

Anne-Charlotte Leffler—*Desire, Politics and Feminism*

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“**W**hen I am 70, I will write my biography,” Anne Charlotte Leffler wrote to her friend Ellen Key a few years before her death. She went on:

And I shall never write a more interesting, more psychologically remarkable, more complicated novel, that is certain. It is like George Sand - she never wrote a more interesting novel than the story of her life—and yet she hid and lied about the most interesting things, but I will not do that.¹

Death tragically intervened and took Anne Charlotte Leffler long before there was time for an honest autobiography, despite several attempts at one. But sincerity—the desire not to hide or lie—was present throughout her writing career. Few Swedish writers of the 1880s wrote as openly about female sexuality and the consequences of moral conventions for women as Leffler did. It is no coincidence that Leffler’s most controversial short story, “Aurore Bunge” (1883), shares a first name with George Sand.² The beautiful, wealthy, upper-class Aurore has been attending balls for several seasons without finding a man who truly interests her. She is cynical and bored. At nearly thirty, she

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¹ “Och jag skall aldrig uppfinna någon intressantare, mer psykologiskt märkvärdig, mer komplicerad roman än den, det är säkert. Det går med mig som med George Sand – hon har aldrig skrivit någon intressantare roman än sitt livs historia – och ändå har hon där dolt och ljugit bort det intressantaste, men det skall inte jag göra”. (quoted in Key 1893: 5). All translations: Claudia Lindén.

² Aurore, of course, means dawn. In another novella, Aurore Bunge meets another Leffler character called Arla, which means, in older Swedish, “early” or “early morning.” Both names suggest new beginnings, pointing to a tradition that harks back to George Sand, but also includes the new woman of the decades surrounding 1900 (note by Lynn Wilkinson).

Fig. 1. Anne Charlotte Leffler. Drawing by Anders Zorn. Public domain.

will soon be too old for this ruthless marriage market. During the summer, Aurore discovers freedom in the archipelago and embarks on an affair with a lighthouse keeper. When she becomes pregnant and cannot bring herself to break with her class background, she allows her mother to marry her off to a debt-ridden baron, who accepts her on any terms due to his financial desperation. The story ends with the words of the minister: “So I, as a servant of Christ, ratify this marriage covenant of yours”³—a scathing criticism of the hypocrisy of bourgeois marriage.

Aurore’s marriage will not be happy, but she does not kill herself, as Julie would do five years later in Strindberg’s play *Fröken Julie* [*Miss Julie*] (1888). Nor does Aurore refrain from sex, unlike the protagonist of Stella Kleve’s short story “*Pyrrhussegrar*” [“Pyrrhic victories”] (1886), in which the theme is a woman wasting away and dying from unfulfilled desire. What made Leffler more radical than many of her contemporaries is that she avoids tragedy as an ending, both here and in her later work. Although many authors—such as August Strindberg, Alfild Agrell, and Stella Kleve—criticized double standards and societal attitudes toward sexuality, they typically expressed their criticism through tragedy, often in the form of the protagonist’s death or social punishment. In the “Afterword” to *Kvinnlighet och erotik II* [*Women and Sex II*] (1890), Leffler criticizes contemporary Swedish and international literature—including Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*—for always ending tragically with the death of the female protagonist. In contrast, she presents an aesthetic manifesto that encourages readers to develop compassion and acceptance for those who deviate from accepted morality and behavior (Leffler *Efterskrift* 1890: 8ff).

In her memoir of Leffler, the Swedish feminist and essayist Ellen Key writes of her friend that she had:

unusually little sensitivity to public criticism [which] gave her increased courage to deal with subjects women usually avoid [...]. Such courage is not easy to maintain, for it is usually interpreted in a way that is anything but agreeable to a woman, and this applied to A. Ch. Leffler as well.⁴

What Key suggests here, also from her own experience, is that a woman who wrote openly about sexuality was naturally suspected of living such a life herself. “How else could she know...?” was the public’s obvious question.⁵

³ “*Altså stadfäster jag, såsom Christi tjänare, detta Edert äktenskapsförbund* —” (Leffler “Aurore Bunge” 1883: 52).

⁴ “*Själff hade hon ovanligt liten ömtålighet för offentlig kritik... [som] gaf henne ökat mod att behandla ämnen, som kvinnor vanligen gå omkring... Ett sådant mod är icke lätt att bevara, ty det får vanligen en tolkning, som är allt utom behaglig för en kvinna, och denna kom äfven A. Ch. Leffler till del*”. (Key 1869: 69-70)

⁵ Ellen Key experienced this first hand as well when she published *Kärleken och äktenskapet* for Bonniers, Stockholm in 1903. The book was translated into English by Arthur G. Chater with a critical and biographical introduction by Havelock Ellis in

From this perspective, it is interesting that Leffler compared herself to the French writer George Sand (Aurore Dupin 1804-76), with her masculine dress and love stories with men such as Alfred de Musset and Chopin. Sand was also admired as a feminist icon by authors as diverse as the British Elisabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) and American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), as well as Ellen Key (1849-1926). In her early novels, like *Indiana* (1832), Sand was critical of conventional marriage, arguing for a woman's right to choose whom to love and to marry. It says something about the power of Leffler's rebellion against the conventions of her time that she saw herself as someone who would be *more* outspoken and daring than George Sand.

