

## Catastrophe, Emotions and Guilt – The Great Fire of Turku 1827

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The catastrophe known as the Great Fire of Turku was the largest conflagration in the history of the Nordic countries. Three quarters of the city were destroyed in the fire that started on 4 September 1827, at 9 o'clock in the evening. The fire raged through the night, in some parts of the city until 6 September, and the soil was hot for weeks afterwards.<sup>1</sup> The city of Turku had burned down at least 30 times before, but the fire of 1827 was the last one, making room for a more modern, spacious city structure that was meant to prevent such disasters from recurring. As callous as it may sound, the fire benefited the process of modernisation.<sup>2</sup>

In 1827, Turku was known as the oldest city of Finland, with a gothic cathedral and with a university that had been founded by Queen Christina in 1640. It was also the largest city in the country with its 12,000 inhabitants, and 11,000 of them lost their homes in the catastrophe. These figures can be compared to the fire of London in 1666 when 70,000 of the 80,000 inhabitants of London became homeless. In both cases around 90 per cent of the citizens lost their homes.<sup>3</sup>

Often, a disaster happens under circumstances in which different unfavourable conditions converge. It is significant that the conflagrations of Turku and London started in early September, the London fire on the 2nd and the Turku fire on the 4th of September. In both cases there had been a particularly dry summer, and at least in the case of Turku, there was a significant amount of dry hay in the barns. Furthermore, the weather conditions changed rapidly after 9 pm; the wind started to rise and soon there was a tremendous windstorm. It was also market time, and many of the men were in Tampere, 143 kilometres away from Turku, and almost all of the students were out of the city because the academic year had not yet started. Thus, there were fewer people in the city to assist in extinguishing the fire. Turku was to a large extent a women's city at the time of the disaster.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the emotional response to the catastrophe that effaced much of the medieval past of the city, destroyed the library of the Academy of Turku almost completely and left 11,000 people homeless. The chapter focuses especially on the question of guilt, which was continuously referred to not only in the trial after the fire but also in the press and, of course, in the streets of the ruined city. What is interesting is that the memory of the catastrophe has had a persistent gendered emphasis that has continued to the present day. In the discourse on the fire, maintained by history books, newspapers and popular memories, the role of a maid, a female servant is repeatedly emphasised. Thus, it is essential to ask what this gendered memory of the catastrophe means, what it entails and how it relates to the transition from the early modern town to a modern city. This particular maidservant has also a name in the memory of the fire: she was Maria Vass, and she probably is the only early nineteenth-century maidservant whose name, after almost two centuries, is still remembered and recognised by the city dwellers.<sup>4</sup> This chapter aims at analysing this gendered remembrance of the greatest catastrophe in Finnish urban history.

### **A Moment of Terror**

The fire started in the Northern Quarter of the city, in the house of the merchant Hellman. The owner Carl Gustaf Hellman was himself in Stockholm and, returning after a few days, he found his home in ashes. The fire brigade which was strongly criticised after the catastrophe, headed towards the hill of Aninkainen where Hellman's house was situated, but there was nothing that could be done. The wind threw sparks and cinders behind the fire fighters who were not able to contain the emerging catastrophe.<sup>5</sup>

The rising wind pressed the flames down the hill towards the river Aura that flows through the city. The most valuable buildings, like the cathedral and the academy, were on the other side of the river. The citizens probably thought that the river would prevent the spread of the conflagration, but this did not happen. Soon, the sparks had reached the roof of Gustaf Hällström's house, which was a visible landmark near the cathedral. The burning of Hällström's roof was mentioned regularly in the press coverage, probably because he was a professor of physics at the Academy and a notable figure in the city. After a couple of hours, around midnight, the fire started to approach the cathedral. Very quickly, the city was like an ocean of flames. That evening, the Prussian astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm August Argelander (1799–1875), who had been working in Turku since 1823 and was collecting evidence for his ground-breaking research on star movements and magnitudes, was sitting in the observatory on the southern side of the city. His observation diary tells that he was just

writing down remarks on the star Aquilae, when the emerging catastrophe caught his eye: ‘My observations were interrupted by a terrible fire that very nearly burnt the entire city to cinders.’<sup>6</sup> The cathedral bells were heard to toll 3 o’clock in the morning. After that, the flames had reached the top of the tower and the bells collapsed.

**Image 7.1: The map of Turku by Johan Tillberg 1808. The map was coloured after the Great Fire and the destroyed quarters were marked with grey.**

Although there were more women in the city at the time of the fire, most of the eyewitness accounts were written by men. Adolf Moberg, later professor of chemistry and physics and Rector of the University of Helsinki, was 14 at the time. He writes in his memoirs:

The sight was dreadful but fascinating. The entire riverward hillside of Aninkainen and the quarter of Multavieru were wrapped in smoke and had turned into a sea of flames of divers colours which nobody could approach, and which was spreading further at an unrestrained speed ... I saw the flames coming closer and saw the roof of the cathedral catch fire. Soon fire was glowing through the top windows of the belfry, and flames reached the wood construction at the top. The tower of the cathedral stood high as a tall column of fire from the sea of flames raging around it, until the burning roof toppled down and, with the bells and the clockwork, fell stage by stage causing dreadful noise, throwing flames from the window-holes and driving them upwards.<sup>7</sup>

