



مثلث الحب في مسرحيتي "الأقوى" لأوغست سترندبيرغ و كانديدا لبرناردشو

كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/واسط

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الملخص:

لقد كان موضوع مثلث الحب أو المثلث الأبدي مركزيا في الكثير من المسرحيات التي تناولت الحكمة فيها علاقة ثلاثية تصبح المرأة فيها مسرحا لصراع الحب بين رجلين هما الزوج والعاشق. و في الأعم الأغلب من هذه المسرحيات أنها قد قدمت المرأة رمزا للزوجة الخطاءة التي تختار أما الرحيل مع العاشق أو البقاء نادمة مع زوجها. في هذا البحث نتعامل مع عرض جديد لموضوع مثلث الحب والذي تقوم الزوجة فيه أما بالدفاع عن زوجها أو الوقوف بوجه الشخص الدخيل. وهكذا نوع من العروض يمكن تشخيصها في مسرحيتي "الأقوى" لأوغست سترندبيرغ و كانديدا لبرناردشو. ان هذا التقارب في موضوع المسرحيتين لايغني بأن الحكمة فيهما متطابقة. فبينما يكون الشخص الدخيل امرأة في مسرحية سترندبيرغ، فإنه يصبح شاعرا يافعا في مسرحية برناردشو. بالاضافة لذلك، بينما تنتهي مسرحية برناردشو برحيل الدخيل فاسحا المجال للزوجين بأكمال زواجهم بفهم جديد للعلاقة بينهما، يبقى الصراع قائما في مسرحية سترندبيرغ. و تبين الورقة البحثية أن هذا التقديم المتناقض لموضوع مثلث الحب في كلا المسرحيتين يعتمد بدرجة كبيرة على تجربة الكاتب المسرحي نفسه و كذلك رأيه بالمرأة و دورها على المستويين المنزلي و العام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مثلث الحب، مسرحية، الأقوى" لأوغست سترندبيرغ ، كانديدا لبرناردشو



Love Triangle in August Strindberg's 'The Stronger' and G.B. Shaw's *Candida*

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Abstract

Love triangle, or eternal triangle, has been the focus of many plays where the plot revolves around a three-sided affair in which the woman becomes a site of love competition between two males, the husband and the lover. The majority of those plays present the woman as the erring wife who chooses either to be with the lover or remorsefully remain with the husband. In this paper, we deal with another portrayal of love triangle in which the wife either defends her marriage or stands against the intruder. Such a portrayal is identified in August Strindberg's 'The Stronger' and G.B. Shaw's *Candida*. Yet, this does not suggest that the plot in both plays is identical. While the intruder in Strindberg's play is a woman, it is a young poet in Shaw's play. Moreover, whereas Shaw's play ends with the intruder's departure opening the space for the husband and wife to continue their marriage on a new basis of understanding, the conflict remains unresolved in Strindberg's play. This paper argues that this contrastive portrayal of love triangle in both plays relies, to a great extent, on the playwright's personal experience and also his notion of the woman and her role in the domestic and public spheres.

Key words: love triangle, Strindberg, Shaw, 'The Stronger', *Candida*.



Love Triangle in August Strindberg's 'The Stronger' and G.B. Shaw's *Candida*

August Strindberg (1849-1912) is a Swedish dramatist, poet and novelist. As a prolific writer, he wrote over sixty plays including *Master Olof*, *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, *Comrades*, *Creditors*, *To Damascus*, *Pariah*, *The Dance of Death*, *A Dream Play*, *The Outlaw*, *The Ghost Sonata* and 'The Stronger'. 'The Stronger' first premiered at Dagmars Theatre, Copenhagen, Denmark, on March 9, 1889. The first performance of the play in Sweden was at the Intimate Theatre (Stockholm) on December 5, 1907. Although being the shortest, the play is considered as one of Strindberg's significant plays. In this play, Strindberg presents two women, Madame X and Mademoiselle Y, in a women's café where only one of them speaking and traces their relationship and competition for one male who never appears in the play. As such, the play introduces a new portrayal of love triangle where two women fight for one man, Mme X's husband. The play's exploration of women's issues is also suggested in its all-female cast. When the curtain rises, the two women, Mme X and Mlle Y, meet at this café on Christmas eve and sit on one table. In addition to sharing the love of one man, the two women are actresses in the same theatre. The heavy impact of their rivalry on Bob, Mme X's husband, is demonstrated on stage when it abruptly shatters the temporary sense of friendship and compels Mme X to abandon Mlle Y's table and sit at a nearby one.

