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Abstract

Märta Tikkanen's poetry collection *Århundredets kärlekssaga* (*The love story of the century*, 1978) is a confessional book on life in a family where the husband and father is an alcohol abuser. It is also a love story about a married couple who love one another despite the terrible challenges posed to the relationship by alcoholism. The poetry collection became one of the most influential books in contemporary Nordic fiction, its themes on gender roles and alcohol abuse setting the trend in the Nordic discussion of women's liberation. Märta Tikkanen's courage to tell her own private story inspired other women to confess their gender equality problems to the public. The alcohol abuse of Märta Tikkanen's husband Henrik Tikkanen was seen as an allegory for the more general problems in the relation between men and women. My essay introduces Märta Tikkanen's poetry collection and discusses how the poems develop the theme of gender and alcohol. I will also compare her description of their marriage with Henrik Tikkanen's self-portrait in his autobiographical novella *Mariegatan 26, Kronohagen* (1977). The analysis refers to contemporary research on gender and alcohol abuse and discusses how the poems contribute to a public recognition of the relationship between gender and alcohol abuse. The essay discusses the reception of Märta Tikkanen's influential poems and explores her treatment of alcohol and gender in relation to other Nordic confessional or fictional books on alcohol abuse.

Keywords

alcohol abuse, gender, literature, Tikkanen

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In the late 1970s, the Finland-Swedish author Märta Tikkanen (b. 1935) was one of the best-known and most appreciated authors in northern Europe. Her poetry collection *The love story of the century* (1978)¹ was the talk of the day, and the public flocked to readings with the writer who, in 1979, won the women's alternative Nordic literature prize for her work. The prize was awarded as a protest against the fact that the Nordic Council's Literature Prize, established in 1962, had never in its history been awarded to a woman.

Märta Tikkanen was celebrated as a feminist icon (Witt-Brattström, 2013) and as a representative of a new, engaged women's literature that openly portrayed a prevailing discrimination of women and the struggle for a change in the relation between men and women. Her poetry collection was seen as a bold piece of confessional literature that provided insights into a marriage in which the male half, Henrik Tikkanen (1924–1984), was deeply alcoholised. Now that Nordic readers are used to no-punches-pulled, sensational self-portraits by such writers as Karl Ove Knausgård, it can be difficult to fully understand the tsunami of interest, enthusiasm, and sympathy that surrounded Märta Tikkanen in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But Tikkanen was celebrated for her courage in using her own experiences and for exposing a marriage where the built-in problems of the nuclear family were intensified by alcohol misuse.

The Nordic reviewers agreed on reading and perceiving *The love story of the century* as a portrayal of the patriarchal structures that were still socially and psychologically predominant in the Nordic countries, despite all efforts to create gender equality. The story of the husband's alcoholism mainly functioned as a developing bath for basic mechanisms of the suppression of women.

The Danish reviewer Mette Starch praised the work in the daily newspaper *Information*:

[...] even though it deals with a relation in which the man is an alcoholic, the male role he

otherwise does... is unfortunately completely normal! And the resulting female role... yes, that is what Märta Tikkanen is fighting against in her books. (Starch, 1979)

Märta Tikkanen commented on the significance of alcohol abuse in the book when speaking about all the people who had contacted her:

They also are people who have no real contact with alcohol problems, but who experience a similarity between the actual problems in my book and their own problems. "I have no experience of alcohol problems", a woman had written to her, "but my husband is a workaholic". So I must have touched on a single aspect of an issue that has many facets. Though I could never think of comparing Henrik with any other alcoholic, for he is something quite unique. (Sörsgaard, 1979b)

Alcoholism created extreme situations in the family between father, mother, and children. It was therefore claimed the book shed light on the patriarchal suppression mechanisms which made the man, woman, and children all victims. But other kinds of male abuse of work, sexuality, money, gambling, or emotions also seemed to be able to function as informing the fundamental issue of female suppression.

You closely fence in
my life
When I've started out from work
and when I arrive home
and what have I done
an empty half hour
more than the route could
reasonably take
even in rush hour?
Highly incensed
when I have shaved
under my arms my armpits
For whose sake
do I actually shave
my armpits?
What by the way is it
that forces me to work
and makes me unattainable

when you can
 provide for me
 so I can stay
 at home and wait for you
 all day long?
 It may well be
 you think
 that freedom can't be
 that important
 for me?
 But that of course is only because
 of your unprecedented
 love
 Why don't I appreciate
 your love?

