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I ordenes og bildenes vold

A Reading of Amalie Skram’s Forraadt

Introduction

Amalie Skram’s Forraadt (1894), together with the other three marriage novels, has traditionally been read as a woman’s novel, that is: written by a woman, intended for a woman and staging a woman as a victimized protagonist in a male-dominated society. This article is an attempt to introduce a new perspective to the reading by rehabilitating the male side of the gender polarity and consequently showing that patriarchal societal norms which subjugate the woman become a detrimental force that bounces back to destroy the man.

My main tool for this reading will be my focus on the imagery in Forraadt. It cannot, however, be literally understood as images, but, according to Hans Lund, rather as constellations of elements that produce a physically non-existing image. The information about the image is transmitted via the verbal language. In the analysis of Forraadt the issue in question will be mental imagery, that is: dreams, memories and fantasies.

I will look at the conflict between Riber and Ory through the focus on the relationship between word and image that, as a consequence of the character’s unfulfilled sexuality, transforms into the struggle between iconoclasm and idolatry. This conflicting paragone-situation, when read within the context of the mythical patterns, will provide an explanation for why Riber’s iconoclasm appears to be directed not only towards idolatry, but also towards the woman.

Round-about way to the end

The novel has a strikingly repetitive structure that, permeated by foreshadowing episodes, anticipates a course of events from the very beginning and leads the reader to the expected end. One of the most conspicuous examples is a number of warnings about Riber’s death. During the wedding night Riber tells his unwilling bride a ghost story about his dead father who appeared in a vision during one of his sea trips: “Men da vendte han sig og pegte med udstrakt Arm hen imod Vinduerne. Saa drejed han Hodet og saa truende paa mig, og idetsamme blev han mindre og mindre og svandt væk i en lys, gul Taagerunding” (108). The dream vision emerges in the form of an image that is fatal for Riber and, as if to confirm it, he adds that he has thought about jumping overboard namely this way. Later he repeatedly tells Ory that he would like to die for her sake. In addition Ory has a dream that warns about Riber’s death: Ja, jeg [dvs. Ory] kom altsaa bare ganske simpelt gaende alene […]. Saa med ét, var der nogle faa Skridt fra mig, en Grind, og bag den stod Du [dvs. Riber] og saa imod mig med fremrakt Hode, og dit Ansigt var saa fuldt af Sorg og Lidelse og Bonligthed, – aa, det var hjærteskjærende saa’n som Du bad med Ojnene. […] Du gik langsomt og vaklende, og Du vendte dig ikke om en eneste Gang, og saa med ét, saa hurtig som et Lynglimt tog Taagen Dig, og væk var Du (149–51).
Riber’s vision and Ory’s dream emerge as internal images of the subjective irrational reality that appear on the text’s external reality. But the borderline between those two dimensions becomes blurred when fantasies transform to reality at the end, and Riber dies in the manner that these foreshadowing episodes prophesied. In addition, these dream visions can be looked upon as a reflection of the character’s feelings. Forrådt offers a more complicated pattern, where Ory’s dream discloses the transformation of her feelings into an anti-reflection rather than a mirror image and reveals the main conflict, in which she is encapsulated. Keeping in mind her prayers to God to gain strength to love Riber, the dream is an anti-reflection of her condition when she remains immovable “med det samme onde, haarde Blik” against Riber’s “hjærteskjærende” (150) eyes that were asking to save him. On the other hand her dream is a pure reflection of her actual feelings that contradict her logical efforts: “Men jeg svarte fremdeles ingenting, og det var fordi jeg ikke vilde svare” (150). In the context of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theory that interprets a dream as a symbolic expression of subconsciously suppressed desires, Ory’s dream becomes a reflection of reality that comes into being later in the book – in the end she appears as a cold and unapproachable monster-woman.