Anne Charlotte Leffler, A Short Biography

Anne Charlotte Leffler (1849-1892) was born the same year as August Strindberg and Ellen Key and belonged to the radical 1880s of the Modern Breakthrough in Sweden. She published a collection of short stories when she was in her late teens, then when she married, promised her husband Gustaf Edgren that she would stop writing. It was a promise she could not keep: three months into the marriage she anonymously sent the play *Skådespelerskan* [*The Actress*] (1873) to Dramaten [The Dramatic Theater] in Stockholm. It was a success. The marriage was not happy and remained childless. She continued to write, however, to her husband's chagrin, primarily theater plays, such as the one-act play *En räddande engel* [*A Saving Angel*] (1883), which became a recurring role for the famous nineteenth-century Swedish actress Ellen Hartman, who even performed in Paris, where she lived for two years, having left Sweden after a scandalous love affair (Ohlsson 2018: 76-78, 215-231).

Leffler was at the height of her career at the time when the Nordic literary debate on morality ("*Sedlighetsdebatten*") was at its most intense. In 1882, Leffler published under her own name a collection of short stories, *Ur lifvet* [*From life*], which was well received. The following year she published a second collection, *Ur lifvet II*. This time the stories were much more provocative, causing a minor scandal and earning her a reputation as a radical and modern



Anne Charlotte Leffler in her thirties. Norsk bokmål: Bilde fra boken, 1893. Nasjonalbiblioteket, Norway. <https://www.nb.no/items/URN:NBN:no-nb_digibok_2009020503002?page=3>.

1911 as *Love and marriage*. See ch. 3 in Linden 2002. For the reception of Key in Britain and the US see Lindén 2020a: 37-60.

writer. The same year saw the performance and publication of her play *Sanna kvinnor* [*True women*] (1883), which criticized women's lack of financial independence. It tells the story of a gambling husband who manipulates his wife into giving him what she has inherited. In the final scene he describes it as an act of "true womanhood," but the audience understands that it will lead to the ruin of the family.

In 1887 Leffler met the Italian nobleman Pasquale del Pezzo, a colleague of her mathematician brother Gösta Mittag-Leffler. She had her first marriage annulled and married del Pezzo in May, 1890. They settled in Naples and had one son, Gaetano, born in 1892. She died tragically of peritonitis in October 1892, when Gaetano was only seven months old. During her brief period of happy married life in Italy, she wrote *Familjelycka* [*Family Happiness*] and *Moster Malvina* [*Aunt Malvina*], published together with *Den kärleken* [*That Love!*] (1890), in *Tre komedier* [*Three Comedies*] (1891). They were performed, but did not have the same success as some of her earlier plays. The year before her death, she tried out a new, more symbolist aesthetic in *Sanningens vägar* [*The Ways of Truth*], published posthumously in 1893. Lynn Wilkinson points out that Leffler in her last play, moving towards a more modernist aesthetic, wanted to portray the unconscious and invisible aspects of human life (Wilkinson 2013: 109, Wilkinson 2011: 253-287).

Leffler was translated into several languages, mainly Danish, but also German, English, French, Dutch, Russian and Italian. German, however, was the language outside Scandinavia into which most Scandinavian authors were translated. Birgitta Lindh Estelle shows how Leffler was received in different countries. Although her plays were translated, in Germany she was mainly known as a prose writer, but in Britain it was her play *True Women* that made her famous (Lindh Estelle 2019b: 218-219). Lindh Estelle points out that the reception of Leffler's biographical story was also important in understanding the extent of the breakthrough, and in what sense it is relevant to use words like "impact" or "breakthrough": "The two plays *True Women* and *How to Do Good*⁶ and Leffler herself as a representative of the "new woman" were



Fig. 2. Actress Ellen Hartman as Gurli in *En räddande ängel* at Kungliga Dramatiska teatern in 1883. Photograph by Gösta Florman. Scenkonst Museet, Musik- och Teaterbiblioteket: Musikverket image: H3_184. <https://calmview.statensmusikverk.se/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=H3_184>.

⁶ *Hur man gör gott* in Swedish (1885). "Comment on fait le bien", in *La Revue socialiste*, January 1895 (3 acts): <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5817159b/f287.item>>.

useful for mobilizing political action within a social movement” (Lindh Estelle 2019: 251). Anne Charlotte Leffler and Victoria Benedictsson are the only women who never completely disappeared from the Swedish literary canon. However, she was out of print between 1950 and the early 2000s, when her dramas were published online, followed by several print editions of her short stories and plays.⁷

The Nordic Sexuality Debate in the 1880s—A Question of Masculinity?

