

PRE-PUBLICATON DRAFT – DO NOT CITE!!!

## Gender and the Historical Novel

by Susan Brantly

History has traditionally been something of a male domain. Until recently, history was written by men about events in which men played the prominent roles. Women were effectively silenced and “herstory” seldom, if ever, was told. Happily much of this changed in the late Twentieth Century. Women writers together with professional historians have been able to reclaim a role for women in history. However, if history has been a male domain, it remains a hostile element for women. This essay examines the narrative strategies used by Twentieth-Century Swedish women writers who have made forays into historical fiction. Hayden White has argued that most narratives of history begin with a moral judgment on the part of the writer: “Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too.” [1] What kind of story one tells depends on whether the writer feels the facts support a tragedy or a comedy, for example. Writers of fiction are liberated to a greater degree than professional historians from the tyranny of fact. Thus their narratives are even more clearly the result of choices and judgments made in order to imagine a space for women in history. The implications of these choices are of particular interest to the present study. The writers included here occupy a spectrum from famous to obscure. Popular fiction or so-called “triviallitteratur” has not been ignored, since such books reveal a great deal about public taste.

The assertion that history, and more specifically historical narrative, is a hostile element for women may require some support. The examples that follow are admittedly extreme, but they illustrate some of the pitfalls awaiting women in male narratives of history. Sweden has produced a surprising number of regional novels penned by locals for a relatively small local audience. Evert Lundström is one such author and he has written two novels set in Gothenburg

during the Napoleonic Wars. In those books, men have all the fun as privateers and businessmen, and there is not a single female character with more depth than a saucer. Lundström often seeks to impress his reader with the research he has done by quoting at length from cargo manifests and tax rolls, a strategy intended to bolster his authority as a historical narrator, but prone to inducing tedium. He has an unfortunate tendency to list women alongside livestock and other commodities: “Statsskatten drabbade ju nära nog allting; procent på inkomsten, personavgift för varje hushållsmedlem, skatt för all betjäning (jag betalade för Eugenia; men det var hon ju värd efter den gångna natten), extra avgifter för häst och vagn, för sidenkläder, för sidenklädda möbler, sidentapeter, silververnor, tobak, spelkort.” [2] [The city tax affected almost everything; a percent of the income, a fee for each member of the household, tax on servants (I paid for Eugenia;but she was worth it after last night), extra fees for horse and carriage, for satin clothing, for satin-covered furniture, satin wallpaper, silver goods, tobacco, and playing cards.] Eugenia, the housekeeper, is a bargain since she both cleans house and is available for sex on demand. Eugenia’s subordinate and exposed position in the household is viewed as handy convenience and never questioned. Women in Lundström’s narrative are presented as merely shallow background figures that serve men, while men create history.

Rune Pär Olofsson is a major source of popular Swedish historical fiction, having written over 20 historical novels. Normandernas hövding (Chieftan of the Northmen) from 1987 describes the Viking conquest of Normandy. When Rollo and his men sack Burgundy, they behave as Vikings traditionally do. When Rollo first meets his beloved Popa, he has her stripped naked before his men and examines her body publicly: “Hon spände låren och förde dem samman inför vad som komma skulle. Men han nöjde sig med att stryka nerför hennes bäver och stanna med långfingret just på det känsligaste stället. Hon darrade till och var nära att mista balansen. Trycker han djupare känner han att jag är våt, tänkte hon och förbannade sin rodnad; hon kände den svirra från hårfästet och neråt men vågade inte titta ner på sin kropp för att se om rodnaden hade spritt sig över hela henne.” [3] [She tensed her thighs and drew them together before what would follow. But he was satisfied with stroking her beaver and stopping with his

middle finger on the most sensitive spot. She trembled and almost lost her balance. If he pushes in deeper he will feel I am wet, she thought, and cursed her blush; she felt it burn from the roots of her hair downward but did not dare look at her body to see if the blush has spread over all of her.] Popa becomes sexually aroused by this humiliating treatment. Popa and Rollo become lovers and she does not hold this introduction against him. The threat of public rape does not induce the feeling of terror it would inspire in most women. This text revels in the days when men were men and women were booty (in more ways than one.)