(Tikkanen, 1978, pp. 107–108)

Märta Tikkanen focused on basic issues of self-determination, mutual recognition, and inequality. Alcoholism could be replaced by other forms of abuse, but abuse and extremes characterised the male gender role and accompanied the clash of the sexes in the one-to-one relationship and family life.

The (alcohol-)sick man and the healthy woman trapped in their twosomeness and mechanisms of suppression seemed to be each other's opposites. Märta Tikkanen made it the healthy woman's task to liberate herself, the children, and the sick husband from the hell of gender roles and alcohol abuse. The gender issue was further underscored by the fact that both Henrik and Märta were active, creative artists. But while his artistic practice was conducted under considerable public attention, she portrayed her work as being almost as secret and concealed as that of her great-grandmother, who wrote "at night/at her white empire table" (Tikkanen, 1978, p. 145). Märta had to fulfil her role as mother, wife, and working woman before she could "allow" herself to write poems, and this was perhaps the most profound source of righteous indignation in her work.

The husband's alcoholism rendered it all the more obvious that women's emancipation was not just a question of women but just as much one of men. In her retrospective look at the

work, Ebba Witt-Brattström emphasises that Henrik Tikkanen – as can be seen from his own memoirs and the portrayal of his relationship to Märta Tikkanen in *Mariegatan 26, Kronohagen* (Tikkanen, 1977) – displayed considerable courage when his wife, like other feminists of the 1970s, made the men around them the subject of a gigantic reform project (Witt-Brattström, 2013). And such courage proved highly necessary, for Henrik Tikkanen, after the publication of the poetry collection, found himself proclaimed feminism's number one enemy – "the biggest male chauvinist in Swedish literature since Strindberg" (Witt-Brattström, 2013).

Alcohol and masculinity

Henrik Tikkanen's autobiographical novella *Mariegatan 26, Kronohagen* (1977) describes the relationship between Henrik and Märta from his point of view. The book is the third volume of his biographic series of novels, published in 1976–1984. The narrative opens with Henrik's interpretation of his and Märta's love affair as a strong physical attraction that they cannot resist. They are both engaged in other relationships, but they cannot stay away from one another. The secrecy of their love fascinates both, and as they work at the same newspaper their work life and love life interfere. Henrik's love for Märta is also linked to his drinking habits. Drinking alcohol and making love to her represent a feeling of being free from the bourgeois ties of his life and the shadows of his past. Alcohol confirms his artistic freedom; he drinks when he feels inspired or needs inspiration. When Henrik and Märta get married and start a family, he also admits to himself that he drinks to keep her at home:

When she had something important to do (she continued her studies) or she had to participate in an important meeting or seminar, I started to drink so that she could not leave or was forced to worry about me. She shouldn't be off. (Tikkanen, 1977, p. 92)

Henrik Tikkanen's use of alcohol turns into abuse. He follows in the footsteps of his father, who died from drinking. Henrik both wants to liberate himself from the shadow of his father, who left his mother when Henrik was still a child, and to live up to his bohemian lifestyle. He describes how his father was found dead with a half-full bottle still in his hand. The whole situation represents the humiliation caused by alcohol. Henrik completes this: before the funeral he tips the ash of his cigarette in his father's urn.

Henrik Tikkanen's life story links heavy alcohol consumption to masculine gender identity. He repeats the patterns of his father's alcohol abuse and feels that drinking alcohol frees him from the bourgeois lifestyle of his own family and helps him to accomplish his ideal of being Märta's powerful lover but also her childish and dependent husband. His autobiography tells the story of how alcohol constitutes his gender identity. The story reveals not just a personal tragedy; it is pictured both by Henrik Tikkanen and Märta Tikkanen as typical of male alcohol abuse.