Another important feature of this repetitive structure is the use of the window motif that frames the novel. It is first mentioned in the ghost story as a cabin window that becomes fatal at the end of the book: Riber jumps into the sea through the same window that was pointed out by his father’s ghost. Moreover, an open window, according to Lund, can express the possibility of escape or have a symbolic function of the transition between life and death or the barrier between the two spheres, each of which is relevant in Riber’s case. Skram stages the two spheres as apparent opposites. Already in the ghost story the window has an ambiguous function: it becomes an opening that lets the day light in, but at the same time it remains open for something dark – Riber’s dead father who, again paradoxically, by pointing out to the light reality outside, forecasts the manner in which Riber dies. In such a context the alternation of the light and darkness in relation to death becomes blurred and this ambiguity is perpetuated further in the novel. Riber is sitting in the sitting room and looking at the blue sky while the light and sunshine is streaming through the open skylight and filling the room with the golden radiance. Ory, on the other hand, is standing in the cabin surrounded by impenetrable darkness unable to see the hatch-covered windows. That is to say, on this side of the window the reality is dark, even though it is related to Ory’s fate – it is she who remains alive at the end the story. Skram’s playing with the alternation of light and darkness has to do with the alternating positions Ory and Riber assume in relation to each other that I will discuss later.

But if the novel’s repetitive structure foreshadows, the end as discussed, already at the beginning, what is it then that drives the plot forward and gives grounds for the tragic ending in the story? I will show that the causal pattern of the novel rests on the characters’ problematic relationship to their own and each other’s sexuality if seen in the context of the relationship between word and image.

**Male sexuality and narration**

The essential point in the plot is the contract Ory establishes with Riber: sexuality is replaced with narration. But Riber’s project becomes ambiguous. His first purpose is to cure Ory from “gale Forestillinger”, “Amnestuevøvl” (178) and educate her in the realities of life. He wants to liberate Ory from harmful images that she cultivates and help her to unfold sexually. The only way out he sees is: “å ta Bladet fra Munden og snakke fra Leveren om alle disse
Ting” (179), that is: to narrate. In that manner Riber’s project also implies that he distances himself from the ideal image of the woman that he had imagined. He realizes that the untouched and pure woman carries a destructive power in the form of the cultivation of mental imagery – therefore she must be “cured,” or in other words, controlled by the masculine word.

But eventually Riber’s project changes. His expectations about Ory’s liberation from the repressive visions with the help of narration turn into a yearning to become purified himself by getting rid of – narrating out – his “dirty” past: he talks himself into believing that he could become a new person after that and make his marriage work. By telling stories to Ory he hopes to get the love she has promised him. But even after having understood what a futile hope it was, he could do nothing but tell. His narrative compulsion was no longer controllable when he felt that words were coming out against his own will: “Han var rent fortvilet over sig selv. Hvorfor kunde han dog aldrig tie stille eller nægte. For havde det vært, fordi han vilde skrifte alting og faa fuld Absolution. […] Men nu, da han vidste, hvordan hun tog det. Det var jo den rene Galskab. Men hvergang hun spurgte pent og venligt som nu, maatte han ud med Sandheden” (294). Riber’s own sexuality, suppressed by the premises of the contract, yet simultaneously provoked by Ory’s insistent questioning, finds an outlet in the narrative project that ultimately leads to his insanity.

In contrast to the former adventures of his life, Riber starts coming up with fragmented references to the Bible and bizarre self-identification. According to modern psychology, the ability to tell one’s story coherently is an important factor in creating identity. And the other way around: the inability to detect a consistent line in one’s reality and create order out of chaotic way of telling a story could signify an effort to organize one’s reality in a new and unfamiliar way. But it could also be a sign of a pathological insanity. As it appears in the novel, both of these possibilities are the case for Riber: first insanity, then suicide.

**Female sexuality and idolatry**

While Riber’s ideal of the woman apparently corresponds to Ory’s behavior, Ory’s expectations of the ideal man are crushed from the very beginning. She looks upon him as “den, hvis hele Liv var en uafbrudt Række af de ækleste Synder” (282). Her virgin upbringing is confronted with the realities of life that are based on the premises of double morality. This uncertainty evokes and unleashes Ory’s search for the truth about Riber’s life. The situation becomes complicated when Ory starts transforming the audible into the visual. She cultivates the “dirty” images of Riber’s past by reliving the memories of what has been told to her. In addition to the stories, Riber stirs up her fantasies by showing her the unknown side of life. He takes her to areas in London swarming of prostitution and unrestrained unfolding of bodily desires. These experiences unleash her imagination, reproducing the images of the seen, and that, in the end, locks her in her own imaginary reality. In contrast to Riber’s need to express himself verbally, Ory lives for the most part through ‘sight’. She thinks in images, not words, and she observes the world in a visual way.

