the play (specifically, scenes 3 and then 10 and 16 and finally 21). His role is that of the dissatisfied grumbler, but above all of the moralist. Often his moralizing takes the form of a proverb or saying, usually of Old Testament origin. These sayings or proverbs comprise almost a quarter of his lines, the rest are composed of his insinuations and grumbling. In this respect it is most often his son Knut that he objects to and reproaches in this indirect fashion, and naturally the effect is often comic. From his very first entrance he delivers proverbs in response to his son's more direct impertinances: "A fool is a grief unto himself, and the father of a fool findeth no joy." (p.5) His next reply also takes the form of an adage: "A wise woman buildeth a house, but a fool destroyeth it." (p.5) His son is accustomed to this sort of response and for once he replies in kind: "A beautiful woman who knoweth not discretion is like a sow with a gold ring in her nose." (p.6) It is only after this exchange that they begin quarreling in earnest. The father berates his son and daughter-in-law for having received Axel at an unseemly hour the previous evening. He views a portrait of Axel and delivers his judgement of him,

which is absolutely categorical and in its moralism related to another proverb he employs: "He who hath no religion is an evil man, and he who breaketh his marriage is an evil man." (p. 7) And further – with yet another saying – "There is an hour for love, and there is an hour for hatred." (p. 7)

In the middle of the play – the 10th scene – The Father returns. Mosquitoes have managed to get into his room and he wants to use the study instead. But you get the feeling that he is very well aware that the study is occupied by none other than Axel, so that The Father is able to make another exit posing as a martyr. In the 21st scene of the play, the last, The Father is told that he can have the study, whereupon he responds that he doesn't need it anymore. His son states that he is certainly fickle, and The Father extends the insinuation in a fashion that we have seen is typical for him when he says, "Well, I'm not the only one. But – 'He who knoweth his own mind is greater than he who conquereth cities'." (p. 33) The Father is also the one given the last words in the play. Even this bit of dialogue is ironic; he says one thing and means another. His son suggests that he offer Kerstin his arm when they go in to breakfast. He replies, "No, thanks. You keep Kerstin for yourself." (p. 33)

So, The Father grumbles and moralizes, but he is quite satisfied when the intruder is driven from the home. The constant undercurrent in his responses shows that he is actually very well informed about what has been going on. You almost get the feeling that he has been lurking about in the wings, spying; how else can you explain for example his sudden appearance when Axel is proclaiming his love for Kerstin?

With his foolish moralizing and way of speaking in citations The Father naturally develops into a comic figure, but it may be considered unfortunate that it happens to be him, with his simple and rigid moral strictures who gets the last word and who is in fact the real victor in the concluding scene.

In *Leka med elden* it can be seen that the dialogue shifts, depending on the degree of sincerity and self-restraint shown by the speaker. The Father here represents an extreme; his language is the most impersonal and the most literary. His wisdom is as it is pointed out in the play borrowed from such sources as Solomon's Book of Proverbs and from Ecclesiastes.

Considering *tone,* it is possible to say that with The Father Strindberg

utters truths in a comic or laughable manner, "ridentem", but at the very same time on another level the author gives a devastating demonstration of how hollow these same truths really are.

How sincerely do the other characters in this play speak? *The Mother* appears only in the 2nd and the last scene, and her role is completely insignificant, with the exception that it is she who warns against playing with fire. The context here is interesting. The Mother says: "Well, your friend turned up again last night." (p. 3) Kurt replies: "Kerstin's friend, you mean. She's quite mad about him. When he arrived last night I thought they were going to kiss each other." (p. 3) The Mother then warns: "You shouldn't make jokes like that, Knut. 'He who plays with fire ...'". (p. 3). Thus it is not just Kerstin who, if she really was about to kiss Axel, played with fire: it was also Knut who played with fire when he jokingly regarded a possibly explosive truth.