Moberg’s words reflect some kind of terrified fascination at the spectacle. The red glow of the sky was seen hundreds of kilometres away from Turku, as far as Ostrobothnia, to the north. Many people sensed that something dreadful had happened, but it took three days to get the message to the Ostrobothnians that Turku had burnt down.<sup>8</sup> Chaos overwhelmed the city. In the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, there had been stories about looting that started immediately when the controlling eye of the authorities was gone.<sup>9</sup> The same happened in Turku. There were people who used the occasion for their own advantage. One of the eyewitnesses, Immanuel Ilmoni, who was working as an assistant in the anatomy department of the Academy, writes in a letter to Adolf Ivar Arwidsson, a well-known scholar and journalist:

The sizzling of flames and the high wind mixed with savage shouts of robbers, both Russian and Finnish, who were scurrying around – and did not make a very pleasant impression. And never in my life will I forget the dreadful, heart-rending feeling I experienced when I walked past the burning academy and the cathedral as Wednesday night was falling.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Ilmoni comments also on the role of the Russian military that had been present in the city since Finland had been detached from Sweden and annexed to Russia in 1809. Ilmoni seems to insinuate that the Russian soldiers did not participate in helping the citizens but on the contrary took advantage of the catastrophe for their personal benefit. On the other hand, Ilmoni observes that the local people were no better either. After the fire, there were many stories of unselfishness and solidarity, but also stories about greed and egotism. Young men with their horses came from the neighbouring villages and demanded money, for example.<sup>11</sup> When the mapping of the losses were made after the disaster, the professor of the Academy, Johan Gadolin, reported that a robbing bunch had attacked his garden, broken his fence and stolen all the apples that were still left in the garden.<sup>12</sup>

A rich source material for the history of catastrophes is the broadsheet ballads. In the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, these ballads, often written to match a popular song, a melody already widely known, were produced in Finland in the thousands. Disasters, earthquakes and fires, but also famous murder cases and other crimes offered raw material for the songs. In Finland, around 1750 religious broadsheet ballads and around 4800 secular songs still exist. No wonder that the Fire of Turku also spread as a song. It seems that one particular piece became especially popular. It was written by Matias Jernvall, who had been educated at the Academy of Turku and was at the time of the fire a chaplain in the Finnish parish of the city. [There was both a Finnish and a Swedish parish in Turku.] In the song, he presents himself as a responsible father who struggled to rescue his family during the night when children cried and adults shouted in agony. The cathedral bells had tolled continuously, and still in 1829, at the time of his writing, the author writes that he feels pain and sorrow in his heart. The memory of the lost city was unbearable. The author had an especially bitter memory of the greed that surfaced during the dreadful night and the whole song culminates in this. In the second last, fifth stanza of the poem, Jernvall refers to the chaotic circumstances of the climax of the disastrous night, although he clearly indicates that this was something that he heard from others and did not personally witness:

It was so horrible to hear  
that theft so much ruled.  
It is so hard to speak this out  
how wrongdoing suppressed truth.  
Oh, merciless heart! Oh, damned desires!  
How dared you rob things of your fellow man,  
who'd relieved them from the fire.<sup>13</sup>

Jernvall himself died in 1831, but his song was reprinted in 1853, probably to honour the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fire. The popularity of the song becomes obvious from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society. When folklore collectors travelled around Southern and

Western Finland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this song had been written down in several places. There is even a draft of the lyrics and melody, written as late as 1954, almost 130 years after the catastrophe.<sup>14</sup>

After the fire had ceased, there was a sombre, gothic atmosphere in the ruined city. Adolf Moberg describes his feelings the next day:

The next day, when the smoke from the burning city had become less thick although fire was still smouldering beneath the ashes in many places, my comrades and I went to look at our familiar, now ruined streets. The visit was not long. Paving was, in many places, still hot; many chimneys and former hearths grim and dangerous-looking; many wells and outhouses filled with ash and earth, and treacherous to step on. We also encountered a number of dead, half-burned bodies yet to be removed – all in all, not inviting in the least.<sup>15</sup>

Jernvall, and other broadsheet poets, did not comment on how the fire started. Jernvall's song, in particular, is a depiction of the emotions of terror in the middle of the catastrophe. This reminds us of what Aristotle wrote on tragedy in his *Poetics*. Aristotle regarded the emotions of terror, fear and pity as essential ingredients of a tragedy. Fear, *deimos*, refers to the expectation of evil, while terror, *phobos* meant a sense of panic or loss of self in the middle of the tragic events. Pity, *eleos*, in turn was a feeling of pain one experiences when watching others suffer.<sup>16</sup> Broadsheets can be interpreted as tragedies in the Aristotelian sense, since they often portrayed moments of terror, the emotions of the victims in the middle of the catastrophe, but at the same time they aroused fear in the readers and listeners suggesting that, although fires, earthquakes and other disasters were sudden, unexpected breaks in the ordinary flow of life, they could reoccur when they were least expected. Often broadsheet ballads, and reporting of the catastrophe by the press as well, described the innocence of the victims, or their unawareness of the misfortunes that haunted nearer than anyone could expect. In this narration, the depiction of terror was bound together with the expectation of evil. Broadsheets were early platforms for mediated catastrophes and offered the possibility to feel pity for those who had suffered.