It would be easy to dismiss this scene as a typical male historical fantasy, were it not for the fact that rape fantasies are fairly common in the American historical romance, a genre whose consumers and producers are overwhelmingly female. [4] For two of the giants of the industry, Kathleen Woodiwiss and Johanna Lindsey, the “friendly rape” is their stock in trade. Swedish women writers of even trivial historical fiction, as a rule, are not at all interested in this device. Perhaps the phenomenon stems from different cultural attitudes towards sexuality. The typical American reader tends to be somewhat puritanical, thus the “friendly rape” absolves the heroine from the moral slur of consenting to have sexual intercourse before marriage. The heroines of Woodiwiss and Lindsey are generally rehabilitated in the eyes of reader when their rapists fall in love with them and marry them. Swedish women writers have not felt the need to employ such a device since premarital sex is not quite the cultural taboo it is in the United States. In the Swedish novels by the women surveyed in this article, rape is an act of violence. Thus in a sense, Olofsson’s scene is even more offensive in the cultural context in which he writes.

The final example of a hostile historical narrative stems from Helmer Linderholm, who has written even more historical novels than Rune Pär Olofsson. In Nunnorna (1981, *The Nuns*), Linderholm describes a community of nuns at the point in Swedish history when the cloisters are being disbanded, due to the protestant reformation. An apparently strong anti-Catholic bias together with a good measure of sexism colors much of the narrative. Linderholm cannot imagine a community of religious women with no need for men. Sister Irmgard’s visions of Christ are simply a symptom of repressed sexuality that land her in the madhouse. Most of the

nuns, however, do not bother to repress their sexuality; in fact, they seem particularly libidinous. They engage in lesbian affairs and, in their workshop, they fashion dildos which they use on each other. The nuns are quite frankly obsessed with phalluses, despite their rejection of men. The prioress ruminates, “Nej, här var hennes rike, och det skulle hon aldrig i livet överge, minst för att bli en undergiven hustru åt något manfolk, hur det än någong gång kunda svida i kveden efter manfolks fyllnad.” [5] [No, this was her kingdom, and she would never in her life abandon it, least of all to become a submissive wife to some man, no matter how much her womb might ache for a man’s fullness.] There is also a completely gratuitous scene in the sauna, so that the reader can know what all the nuns look like naked. The women who seek to extract themselves from a male sexual economy are severely punished. Sister Grima is raped twice, once by a merchant who disapproves of her as a business competitor, and once by a man who appears with ownership papers for Grima’s remote house in the woods. Although the author pretends sympathy for the sisters’ plight in a brief forward to the novel, the prurient fantasies and vengeful punishments call that sympathy into question. Each of these three examples by Lundström, Olofsson, and Linderholm treat the themes of female subjugation and sexual exploitation. Women writers also write about such topics, but it is the nostalgia and titillation factor in these male narratives, together with an implied approval of these practices, that justifies calling these historical narratives hostile to women.

How have Swedish women writers gone about imagining a space for women in history? What kind of stories do they choose to tell and why? One of the strategies common in popular historical fiction written by women is that of exceptionalism. The main character is given exceptional qualities that enable her to overcome any obstacles in her historical environment. Margit Söderholm writes of women with enough monetary and social clout to take on their adversaries. A noble title gives the women access to the world of property and power, though it is the women’s own independence and resourcefulness that leads them to succeed. In this respect, Söderholm’s heroines bear a certain resemblance to some of the heroines of American historical romance; however, Söderholm’s books do not always end with the expected wedding.

On the contrary, Grevinna (1945, Countess) begins with a wedding that quickly turns to a shambles because of spousal infidelity. [6] Charlotte returns the favor and her second son is fathered by a peasant. She shows true resourcefulness in securing an estate for her illegitimate son who has been disinherited by the Count. Söderholm's heroines enjoy both fiscal and sexual independence.