More interesting as a person than The Mother is *The Cousin,* 20 year old Adèle. She is one of the sincere individuals in the play, for with her there is no discrepancy between thought and expression. Axel – who in the list of characters is called "The Friend" – thus tells her: "You're remarkably eloquent. And penetrative." (p. 14) Adèle responds: "Hatred is always penetrative" (p. 14) to which Axel says, "Anyone who hates as much as you do must also be able to love." (p. 14) Thus the strong emotions lie side by side. For Strindberg this is a psychological truth and the sign of a true and passionate nature, and once again, it is of course so that the "passion" is not only erotic in nature; the link between the powerful emotions and clearness of vision shows that it is instead a question of a person with considerable moral pathos. This is also made clear in her concentrated description of the family. Adèle is disturbed by their immoral way of life: "Yes, they're a strange family. The father's been doing nothing for ten years, living on his dividends; and the son's never done a stroke of work since he was born. They eat, sleep, and wait for death, wasting time as amiably as they know how. No purpose in life, no ambition, no passions, but a great deal of the Ecclesiastes." (p. 14) This intelligent and temperamentally forceful description has been remarked on by Lamm in a manner which certainly demands comment. Lamm writes: «The play even contains fully developed French raisonneur dialogue which with rhetorical abandon is flung over the footlights at the audience. Take for example The Cousin's long tirade in the 7th scene [...] Strindberg has himself

noticed that he has written Dumas-like dialogue and tries to improve things by having Axel respond: 'You're remarkably eloquent'."[7]. I think that it can be seen that the situation is quite the contrary: her speach deviates in degree of naturalness from the others since in her case there is agreement between form and content. This would certainly seem to be Strindberg's aim, and Adèle's way of speaking is consequently appreciated by Axel as a counterbalance to all the cited proverbs and to Knut's banter. Thus Axel does not "improve" anything with his words: he merely agrees. And when he says that she "speaks well" this means of course least of all that he is offering her a compliment on her ability to express herself. And additionally, Lamm has not cited the entire line, which as we saw runs: "You're remarkably eloquent. *And penetrative.*" (my italics)

It's possible to sum up, then, regarding The Cousin, by saying that she really speaks truths, but truths of another sort than those of The Father, and without Knut's flippant manner.

The Daughter-in-law *Kerstin*'s character has already been touched on. She gives a decidedly non-intellectual impression and seems in no way to be the equal of her husband, whose bantering tone she has difficulty in coping with. With a line that is at once an expression of her wishful thinking and also of the author's irony, she states: "Oh, Knut's impossible. If I didn't know that he means nothing by what he says ..." She is interrupted by The Father who makes an assertion which with its change of meaning is characteristic Strindberg: "If he means nothing he must be an idiot." (p. 6)

Kerstin is as a character the complete opposite of the other woman in the play, Adèle, about whom she says: "She knows everything, that girl!" Kerstin herself is responsible for most of the questions asked in the play. She is certainly sincere but at the same time so naive that her sincerity becomes uninteresting. Her very first line is indicative of her questioning stance. Knut asks her if Axel has arisen yet, and she answers, "How should I know?" It may seem a bit ironic that she then prefaces many of her comments with "If I didn't know that ..." but by now the audience is forewarned and can take her formulated claim with a pinch of salt. It is naturally such details in the construction of the dialogue that contribute to the impression that Strindberg has woven his dialogue with unusually polished craftsmanship.

[7] See Lamm, op. cit., p. 401.

She is such a naive character it might seem that Kerstin represents a kind of moral innocent in this environment of insinuations and petty intrigue. You can't say that she schemes against Axel, and she doesn't seduce him. She really has no influence on the play's *tone* nor on its *intrigue*. She neither creates the atmosphere nor acts as a driving force. Through her naivity she is incapable of being anything but sincere, but this is of course quite different from being sincere with pathos. Towards the end of the play it might seem as if she was in fact Axel's superior in passion as well as sincerity. She tells him: "Oh, you're so strong, you can control your passions, you're so proud and high-minded, but that's because you have never loved, you've never loved as I have loved you!" (p. 25) But Strindberg has insured against such an interpretation: according to the accompanying stage directions, Kerstin is simply "hysterical". Thus also in the case of Kerstin there is a discrepancy between what she says, and what she accidentally happens to say. Unlike The Father, who deliberately intends his words to carry a double meaning, Kerstin has no such ulterior intent. But if you listen carefully to her thoughtless chatter, there is still an underlying meaning even in *her* responses. The naively sincere character and the insinuatingly ironic: with both these categories the lines carry double meanings.

When these personages speak dialogue that lacks double meaning – as in the scene where Adèle describes the family or where Axel leaves the family in scene 19 – it is a question of an affected outburst by an indignant moralist. But here even these characters break through the comedy convention that decrees that truths should be served up in an amusing form. There is of course nothing that in itself prevents the occurance of affected outbursts of rage in a comedy, but according to the convention the furious character should either be a comic figure or make himself look foolish, and the anger itself usually is not in the name of truth but mostly just a sign of a lack of balance. Thus what is awkward is that someone suddenly drops their mask – not that an uncomfortable truth has been conveyed.