**Image 7.2: Gustaf Wilhelm Finnberg: *Ruins of Turku* (lithograph, 1827).**

## **Viral Nature of Catastrophes**

In the 1820s and 1830s, the huge expansion of the press in Europe gave a new platform for media tragedies. The advent of steamship services enabled new connections and more regular timetables, and the breakthrough of railroad traffic intensified the change. The first half of the nineteenth century was thus characterised by rapid flows of people, information and goods. At the time of the Fire of Turku, in addition to natural disasters, newspapers frequently reported industrial accidents, such as steamship wrecks and engine explosions, and thus created an ambiguous image of the emerging modern society for readers.

It is obvious that many nineteenth-century phenomena gained momentum from the increasing power of the press, especially from 1820s onwards, and there seems to have been a demand for disaster news in a quickly modernising world. In the early nineteenth century, the spread of newspaper publicity was not a coherent, linear process but merely a rhizomatic assemblage or a chain reaction that developed into unexpected directions. Thus, there was a particular viral character in the emerging global media space.<sup>17</sup>

It is obvious that the Great Fire of Turku became the first Finnish media catastrophe. Its qualities as a tragedy spread rapidly all around Europe and even further. Inspiring pity and fear, the fire was a tragedy in an Aristotelian sense. The news often depicted how, the previous evening, many of the citizens went to sleep, unaware of the catastrophe that would abruptly change their fortunes, fateful mistakes made by the poor maid of the house of Hellman, the irresistible blaze that nobody could stop, and of course the completeness of the destruction.

The news items were copied from paper to paper, as was the habit of the time. It is striking however how much the catastrophe got attention even in Britain where there were many other domestic issues to discuss. In London, *The Times* published a long story about the event on 30 October 1827 under the title ‘Conflagration at Abo’, which was openly taken from the *St. Petersburg Journal*:

It was on Tuesday, the 23d of August (4th of September), at nine o’clock in the evening, that the dreadful fire broke out at Abo, in the house of Mr Hellman, situated in Aningais street. It happened through the negligence of his servants, who, during his absence, were occupied in melting tallow, and the great quantity of inflammable matter with which the courtyard was filled, gave vigour to the devouring element, so that it quickly communicated to the neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup>

In Bavaria, too, the *Augsburger Ordinari Postzeitung* and *Tags-Blatt für München* referred to the melting of tallow as a starting point for the fire.<sup>19</sup> It seems that outside Nordic countries, especially English, Russian, German and Austrian newspapers discussed the sad chain of events, and the readers of, for example, *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, *Journal de St. Pétersbourg politique et littéraire*, *Pressburger Zeitung* and *Österreichischer Beobachter* came to learn about the destruction of the distant town of Turku, which was sometimes presented as a Russian university town, sometimes as ‘a century-old heart of Finland, the cradle of the muses’, as *Pressburger Zeitung* poetically described.<sup>20</sup> It took six months for the Fire of Turku as a media catastrophe to circumnavigate the globe, and the most remote news that can be located is from as far as Tasmania. When the readers of *The Hobart Town Courier* opened their paper on Sunday 15 March 1828, they could see these short lines: ‘A dreadful fire took place at Abo, in Russia, in September, occasioning a loss of thirteen millions of rix dollars.’<sup>21</sup> Here, the size of the disaster is expressed in rixdollars, which was the English term for silver coinage used in Europe at the time. The further away the news spread, the more scarce the information seems to have been.

It is arguable that, already by the 1820s, media catastrophes were global, and the readers of these tragedies became their victims, emotionally. It seems obvious too that the first letters sent from Turku to Helsinki, Stockholm and St. Petersburg transferred the rumours about the origins of the fire into the media sphere. Without knowing it themselves, the servants of the house of Hellman were presented as the guilty ones everywhere. On 26 September 1827, *The London Standard* stated that the servants had melted tallow and tried ‘to escape the penalty attached to carrying on such a business in the town, endeavoured to conceal the fire as long as they could; but in five minutes the whole was reduced to ashes. The fire spread in three directions, and was soon universal.’<sup>22</sup>

It is also evident that many of the news items emphasised the cultural loss, caused by the fire. *The London Standard* noticed that the cathedral was ‘totally destroyed, with everything it contains’. The text continued by stating that ‘of our celebrated university nothing remains but the observatory; all the buildings of the academy, with the valuable collections, the library of 40,000 volumes, the cabinet of medals, the collections of instruments, the custom-house, the court of justice, with the archives, the town-hall, and above all 900 houses are destroyed.’<sup>23</sup> The reference to ‘our celebrated university’ reveals that this news originated from a letter sent from the city itself, and these expressions spread in a viral manner. In Finnish poetry, the burning of the library of the Academy was paralleled with the destinies of the Library of Alexandria.<sup>24</sup> The flames had swallowed medieval manuscripts, valuable collections and rare books. There were also sad individual stories. Professor of Greek Johan Bonsdorff (1772–1840), for example, lost not only his entire personal library but also all the manuscripts he himself had authored. After the fire, he kept on repeating:

‘Now I will soon die – in knowledge of having lived my life in vain.’ Another distressed city dweller was obviously Fredrik Wilhelm Pipping (1783–1868), who was the amanuensis of the library of the Academy. The records reveal that he was unable to participate in the meetings of the consistory of the Academy for weeks. His contemporaries remembered later that Pipping lost his ability to work for several months. There had been iron shutters in the windows of the library, but that evening they had been left open. If the shutters had been closed, the flames would not have spread so rapidly inside the building.<sup>25</sup> The result was that, from the collection that included more than 40,000 items, only 830 books were preserved, most of them home loans that were outside the city at the time of the disaster. When the news of the catastrophe spread, book donations started to flow to Finland especially from Denmark, Britain, Germany and Russia.<sup>26</sup>

The image of the lost cultural heritage was particularly strong, and it was very already prominent in the press coverage that described the destruction of civilisation at length. This image had European-wide resonance through the press. If this public representation of the disaster is compared to the private correspondence of contemporaries, the image becomes more diverse. It is evident that the public image of the cultural loss originated from letters sent from Finland to foreign correspondents. But there were transnational flows of letters also in the private sphere. The Finnish pharmacist Johan Jacob Julin was married to the Scottish-born Emilia Lindsay. On 28 September 1827, Emilia wrote to his husband of having read the sad news from an English newspaper, which based its information on a letter from Stockholm.<sup>27</sup> Emilia wrote several letters to her husband, who was in Finland, and still in January 1828 she expressed her ‘uneasiness’ of the destinies of ‘that unfortunate Town Åbo’.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the letters reveal that Emilia felt that she did not obtain as much information on the circumstances in Turku as she would have liked to have had. English, and also German, newspapers were her major source of information. Emilia stresses repeatedly her concern for the coming winter, on the sufficiency of warm clothing and points out the economic support that had been organised in England to help the victims.<sup>29</sup> Emilia is of course troubled by the destruction of the cathedral and the library too, but her letters show more profound interest in the human suffering. Emilia Julin’s letters are only one example of how the catastrophe was perceived on an individual level, but they refer to a more general aspect, suggesting that there was a gendered perception of the fire. It is obvious that the image of cultural loss was particularly maintained by the academia: professors of the university were depicted as safeguards of civilisation that now were absorbed into melancholia. It is also evident that this image became juxtaposed with the ideas about the origin of the fire. Who was responsible of this incredible disaster that had forced so many lives into misery? The sloppiness of the servant was set into a strong contrast with the sublime image of the destruction of civilisation.



## Servants on Trial

The courthouse of Turku had been burned down, but very quickly law and order were re-established. The court assembled at the Society House, the local hotel and restaurant of the *société*, which had luckily been preserved and could now serve as the gathering place of the court. On 13 September all the people of the Hellman household were invited to a hearing. The actual trial started on 25 September and continued until 6 October. In sum, sixty-eight witnesses were called to testify, but it is clear that the maidservants were the first to be suspected. They were the usual suspects, in the case of town fires simply because it was their duty to light the fire. The main witnesses were the merchant Hellman and his wife Christina Elisabeth, the maidservants Helena Ginman, Maria Vass and Katarina Wikström, the hired man Johan Hallin, the carpenter Johan Lydman and his apprentice Jonas Sundholm and some other residents of the household. The merchant Hellman had come back from Stockholm but he fell sick and could not participate in the trial.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Hellman died the next spring 1828 at the age of 42. It remains a mystery how he reacted to the disastrous events that had happened in his absence, what kind of a shock it was for him and how this influenced his untimely death. No letters or other personal documents have been preserved from the Hellman family, neither from the servants who lived under the same roof. As has been shown by the historian Svante Dahlström, in the household of Hellman there lived 33 people, which was a particularly high number at the time.<sup>31</sup>

**Image 7.3: The name of Maria Vass in the court records of the Turku City Archives. As the image shows, Maria was the daughter of Isaac (*Maria Isaacsdr.*).**

The town prosecutor Fredrik Möller was eager to put pressure on the womenfolk of the house. He insisted that there had been a lot of hearsay about the amount of inflammable materials like tallow and tar in the house. Christina Hellman denied this strongly and responded that Hellman had tar but not in this building. She also defended her maidservants, especially Maria Vass who was one of the first to be interviewed. Finally, it looked probable that the spark had simply flown from the chimney of the neighbouring house to the attic of Hellman's house, which was filled with hay. There was no evidence of the fire having started in the room where the maidservant Maria Vass had been. The trial ended with a conclusion that it was impossible to determine whose fault the fire had been. Or, more precisely, the court concluded that it was not possible to create a clear picture of how everything had developed. Thus, it did not confirm the innocence of the maidservant either.<sup>32</sup> It is probable that the discussions of the court proceedings were echoed in the streets of Turku, but it is clear that no official statement was given outside the courthouse and nothing was written in the newspapers. This paved the way for ever-flourishing rumours.