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, sexuality became one of the central issues of debate throughout Europe.⁸ It was to a high degree also a question about what could or should be deemed an appropriate literary topic. The Nordic debate on sexuality took on a distinctly literary character. Underpinning the discussion of sexuality were issues such as the status of the bourgeois nuclear family, the boundaries of privacy, men’s guardianship over women in marriage, women’s rights to their income and inheritance, and ultimately, their right to citizenship. In 1879, Nora left her husband in *Et Dukkehjem* [*A Doll’s House*] and in 1882, the Danish author Edward Brandes contributed to the debate with his play *Et besøg* [*A Visit*] which depicts a woman who has had premarital affair. The following year, his brother Georg Brandes wrote his manifesto on modern literature, *Det moderne gennembruds mænd* [*The Men of the Modern Breakthrough*] (1883), in which he highlighted Ibsen’s critique of marriage in *A Doll’s House* as an example of the playwright’s modernity.

The Norwegian gender scholar Jørgen Lorentzen points out that Brandes’s title is not only about men, but also about a new kind of masculinity. Lorentzen argues that what was really at stake was the link between masculinity, sexuality, status and modernity:

namely the transition from an outdated patriarchal culture of authority to a modern individual—and subject-based family community. It is this transition that Brandes advocates so strongly when he describes the new ideal of masculinity as based on reason and humanity.⁹

⁷ The small Swedish publishing house Rosenlarv’s (2005-24) efforts in publishing several of her texts were crucial in reintroducing Leffler: *Familjelycka* 2007; *Skådespelerskan* 2008; *Kvinnlighet och erotik* 2009; *I krig med samhället och andra texter*, 2013 (with short introductions by Claudia Lindén), and the collection of essays *Att skapa en framtid: kulturradikalen Anne Charlotte Leffler*, 2013 Gedin, D. & Lindén C.(eds.).

⁸ The literature on Fin-de-siècle and discussions about morality and sexuality is extensive today, but some examples are: Cryle & Forth 2008, Lennartsson 2001, Swartz 2008, Showalter 1991, Annell 2016, and Lindén 2002, ch. 3 and 5.

⁹ “Bak hele diskusjonen om kjønnet ligger det altså en særegen mannlig problematikk som aldri bli problematisert, nemlig overgangen fra en foreldet patriarkalisk autoritetskultur

Lorentzen highlights an important aspect that is often overlooked in feminist discussions of the 1880s: many radical men also criticized traditional ideals of masculinity and sought to define a more modern masculinity. However, Lorentzen does not fully acknowledge that even radical criticism of masculinity can coexist with strong misogyny.¹⁰ In the *Nordisk Kvinnolitteraturhistoria* [*History of Nordic Women's Literature*], Inger-Lise Hjort-Vetlesen also describes the morality debate as a male movement in which masculinity was undergoing profound change as modernity took hold:

The traditional breadwinner and head of the family was threatened in his authority and masculinity by market forces, changing management structures within the state and society, and the emerging women's movement (Hjort-Vetlesen)

The problematic and contradictory nature of masculinity became glaringly obvious in the cultural discussions that characterized the 1880s in the Nordic countries. As Jonas Liliequist has pointed out, the morality debate meant that "masculinity was put in focus, both in relation to morality and as a rhetorical weapon in the rivalry between men" (Liliequist 2006: 201). What was really at stake for the men involved was the construction of masculinity. In his thesis *The Power of Character*, David Tjeder points out that masculinity, just like femininity, was unstable and not something self-evident in the nineteenth century (Tjeder 2003:23). Focusing on a dynamic between masculinity and unmanliness, as Jørgen Lorentzen and Claes Ekenstam suggest, makes it possible to see how both men, and women like Leffler, criticized an older ideal of masculinity, without necessarily agreeing on the future ideal (Lorentzen and Ekenstam 2006:10).

A Battle not Between Men and Women, but Within Both Groups

Conservatives wanted women to remain virgins before marriage and uneducated in sexual matters afterwards, and advocated for state-controlled brothels to cater to men's desires. However, *all* members of the radical, intellectual circles of the Nordic 1880s wanted an end to double standards and hypocrisy. They were all in favour of a change in sexual morality, however, in different and complex ways, not following a simple division of gender. Radical men believed that sexuality existed in both sexes, they criticized bourgeois

til et moderne individ- og subjektbasert familiefelleskap. Det er denne overgangen Brandes taler varmt for når han beskriver det nye mannlighetsidealet som basert på fornuft og humanitet. Georg Brandes var altså på mange måter en radikal kjønnstenker". (Lorentzen 1998: 19-20).

