

Arne Jönsson, Valborg Lindgårde, Elisabet Göransson (eds.), *Vår Lärda Skaldefru Sophia Elisabeth Brenner och hennes tid* (Ångelholm: Skåneförlaget, 2011)

The present volume, which stems from a Symposium held in Lund in August 2009 and entirely dedicated to “the first poetess” in Swedish literature, brings together some twenty scholars and experts in various fields of knowledge ranging from linguistics to numismatics. The common scope of their efforts is to shed light on the manifold aspects of Brenner’s literary work, life and times. Lovers of Burman, as well as readers who missed out on her acclaimed second novel, may thus turn to this monumental work to discover (or rediscover) Brenner, whose work (*Poetiske Dikter*, 1713) was published, widely read and appreciated during her lifetime both in Sweden and abroad, but neglected or scorned by the generations that followed the Baroque.

Brenner’s biography is thus not at the heart of any of the 24 essays composing the volume. Rather, the general reader is informed about the art of a poetess well versed in religious poetry and in the popular genre of *tillfällespoesi*, written for family, relatives and close friends, members of the nobility and monarchy, academics and politicians, often on occasions such as weddings, child births and funerals. Brenner’s habit of commenting on women’s rights and values in her poetry led her to become known as “the first Swedish feminist”. Because of her language skills (Brenner was bilingual in German and Swedish in addition to mastering Latin, French, Italian and Dutch), her name appeared in several 17<sup>th</sup>-century European catalogues listing *doctissime*.

Through the division of the material and the shifting scholarly approaches, the average reader is led step by step into the vast, yet little known, world of Brenner. Apart from several interesting investigations that contextualize and relate the various poetic genres mastered by the poetess to the literary canon, Jon Helgason’s discussion of Brenner as a Swedish Sappho is worth highlighting. His essay seemingly enlightens the discussion of the varying uses of the mythic character of Sappho as an attempt to legitimate women writers. In the age of Brenner, Sappho had come to represent female authorship through the role model of the learned woman. In order to find an official place as a woman of letters, Brenner was therefore expected to adhere to a cultural construction that Helgason calls the 18<sup>th</sup>-century’s “short-lived negation of the witch”. Similarly, Brenner had to come to terms with a female ideal in which learning, sense and virtue had taken the place of vision, irrationality

Arne Jönsson, Valborg Lindgärde, Elisabet Göransson (eds.), *Vår Lärda Skalde-Fru Sophia Elisabeth Brenner och hennes tid* (Ångelholm: Skåneförlaget, 2011)

and instinct — a short digression before the sensibility of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century's literary heroines would come to pull the rug from under her feet.

Paratextual aspects in the broader sense are the focus of Anna Perälä's and Valborg Lindgärde's essays. Indeed, Perälä writes a chapter on the history of the book as she sets out to discuss the relationship between word and image in the printed editions of Brenner's work and the poetess's own taste for graphical embroidery accompanying the poems. Lindgärde instead tackles Urban Hiärne's promotional campaign for *Poetiske Dikter*. Several contributions are made regarding Brenner's ability to write in numerous European languages. Verner Egeland, for example, comments on her few Petrarchan, though perfectly contemporary, compositions in Italian inspired by Marini and Tasso. As a conclusion, interart parallels are established between Brenner's work and the visual arts, as well as with music.

-

The trilingual volume (Swedish, Danish, English) is wonderfully produced with a rich apparatus of illustrations accompanying the essays. Its organizing principle, which puts the poetess and the woman in the shadow of her work, her time, the cultural history and the literary tradition, offers a fresh approach to the writing from an earlier age. This treatment caters to both the difficulty and the reward involved in reading the book. The task of piecing together an all-round portrait of Sophia Elisabeth Brenner from the numerous and autonomous contributions is entirely left up to the reader.

## Share this:

- [Share](#)