As already stated, all public accounts of the fire put the blame on the servants. This was the case both in Finnish and foreign newspapers. The maidservant was never named, or identified, in print during the nineteenth century. Adolf Moberg wrote in his unpublished memoirs at the end of the century:

The fire was said to have started from a considerable amount of tallow that had caught flame during melting. The yard where the melting was taking place was enclosed on all sides; only a narrow, roofed gateway led out. The master of the house was in Stockholm, and the people of the house first tried to conceal the accident by closing the gate and putting out the fire unaided, but the flames could not be contained; before any fire-fighting articles arrived, many of the surrounding houses were ablaze.<sup>33</sup>

In the trial, there was no reference to any attempt to close the gate and hide the fire. It looks almost like there had been a desperate need to limit the question of guilt to the house of Hellman, while at the same time the real problems of the fire alarm system, fire safety, town structure and so on, were too complex to be addressed in the first instance. In the broadsheet ballads, there are a few religious songs that tried to point their finger to the sinful life of the people of Turku in general and to insinuate that everybody was responsible.<sup>34</sup> This idea was soon forgotten and removed from the collective memory. The temptation to remember only the maidservant of the Hellman house was too strong. In popular anecdotes the story of tallow as the start for the fire persisted for over a century. In the folklore archive, there is an anecdote written down in 1948 in Tottijärvi, 140 kilometres from Turku. The story narrates that there once was a giant bull in Suoniemi. This bull was sent to Turku to be slaughtered, and it was the tallow of this very bull that started the Great Fire of Turku.<sup>35</sup> As has already been shown, the idea of tallow melting had spread rapidly in the contemporary press. This view appears also in private letters. Emilia Julin wrote to his husband on 19 October 1827 and reported what the English newspapers had written about the fire. Emilia states that everything had started from the house of Hellman ‘who contrary to law was melting tallows and to conceal it closed his gate’.<sup>36</sup> It seems that this view diffused horizontally, over the geographical borders, but it also travelled in time, as a memory that lasted until the post-Second World War era.

Emilia Julin seems to have construed that Hellman himself was responsible (‘Hellman ... closed his gate’), but the press underlined ‘the negligence of his servants’.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the merchant Hellman was transformed into a butcher in the memory of the fire, which furthermore strengthened the theme of tallow melting. It seems that the memory was supported by historiography, especially by Zacharias Topelius (1818–1898) who was one of the most influential figures of Finnish nineteenth-century

culture, a journalist, an author who was fluent in prose and verse, and later professor of history. He was nine years old at the time of the fire, and published later a reminiscence from his childhood memories of how the news on the Fire of Turku had reached Ostrobothnia. He became the eminent transformer of Finnish understanding of the national past. His books *Finland framstäldt i teckningar* (Finnish Scenery in Drawings, 1845) and especially the two-part *Läsebok för de lägsta läroverken i Finland* (Reading Book for Elementary Schools in Finland, 1856–75), the last volume of which was *Boken om Vårt Land* (Book of Our Land, 1875) were standard reading for school classes in Finland up to the Second World War. As early as 1845, in his *Finland framstäldt i teckningar* Topelius not only insinuated but openly argued that it was the maidservant of the butcher Hellman who was careless in melting tallow. In his interpretation, it was not the servants in general but one particular maid who was responsible.<sup>38</sup> First of all, Topelius identifies Hellman as a butcher, in Swedish *slaktare*. This is written in 1845, eighteen years after the fire. In Finland, all newspapers from the nineteenth century have been digitised and are searchable online. It seems clear that there are no mentions of Hellman as a butcher after the catastrophe. The first instance in the press, where Hellman is presented as a butcher, is from 1852, seven years after the book by Topelius. This piece of news was published in the paper *Sanomia Turusta* on 20 January 1852, arguing that ‘the fire broke out in the house of the butcher Hellman’. The text is written in Finnish, and the word for a butcher is *lahtari*, which is a direct translation of the Swedish *slaktare*.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, Topelius was, of course, skilful in dramatising his stories, and he often wanted to address children by giving cautionary examples. It is probable that Topelius combined elements from the popular memory of the catastrophe to the description of the events in the press. He also emotionalised the story by focussing on an individual. While the newspapers portrayed the sad events by referring to ‘the negligence of his servants’, thus using plural form, Topelius mentioned only one servant. When the historian Svante Dahlström published his book on the Fire of Turku in 1927, the centenary year of the disaster, he also noticed one servant, who was one of the maids on trial: Maria Vass had come from the fields of Ruohonpää to the main house at the Aninkainen hill around eight o’clock in the evening, one hour before the fire broke out. In a footnote, Dahlström remarks that it was evidently Maria Vass who was suspected of being responsible for the fire.<sup>40</sup>

The maidservant was not named in Topelius’ account, but the myth of Hellman’s maid became embedded from the 1840s onwards because of the popularity of *Finland framstäldt i teckningar*. It has to be stressed that exactly the same lines were reprinted in the *Boken om Vårt Land* and its numerous editions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The image of the maidservant became deeply rooted in Finnish historical memory. It is illuminating that when the newspapers wanted to remember the Fire of Turku during the 50th anniversary in 1877 or 75th

anniversary in 1902, Topelius' words were quoted.<sup>41</sup> The word *tjensteflickan*, the maidservant, is repeated in such a striking manner that it recalls the way Judith Butler has emphasised gender as something that is produced through repetition, through repetitive performance.<sup>42</sup> In the case of the Fire of Turku, it is not the question of one's own performativity, but there seems to be a persistent circulation of the same cultural image through the decades. In this case, the gendered remembrance is based on performativity in the form of constraining representation, actively produced through repetition. In her 1999 preface to her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler points out that she got inspiration for the idea of performativity from Jacques Derrida's reading of Franz Kafka's story *Before the Law*: 'There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object.'<sup>43</sup> Drawing on this train of thoughts, it may be argued that also the guilt of the maidservant was based on an anticipation of a gendered essence, which produced its outside, the inevitable guilt of a woman, whose responsibility the guarding of fire was. This process was historically not straightforward but a chain of metalepses, gradually changing figures of speech, in which the role of the narrator, Topelius, became particularly prominent. First, the role of the servants was repeated again and again in the press and, after 1840s, it became a naturalised state of affairs with an important disclosure of meaning: one singular maid was responsible.