¹⁰ Liliequist mentions as an example that Strindberg scoffs at "the female authors of the emancipatory movement as 'hermaphrodites' and Ibsen as one of 'their pederasts'." (Liliequist 2006: 205).

marriage and often advocated “free love”, without ties, but did not consider such things as unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. In Sweden, this position came to be referred to as “Strindbergianism” after Strindberg, as mentioned above, was accused of blasphemy in 1884 in the so-called “Marriage-trial”.¹¹

The other position advocated abstinence for both sexes until marriage. It was known as “*hanskemoral*” [“glove-morality”], a term derived from the Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson’s drama *En hanske* [*A Gauntlet*] (1883).¹² In this drama, the protagonist Svava rejects a man who has not remained chaste until marriage, as she has. This position was represented by Bjørnson and the Fredrika Bremer Association, among others. To them it seemed like a simple solution to inequality, unwanted pregnancies and abandoned children, as well as sexually transmitted diseases. For many female authors, the concept of sexual morality was concerned with the position of women within marriage, as well as their broader role in society, and was intertwined with debates about enfranchisement, prostitution, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The devastating effects of syphilis were a real phenomenon, depicted through well-known literary examples such as Ibsen’s *Gengangere* [*Ghosts*] (1881)¹³, in which the father’s syphilis is passed on to his son, and Gerda von Mickwitz’s “*Mässling*” [*Measles*] (1886), in which a father, against his better judgement, marries his daughter to a debauched man. When she contracts syphilis, the father covers it up by calling it “measles.”

Just as there were dividing lines between men with completely different views on male sexuality, there were also dividing lines between women. For instance, Anne Charlotte Leffler and Sophie Adlersparre, the chairwoman of the Fredrika Bremer Association, had opposing views on female sexuality. This is evident in Adlersparre’s critical review of “Aurore Bunge”, in which she calls Leffer’s story a depiction of “depraved love.”¹⁴ She was even harsher in a private letter to Leffler: “The subject is so disgusting that it grieves me that it has been taken up by a woman.”¹⁵ Depictions of female sexual desire were problematic for the woman movement with their morality project that sought to bring men into line with the sexual and moral norms of women. To encourage or describe female desire in literature was, for Adlersparre, to betray “the cause.”

¹¹ Anne Charlotte Leffler, Ellen Key, and Viktoria Benedictsson, were accused by the leader of the Fredrika Bremer Association, Sophie Adlersparre, of “a female Strindbergianism of the most degrading kind” / “en kvinlig strindbergiansim af det mest förnedrande slag”, *Dagny*, October 1886: 249.

¹² Translated into French by Corinne François-Denève as *Le Gant*, 2013, Paris, Avant-Scène.

¹³ *Les Revenants* in French.

¹⁴ For a longer analysis of Adlersparre’s review, see the biography by Monica Lauritzen (Lauritzen 2012: 254f)

¹⁵ Sophie Adlersparre’s Letter to Leffler, July 19th 1883.

Like Ellen Key and Benedictsson, Leffler was first supported by Aldersparre but eventually had a falling out with the whole Fredrika Bremer Association, the organized women's movement. Leffler's placement of sexuality at the heart of women's liberation was at odds with the Fredrika Bremer Association's focus on work and celibacy outside wedlock for both men and women.

Some female authors, including Leffler, Stella Kleve, Gerda von Mickwitz, Victoria Benedictsson and Ellen Key, took a third position on sexuality, between "Strindbergianism" and Bjørnson's *hanskemoral* or "glove-morality," seeking to explore and portray a freer and more affirmative sexuality for women on their own terms. These female authors criticised the traditional double standards, as well as the irresponsible and consumerist sexuality of men who espoused "free love," but they also completely rejected the idealised female virtue of the women's movement.

Recognising these tensions and divisions is important for understanding discussions about gender, sexuality, class and identity in the 1880s.

Leffler's Focus: Desire Instead of Morality

Discussions of sexuality and morality in the late nineteenth century provide an important context for Leffler's project of emancipation. What Leffler saw, I argue, was the need to restructure not only the morality of sexuality, but sexuality itself, desire as such. In her texts she explores what might be termed "the eroticism of emancipation".

Unlike many stories, where women's virtue is used as a guideline for men's, or the main characters perish because of lack of sex, or rather because they have fallen and have had sex outside of marriage, the women in Leffler's texts actually have sex and survive. Sometimes, as in the novels *En sommarsaga* [*A Summer Saga*] (1886) and *Kvinnlighet och erotik II* [*Women and Sex II*] (1890), they also become happier as a result. These two novels are good examples of how Leffler could later allow the structure of desire itself to change—even within the framework of an established relationship; it was the happy endings that Leffler occasionally invented that were the most radical.