Recent surveys of alcohol consumption confirm this and indicate that such a relation between gender and alcohol is common and still alive. Steve Dempster stresses in a survey of the alcohol consumption of young British students that alcohol consumption serves to demonstrate masculinity:

Although there was a general perception that students of both genders drink heavily, prominent in male undergraduates' discourses were traditional associations between heavy alcohol consumption and masculinity. Males in both phases of the research identified consumption of alcohol as integral to their understandings of masculinity and of laddishness as a template of masculinity. Heavy alcohol consumption allows male undergraduates to demonstrate their manhood to others and facilitates their inclusion into male peer groups. (Dempster, 2011, p. 648)

In the treatment of alcoholism it would also seem that gender is crucial to the way in which

alcoholism is viewed and assessed. Frederik Spark points out that alcohol treatment often selects women as a particular at-risk group, which is based on the idea that men have a right to drink that women do not:

One can really wonder why women are singled out as an at-risk group. It can hardly be because they have the most illness, mortality, social problems or cause most social problems, for that mainly applies to men. So why do we behave in this way? Why do we stress that precisely women are at an at-risk group? Can one explanation be that men's power hegemony means that one protects precisely men's right to drink a lot? But it is perhaps incorrect to use the expression "men's right" to drink – it may perhaps have more to do with the usual view that one "ought" to drink. Or have we kept the idea that precisely women are an at-risk group because we generally speaking wish to retain a general theory about women being more vulnerable? (Spark, 2014, p. 637)

The masculine artist-alcoholic myth

In the analysis of the relationship between gender and alcoholism it is also relevant to remember that there is a powerful link between art and alcohol in Western culture. A striking example is the writer and Nobel Prize winner Ernest Hemingway, whose enormous consumption of alcohol served to underline his masculinity and status as the man who could outdo all other men. Early on in his writing career, says Tom Dardis, Hemingway began to construct the myth about himself as someone who could "outdrink, outfight, outhunt and outfuck anyone on this planet" (Dardis, 1989, p. 173). According to Dardis, Hemingway stressed the difference between men like himself, who could take their drink in order to increase their powers and talents, and the so-called "rummies" who became drunks – such as William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

There are certain traces in *The love story of the century* of the artist's myth of masculinity partly acknowledged by Märta's first-person speaker:

At a stage in your drunkenness
you suddenly see
the connection
Then you say things
that are so mind-blowing
that it is almost
worth all the misery
that frames in
what precedes and follows
these seconds of truths.

(Tikkanen, 1978, p. 54)

The alcoholic artist is presented as a special, brutally honest soothsayer, but in *The love story of the century* the alcoholic becomes a "rummy" whose consumption of alcohol is partially justified by an unsatisfied male urge for independence, and is partially a desperate, self-destructive response to his betrayal by other men, first and foremost by his father. Alcoholism appears to be a mixture of a bad inheritance and an artistic source that the man has become dependent on. Alcoholism distorts the love relationship between man and woman to such an extent that there is a direct inversion of love and hate, with love being transformed into power and the exercise of power.

Somewhere or other
all of it is
quite horrid –
to have taken over
power
and not have reacted
against this at all
most horrid of all to know
that both of us
know this.

(Tikkanen, 1978, p. 23).

But the artist-masculinity myth that can be traced in the work is also nurtured by the inter-views that, as strong paratexts, accompany the

publication of Märta Tikkanen's poetry collection.² Henrik Tikkanen pronounces that *The love story of the century* is an excellent work; he is proud to have been a source of inspiration. Märta says about his reaction: "A little later he came in to me. 'I'm happy to have inspired you to do this', he said. 'I will never forgive you if you don't publish the poems'" (Sörsgaard, 1979b). Henrik Tikkanen also speaks of his delight when asked what he thought about her collection, saying he was "fantastically glad that she has written it" (Sörsgaard, 1979a).

Paradoxically enough, Märta Tikkanen's poems about alcoholism came to confirm the masculine artist-alcoholic myth: male alcohol abuse is the point of departure for excellent art both in his and her autobiographical works. Although we are dealing with a thorough revelation of the destructive effects of alcohol, it is still a muse for remarkable art. The male artist-alcoholic myth is fulfilled by the feminist artist who seeks emancipation, and alcohol is even the trigger that artistically redeems them, so that they separately and in a constant mutual strife and literary competition can assume their position among the major artists of their time.