Strindberg's works draw heavily and directly on his personal life and experience. Michael Meyer, to name one critic, points out that the majority of Strindberg's works are "autobiographical" (1976, p. 15). Commenting on the playwright's interest in marital issues, Gassner points out that Strindberg's personal life was the cause of his obsession with the struggle between man and woman and forced him "to add the war of the classes to the war of sexes, the grievance of the



underdog to the protest of the male” (1960, pp. vii-viii). This is also suggested by Törnqvist and Steene who assert that Strindberg’s relation with his wife, Siri, can be traced in his works and that his “writings during the 188s are profoundly affected by their life together, particularly his views on the Woman Question” (2007, p. 78). Regarding this play, Meyer asserts that ‘The Stronger’ reflects “a sympathetic portrayal of his wife” (1966, p. 221). It casts light on the rivalry between Siri von Essen, Strindberg’s Finnish wife, and the Danish actress Nathalia Larsen, who both worked as actresses and played major female roles in his plays (Sutandio et al, 2017). Meyer points out that the character of Mlle Y might refer to another actress at the Royal Theatre in Stockholm named Helga Frankenfeldt. As such, the play comments on the playwright’s relations and affairs with the actresses who played leading roles in his plays. Such an issue is not restricted to the playwright’s personal life before marriage but also after that; Meyer (1966) posits that after marrying Siri, Strindberg had several affairs and flirtations with actresses at the theatre.

It is important to note that Strindberg wanted his wife, Siri, to play the character of Madame X and when she declined, Strindberg convinced Nathalia to replace her (Sutandio et al, 2017). Taking into consideration the playwright’s choice of a plot in which the character of Bob, Mme X’s husband is in the theatre office where both Mme X and Mlle Y work, one can easily assume the extent to which this play draws on Strindberg’s personal life. As delineated in other plays like *Comrades* and *The Father*, this play underscores Strindberg’s obsession with marital problems and the issue of women’s emancipation. In a message to, Albert Bonnier, his publisher in Stockholm, Strindberg expressed his reaction to Henrick Ibsen’s support of the feminist campaign in his plays, such as *A Doll’s House* (1881), saying that he is “preoccupied with this question of women’s rights [...] which has been befogged and made a farce of by such *sometimes* men as Ibsen” (Meyer, 1976, pp.13-14). Gassner notes that Strindberg “derided the species of



emancipated woman now arising, and he loathed Ibsen [...] as a fatuous supporter of the cult of feminine emancipation” (1960, p. x). Accordingly, while Nora, the leading female character in Ibsen’s play, is transformed from a doll-like wife into a determined woman valuing and asserting her independence, Strindberg’s plays often delineate female characters as overwhelmed with a sense of inferiority. Such depiction of female characters is also attributed to his personal life. Although being married to a baroness, Siri, Strindberg could not get rid of, Mayer proclaims, his “sense of resentment against people with an upper-class background” (1976, 81). In this sense, his plays depict this interaction between the two spheres, the private and public.