One of the most popular writers of historical fiction in Sweden is the Norwegian writer Margit Sandemo, who has penned the 47-volume Sagan om Isfolket (Saga of the Ice People). [7] Sandemo lives in Sweden and is being annexed for this study because of the enormous success her novels have had in Sweden. It is estimated that half the population of Sweden has read one of her books. The series of novels chronicles the fate of an unusual family from the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the present. Sandemo's exceptionalist strategy is to endow her characters with supernatural abilities. A talent for witchcraft runs in the family. One member, Sol, is a young witch who uses her powers to dispense social justice by stopping a gang rape and, on one occasion, killing an abusive husband. The reader derives enjoyment from seeing the "bad guys" of history punished. Because of an original act of kindness (Silje rescues a newborn child that has been abandoned in the woods), the family becomes linked with nobility, thereby enhancing further their exceptional status. The family somewhat anachronistically holds rather Social Democratic values, including equality of the sexes. In the late 1600's, family members begin collecting mentally handicapped adults and children and giving them meaningful employment. In the 1700's, the family tries to establish humane labor practices at their saw mill. No doubt, part of the great appeal of these novels is the creation of supernatural enforcers who can punish both the sexist and social abuses of history. The exceptional qualities of high social standing as well as a little witchcraft from time to time help to keep the dangers of history at bay. The exceptionalist strategy renders history habitable by strong women and palatable to readers who want to enjoy a fictional journey through time. Both Sandemo and Söderholm acknowledge the difficulties women faced in the past, but tell a story in which the obstacles could be overcome.

Other Swedish women writers embrace the horrors of the past and present a litany of

abuse. The intent seems to be to focus attention on the injustices women have suffered throughout history. As presented earlier, it is possible to incorporate sexual abuse into historical novels as a source of titillation. That is clearly not the strategy of novelists like Vibeke Olsson. [8] There is scarcely a character in Olsson's chronicles of ancient Rome that dies peacefully in her or his sleep. Callistrate is tortured for her Christian faith, condemned to a brothel, and dies in childbirth because the brothel keeper does not want to pay the cost of a midwife. After years of serving as a slave and sexual resource, Sabine is finally freed and taken as a wife by Alexander. Alexander dies in battle and Sabine is killed by marauders on the way back from a trip to buy cheap flour and vegetables. Elisabeth, exhausted by years of working as a prostitute, finds brief happiness with Callixtus. Because she is too weak to go to the well, Elisabeth agrees to have sex with a man named Dexter, so that he will carry 12 buckets of water for her. The sex damages her so, she bleeds to death. Olsson's view of history in general seems extremely bleak, and women are the primary, though not the only, victims. As Celer, a Christian cook who is destined to die in the arena, says to Callistrate in Kvarnen och korset (1984, *The Mill and the Cross*): "Du tror att världen är god, att dess ordning är gudomlig, att...att...Rom är evigt och världen går framåt. Det onda, det är som som skador, som fläckar. Men istället...istället är hela världen ond. Ett enda stort fängelse. Det kommer att ske så mycket...så mycket som Gud inte vill." (161) [You believe that the world is good, that its order is divine, that...that...Rome is eternal and the world moves forward. Evil, it is like wounds, like stains. But instead...instead, the whole world is evil. One big prison. So much is going to happen...so much that God does not want.] The generally pessimistic world view of the novels corroborates Celer's assessment.

It is curious that the two women writers being used as examples for the litany-of-abuse strategy happen to be strongly Christian in their personal lives. Vibeke Olsson has served as a Baptist minister, and Birgitta Trotzig is a Roman Catholic. Trotzig is capable of painting misery in equally dark colors as Olsson, as she does in En berättelse från kusten (1961, *A Tale from the Coast*), which begins with Merete being born in miserable squalor in the late 1400s and ends with her being beaten to death by an angry mob that believes she is responsible for the plague

raging through Åhus. Trotzig's characters are often caught in a mire of biological drives and oppressive material circumstances that they are incapable of escaping except by death. The world seems to be one big prison, to paraphrase Olsson's character. Trotzig has compared her narrative strategy of depicting suffering to the artistic strategy of religious icons depicting the suffering of Christ. [9] They depict a suffering that should never have happened. Kjerstin Norén has further elaborated that Trotzig chooses to depict suffering: "Inte för att cementera denna bild av underklassens folk, men för att väcka vreden över förhållandena som de är." [10] [Not to cement this image of the lowest classes, but to incite rage over the circumstances that exist.] As the reader is exposed through these narratives by both Olsson and Trotzig to tragedy after tragedy, a sense of outrage and indignation rises in the reader. Life should not have to be so hard, nor women so helpless. This calculated impact on the reader—to incite indignation over certain conditions—is not far removed from the strategies of the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough, during which social injustices were written about in order to evoke outrage and public discussion. The main difference here is that those writers were speaking of current issues, whereas the novels discussed in this essay are looking to the past. Establishing a history of abuse and tragedy generates a moral high ground from which women in the present can demand more equitable and just treatment: Those were the bad old days; we do not have to do things that way any longer. A perhaps unintended effect of setting these tragedies in a historical space may, oddly enough, be a sense of comfort and pride. The modern Swedish audience may reason that things like that do not happen in modern Sweden any longer, thus, progress has been achieved.