Several years after Henrik Tikkanen's death, Märta Tikkanen published an autobiographical book about their marriage as artists, *Två. Scener ur ett konstnärsäktenskap* (*Two. Scenes from an artist's marriage*, 2004). In an interview she relates: "It was a complex, heavy and difficult relationship, but it was a true love relationship for both of us. I don't think I would have started to write if we had lived happily ever after" (Remar, 2005).

With these few words Märta Tikkanen underlines the theme of female power in *The love story of the century*: when the chips are down, the woman's authorship is the deepest cause of unhappiness, as it leads to a sharpened gender struggle between man and woman and the conflict-enhancing alcoholism. And yet, this authorship is also the source of happiness embedded in the works of art they separately and in deadly competition managed to create.

Just how alcohol functions as fuel in the complex and tortuous creative processes and as a masculine identity marker emerges from the pages of *Två. Scener ur ett konstnärsäktenskap*, where Märta describes the history of their relationship as well as Henrik's cancer and death. When he returns home from hospital for the final time, Henrik's prime concern is whether the fridge is stocked with spirit and beer, as Märta has promised him, and it is just as characteristic that she has not thought of doing it. She manages, with some help from friends, to procure some beer for him, but by then he is so weak that he can no longer lift the glass to his lips.

While the early reception of *The love story of the century* was extremely positive, the Danish literary figure Pål Dahlerup produced a particularly critical analysis of the work in 1981, the objection being that the work was affected by a masochistic aesthetic that should be considered dangerous and obsessive. In Dahlerup's opinion, this aesthetic is revealed in both language and style, as the female I-figure uses the male you-figure to carry out a consistent self-accusation. The I is deeply dependent on the attitude of the you and incapable of showing the you her true self. Dahlerup felt that there were both masochistic and non-masochistic poems in the work. About the former she wrote:

When assessing such openly masochistic poems, I include psychoanalytical and feminist criteria. And I then have to say that it is a sick and insane way of treating oneself and the other person. That it has caught on is obvious from the popularity of the book and the fact that a number of Scandinavian female literary critics have awarded this book their alternative literature prize and thereby rewarded this story of dependence that Märta Tikkanen has launched under the title of a love story. That of the century, into the bargain. That is not incorrect perhaps, measured by the facts concerning one-to-one relationships between men and women. But being a prize example does not make it any more correct. (Dahlerup, 1981, p. 22)

A further turning of the screw was Dahlerup's remark that she did not consider the poetry collection to be particularly good artistically. It did not live up to the linguistic and stylistic range that to her represented an ideal of the lyrical genre.

It is possible to argue against this last item. Märta Tikkanen creates individual lines with sharp images and impressions that form an artistic unity. Dahlerup's ideal of lyrical poetry is normative – not all good poetry has to have a large aesthetic range.

The criticism of masochism caused a furore. The analysis was also disputed by the linguist Mette Kunøe in the *Forum for feminist research* (Kunøe, 1982). Looking back, Dahlerup's text-analytical considerations do not seem all that convincing. But with her article Dahlerup had already shown that the depiction of the male and the female figures was far more complicated than assumed by that period and, in particular, that the complex relation between gender and alcoholism does not, artistically speaking, have any simple answers.

Current problem areas of alcohol and women's emancipation

Märta Tikkanen's *The love story of the century* became a classic that is still reissued and has been translated into various languages. The latest Swedish edition was published in 2016, and the work still keeps resonating. A Norwegian reader, for example, writes:

What happens when one ought to but is even so unable to leave one's husband? It is precisely these feelings that Tikkanen portrays in masterly fashion in this book. Her enormous strength, her weaknesses, her heart-rending openness, her bitterness, her hope, her despondency, her love, her hatred, her needs, her self-effacement. Everything is described, without Tikkanen ever resorting to clichés. (Anja E, n.d.)

The interesting thing about this blog comment is that the writer does not mention alcoholism at

all. The poems deal first and foremost with female emotions and the difficulty in ending a destructive one-to-one relationship.