Leffler sometimes continued an earlier story, or developed a secondary character, in a story of their own. This almost always involved a radicalization of gender criticism. Arla and Aurore, who both appear in the short story "En bal i 'societeten'" [*A "society" ball*], from 1882. The last scene from "En bal i 'societeten'" also became a one act play, *En räddande engel* [*A Saving Angel*]. Both Arla and Aurore later get their own story. Arla in "*I krig med samhället*" [*At War with Society*] and Aurore in "Aurore Bunge" (1883). The same is true of the novella and play both called "Moster Malvina" [*Aunt Malvina*] (1889 and 1891). The second part, the play, also ends happily when Malvina decides

to stand up to her relatives and support her daughter, who has had and lost a child out of wedlock.¹⁶

Aurora, and Arla: Two Versions of the Woman of the Future

In *En räddande engel*, Arla's younger sister Gurli reveals that she has already met and flirted with baron Lagerskiöld, who had been Arla's dance partner earlier that evening. Birgitta Lindh Estelle points out that it portrays "the young woman's first confusing erotic experience" and that the "true love" that she believes makes her a woman appears to Arla as a purely physical reaction" (Lindh Estelle 2019: 188). In his thorough examination of female authors' descriptions of balls in the 1880s, David Gedin highlights how criticism of marriage distinguishes them from descriptions of balls earlier in the century:

The ball as a market for marriage has been effectively dismantled by the female generation of the 1880s. [...] The belief in underlying, priceless love—the "temple in the marketplace"—as the value and foundation of the existing nuclear family is sharply questioned.¹⁷

Both *En bal i Societeten* and *I krig med samhället* are strongly critical of marriage, albeit in different ways. They depict breaches of convention and various examples of attempts to break out of a traditional female role. If Aurore agreed to marry in order to conform to convention, Arla takes a more drastic step in "I krig med samhället", and divorces. Arla has chosen a loveless marriage of convenience as a reaction to her first disappointment in love in "En bal i 'societeten'". However, Arla falls in love with a new man and decides to divorce and remarry. She pays a high price for this attempt at emancipation: by law, her first husband has custody of the children, and he forbids her to see them after the divorce. This was a common consequence of divorce for women. The new marriage is not a happy one either. Friends and family distance themselves from Arla because of the social scandal of divorce, and her new husband does not understand Arla's grief over her children.

There is a touch of *Anna Karenina* about Arla's story. However, Arla is not punished by her author by killing herself. Instead, the reader follows her trials and tribulations, even when her new husband finally leaves her, and she faces difficulties when she tries to reconnect with her children after the death of her first husband. Arla's second husband exemplifies a type of man that recurs in several of Leffler's texts: the man who defines love as the wife giving him

¹⁶ For a discussion of these texts and the relationship between mothers and daughters in the Swedish modern breakthrough, see: Lindén 2020b: 181-207.

¹⁷ "Balen som marknad inför äktenskapet monterats effektivt ned av de kvinnliga åttitalisterna. [...] Tron på den bakomliggande, ovärderliga kärleken—"templet på marknadsplatsen"—som värde och grund för den existerande kärnfamiljen ifrågasätts skarpt." (Gedin 2007:79).

undivided attention. Only the husband, not even children, should have first place in the woman's heart. Arla's new husband accuses her of caring about too many people other than himself:

"Yes,—that is the very thing that is intolerable," he exclaimed,—“that you have duties and considerations and obligations to so many others besides your husband? I do not want a wife whose heart is as divided as yours”.

"I have asked you to choose—you have chosen," he said ominously. You are a mother more than you are a wife—."¹⁸

Arla's husband cannot share his wife even with her children. By focusing on desire and sexuality, Leffler also came to depict in detail the constructions of masculinity. It is often the man's fantasies about woman as both intellectually and sexually passive, that trigger the tragic course of events. Dramas such as *Skådespelerskan* [*The Actress*] (1883) and *Sanna kvinnor* [*True Women*] (1883) show how men's double standards control women's behavior and contribute to the production of a timid, conventional femininity. The theme of the man who wants the woman to have no other interests than him is, however, given a possible new development in Leffler's hands, first in *En sommarsaga* [*A Summer Saga*] (1886) and then in *Kvinnlighet och erotik II* [*Women and Sex II*] (1890).

A Summer Saga

Like Aurore, Ulla Rosenhane in *En sommarsaga* and later Alie in *Kvinnlighet och erotik II* are women who acknowledge a sexual desire that is not initially based on love - and is not intended to lead directly to marriage. Even though she succumbed to the intoxicated moment of passionate love and ran off with Falk, Ulla does not perish either. Maria Hansson, who wrote her dissertation on folklore as a vehicle for social criticism in the works of Leffler and other writers, has also pointed out how Leffler was able to circumvent both criticism and topics that were considered a bit "disgusting" in *En sommarsaga* (Hansson 2020 and 2021). Ulla is unmarried, an adult and an independent artist, with "a past," a previous love story. During a visit to relatives at a seaside resort in Sweden, she meets the equally independent and headstrong, but passionately committed elementary Norwegian school teacher Falk. They quickly fall in love and during a trip with friends they simply escape together in Falk's boat and sail all the way to Oslo and then marry and settle down at his place in the Norwegian countryside.