Both Vibeke Olsson and Birgitta Trotzig go back in time to focus on the dark side of women's history. Another strategy of women writers is to write a history of women that exists in counterpoint to the history of men. Discovering the untold stories and perspectives of women throughout history is in line with what professional historians have attempted to do in recent decades. An example of this are Elsie Rydsjö's novels relating to the wars of Charles XII. [11] The Swedish king Charles XII is a major figure in the Swedish historical imagination, and a number of novels have been written about him throughout the Twentieth Century, mostly by

male writers. [12] These accounts, not surprisingly, deal mostly with male soldiers and troop movements. Elsie Rydsjö takes the woman's perspective on the campaigns of Charles XII. Her primary character, Mette Christiern, follows her husband when he goes to war. She considers the king to be a sort of evil Pied Piper of Hamelin, who is able to enlist all the men to his cause. Mette is captured at Poltava and sold into Russian slavery. From the female perspective it is clear that war is a form of male madness that claims women and children as its victims. Although most late Twentieth-Century Swedish novels about the period tend to cast Charles XII in the role of villain, it is most often the men under his command who are his victims. Rydsjö offers a narrative of these historical events in which women are present during the military campaigns, and she suggests that they suffered more greatly. Mette Christiern's husband is released from captivity in Russia because of the practice of ransoming prisoners of war. Mette does not count as a prisoner of war; she is sold into slavery and must escape herself.

Marianne Fredriksson is one of Sweden's most popular writers. She has tried her hand at the exceptionalist strategy in her novels about the Biblical Eve and her daughter Norea. Their destinies are exceptional, even mythical, and do not represent a typical slice of life from the past. In Anna, Hanna och Johanna (1994, Hanna's Daughters, 1998), Fredriksson adopts the strategy of narrating the untold stories of three generations of women. Hanna is the implied author of the book, who has tried to piece together and research the lives of her mother and grandmother. There is a certain self-consciousness in the novel about the possibility of reconstructing the past and getting at the truth, but nevertheless coherent narratives emerge about Anna, who was raped at the age of 12 by her cousin, but survived the shame and later became a wife and mother to 4 sons and Johanna. Anna lived in the country and survived thanks to her ability to manage and exploit the natural resources at her disposal. Johanna is raised in the city and has an aptitude for sales, but she gives up her career when she gets married. Fredriksson pays special attention to the choices available to the women and the sacrifices that must be made when one follows the career of wife and mother. She tries to capture what it was like to be a woman during the rapidly changing world of the past century.

Several scholars have remarked that Kerstin Ekman views history from a sustained women's perspective in her tetralogy set in a Swedish railway town. Traditional, masculine history has focused on wars and political events. From a female perspective, the important events of history are different. The invention of the sewing machine, the establishment of a communal washing area, and improved birth control affect the women's lives more than many of the political decisions made in Stockholm. Men are engaged in politics and women are suspicious of it, having to deal with the consequences as best they can. The Great Strike causes Frida to lose her husband. The war forces women to become inventive when it comes to feeding their families. In a sense, Ekman is filling in blanks, telling the stories that were not deemed worthy of historical notice before because they involved women.

Following Julia Kristeva, Sara Death points out in an article on Ekman's tetralogy the existence of "women's time," defined as "cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrences of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature," which contrasts with "time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding: time as departure, progression and arrival – in other words, the time of history." [13] This latter form of time is implied to be masculine and the paradigm governing the modern world. These words from Ann-Marie in *En stad av ljus* (1983, *A City of Light*) echo Kristeva's characterization: "En gång var här ingenting annat än skog och gråa lutande torp. [...] Ja, stillhet och återkomster måste det ha varit. Ända tills järnvägsrälsen las ut som ett band av dunkande skenande tid genom landskapet." [14] [Once there was nothing else here but forest and gray tilting farmhouses. [...] Yes, it must have been stillness and recurrences. Up until the train rails were laid out like a band of throbbing rushing time through the landscape.] Nature in Swedish culture has such strong positive implications that the impositions of modern, masculine time are perceived to be a defacement of the natural, feminine world. Thus in this binary opposition, Ekman elevates women's time above masculine time, a reversal of the traditional hierarchy. Both women's time and women's experience of history are in opposition to their male counterparts. There is little possibility for overlap.