From the writer's point of view, the emotional mechanisms are the same then as now, and the poems are still a valuable work of art. If one looks at what has changed since Märta Tikkanen's 1970s, one can note that excessive consumption of alcohol is no longer mainly a male problem. In the Nordic countries, women's alcohol consumption has increased over the past decades (Bjørk, Vinther-Larsen, Hvidtfeldt, Thygesen, & Grønæk, 2006), and young women's alcohol consumption has also altered. Conceptions of gender and alcohol seem to be changing. Various conflicting conceptions exist side by side, particularly in the image of women and alcohol in the media. There is no longer one conception only. In her article on the risks and pleasures related to gender, sexuality, and alcohol culture in the early 2000s, Alexandra Bogren emphasises this point:

Instead the thought exists that it is unnatural for women to drink side by side with the thought that women today drink "like men". And at the same time, these two thoughts are interwoven with a consumption-oriented and post-feminist interpretation of alcohol in which women's consumption is seen as a project of emancipation and freedom of choice. Women's drinking is condemned on the one hand, based on a risk perspective – it is dangerous if women "drink like men" – and is spared on the other hand based on a freedom-of-choice and consumption perspective – a woman who drinks is "equal, free and cool". To avoid risks and seek pleasure thus become part of a complex identity project which in turn is linked to contradictory conceptions of what is "correct" female behaviour. (Bogren, 2014, p. 579)

Changes in alcohol consumption are connected to changes in the family structure brought about by the building up of the welfare state. A family structure with two breadwinners, consisting of father, mother, and child, gained ground in the

Nordic countries after the 1960s, and it was supported by legislation and governmental regulations on maternity leave, family planning, expansion of day care centres, and care of the elderly (see Christiansen, Edling, Haave, & Petersen, 2006).

So the Nordic welfare states, early on, were already shifting toward a social situation where the family started to resemble a temporary community, loosely bound together by gender roles and undergoing rapid reformulation. At the same time, the state was assuming the role of a "people's home". The Nordic welfare model takes care not of families but of individual citizens. The welfare state has become – as in the Danish Social Democrats' 2011 platform – an invisible being that will take care of every individual citizen. The cover of this programme portrays a young girl sitting on a jetty, her face turned away from us toward the open sea. She is hugging a doll. She is alone and the caption reads simply: "Hand on heart" (Hånden på hjertet; Socialdemokraterne, 2011). The welfare state is portrayed here as an unseen lifeguard-parent that has taken over responsibility for the life of the individual. The significance of family relations has waned, and the child belongs to the state: the welfare state looks after and guards each one of us like a lifeguard above the young girl on the great jetty of existence.

In literary fiction, alcohol and alcoholism are used as markers of welfare issues and problems linked to adapting to the new gender identities. The Swedish writer Susanna Alakoski's first novel, *Svinalängorna* (*The swine rows*, 2006), describes the seamier side of welfare-state life in the 1960s and 1970s in a concrete housing estate in Ystad, on the south coast of Sweden. A family finds itself in deep social problems, and the authorities are unaware of just how bad things are when both mother and father become alcoholics and the collapse of the family accelerates. The novel's artistic strength comes from the use of the young daughter, Leena's, point of view. Leena is a child that the welfare state ought to have helped but did not even have on the radar.

Alcoholism flourishes on the unsavoury side of life in the welfare state, but also hits women who are unable to live up to the new female ideals of emancipation. This is what happens to the mother figure in the Danish writer Sissel Bergfjord's *Sortedam* (2012), which portrays a daughter's difficult relationship with her alcoholic mother unable to fulfil the feminist ideals of the strong, self-reliant woman.

A glimpse of how alcohol functions in youth culture is to be gained from the Danish writer Ina Munch-Christensen's debut novel *Nielsine* (2015), about the hectic big-city life of a young girl with love troubles, fragmentation, and insecurity. Her nerves are numbed and her sexual preferences are finally allowed to express themselves during Nielsine's many binge-drinking sessions. Alcohol is used here as a lubricant for Nielsine's lesbian orientation.

In Märta Tikkanen's suite of poems *The love story of the century* it was the alcohol-sick man, Henrik, who was caught in patriarchal structures and old gender roles. In present-day Nordic literature the portrayal of alcohol and alcohol abuse is partly linked to a thematic discussion of the seamier side of life in the welfare state and partly to one that shows that new gender identities and gender ideals are both porous and hard to live up to for men and women.