Kerstin, then, tries to show herself to be of a very passionate nature. But in striving to do so she mostly manages to appear decadent.

Knut sees himself as the speaker of truth in whatever situation we see him. However the utterance of truth can take place on qualitatively different levels. For Knut revealing truths involves the rather simple task of finding what he thinks is someone's weak spot, then being as

impertinent as possible. For him it is a question of truth without morality – for Axel the two concepts cannot be separated.

After Knut greets his mother with the exclamation, "Oh, God, Mother, you look like hell!" (p. 3) and they have had a bantering give-and-take Kerstin then states: "You two have such a nasty way of joking, one never knows when you're serious". Naturally Knut answers, "I'm always serious." (p. 3) This does not, however, prevent him from adding a few minutes later, when asked to try and cheer up The Father, that "he isn't always in the mood to appreciate my jokes". (p. 5) Possibly this is said with ironic intent, so that what Knut still means is that he never jokes, but that those around him prefer to think he is joking – purely out of their sense of self-preservation! In any event that is how The Father reacts when Knut points out that he looks like he is courting – an insinuation about The Father's interest in Adèle: the old man retorts: "There *is* a limit *even* to jokes". (p. 6)

Knut's lines are thus generally sarcastic. Consequently he should also be acceptable as a person who does not break the comic frame. He is as irresponsible as the father is moralistic, and both of them appear more as types than as individual characters. Knut's half-serious truths give an impression of decadence to anyone who hears Axel's serious and uncompromising views. When Knut does succeed in shocking it is because he is daring in his erotic utterances, as when he says about Axel, to Kerstin: "I am jealous, though I feel no envy nor malice. I like this man so much I couldn't deny him anything [...] It's mad, criminal, base, but if he asked me to let him sleep with you, I'd say 'yes' [...] Do you know, sometimes I'm haunted by a vision, not only when I'm asleep, but when I'm awake too. I see the two of you together – and it doesn't hurt me, I enjoy it, as though I were watching something very beautiful." Kerstin exclaims "This is revolting", and he is happy to agree: "It may be unusual, but you must admit it's damned interesting!" (p. 22)

When Kerstin explains to Knut that she and Axel love each other, it seems as if he has really lost his composure for a moment. Now, reading the text does not give you a completely clear picture of exactly how Strindberg envisioned Knut's character and his attitude towards his wife. Besides the possibility that Knut is merely passing the time by experimenting with his wife and Axel – and thereby running the risk of losing control of events – another interpretation offers itself, also sup-

ported by the text, perhaps no more strongly than this one but certainly no less convincingly.

It is possible to conceive that Knut honestly wants to rid himself of Kerstin, and sees Axel as a way of doing so. But if Knut really wants to get rid of his wife, then the terms he presents in the final confrontation scene are certainly risky. He demands that Axel marry her. This is setting the stakes high, and seems in fact to be a bit unnecessary. It is more likely that after a moment of confusion, Knut, the least inflamed of the three characters, is the one who is first able to grasp the situation and immediately poses an ultimatum which – through touching on Axel's concept of honour – makes Knut certain of the outcome. He can be sure that Axel will withdraw, which he does, though for other reasons. This scene, with its swiftly presented terms, is as Lamm pointed out, borrowed from Sardou's comedy *Divorçons*. Strindberg appropriates the suggestion, but treats it differently. The idea itself is for him a sign of decadence, but it is in fact through this invitation that the whole moral rottenness of the place is finally made evident to Axel. It is now that he makes the decision to flee.

The most likely interpretation, then, is that which presupposes that Knut does want his wife to stay with him. He gives the impression of being far too comfortable to appreciate any major change in his life, but even more important is that when he is confronted with the fact of the relationship, for a moment he loses his grip. That you tend to take him as being sincere in this specific situation depends, however, on what he says about himself, and on his way of speaking. He says: "I feel as though I'd known all this before, and yet it astonishes me so much I can't comprehend it [...] All the same we sit here confronted by a situation which is not our fault and which we could not have prevented. *We tried to forestall the danger by pretending to be frank, and making fun of it,* but it has closed in upon us and now it has struck." (pp. 29–30; my italics) This is in my opinion one of the key lines in the play. What Knut does here is that he delivers a sharp and honest piece of self-criticism directed at his own way of speaking, of only playing with the truth. This is not however a question of any enduring change in Knut. He soon pulls himself together and then sets up Kerstin's "cold shower".