Like Ekman, Sara Lidman uses the railway as an incarnation of modern time invading

and mastering the natural rhythms of nature in her Norrland epic. The opposition, however, is not as clearly gendered, since it is not only the women who fall victim to the new modern order. Nicke, who is able to live off the land in tune with nature, is at odds with the laws regarding private property imposed by the “real Sweden” down south. Didrik’s dreams of bringing culture and prosperity to his region, coupled with a thirst for prestige, simply open the gates to exploitation that will result in Norrland becoming a colonized third-world country.

Lidman repeats a saying in *Lillvattnet*: “Häst och karl – det är karl det! Men ko och qweijn – det är bara ko.” [15] [Horse and man – that’s a man! But a cow and a woman – that’s just a cow.] At first glance, the comparison seems less than flattering, nonetheless, it is a telling distinction between the gender roles. Horses are used in masculine enterprises, hauling loads from place to place, and redrawing the face of the landscape. Cows provide nourishment in the form of milk. Lidman’s texts ask why the cow should be despised and the horse praised. Like Ekman, Lidman urges a revision in the hierarchy of the binary opposition. Men love their horses as representations of their masculine power. Yet, when Didrik’s Hästen tramples Hård into the mire and kills him, this becomes an emblem of how Didrik will trample upon the rights and livelihoods of others to serve his ambition. The railway station is later constructed on the exact spot of the death. Didrik’s wife Anna-Stava finds it hard to bear the guilt of Didrik’s misadventures, but she does bear it, literally, in the form of Hård’s skull which she carries about with her. In the last novel of the series, *Oskuldens minut* (1999, *The Minute of Innocence*), a cow takes its revenge. Rønnog, Didrik’s daughter-in-law, identifies with a vicious cow named Sabina. Sabina attacks Amos, one of Didrik’s bachelor brothers, and is sent to be slaughtered. Weary of life and paralleling the fate of Sabina the cow, Rønnog tries to hang herself in the barn, only to be stopped by another of Didrik’s bachelor brothers. In a newspaper interview, Lidman said that she was not surprised that cows went crazy and ran amok: “Det är bara ett svar på all den vildhet som förtryckts inom kon...Hennes rätta natur har förvägrats henne i generationer.” [16] [It is just a response to all the wildness that has been suppressed in the cow...Her true nature has been denied her for generations.] The cow’s usefulness in this culture is based on its

domestication and docility, and, by implication, the same can be said of women. Any wild aberrations are suppressed with violence.

Another strategy for finding a place for women in history is that of locating a female utopia in the past. Karen Thelander finds something of a utopia in the pre-reformation cloisters of Sweden. In a series of three novels, Thelander writes about Vadstena Cloister, Birgitta, her daughter Katharina, and the canonization process. Unlike Helmer Linderholm in his book, Nunnorna, Thelander takes the religious feeling of these nuns seriously. The cloister life is able to keep the women safe and the structure of the church is a protective barrier between the women and the dangers of the world. Within this sanctuary, both Birgitta and Katharina are able to pursue their own spiritual leanings and act independently of their husbands. Katharina would most of all like to be a hermit in the mountains: “Men hon visste ju att det var omöjligt. Omöjligt redan därför att de var kvinnor, hennes mor och hon. Alltid detta oöverstigliga hinder, detta kön, som inte gav henne någon glädje, men som spärrade in, korsade ens planer och önskingar.” [17] [But she knew that it was impossible. Impossible because they were women, her mother and she. Always this insurmountable obstacle, this sex, which did not give her any joy, but confined her, demolished her plans and wishes.] Clearly this is a limited utopia. Independence, peace, and spirituality can only be found in a community of women within protective walls.