Literary recognition

The lasting popularity of Märta Tikkanen's poems and the ongoing discussion of the poems among readers show that *The love story of the century* has made readers aware of both alcohol abuse and more general gender equality problems. Tikkanen's work highlights the gender aspect of alcohol abuse, reveals the patriarchal structures of family life and feelings that men and women can still be caught in, and made it permissible to discuss these problems in public. Many readers recognised and still recognise themselves in the poems of Märta Tikkanen and share their feelings and understanding. The reception and the discussion of *The love story of the century* showed that literature can offer

readers new ways of seeing and understanding. The literary researcher Rita Felski underlines this effect in her discussion of literary recognition:

Literary texts offer us new ways of seeing, moments of heightened self-apprehension, alternate ways of what Proust calls reading the self. Knowing again can be a means of knowing afresh, and recognition is far from synonymous with repetition, complacency, and the dead weight of the familiar. Such moments of heightened insight are not just personal revelations in a private communion between reader and text; they are also embedded in circuits of acknowledgment and affiliation between selves and others that draw on and cut across the demographics of social life. (Felski, 2009, p. 48)

The love story of the century showed that an experience of insight and recognition could be shared by many readers. While the autographical works of both Märta and Henrik Tikkanen confirm the artist-masculinity myth that male alcohol abuse is the point of departure for excellent art, their books have also functioned as media for public discussion of opinions on gender, alcohol, and family life. And while the books articulated the gender perspective on alcohol abuse, Märta Tikkanen's and Henrik Tikkanen's interpretations did not differ very much. Märta Tikkanen's poems were published after *Mariegatan 26, Kronohagen*, and the poems seem to extend his interpretation of the troublesome masculinity. Perhaps that is why Pil Dahlerup found that Märta's poems expressed masochism. The books nevertheless contribute to our common knowledge of alcohol abuse, clarify and illustrate some of the themes of research on alcohol abuse and thereby bear witness on the effect of literary recognition. Contemporary Nordic literature still features strong artistic thematisations of alcohol abuse, but today it is often women's abuse of alcohol and the related gender equality trouble and the new life of liberated women that literature brings into focus.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed how contemporary research on gender and alcohol helps us to understand the representation of alcohol abuse in Märta Tikkanen's collection of poems *The love story of the century*. The analysis shows that Tikkanen's poems paradoxically enough confirm the masculine artist-alcoholic myth: male alcohol abuse is the point of departure for excellent art both in Henrik Tikkanen's and Märta Tikkanen's autobiographical works. Alcohol is the "trigger" that artistically redeems them, so that they separately and in a constant mutual strife and literary competition can assume a position as being among the major artists of their time.

Henrik Tikkanen's autobiographical *Marie-gatan 26, Kronhagen* (1977) confirms this male myth on alcohol and creativity. His artistic practice is linked to his physical addiction to Märta's body and to the fluid of alcohol. Her body and the bottles of alcohol represent comfort, liberation, and a hiding away from his father although he repeats his father's mistakes.

Märta Tikkanen's poems have enjoyed lasting popularity. *The love story of the century* has made readers aware of both alcohol abuse and more general gender equality problems. Women seem to recognise themselves and their experiences with men by reading these poems, which highlight the gender aspect of alcohol abuse. Märta Tikkanen's lines revealed the patriarchal structures of family life and feelings that men and women can still be caught by, and made it permissible to discuss such problems in public.

The essay has also compared Märta Tikkanen's poems and the treatment of alcohol and gender to other contemporary Nordic confessional or fictional books on alcohol abuse. In some influential works of present-day Nordic literature the portrayal of alcohol and alcohol abuse is partly linked to themes dealing with the seamier side of life in the welfare state and partly to one that shows that new gender identities and gender ideals are both porous and hard to live up to.

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Notes

1. Märta Tikkanen's poems were translated into English by Stina Katchadourian in 1984. The translations of the poems in this essay are by John Irons.
2. The concept of paratext is used as an extension of Gérard Genette's definition of texts that accompany a text and have a bearing on the interpretation of the text. The paratext in the form of, for example, interviews and reviews is a link between the institutional framework of the text and the text itself (cf. Genette, 1997, pp. 1–2).

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