‘The Stronger’ conveys the playwright’s investment in the issue of patriarchy and also his reaction to women’s emancipation. This is noticed in the ongoing conflict between the two female characters over one man who never appears on the stage. As shown in the play, Mme X, is depicted as a woman who is interested in the domestic space and who finds joy in buying presents, on Christmas Eve, for her husband and their offspring, Lisa and Eskil. Mlle Y, her adversary, is unwilling to play such a role in life and thus appears lonely. As such, her loneliness, on such a special day, is attributed to her refusal of the domestic sphere of marriage and children. Moreover, the competition over Bob, Mme X’s husband, is not restricted to the two women but includes Frederique, a third woman, advocating, thereby, the premise that females are the persons to be blamed for men’s unfaithfulness to the marriage vow. Such a depiction of male dominance in the play urges Sutandio and Apriliani to regard Amelia’s silence as the playwright’s determination to “[silnce] her because she does not fit the gendered world that he created” in the play (2017, p. 98). This is, indeed, another instance of the playwright’s response to the question of woman and women’s rights by marginalising Amelia’s narrative or denying her a voice in the play. In this sense, half of the story is not told and we are compelled to listen to one testimony,



Mme X's. As such, we might metaphorically regard the women's café as an exile for those who do not fit, as indicated above, the gendered setting of the play.

As we notice in the play, the two women's fragile relationship undermines any sense of solidarity or social compact. We read this as referring to a period in the playwright's life in which he fell under the impact of misogyny. During this period, in which he perceived "woman as man's natural enemy", misogyny became, Strindberg observes, "the reverse side of my fearful attraction towards the other sex" (Gassner, 1960, p. x). Strindberg's undermining of solidarity between the two women is another instance of his assertion of male domination. Male dominance is further expresses in the play through the actresses' competition over Bob's attention and also through his position "in the ministry" which enables him to have "some pull at the theatre" (Strindberg, 1964, p. 231). Accordingly, Mme X is portrayed as being happy to marry such an influential person and more determined to appease him even if this entails shedding off her own identity and individuality and accepting a new one.

Such willingness to accept a new identity comes in the form of a dramatic monologue that casts light on years of misery where the wife has no other option to win over other women, such as Amelia and Frederique, than enduring a gradual exchange of her identity with another that is both alien and ready-made:

it is horrible! Everything, everything that belonged to you, entered into me. Even your passions! Your soul crept into mine like a worm into an apple, eating and eating, boring and boring, till there was nothing left but the skin and a little black mould (pp. 232-233).

We argue that the little dark dust or mould evidences the termination of the original Mme X and also a her espousal of a new identity favoured by her husband. Such a transformation entails not only Mme X's soul and passions but also habits and favourite authors, dishes, drinks and colours.



Accordingly, while Mme X endures a painful process of identity distortion, Bob seems to be satisfied to have a woman who is willing to update her techniques, habits and colours to please him and accepts to retain her humble and inferior position in his house.

Such depiction of a wife soothes, perhaps, Strindberg's sense of individuality and satisfies his yearnings for a woman, Gassner purports, that "he could totally possess and subordinate to his need for inner security" (1960, p. xi). As such, Strindberg's play conveys a blunt reaction to Henrick Ibsen's *Dolls House*. While Ibsen's play culminates in the wife's sense of independence by leaving the house and her husband, Trovald, who fails to carry out his role as a traditional husband ready to defend his wife, Mme X asserts her submission to her husband's will and supremacy and also her unwavering determination to meet his needs.

It is worth noting that the competition over Bob forces both women, Mme X and Mlle Y, to keep their places around him. While Mme X appears energetic as when she leaves the house to buy gifts for her husband and children, Mlle Y is described by Mme X as being quiet, indifferent and incapable of expressing hate or love (p. 233). Yet, this does not mean she is unwillingness to interact. As indicated by Mme X's words, she is observing and monitoring her. Despite being static, as stated above, she is also capable of taking a swift action once she is offered the opportunity. As Mme X puts it, Mlle Y is "motionless like a stork over a rat-hole" who is unable to catch or pursue its victims and, thus, "wait[s] for it" (p. 233). Thus, in addition to being silenced in the play, Mlle Y's part in the story is being narrated by another woman, her rival. The two women appear destined to keep their places in the sole male's proximity. Mme X's fear of being replaced by Mlle Y is expressed in her words where she points out that she is "going home, to love him" (p. 234). Being the lone woman at Bob's home has become Mme X's consolation for the suffering and the affirmation that she is the winner.