Now, this scene is without a doubt unsatisfying. You have to agree with Lamm when he states that it is psychologically absurd. But it is not quite as absurd as Lamm seems to think. According to him Knut

doesn't lose his composure for even an instant. This is as we have seen simply not so. Nor are things as Lamm would have them when he states that Knut's strategy is completely successful[8]. That may be what Knut himself believes, but the reader or the audience knows what kind of success he has had.

Because Knut has always joked in earlier scenes, he has of course set up the conditions for misunderstandings. But at this point he changes *tone* precisely to comment on his own manner of speaking and consequently there is good reason to take him seriously for a moment. I feel it can be seen that Strindberg has forcefully stepped in here with a line that is so powerful it almost breaks the dramatic illusion by commenting on, revealing the very conditions for comedy in general and especially this particular comedy. It must be the author's idea that we see Knut so, that he has here a moment of self-examination and is in fact prepared to give up his wife – on the stated conditions and for just the reason he gives: it is less humiliating to give than to be robbed. In fact, in a letter sent when the play was being produced in Stockholm in 1908 Strindberg himself points out to one of the actors that the scene is indeed a "serious" one.[9]

Finally, to consider *Axel,* I have suggested earlier that he is not a comic figure, but on the contrary, his arrival sabotages both the *intrigue* and the *tone* of the comedy. Axel's entrance is well prepared for. Just before, Knut has argued with Kerstin, and both The Mother and The Father, and Kerstin has in turn argued with Adèle. Then Axel appears on stage, dressed in light summer clothing and exclaims: "It's a glorious morning, and when one has slept beneath the roof of two happy people, one feels that life still has something to offer." (p. 9) To the audience this of course appears to be ironic, but Axel certainly means it sincerely. Knut and Kerstin now decide to attack this innocent figure, and their favorite topic is love. Axel is asked why he had left them so suddenly the year before, and it is suggested that it was because he had fallen in love with Adèle. So that he won't appear to be fearful of women and seem to cut a comic figure, he responds: "I'm not afraid of women, only of my feelings for women." (p. 10) That gives an indica-

[8] See op. cit., p. 399.

[9] Letter to actor Alrik Kjellgren 2.2.1908. See *Meddelanden från Strindbergssällskapet* nr 25, 1959 (Stockholm 1960) p. 6.

tion of the important theme that will be developed in his presence as the play goes on; the passion that other speak about, he possesses. The passion the others try to build up he is at pains to prevent from growing, for he fears it could be devastating. His so-called flight the year before appears in this light more to be a gesture of consideration. Thus, though Axel sees a danger he does not try to avoid it by joking, like Knut, but by giving warning. With Adèle he can on the other hand speak clearly. She already seems to know everything and she lets him know that – even though he may not be aware of it – he is in love with Kerstin. He responds by saying that even though this may be the case, it won't matter as long as he can control his feelings. So he still thinks that this is possible, and it is in this situation that the wise and perceptive Adèle observes: "Feelings have a way of communicating themselves; and fire spreads." (p. 14)

But together with Knut and Kerstin Axel is, to begin with, cautious, avoids answering directly and prefers not to be any bother: he just wants to observe their happiness. But he soon sees something else, and he tells Adèle: "There's a new atmosphere, a different way of talking and thinking. There's something that makes me uneasy." (p. 14) And with a formulation that will later be followed by many similar figures in Strindberg's work, we hear: "I think something must be rotting beneath these floor-boards." (p. 19) Instead of basking in a glow of happiness and harmony as he had intended, he is driven to formulate that conclusion, and he does it after listening to what has been said and how people speak. He has been jolted by their irresponsible way of treating not only love but above all the truth about themselves. He continues: "Yes, you play with matches, with hunting knives and sticks of dynamite! I think it's horrible." (p. 19) We can make this more precise by saying that he is certainly afraid of what might be the result of this game, but more important, he is afraid of an atmosphere in which such a game is allowed. And perhaps it should be mentioned once more that sex is here only the catalytic or triggering factor, the igniting spark for other sorts of passions. Love will certainly be followed by hate, and hate is of such a nature that it brings out the truth – something that Adèle has pointed out early in the play.