As argued above, maidservants were the usual suspects. The Great Fire of London in 1666 had started in Pudding Lane, at the bakery of Thomas Farriner. It is sometimes argued that Farriner's maid 'failed to put out the ovens at the end of the night' and thus the catastrophe started.<sup>44</sup> The maid was the first victim of the fire too: she never got out of the building, in contrast to Farriner and his daughter Hanna. It seems however that the blame was not put on the maidservant as exclusively as in Turku. In London there was a phase of paranoia after the fire, and both foreigners and Catholics, were accused. In Turku, there were also various kinds of rumours including stories about alchemist experiments with inextinguishable matter, but finally the melting of tallow proved to be the most popular interpretation.<sup>45</sup> These different views on the origins of fire also appeared in the trial records.

It is noteworthy that in the case of Turku, the name of the maid was, as far as I have been able to find out, never published in the newspapers or in history books during the nineteenth century. It is probable however that her name became known among the city dwellers: Maria Vass was among the first to be heard as a witness.<sup>46</sup> During that fateful evening, she had come from the nearby fields to the house of Hellman around 8 pm, to knead the dough in the baking room. But, how did the real

Maria Vass feel after the catastrophe, what were her emotions? The court did not find her guilty, but the popular imagination never forgot her. Throughout the nineteenth century, Finnish school children were taught that the maidservant was responsible for the sad events. The church records show that the real Maria Vass, Maria Isaacs' daughter Vass, was not actually a young maiden. She was born on 26 February 1798 in Mouhijärvi, 140 kilometres north from Turku, as a daughter of the soldier Isaac Vass and his wife Valborg.<sup>47</sup> She was already 29 years old at the time of the fire. For this chapter, it has been possible to trace her life until 1841. After the destruction, it seems clear that she remained the maidservant of Hellman, since her name is still mentioned in the record of the Finnish parish of Turku. The merchant himself, Carl Gustaf Hellman, had died in spring 1828, but Maria kept on serving the widow Christina. The records reveal that in 1841 she still lived in the same quarter where the fire had started in a rebuilt house. The streets were drawn on the basis of the new city plan by Carl Ludvig Engel, but the house was approximately in the same place as it had been. Maria remained a faithful servant of the family. In 1841, she was still unmarried, 43 years of age. The priest of the Finnish parish of Turku had given her absolution, as we can see from the records. The next parish record is from the year 1845, and then she has suddenly disappeared.<sup>48</sup> It is still unknown where she went, or if she lived to see the 25th anniversary of the fire to notice that *tjensteflickan*, the maidservant, was still remembered if not as the guilty one at least as someone who had been at the heart of events. It is probably a coincidence that, in 1845, Maria Vass did not live in the house of Hellman's widow anymore, and in that very year Zacharias Topelius published his *Finland framställt i teckningar*, pointing his finger to the maid, 'through whose carelessness this took place' and who 'could never have imagined, which kind of a tool she would become in the hands of Providence'.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

The image of the poor maid, and the representation of the Great Fire of Turku through it, can be interpreted, as has been shown in this chapter, from the point of view of gender and class difference. Topelius described his *tjensteflicka* in a patronising way by stressing on the other hand her sloppiness but at the same time by elevating her into an instrument in the hand of Providence.

It seems however that, in popular memory, the image of the maid has not only been described in a stigmatising way. The maidservant's perspective must have been understandable and accessible for many in a country that was mostly rural until the late 1960s. Her experience was much nearer to the Finnish majority than the melancholia of the academics who had lost their symbols of civilisation.

Knowing that Topelius became famous of his fairy tales and educational stories for children, it seems clear that he understood the power of the image a poor girl and that this image was a reminder of the importance of diligence and carefulness.

If we interpret catastrophes as mediated tragedies, the maid also aroused feelings of pity and sympathy. The image of the maid was important in describing the unawareness of the nightmare that was lurking ahead. In Turku, an urban story, an urban legend, has been told, arguing that Maria was a red-haired girl who went mad after the fire and was seen for years in the streets of Turku shouting: 'The church is on fire, the church is on fire!'<sup>50</sup> This story is not condemnatory but can be interpreted as an expression of pity. On the other hand, it refers to the profoundness of the emotional impact of the catastrophe. After many years, she was still possessed by the disaster. Maria became the embodiment of the memory of the Great Fire, and therefore her hair too was remembered to be as red as the flames that swallowed most of the city. Furthermore, she was, and has been reminisced, as a young girl. In fact, this chapter is the first study on the Fire of Turku to trace the background of Maria Vass, noticing that she was born already in 1798 and, considering the early nineteenth-century social context, she can by no means be regarded as a *young* maid. In 1827, she was almost 30 years of age, a single woman working for Hellman.