Their mutual dependability can be explained from psychoanalytical perspective, as Irene Engelstad suggests. Freud claims that the main reason for pathological disturbances and nervous breakdowns lies in the conflict between natural instincts that, suppressed in the confrontation between social and cultural norms, acquire the form of dreams and visions. Ory is caught and imprisoned in the socially determined virginity ideals that hinder her sexuality from unfolding, while she relentlessly strives for sexual fulfillment in her fantasies, visions and by listening to Riber. Riber’s sexuality, on the other hand, is suppressed by the contract’s premises—he cannot touch Ory throughout his confession, while she continuously agitates him sexually by making him come clean about his past sexual encounters. This way, his suppressed sexual desires get an outlet in fantasies.

The male sexuality is rendered in the novel through three images of the male sex organ, as both Harald Bache-Wiig (1979: 4–6) and Irene Engelstad (1992: 155–157) have pointed out. They all appear as embodied fantasmata of Riber and Ory’s sexually agitated mind. The Slommen-vision in Riber’s case and the pipe- and midget images in Ory’s fantasies can be read as the consequences of the absence of sexuality, but more importantly sexuality that is a desired object for both Riber and Ory. However, at the same time it is controlled by words on Riber’s side and by idolatry on Ory’s. In this context their projects enter into the paragone—rivalry and struggle between words and images.

All the above-mentioned patterns create an ambiguous message. On the explicit level the female character is deprived of the sexual desire, but through the underlying meanings produced by images and thematic relations, she is rendered as the woman obsessed with sexuality. In this manner the message that it is only the man who represents the sexual drive is undermined.

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In a certain way Ory and Riber’s projects become woven together, but they are nevertheless marked with ambiguity. The thought regarding “at de to skulle vorde ét Kjød” (103) she rejects with disgust. Yet at the same time she possesses an irresistible desire to become one with Riber in a different way than sexual, namely by taking part in his past. As for Riber, he discards the dangerous and destructive ideal of purity that Ory stands for, but at the same time he expresses the wish to bring himself nearer to that ideal. For both of them this desire to be a part of the other becomes a compensation for the erotic contact.

**Fusion in the light of the paragone—rivalry between word and image**

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Ory’s visual transformations can be read as an attempt to compensate for a sexually failed life with projected imagery, which in addition reveals her troubled relationship to her surroundings. Her insistent focusing on certain elements indicates both disgust and attraction—the paradoxical in Ory’s relationship to reality and sexuality. She is excited, agitated, so that she can hardly control herself. However, the sight of the husband’s similar excitement instantly makes a component of disgust take over. Only through the verbalization and visualization of her own and Riber’s experiences can Ory come in contact with her own body.

In short, it is both the uncontrollable curiosity and idolatry in Ory’s mind that makes her question Riber more and more and Riber’s irresistible desire to narrate that steer the transformations of Ory and Riber’s positions towards each other and create a fusion of their projects in the text.
The mythical patterns in the iconoclastic context

In addition to the discussed dreams and visions Forraadt is also infiltrated with other fantastic elements, namely mythical patterns. The names of the main characters carry signals that point out to the myth about the dawn deity Aurora that chases and seduces the mighty hunter Orion, as Irene Engelstad also indicates.

Engelstad refers to another mutual feature of the names. She links the diminutive name Ory, the ship Orion and the beginning of Riber’s name in respect to conspicuous morphological similarities and maintains that they express the complicated merger between Ory and Riber (Engelstad 1992: 161). At the beginning Ory appears as the mistreated one that evokes compassion. Later the sympathy neutralizes and turns into condemnation: now it is Riber who needs to be given adequate consideration. As in the myth about Aurora and Orion, first it was Riber who captured Ory with his manhood, but later it is Ory who chases him with her titillating curiosity. The pursuer becomes the pursued and the other way around.