This then is Axel's concept of immorality; therefore he goes as far as he can to, as he himself puts it, "hide his feelings". At the same time the most serious thing he could be accused of would be that he himself

had acted similarly, that *he* lacked seriousness and passion. At this point this is exactly what Kerstin tells him, thus bringing an end to all calm. Axel undergoes a metamorphosis, his language becomes direct, he speaks what he feels and gives an at once passionate and pedantic account of what he has thought of Kerstin in the past year: Here is the dialogue between the two: Kerstin says, "*(hysterically)* [...] don't stand there like a statue awaiting adoration and sacrifice. *(She falls on her knees)* Oh, you're so strong, you can control your passions, you're so proud and high-minded, but that's because you have never loved, you've never loved as I have loved you." He responds: "Haven't I? Get up! ... Go over there and sit in that chair. ... The farthest one. That's right. ... Now I shall speak!" (p.25)

Now follows his long confessional account after which he sums up: "Now that everything has been said, there is nothing left for us to do but part." (p.26) After such an outburst of sincerity, the world is not quite the same, nor will the course of the comedy proceed along quite the same lines. What Axel spells out here in clear language is as fatal as the off-stage seduction in *Fröken Julie*. The catastrophe is a fact. But: here Strindberg allows Axel to leave the stage, and then the tone becomes just as heartless once again.

But before Axel flees, the author must see to it that he is innocent of any guilt: he must leave as a martyr and not as a sinner. They discuss flight, but Axel responds: "No, let us be original for once, let us show the world an example of how to behave honourably. The moment Knut enters this room, we will say to him: 'It has happened, we love each other. Tell us what we must do'." (p.27) That is just what they tell him, so this time Knut gets a taste of his own medicine, and he comments: "Well, it's certainly original, but it's damned immodest." (p.29) However the same thing can certainly be said, and with greater justification, about Knut's offer and his conditions. Axel begins to see that he and Kerstin don't speak the same language; his sincerity and hers and Knut's sincerity are qualitatively different. He says: "Yes, I hesitate, because this honesty of ours begins to seem like impertinence, this honourable behaviour smacks of callousness." (p.31) Axel then flees and when Knut returns to the others and tells them about the flight, he does it of course in his old comic manner, full of double meanings. His language blossoms a final time: "But why did he run out through the garden like that? He looked as though he was going to take the trees

and bushes with him. I thought the seat of his trousers was on fire." (p. 32) The play's final lines consist mainly of insinuations and uttered proverbs and the whole thing really does have the character of a coarse and heartless game; the scene tends to confirm Axel's early description. Axel hasn't been able to fit in to this environment. He entered it innocently and with the best intentions, but the language repelled him and he saw this language as a symptom of the underlying immorality. His own passionate nature, his deep concern for truth made him impossible in such a situation composed on the one hand of a fixed morality, as in The Father's sayings and proverbs, and the open immorality of the married couple on the other. These representatives of two kinds of extremes make peace in the closing scene, and no one can really doubt that Strindberg himself did *not* consider this to be a so-called happy ending.

It can be seen, then, that close analysis of the intrigue and the dialogue shows that we are not dealing with an entirely successful comedy. The question to be considered then is if Strindberg really intended to write a conventional comedy or if he, as I have suggested, was actually attempting to sabotage the conventions of the comedy of intrigue and by a practical demonstration, simply demolish it. That dispite all he retains the label "comedy" for his play and employs so much of the intrigue and prerequisites of salon comedy should then actually be his own highly personal use of the formula "ridentem dicere verum": the author invites his audience to an erotic comedy and serves them a vivisection.

If we consider, then, all of Strindberg's plays from the period 1888–1892 it is in fact *Leka med elden* that best answers to the plan for the theater he sketched in the essay *Om modernt drama och modern teater* (1889). This correspondance has not been adequately noted by researchers, which may in turn be the result of their not having noticed that in this essay it is above all the tradition of *comedy* that Strindberg deals with.

I am not going to dwell on his reasoning in this essay.[10] It is adequate to mention here that he declares his intent to employ the form of the

[10] A further discussion of this and also of the biographical background of the play is found in my paper *Sanningssägaren som komediförfattare. En studie i Strindbergs komedi Leka med elden,* Samlaren 1979 (Uppsala 1980), pp. 75–106.

proverb to deliver the observations of modern psychology and vivisection – of course not in harmony with contemporary French salon comedy such as that of Sardou, but in direct opposition to it.

With *Leka med elden* the proverb form itself is revivified in such a way that the moral of the play stands in opposition to just that type of moral truth that a proverb is traditionally expected to illustrate.