After almost 200 years, Maria Vass is still here, not really as a historical but merely as a mythical character. When Turku became the European Capital of Culture 2011, she was remembered in several ways. The red-haired maiden was seen on stage, in the dance work *Turun palo* (Fire of Turku) and especially in the heavy metal musical *1827 – Infernal Musical*, which was written by Mike Pohjola and directed by Juha-Pekka Mikkola. The soundtrack of *1827 – Infernal Musical* based on famous heavy songs from the production of, for example, Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden, Kiss, Rammstein and Slayer. In the story of the musical, Hellman has a son Elias who is a sensitive young poet, inspired by old folk tales. Maria Vass is a modern, independent woman. She has red hair, but she has nothing to do with the fire. Merely, she is a manipulator of events. This time Maria is relieved from the burden of history: the Great Fire was not the fault of the little maid but there were much deeper, infernal forces behind, especially because of the archbishop Tengström's flirting with the devil.

To conclude, in the popular culture of the early 2000s, Maria Vass has turned into a floating signifier that does not point to any specific historical referent. In Mike Pohjola's *1827 – Infernal Musical* Maria is more a phantasy figure than a character from the past. At the same time, she is a reflection surface for modern concerns. On the other hand, it may be argued that already the maidservant of Topelius was a kind of floating signifier that was filled with different meanings in

different contexts. She was an embodiment of carelessness for Topelius himself, and in the service of the need to highlight the opposite, the obedient maid. For the readers of Topelius, she might have looked like a tragic heroine, who was completely unaware of what was ahead, and in that sense she also had innocence. For those who experienced the catastrophe and who lived in Turku before and after the fire, she was the most concrete figure. They could associate the maidservant of *Finland framstäldt i teckningar* with the particular woman who had been on trial right after the disaster with all other people from the household of Hellman, who was known of having been the one that come back from the fields in the evening and was the first one to make the fire – and who was known in the city as Maria. It is impossible to know how Maria Vass herself experienced all this, since she left no personal letters, diaries or memoirs to posterity. Still, her memory lives, as the recent heavy musical shows, although in a very different way if compared to the larger picture of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history.

<sup>1</sup> Svante Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827: tutkimuksia Turun kaupungin rakennushistoriasta vuoteen 1843. I*, trans. E. Jalava and A. Penttilä (Turku: The City of Turku, 1930), 320–23.

<sup>2</sup> Marjatta Hietala, 'Fear of Fires: Impact of Fires on Towns in Finland at the Beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century', in *Cities and Catastrophes: Coping with Emergency in European History. Villes et catastrophes: Réactions face à l'urgence dans l'histoire européenne*, eds. Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, Harold L. Platt and Dieter Schott (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), 153–54.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Hanson, *The Great Fire of London: In That Apocalyptic Year, 1666* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 169. See also Hietala, 'Fear of Fires: Impact of Fires on Towns in Finland at the Beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century', 153.

<sup>4</sup> For further details on servants in Turku, see Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen, 'Everyday Politics: Power Relations of Urban Female Servants in the Finnish City of Turku in the 1780s', in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy Gender in European Towns, 1640–1830*, eds. Deborah Simonton and Anne Montenach (New York: Routledge, 2013), 189–205.

<sup>5</sup> Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 323–27.

<sup>6</sup> On Argelander, see Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 334.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf Moberg, 'Autobiografi', in *Historiska och litteraturhistoriska studier 3*, eds. Gunnar Castrén, Carl von Bonsdorff and C. A. Nordman (Helsinki: Society of Swedish Literature in Finland, 1927), 148–49.

<sup>8</sup> Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 348.

<sup>9</sup> On the turmoil after the Lisbon earthquake, see Nicholas Schrady, *The Last Day: Wrath, Ruin, and Reason in the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755* (London: Penguin, 2008), 35.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Ilmoni's letter to A. I. Arwidsson 10 September 1827, in A. R. Saareseppä, 'Turun palo v. 1827. Kaksi Imm. Ilmonin kirjetä A. I. Arwidssonille', in *Historiallinen Arkisto* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1911), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 335.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>13</sup> Matias Jernvall, *Wärsyt, joita yksi turkulainen M. J. ittekseen hyräili muistaissansa sitä kowaa ja haikiaa yötä 4:n ja 5:n päivän välillä syyskuussa w. 1827, jona hän Turun kaupungin palon tähden, ynnä tuhanten ystäväinsä kanssa, täytyi lapsinensa paeta ja jättää majansa ja tavaransa tulen saalihiksi*, second edition (Turku: J. C. Frenckell, 1853).

<sup>14</sup> The manual reference cards of the Folklore Archives, Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki, Finland.

<sup>15</sup> Moberg, 'Autobiografi', 150–51.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1, VI. Ekkehard Eggs, Dermot McElholm, 'Doxa in Poetry: A Study of Aristotle's Poetics', *Poetics Today* 23, 3 (2002): 395–426.

<sup>17</sup> More on the viral nature of press publicity in the early nineteenth century, see Hannu Salmi, 'Viral Virtuosity and the Itineraries of Celebrity Culture', in *Travelling Notions of Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Europe*, eds. A. Nivala, H. Salmi & J. Sarjala (New York: Routledge, 2016), 135–53.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times* (30 October 1827).