¹⁸ "Ja, – det är just detta, som är det outhärdliga, utbrast han, – att du har plikter och hänsyn och skyldigheter till så många andra utom din man? Jag vill inte ha en hustru hvars hjärta är så deladt som ditt – en hustru, som alltid täres af en otillfredställd längtan, till och med i mina armar"; "Jag har bedt dig välja – du har valt, sade han doft. Du är mor mer än du är hustru –" (Leffler *En bal* 1883: 482 and 486)

Ulla Rosenhane does not fit the 1880s codes of good womanhood. She does not want to give up her own career as an artist, does not want to be the supportive wife in her husband's work, is not a good mother, does not accept her husband's moodiness and desire to control her, and she definitely does not accept being pushed from her position as one of the top artists of her generation. In spite of her assertiveness and supposed failings as a woman, she does not perish, but is instead allowed to develop a mature understanding of the importance of keeping her artistic career *and* her marriage.

At the beginning of the novel, Ulla's friend Nelly, a typical New Woman type, is obsessed with women's rights and the image of woman as the moral model for men. According to the ideology of the women's movement, the purity of both man and woman is required before marriage. Nelly expresses this by assuming that the man she is in love with is also celibate before marriage. Ulla and Falk's relationship, on the other hand, allows for a "past" that is more in line with a culturally radical view of morality: Ulla tells him about a young male artist colleague with whom she shared a studio and who was in love with her, and admits to Falk that she tried to fall in love with him because she wanted to experience love in the same manner as her male colleagues. Whether Ulla and her colleague had a physical relationship is never fully clarified. But Falk decides not to ask any more: "He felt he had no right to this past."¹⁹ Nelly's fiancé's chastity and Falk's acceptance of Ulla's previous love life are very different, for example, from Rudolf's reactions in *Den kärleken!* [*That Love!*] (1890), where the male characters are ridiculed through comic use of language, as Lynn Wilkinson has pointed out (Wilkinson 2011: 231-2). What is interesting here is Falk's masculinity, because he does not criticise Ulla, but allows for a possible premarital sexuality for women, as well. This points to the equal relationship between them at the end of the novel.

Ulla's failure at an exhibition in Stockholm is directly linked to the fact that she is unable to work as she used to because she has had two children in a short time. Ulla suspects that she might be pregnant again. When Nelly, who had been married for a couple of years, hears about this she argues for the use of contraception—a very radical stance at the time: Knut Wiksell caused an outcry when he advocated for it in his famous 1880 lecture. Ulla and Nelly not only talk openly about contraception, but also consider the number of children in relation to a woman's career. The question is not whether to have children at all, but how many you can afford and have time for, since women can also have "other things to do" (Leffler 1886: 290).

En sommarsaga ends with a paean to compromise between work and marriage. Falk admits that his demand that Ulla should always put him and his needs before her art is wrong: "I have done you a double wrong, because I have

¹⁹ "Han kände att han icke hade någon rätt öfver detta förflutna". (Leffler *En sommarsaga* 1886: 111-2).

demanded a sacrifice from you without sacrificing anything myself”.²⁰ These lines are precisely what make *En sommarsaga* so unusual in the literature of the period. When Falk admits that he has asked Ulla to make sacrifices without making any of his own, he is also acknowledging the need for mutuality in a relationship. If their relationship is to have any future, he will need to change his whole conception of what love is.

Kvinnlighet och erotik II [Women and Sex II]

The title of Leffler’s short story and subsequent novel of the same name *Kvinnlighet och erotik I och II* refers to men’s view of women as erotic creatures. They are as much about men’s sexuality as they are about women’s. Both the short story and the novel examine and problematise men’s view of love and, not least, their demand that a woman should show them love by abandoning all other interests and concentrating only on them.

The short story “*Kvinnlighet och erotik I*” [*Women and Sex I*] (1883), ended with Alie rejecting a marriage proposal from Rikard, a man she was in love with, when she sensed that Rikard found it difficult to be attracted to a woman who was his intellectual equal. When the novel begins, a few years have passed and Rikard has definitively disqualified himself as a lover through his erotic coldness. Rikard and his wife Aagot’s conventional and erotically unsuccessful marriage serves as a bad example throughout the novel. Alie would “like to love—but not in the way that Rikard and Aagot loved each other”.²¹

Aagot has a lung condition and is prescribed a rest in the south, with Alie as her chaperone. Rikard and their son remain in Sweden. This leaves the two women alone on the warm, fragrant and sensual Italian Riviera. As Eva Heggstad has pointed out, Italy stands for freedom in contrast to the stricter North (Heggstad 2013: 95-104).²²

Kvinnlighet och erotik II caused a scandal when it was published. One reason the book caused such a scandal in Sweden was that the author’s own life had taken a dramatic turn, with a divorce and a new marriage in Italy to Pasquale del Pezzo, Duke of Caianello. The story of Alie and Andrea Serra was seen as Leffler’s own love story. The gossip potential of the book added to its scandalous reputation. Many reviewers also reacted against the openness of the depictions of sexuality. Yes, the story of Alie, a Swedish woman who spends a summer on the Italian Riviera, falling in love with an Italian nobleman and having a love affair with him, with no intention of marrying him, was a daring

²⁰ “Jeg har haft dobbelt uret mod dig, fordi jeg har krevet ett offer af dig uden selv at ofre noget”. (Leffler *Sommarsaga* 1886: 185).