This change relates to a number of binary oppositions in the novel: victim–executioner, betrayed–traitor and consequently culminates in the opposition of the angel–monster woman. During the wedding Riber complains that Ory might have gotten an impression that she is going to be delivered to “Bøddelen” (75). At the end of the book it is Riber who perceives Ory the same way, when he says that he has never known that a child could be such a cruel executioner. A similar fusion of positions occurs in Ory’s treatment of herself as a betrayed victim whose sheltering from the realities of life made her incapable of accepting the duties of married life. But later her passive position of the betrayed is replaced by a lethal embodiment of the one who betrays by not keeping her word and driving the other to suicide.

The woman who earlier was “Guds Engel”, “Guds Aabenbaring” (133) for Riber, becomes his “Forræder” (298) and “Bøddel” (309) when he realizes that her purity is dangerous and detrimental. In addition, Ory’s obsession with the transformation of the audible to the visual makes her, if to refer to W. J. T. Mitchell’s theoretical observation here “[...] an object of pity who requires education and therapeutic conversion “for [her] own good” (Mitchell 1986: 197). That is exactly how Riber sees her when he decides to cure her from the harmful cultivation of imagery. In such a context the experienced Riber is an iconoclast who is capable of providing a mature explanation of her obsession. Later he assumes, however, an iconoclastic position with respect to both – Ory’s cultivation of “filthy” images and his own idolatry towards the ideal of a pure woman. His fear is based on what Mitchell calls “the iconoclastic point of view” that provides an understanding that “[T]he illusion is never simply innocent or harmless, [...] it is always a dangerous, vicious mistake that not only destroys the idolater and his tribe, but threatens to destroy the iconoclast as well” (Mitchell 1986: 197).

So while Ory remains an idolater, Riber’s position changes from being an idolater to becoming an iconoclast who gains insight in the harmfulness of image cultivation. In this manner Riber’s angel-woman with her innocence, ignorance and purity appears as something dangerous and threatening, that is to say, that his iconoclasm is directed not only to images but to the woman as well.

This transformation of the female angel image to frightening monster woman makes it possible to relate the Aurora-myth to other myths, such as the myth about Amor and Psyche, where the woman’s curiosity to know the identity of her husband puts the relationship to the test (Engelstad 1992: 139). The Ory-character can also be linked to the Medusa-image in the modern literary criticism – “dangerous,
perverse, hideous, and sexually ambiguous” (Mitchell 1994: 171–176), whose paralyzing look can be compared to Ory’s deadly curiosity.

These mythical archetypes can be looked upon as dreams and visions. They allude to the inescapable end in the novel and on the other hand it is death that gives meaning to these elements.

Conclusions
I have tried to show that Forraadt is more than just a woman’s novel as it is often seen in the context of the second wave feminist criticism. The conflict between Ory and Riber gains another dimension when looked upon through the focus on the relationship between word and image – it makes it possible to interpret the struggle between idolatry and iconoclasm as an expression of the characters’ unfulfilled sexuality. This *paragone* situation read within the context of the mythical patterns invites for the reading, in which Riber’s iconoclasm appears to be directed not only towards idolatry, but also towards the woman. At the same time such interpretation makes it possible to uncover the social criticism that puts blame on the patriarchal society as victimizing not only women, but men as well. Female sexuality, perverted and destroyed by the ideals of virginity and puerility, bounces back with fatal force, disabling and destroying the man and his world order.

For the final note: it may seem as if Skram undermines her own narrative project by staging the failure of Riber’s compulsive narrative project within the internal structure of the novel. Similarly, by depicting Ory’s visual undertaking as disastrous and pathological, she appears to undercut the naturalist observer model as a means to clarity and resolution. How can the novel succeed in illuminating the situation for the reader, if both the observer and narrative paradigm within the novel fails? My answer to this question is that the characters’ communicative fiasco in no way undermines Skram’s project, for her criticism is directed not towards any of these communication strategies, but rather to the excessive form that both word and image has taken when put into play within the excessively polarized gender system. By extension this message can also serve as a subtle way of cautioning against polarized literary criticism, which is bound to equally fail in finding a solution by focusing only on one victimized party and seeking to replace one power structure with another.

Bibliography

Note
1 All quotations from Amalie Skram: *Forraadt*, Schubothes Boghandel, Kjøbenhavn 1892