

## Abstract

Åsa Arping, *Pretentious Modesty: Authority and Gender in the Swedish Debate on the Novel in the 1830s*. ISBN 91-7139-582-2. Dissertation in Swedish with an English summary, 304 p. Department of Literature, Göteborg University, Sweden, 2002

When novels took the Swedish reading public by storm in the 1830s, it was women who were penning them — in spite of the dubious reputation of the genre, and in spite of the fact that the public sphere and the marketplace were considered male domains. This thesis examines how this was possible and finds one important answer in the gendered climate that marks the decade's literary debate. While many women started to write novels at this time, all of the literary critics were still male. This contributed to making the novel a particularly significant forum for gender politics, being the only legitimate means by which women could enter the literary field.

The main battle concerned the justification of the genre, which status was in great doubt, morally as well as artistically. Another area of dispute was lines of demarcation. About what could one write fiction, and how? The answers given by the arbiters of taste were closely coupled to issues of morals and of gender. The focus was on what was known as "the good novel". If it was to be aesthetically justified, it had to be edifying, from the points of view of both morality and decency. It was written by an anonymous author, aiming to provide what the new bourgeoisie wanted to read.

The present thesis focuses on the problem of authority in relation to the genre of the novel, closely interrelated to the ambitions of the authors to approach "reality". Examining these issues leads naturally to the question of the specific prerequisites for women's authorship. The main point of departure for this discussion is the launch and reception of three important first novels of the 1830s: Fredrika Bremer's *Familjen H\*\*\** ("The H\*\*\* Family", 1830–31), Sophie von Knorring's *Cousinerna* ("Cousins", 1834) and Emilie Flygare's *Waldemar Klein* ("Waldemar Klein", 1838). Feminist narratology is used to reveal the narrative and authority-creating techniques used by these authors to comply with the demands of the critics and the prevailing system of norms. It becomes apparent that their tactics were primarily aimed at bridging the gap between private and public that had often stigmatized commercially-motivated fiction by women writers.

These novelists made their work acceptable by taking up a stance on the defensive which was, in itself, quite ambitious: the pretentious modesty referred to in the title of this thesis. The demands regarding authority were thus not only restrictive. They resulted in an interplay with and against the conventions, which also paved the way for new types of expression.

*Keywords:* Swedish literary history, 1830s, domestic novels, women writers, literary criticism, gender studies, feminist narratology, Fredrika Bremer, Sophie von Knorring, Emilie Flygare-Carlén

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