²¹ “Vilja älska – men icke så, som Rikard och Aagot älskade hvarandra”. (Leffler *Kvinnlighet* 1890:9).

²² This fantasy imagination also goes in the other direction as Thomas Mohnike has shown in several articles (for example Mohnike 2016).

erotic tale. That Aurore ended up in bed with the lighthouse keeper was partly due to circumstances with the storm and the isolation of the island. Alie, on the other hand, after mature reflection, enters into a sexual relationship that probably will not lead to marriage. The novel portrays Alie's fear and vulnerability in this situation, but she still chooses to embrace it. Herein lies the novel's explosive force.

Early on, after arriving in Italy, Alie hears about the intellectual Marquis Andrea Serra and becomes increasingly aware of him. Through Alie's "female gaze" at Andrea Serra, we get a glimpse of the erotic charge of the new fashionable beach and bathing life of 1890s, where bodies freed from corsets and waistcoats were suddenly displayed in revealing costumes:

He wore a red and yellow-striped bathing suit, *which emphasized the youthful, boyish agility of the figure*, [...] He stood bent over the black-eyed lady in whose company they had previously seen him [...]. She wore a white woolen suit with red ribbons and a large cap with a red knot; her neck, arms, and legs were bare; her figure, *freed from the corset, clearly revealed under her blouse her somewhat exaggeratedly voluptuous forms*; and she leaned so close to him as she spoke, with a shining smile and tender eyes on his face, that Alie blushed as she looked at them, and hurried past and into the bathing hut.²³ (my italics)

By allowing Alie's gaze to linger on Serra's body, Leffler shows that women can also view men erotically. In *En sommarsaga*, written four years earlier, there is a long scene spanning several pages in which Falk swims, presumably naked, in the sea while women on the shore look on and discuss this "indecentcy." Ulla arrives and is introduced to the reader and the guests as more relaxed about the situation (Leffler *Sommarsaga* 1886: 1-15). Both *En sommarsaga* and *Kvinnlighet och erotik II* feature swimming as a free-spirited activity with erotic undertones, and the love affairs are foreshadowed when the male protagonist Falk and Serra offer to teach Ulla and Alie respectively how to swim.

After two weeks of flirting and swimming lessons, Serra and Alie swim alone to a cave. There, they kiss. Alie becomes aware of her erotic attraction to Serra long before she feels any kind of love, and the kiss in the cave shakes her to her core. She has no understanding of what she has just been through. "She did not love him - no, at least this was not love as she had always imagined

²³ "Han bar en röd och gulrandig badkostym, som väl framhöll gestaltens ungdomliga, gossaktiga smidighet, [...] Han stod böjd över den svartögda damen, i vars sällskap de förut sett honom [...]. Hon hade en vit ylleklädd med röda bårder samt stor suffletthatt med en röd knut, hals armar och ben var bara, figuren, frigjord från korsetten, avtecknade tydligt under blusen sina något överdrivet yppiga former, och hon lutade sig så tätt emot honom, när hon talade, med ett glänsande leende och ömma ögon upp i ansiktet på honom, att Alie rodade då hon såg på dem, och skyndade förbi och in i badhytten." (Leffler *Kvinnlighet* 1890: 37-38)

it.”²⁴ Alie had always thought of love primarily as a companionship of the soul, and here she had allowed herself to be “intoxicated by a stranger she hardly knew”.²⁵

One of the things that so upset nineteenth-century audiences was that Leffler showed that women could experience sexual desire without being committed to marriage and love. Women’s bodies are not just guardians of morality. The critic Hellen Lindgren wrote in his review that the portrayal of love “is rude, even crude, and seems repulsive.”²⁶ It was precisely this image of the woman as intoxicated, which Leffler had previously used in both “Aurore Bunge” and *En Sommarsaga* that was perceived as offensive. Unlike Aurore, who temporarily violated convention only to return to order at the end, Alie slips further and further away from the norms of convention, both emotionally and ideologically, until she violates all of them, completely and without regret.

