

REVIEWS

VALBORG LINDGÄRDE, ARNE JÖNSSON, ELISABET GÖRANSSON (eds.):

Wår lärda skalde-fru. Sophia Elisabet Brenner och hennes tid.

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Which Swedish poet wrote in five languages, was regarded as in the same league as Georg Stiernhielm and Lasse Lucidor, and gained an international reputation in her lifetime? The answer is Sophia Elisabet Brenner, née Weber (1659-1730), arguably also the first writer in Sweden to express explicitly feminist ideas. Married to Elias Brenner, an expert on antiquities and especially coins, Sophia Elisabet Brenner gave birth to fifteen children.

As Valborg Lindgärde shows in one of her four contributions to this volume, changes in the discourses on gender were affecting Brenner's reputation as early as the 1790s, when she was criticised for neglecting her household duties for the sake of her writing. Two centuries of decline were to follow: as Carina Burman points out, her decision, taken in 1994, to make Brenner the focal point of a novel was partly inspired by the fact that Brenner was still comparatively unknown. The reasons for the relative lack of scholarly interest in Brenner's work were often blatantly sexist.

The rehabilitation of Brenner had in fact been initiated by Karin Westman Berg in 1977, and she also wrote, with Valborg Lindgärde and Marianne Alenius, the substantial chapter on Brenner in *Nordisk kvindelitteraturhistorie* (1993). With the publication of the current volume there can be no mistaking – or denying – Brenner's importance in Swedish literature and culture. Originating in a symposium on Brenner at the University of Lund in 2009, this ground-breaking volume not only investigates Brenner's work from a range of different angles but also relates it to a wide variety of contexts, thus effectively

presenting the outline of a cultural history of a period which, in more traditional history-writing, often seems overshadowed by Karl XII's wars. The contributors to this volume, then, are not just specialists on literature: they also include experts on art history, classics, philology, book history, the history of ideas, music, numismatics, and so on. The value of the book is enhanced by a wealth of illustrations, most of them in colour.

Brenner wrote poetry in Swedish, German, Latin, French and Italian, usually for special occasions such as weddings and funerals. While her Swedish is scrutinised from a range of perspectives in this volume, there are also chapters on her poetry in German and in Latin which highlight her skill in combining linguistic ability (she was bilingual, having grown up speaking German) with erudition and extensive reading. The fact that she wrote mostly for special occasions permitted her, as Lindgärde points out, to move relatively freely in a society that was strictly hierarchical, and her social network consisted not just of family and friends but also of members of the nobility and the royal family as well as learned men, both in Sweden and abroad.

Infant and childhood mortality was extremely high in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and Brenner's children almost all predeceased her. Kristiina Savin highlights two maternal elegies by Brenner, sonnets written on the deaths of Mårten, aged six months, in 1688, and Isak, aged two years and ten months, in 1689. Drawing on these and other related poems, Savin demonstrates the extent to which Brenner's treatment of grief has been read through the discourses of later periods; and she concludes that Brenner's command of what was traditionally a male sub-genre was such that she was able to renew it, and often for purposes favourable to her own gender. The equivalent radicalism is foregrounded in Stina Hansson's chapter on the poems written for weddings which, in addition to celebrating the couple, treat issues to do with contemporary gender politics. Yet Brenner, as Mats Malm shows, had to relate to the notions of gender morality embedded in the understanding of language and poetry current at the time. While Swedish was regarded as pure and manly and languages such as French and Italian were associated with immorality, the sheer pleasure of poetry invariably created a sense

of moral ambivalence. According to Malm the word *dygd*, virtue, is more frequent and prominent in the tributes to Brenner than would have been required in tributes to contemporary male poets – evidence, he argues, of the need to emphasise that she, a female poet writing mainly in Swedish, still remained in control of sensuality and pleasure.

Brenner quickly achieved international fame, and some of the many fascinating chapters in this volume explore the paths of communication that made this possible, including the role of the international distribution of her husband's major work on numismatics, published in 1691 and used also as a vehicle for spreading the word about her poetry.

At once well-researched and beautiful, this volume is not just welcome: it will be essential to research into Brenner's work for years to come.

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