In her 1967 novel, Mannen från havet (The Man from the Sea), Dagmar Edqvist hints at a female utopia on ancient Gotland. The farm Närsaker is inherited through the female line and they are said to worship the old deities: “Det viskades - om det var sant kunde man inte veta - att i riktigt gamla tider hade gudinnan, hon som man av vördnand aldrig kallade vid namn, varit ensam på gudavagnen, och hon hade krävt en ny brudgum varje år.” [18] [It was whispered—one could not know if it was true—that in very ancient times the goddess, she whom out of reverence one never mentioned by name, was alone in the divine chariot, and she had demanded a new bridegroom each year.] The most ancient deity is a goddess, giving the women of the farm a natural authority and respect. During the time of our story (around 800), this matriarchy is

threatened by the Odinist Kolbein, who believes that a man should be in charge of the farm. In other words, he represents the threat of patriarchy, advocating a religion whose chief deity is an “Allfather.” Our attention is on a time when shifting world orders come into conflict. The implication is that Gotland was a matriarchy before patriarchy took it over. From the reader’s perspective of the present, we know that Gunlaug, the matriach of the farm, is fighting a losing battle. Indeed, she is overcome by the greed of the men around her. In the final battle, the stone Gunlaug had erected for her father is broken.

Edqvist is not the only writer to have posited an original goddess who was unseated by a masculine deity. Merlin Stone’s popular archeological book, When God Was a Woman (1976) presents a similar argument. Isis is supplanted by the Judeo-Christian god. Stone begins her book with an epigraph out of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949): “Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being. For the Jews, Mohammedans and Christians among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female.” [19] In Edqvist’s novel, Stone’s book, and de Beauvoir’s quotation, religion is about power and securing divine authority for one’s actions. Both Edqvist and Stone imply that legitimate authority was somehow stolen from women, thus enabling a long history of oppression. Primacy lends an aura of authority and importance. That which is original tends to impress us.

Edqvist’s female utopia participates in what Suzanne Gerhard has termed the search of origins. For example, Rousseau posits an original state of nature which has been corrupted by the growth of civilization. According to Gerhard, the basic strategy of the search for origins is as follows: “That search makes problematic what is given as self-evident and eternal. It reverses the process by which concepts, language, and institutions ‘naturalize’ themselves and thereby tend to become monolithic.” [20] Edqvist’s suggestion that patriarchy has not always been a dominant force, introduces the question of why it should be and the possibility for change.

Edqvist's novel possesses a fascinating postscript. The reader is whisked from the 9<sup>th</sup> Century to the present and an archeological dig where the various participants each have a theory about what Gunnlaug's broken stone represents. The bitter, retired psychiatrist assumes that some rival broke the stone in order to ruin the man's reputation. A Marxist historian believes it was broken in a slave revolt. The professor of archeology is certain that it was broken in a fit of religious fervor. The final member of the dig is a feminist docent in archeology, who has done research on matriarchies. She believes that the stone was broken as a challenge to the woman who raised it. This postscript is a wonderful metahistorical reflection on the shortcomings of historical interpretation. Everyone interprets the evidence according to her or his own biases. However, since, through the miracle of historical fiction, the reader has actually been witness to the events that lead to the breaking of the stone, she or he knows that the feminist is right.

Edkvist's epilogue brings us to the threshold of the final strategy of women writers presented here: postmodern historiographic metafiction. Historiographic metafiction is a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to describe novels which participate in the postmodern practice of problematizing history at the same time that they are self-conscious of their own fictionality. [21] Historiographic metafiction interrogates our ability to know the past at all. It has been a popular mode for male writers in Sweden: P.C. Jersild, P.O. Enquist, Sven Delblanc, Lars Gyllensten, Torbjörn Säfve, Torgny Lindgren, and Peter Nilsson, to name a few, have all tried their hands at it. This choice has been less popular with women writers. With the exception perhaps of Margit Sandemo, the narrative strategies of all the women writers described so far have relied upon historical plausibility, the sense that their stories might be true. It is understandable that women writers were not willing to give up on the representative power of language and of recapturing history just when they were able to tell their stories for the first time. The majority of Swedish women writers have been reluctant to give up on narrating history until "herstory" has been told.