On the evening after the kiss in the cave, Serra comes looking for her. They talk about what happened. Alie thinks he should have asked for permission first. He then presents a typical image of the man as conqueror in accordance with the nineteenth century Don Juan ideal, saying that the woman “wants and demands to be taken - it’s her nature.”²⁷ Alie protests, explaining that a woman who has “come to terms with herself” instead gives herself “voluntarily, of her own accord.”²⁸ She also points out that a free relationship, based on true love, is “more moral” than a marriage, precisely because it is based solely on the lovers’ own feelings. Alie explains her views on love to the man she is about to embark on a love affair with:

No, I do not care for fidelity—but for truth—truth in the moment—full, absolute commitment. For I know nothing more unattractive than when one person gives oneself completely, as a matter of life and death—and the other only plays.²⁹

The love relationship Alie criticises as distasteful was the usual nineteenth-century unequal power relationship between men and women. While the man had other women, other interests, another life, the woman was expected to focus her whole life on the man, to the exclusion of everything else. Instead, Alie believes that loving requires mutual absolute devotion, which is the only way a relationship can be true. Leffler here echoes her friend Ellen Key’s critique

²⁴ “Hon älskade honom icke – nej, detta var åtminstone icke kärleken, sådan hon alltid tänkt sig den”. (Leffler Kvinnlighet 1890: 48)

²⁵ “oreflekteradt låtit sig på detta sätt berusas af en främling, som hon knappt kände”. (Leffler Kvinnlighet 1890: 49).

²⁶ “är ofin, ja grof, och verkar fränstötande”. (Lindgren 1890: 173-185)

²⁷ “vill och fordrar att bli tagen – det är hennes natur”. (Leffler Kvinnlighet 1890: 50).

²⁸ “kommit till klarhet med sig själv; frivilligt, själmant”. (Leffler Kvinnlighet 1890: 50).

²⁹ “Nej jag bryr mig inte om troheten – men sanning – sanning i ögonblicket – ett fullt, absolut hängivande. Ty jag vet ingenting oskönare, än om den ena ger sig helt, på liv och död – och den andre bara på lek”. (Leffler Kvinnlighet och erotik 2009, 112).

of conventional marriages as she would later develop it in *Love and Marriage* (1903/1911).³⁰ In this way, Leffler, challenges the women's movement's view of both women and men.

Serra accepts the challenge, and a period of secret kissing ensues. A complication in the story is Serra's high birth; he is expected to carry on his family legacy and Alie, despite being middle class, is not a suitable match for marriage. Serra can only offer a relationship in secret: "Will you be mine? he asked. All mine—no promises, no future, no worldly interference - my secret bride?"³¹ Alie says yes, but she is still hesitant. After her initial panic when he knocked on her hotel door, she has time to think about what she has done: "Out of false modesty, she had once again ruined everything".³² When he turns up a few hours later, she has no second thoughts.

Alie is surprisingly unconcerned about what others will think, or even about getting pregnant. Her only doubt now is whether it is true love on his part, and she is filled with "shyness at the thought that she had given herself completely to a man [...] for whom she would be just one of many".³³

But Serra returns and Alie is installed as a companion to an older female relative of his. This allows them to live under the same roof, but in secret. Here the novel shifts from a concentration on Alie's feelings to a study of the man's view of love as something that should fulfil a woman completely. Alie should only be there for him, live for him; she is not even allowed to read when he is around unless she is reading aloud to him. Alie dreams of inspiring Serra to write and worries about what will happen the day he is no longer satisfied with just being physically close to her. Serra here reminds us of Arla's husband from "*I krig med samhället*", who demanded absolute attention from his wife. The women's movement saw this part of the novel as Leffler's surrender to men's demands for ownership of women. But I think it is possible to read it as a critical study of a view of love as possession.

The novel's ending was incomprehensible and shocking to contemporaries. Because it ends "happily," in the sense that the couple decide to marry, despite the sacrifice of social status that this entails for Serra. But above all because the final conflict was interpreted as meaning that Alie had given up for good and had become completely passive. In her "Afterword", Leffler writes that she wanted to write a counter-narrative to contemporary literature like Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, in which "characters seized by

³⁰ See Lindén 2002, ch. 7 and Lindén 2020a.

³¹ "Vill du vara min? frågade han. Min helt och hållet – utan löften, utan framtid, utan världens inblandning – min hemliga brud?" (Leffler 1890: 68).

³² "Apfalsk blygsel hade hon åter igen fördärvat allt". (Leffler 1890: 119).

³³ "blygsel vid tanken att hon givit sig helt åt en man [...] för hvilken hon endast skulle bli en bland många". (Leffler 1890: 126-7).

strong erotic passion are doomed.”³⁴ What happens in the closing scene is that the two ultimately break with convention and choose each other in an equal affirmation of love. Like Falk in *Sommarsaga* but more emotionally charged, Serra understands that Alie cannot just be there for him; he too must give his love unreservedly.

In *Kvinnlighet och erotik II*, Leffler showed that sexuality is central to the project of emancipating women. As long as women are afraid to affirm their sexuality for fear of losing their femininity, and men demand passive women for fear of losing their masculinity, no change can take place. Leffler shows that it is not enough simply to criticise or relax conventions; emancipation requires an equal encounter on all levels, sexual, emotional, financial and political.

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³⁴ “de personer som gripas av en stark erotisk lidelse [är] dömda till undergång” (Leffler *Efterskrift* 1890: 8).

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