Strindberg's play poses problems to notions regarding the impact of storytelling on constructing identities. Strindberg's play recounts details of Mme X's engagement in a conflict with Mlle Y. Her narration of those details grants her the audience's sympathy but, unfortunately, not the opportunity to assert or establish an identity whether orally or corporeally. Paul Ricoeur claims that "life has something to do with narrative" which are both completed through the existence of a "living" recipient whether that recipient be a member of the audience at a theatre or a reader (1991, pp. 20-21). Ricoeur maintains that narrative and life are related to and intermingle with each other because "fiction is only completed in life and that life can be understood only through the stories we tell about it" (1991, p. 31). If such identity construction is imagined by the reader when reading a piece of fiction in which the character narrates his/her story, members of the audience are endowed with the opportunity to watch the process of identity construction of a given character demonstrated on stage both corporeally and orally. In so doing, the identity of such a character is believed to be constructed by the character narrating his/his story and not imposed on him from outside (Ricoeur, 1991). In 'The Stronger', this process is done negatively. It is true that Strindberg provides Mme X with an adequate space to tell her narrative, but this is done to establish her identity deconstruction. As stated above, Mme X's story describes how she is forced to relinquish her individuality and adopt a new one to please her husband. Accordingly, contrary to Ricoeur's premise, the play reveals the extent to which her story and the process of identity construction are imposed on her.

The second part of this paper examines G.B. Shaw's *Candida*. Shaw occupies an important position in English drama as he dominated the English theatre for almost sixty years. Ifor Evans, to name one scholar, regards Shaw as the most prominent literary figure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century drama. During those years, Shaw relied on his study of conventional



characters whether on the dramatic stage or the national stage for the purpose of inverting them to awaken or transport the public out of their lethargy of thought. Ample instance is *Candida* which depicts his influence by Henrick Ibsen and also the beginning of his impact on public attention. In this play, Shaw chooses an old plot, a married couple whose relationship is threatened by another person, mainly a man, and deals with it in such a way that would encourage people, Ward purports, to “break away from worn-out” notions and premises which they “had had taken over unthinkingly from their elders, or had simply accepted without question as a matter of social custom” (1966, p. 91).

Candida is an anti-romantic play of three acts all taking place in a single day, the morning, the afternoon and the evening, respectively. It was first performed at the Royal Theatre, Newcastle, on 30 March 1895 and later at Her Majesty’s Theatre, Aberdeen on 30 June 1897 by the Independent Theatre Company. However, it is the New York’s production of the play that created its first popularity. The play, which is set in a suburb in London, circulates *Candida*, a charming woman married to a well-known clergyman in the Church of England, Reverend James Morell, who does not appreciate her and her role in his life. The couple’s relationship is set at stake when a young poet, named Eugene Marchbanks, who the husband found sleeping on the Embankment in London the previous year and treated as a member of the family, has become a real threat to Morell’s marriage. However, *Candida* settles the conflict at the end of the play by choosing to stay with her husband who she regards as the weaker and, thus, the one who needs her love and strength.

Ward observes that the title of the play is derived from the word ‘candid’, which means “faithful” or “frank” and this is how *Candida* resolves to be with her husband (1966, p. 92). In addition to being the main character and the focus of the play, *Candida* is depicted as a faithful wife who is steered by mind rather than passion. As such, Shaw’s portrayal of love triangle in this play differs