Historiographic metafiction questions the notion of history as an objective science, and even our ability to recover the past at all. Some of the novels mentioned previously have flirted

with this idea, even if the bulk of the story being written remains a plausible historical narrative. Edqvist's metafictional postscript is there to question what we think we know about the past. Personal bias clouds our ability to interpret the past. Marianne Fredriksson's *Hanna* reflects over the reliability of memory as she tries to piece together her mother's past: "Det är mycket det lilla barnet misförstått och lagrat som bilder som drar till sig liknande bilder, bekräftar, förstärker. Sen tänkte hon att det som inte hände kunde vara sannare än det som hände. Ha mer att säga. Nu lät hon sina skärivor bli liggande, utkastade, spridda. Och fann att det bara var så hon kunde få kännedom om det förflutna. Endast korta stunder visserligen, ögonblick." [A great deal is misunderstood by small children, then stored as images that attract similar images, confirming and reinforcing. Then she thought that what hadn't happened might be more truthful than what had happened, would have more to say. She left her fragments lying there, scattered about, and found that was the only way she could acquire information on the past, only briefly, of course, just moments.] [22] Both Fredriksson and Edqvist are self-conscious about the processes of historical interpretation and the possibilities of knowledge, but they do not seem to give up hope that some insight into the truth of history is still possible.

Sigrid Combüchen's novel *Byron* (1988) traces the efforts of a group of Byron enthusiasts who want to write a biography of the great poet. The group becomes so frustrated in their attempts to capture the real Byron, that they eventually disinter his remains. Of course, the moldering corpse is not the real Byron either, but that is all there is. The novel is historiographic metafiction in that it centers upon a failed attempt to reconstruct the past. Combüchen allows herself some playful narrative asides: "Efter att ha sprungit i förväg, för att som en lössläpt hund nosa på object runt nästa krok, återvänder nu berättelsen till sin herre, kronologin." [23] [After dashing ahead, in order, like an unleashed dog, to nose at the object around the next corner, the narrative now returns to its master, chronology.] Combüchen's novel does not make a point of thematizing women's history in particular. The focus is a male writer from the British literary canon, and the group of predominantly male enthusiasts (there is one woman in the group) who seek to understand him. Even so, postmodern historiographic metafiction provides a tool for

undermining monolithic, authoritative narratives of the past that insist on male dominance.

Kerstin Ekman's novel, Rövarna i Skuleskogen (1988, Forest of Hours, 1998) follows the career of an androgynous troll named Skord, who emerges from a state of timelessness in the Northern forests and lives through 500 years of human history. From his outsider's perspective, Skord has occasion to comment on the narratives humans choose to tell about themselves, "Ofta föreföll det honom som om människor höll ihop endast genom den ändlösa berättelsen som de berättade om sig själva och sina liv." [It had often occurred to him that people stayed whole only because they span these endless tales about themselves and their lives.] [24] According to Shelly Wright, Ekman has commented: "Rövarna i Skuleskogen is not a historical novel, [...] but rather a novel about history – about how we write our own personal narratives and how we construct a collective narrative of our shared past." One character, Xenia Linderskjöld has lost the ability to order her life in a coherent narrative: "För Xenia hade det sedan lång tid tillbaka inte funnits någon ordningsföljd mellan alla de händelser och förlopp hennes liv bestod av. Allt tycktes ligga slumpvis blandat, men bevarat, precis som korten i en lek." (374-5) [For a long time now, Xenia had not been aware of any order among the events and relationships she had encountered in the course of her life. To her, everything seemed distinct, but shuffled by chance, exactly like the cards in a deck. (420)] Narrative order enables us the illusion of understanding a collection of facts and events. A coherent narrative of our past provides a sense of identity, but imposing order may necessitate selecting some facts as important and forgetting others. Anything else is chaos.

Neither Combüchen nor Ekman are particularly focused on a woman's view of history in these texts. Postmodernism likes to undermine binary oppositions, such as male/female. Historiographic metafiction enables women writers to free themselves from the self-reinforcing binary opposition of men's versus women's history. In calling into question the validity of history, it undermines the authority of accepted historical narratives of male dominance. Furthermore, historiographic metafiction does not rely on plausibility or historical truth, thus freeing the writer's imagination.

In summary, this essay has identified five narrative strategies in historical fiction written by women. Some writers create exceptional female characters who are able to cope with the perils of history. Others present a litany of abuse, which creates a moral high ground from which to demand better treatment in the present. A third strategy is to write a woman's history in counterpoint to men's history, and, generally, women's history tends to be cast in a more positive light than men's history. The fourth strategy is to seek out a female utopia in the past, even if it is ultimately portrayed as limited and transitory. The final strategy is historiographic metafiction, which provides a certain freedom for the historical imagination. It is not being suggested that there are only five possible strategies. The recently opened door of historiographic metafiction may lead to some new and exciting narrative experiments in this area.

#### Notes

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