<sup>19</sup> *Augsburger Ordinari Postzeitung* (3 October 1827), *Tags-Blatt für München* (29 September 1827).

<sup>20</sup> *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal* (1 October 1827), *Journal de St. Pétersbourg politique et littéraire* (20 September/2 October 1827), *Österreichischer Beobachter* (12 July 1828), *Pressburger Zeitung* (5 October 1827).

<sup>21</sup> *The Hobart Town Courier* (15 March 1828).

<sup>22</sup> *The London Standard* (26 September 1827).

<sup>23</sup> *The London Standard* (26 September 1827).

- <sup>24</sup> This refers to the poem by Frans Mikael Franzén (1772–1847). See Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 329. Another poet Carl Johan Luthström referred to the destruction of Troy in his *Minnen af Åbo brand* (1828). See Carl Johan Luthström, *Minnen af Åbo brand* (Turku: J. C. Frenckell, 1828), 17.
- <sup>25</sup> Wilhelm Lagus, *Minnestal öfver Fredrik Wilhelm Pipping* (Helsinki: The Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, 1871). See also Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 341.
- <sup>26</sup> Tuija Laine, ‘Pipping, Fredrik Wilhelm (1783–1868)’, *The National Biography of Finland*, <http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/kb/artikkeli/7972/>, accessed 1 October 2015.
- <sup>27</sup> Emilia Julin’s letter to Jacob Johan Julin 28 September 1827, The Manuscript Collection of the Library of the Åbo Akademi University, Turku.
- <sup>28</sup> Emilia Julin’s letter to Jacob Johan Julin 11 January 1828, The Manuscript Collection of the Library of the Åbo Akademi University, Turku.
- <sup>29</sup> Emilia Julin’s letters to Jacob Johan Julin 28 September, 5 October, 19 October, 29 October, 9 November, 16 November, 22 November, 7 December and 16 December 1827, 11 January 1828, The Manuscript Collection of the Library of the Åbo Akademi University, Turku.
- <sup>30</sup> The court records 25 September – 6 October 1827 at the Turku City Archives (Kämnerrättens memorial protokoll för 1827, Åbo kämnerrätts concept dom bok för 1827). See also Svante Dahlström, *Huru uppstod Åbo brand?* (Turku: Hembugdsföreningen i Åbo, 1912), 1–9.
- <sup>31</sup> Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 321.
- <sup>32</sup> Dahlström, *Huru uppstod Åbo brand?*, 1–11.
- <sup>33</sup> Moberg, ‘Autobiografi’, 148.
- <sup>34</sup> See, for example, Daniel Ekwall, *Walitus Wirsi: Sen surkian tuli-palon ylitse, joka Turun Kaupungin hävitti sinä 4 ja 5 päivänä Syyskuuta 1827* (Turku: J. C. Frenckell, 1828) and Carl Helenius, *Lohduttava laulu jona onnettomille tutuillensa Turussa tuli palon jälkeen vuonna 1827* (Turku: J. C. Frenckell, 1828).
- <sup>35</sup> Story told by 76-year-old Iivari Sireen in 1948, collected by Frans Kärki in Tottijärvi. Folklore Archives, Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki.
- <sup>36</sup> Emilia Julin’s letter to Jacob Johan Julin 19 October 1827, The Manuscript Collection of the Library of the Åbo Akademi University, Turku.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Times* (30 October 1827).
- <sup>38</sup> Zacharias Topelius, *Finland framställt i teckningar* (Helsinki: A. W. Gröndahl & A. C. Öhman, 1845), 69.
- <sup>39</sup> *Sanomia Turusta* (20 January 1852).
- <sup>40</sup> Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 322.
- <sup>41</sup> See, for example, *Morgonbladet* (4 September 1877), *Helsingfors Dagblad* (4 September 1877), *Tammerfors Nyheter* (6 September 1902) and *Västra Finland* (6 September 1902).
- <sup>42</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xv–xvi, xxiii–xxv, 185–93. Butler’s book was originally published in 1990, the pagination with Roman numbers refer to the introduction, written by Butler in 1999, where she comments especially on the idea of performativity.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.
- <sup>44</sup> These exact words are used in several sources and popular accounts, see for example G. Byrne Bracken, *Walking Tour London: Sketches of the City’s Architectural Treasures... Journey through London’s Urban Landscape* (London: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2011), 48; James P. Stobaugh, *British History: Observations & Assessments from Early Cultures to Today* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2012), 97.
- <sup>45</sup> Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 348.
- <sup>46</sup> Also Svante Dahlström confirmed that it the name of the maid was still remembered in 1927, hundred years after the catastrophe. Cf. Dahlström, *Turun palo 1827*, 322.
- <sup>47</sup> The lists of births in Mouhijärvi at the HisKi database, Genealogical Society of Finland.
- <sup>48</sup> The records of the Finnish parish of Turku 1827–1845, The Finnish National Archives, Helsinki.
- <sup>49</sup> Topelius, *Finland framställt i teckningar*, 69.
- <sup>50</sup> See, for example, *Piika Turun palon ytimessä*, [http://www.turku2011.fi/blogit/219/piika-turun-palon-ytimessa\\_fi](http://www.turku2011.fi/blogit/219/piika-turun-palon-ytimessa_fi), accessed 1 October 2015.