completely from other plays he often watched on English stages while working as a critic for a London periodical. Moreover, his depiction of *Candida* differs from the majority of those plays in which female characters were presented either as subordinate or inferior to men. Ward postulates that such negative depictions were confronted with discontent by many women in what came to be called “the Woman Question” (1966, p. 93). Such a reaction was so huge on the public stage that any woman who shared in expressing discontent against such negative portrayals or felt entitled to enjoy an independent role in society came to be known as a “New Woman” (Ward, 1966, p. 93). *Candida* is a good example to convey Shaw’s espousal of and investment in the notion of the “New Woman”. In most of his plays, Shaw introduces heroines who regard motherhood and marriage as their “divine” duty for they are the bearers of better offspring (Ward, 1966, pp. 93-94). Men, on the other hand, play no major role in this purpose for they are the means and, consequently, controlled by the women who select them to be fathers of their offspring. Exploring this issue in *Candida*, we notice how *Candida*, at the end of the play, acknowledges her husband that it is, in fact, she who provides him with strength and not vice versa. As the play ends with the married couple holding each other, Shaw reverses the prevailing and traditional portrayals of the theme of love triangle at his time.

Similar to Strindberg’s “The Stronger”, Shaw’s writing of *Candida* is influenced by Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Shaw purports that *Candida* “is a counterblast to Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, showing that in the real typical doll’s house it is the man who is the doll” (Mander & Mitchenson, 1954, p. 43). Such distinctive depiction of the character of *Candida* has ensured his play a great popularity to the extent of being regarded by critics, such as Frank Harris (1931), as a great play about a great woman. Compared to the portrayal of female characters in both plays, “The Stronger” and *A Doll’s House*, *Candida* neither sheds off her character to please a husband nor abandons her duty



to husband and children. On the contrary, as shown in the “Auction Scene” at the end of the play, Candida discloses supremacy of mind over heart and passions. Accordingly, she is the manifestation of a new woman who is endowed with the strength of mind and freedom from emotional enslavement.

Candida’s great achievement as a character is delineated at the end of Act III in which the two males, her husband, Morell, and Eugene, the lover, keep waiting for her decision. As such, contrary to Strindberg’s play, in Shaw’s, it is the woman who controls the situation. In other words, it is the female’s dominance that is portrayed rather than the male’s. Stunned by her husband’s appeal, Candida finds herself in the middle of a crises where she has to choose between two rivals: a young man who supposes that she deserves love and appreciation and that he is the suitable person to take her out of her domestic yokes, and a husband who thinks that she is in need for his protection and love.

To settle this matter, she places herself at an auction and asks for the two rivals’ biddings saying: “what have you to offer for my choice? I am up for auction” (Shaw, 1937, p. 150). While her husband offers his strength to defend her and his job for her livelihood, Eugene offers his weakness and need for love. However, she proves their false expectations and decides to stay with the “weaker of the two” whom her husband mistakenly interprets as indicating the poet (151). Contrary to her husband’s expectations, Candida’s choice states that it is he who needs her care, love and protection. In so doing, her decision conveys her rejection of the two contrasting models of marriage which demand her to accept either Eugene’s untraditional model urging her to forsake her role as both a wife and a mother or that of the obedient and submissive wife offered by her husband. At the end of the play, James admits his misunderstanding of who is the master in the house stating: “I don’t know of any right that makes me the master. I assert no such right” (149).



To conclude with, this paper explores the two playwrights' engagement with the theme of love triangle, a traditional issue often addressed on stage. Instead of perpetuating the traditional treatment of this topic, both Strindberg and Shaw examine it according to their personal experiences and their viewpoints concerning women's role in society. In 'The Stronger', Strindberg conveys discloses his views that women are subordinate to men. As such, his portrayal of the two female characters in the play, Mme X and Mlle Y, presents them as having either deformed or frozen identities. In contrast to this, Shaw's play signifies his determination to urge members of the audience to relinquish old notions which they inherited from older generation and examine new ones. Ample instance is *Candida*, an example of his notion of the new woman, who is free of emotional enslavement. Shaw's belief in pushing people to relinquish notions which they accepted without questioning is demonstrated on stage through the character of *Candida's* husband who is encouraged at the end of the play to acknowledge his misunderstanding of *Candida's* role in the house as a wife, a mother, or a woman, with a divine duty.

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