

An Intellectual Lady? Hedvig Ulrica de Geer and her Library

Carina Burman

Hedvig Ulrica de Geer (1752–1813) was the fourth of Charles de Geer's and Catharina Charlotta Ribbing's eight children. (Fig. 1) Like her father, she was a bibliophile, and part of her book collection is kept at Leufsta. No research has hitherto been done about her books or about her. When she is mentioned it is often in connection with the Swedish poet Carl Michael Bellman and their mutual friend Anna Charlotta von Stapelmohr, who belonged to the same intellectual circle. Here, my aim is to paint a picture of baroness De Geer through her books.



Figure 1. Gustaf Lundberg, Hedvig Ulrica de Geer (married Dohna). Sörmlands museum, SLM 5795.

Hedvig Ulrica de Geer was probably educated by a governess. The family seems to have kept high standards and had intellectual expectations on the daughters. In March 1763, Hedvig Ulrica's father gave her an *album amicorum* (now kept at Uppsala University Library). Students often brought their *alba amicorum* on journeys and let friends and famous persons make their contribution. This young baroness was no student, and at eleven she was also quite young to have her own album. However, the concept of gender was often modified by rank. Royal women were supposed to possess "masculine" qualities, and perhaps Charles de Geer had the same ideas about his daughter. On the first page of the *album*, he wrote a poem on the importance of being content with oneself. Further into the book her mother echoed the motto of Delphi (γνῶθι σεαυτόν) when giving the advice to reach "la Science supreme" through the knowledge of herself. Two older sisters also added adages. The album was used between 1763 and 1772.

With the exception of the family, everyone who wrote in Hedvig Ulrica's *album amicorum* were intellectual men. The languages used are mostly French or Latin. French would later be Hedvig Ulrica's preferred intellectual language, but there is no evidence that she understood Latin. Swedish is not used in the album, and there are no greetings from girls of her own age. This was an official album meant for wisdom and good advice.

In 1774, Hedvig Ulrica married count Fredrik Carl Dohna, thirty years her senior. He had two daughters from a previous marriage, at the time twenty-eight and twenty-one years old. Hedvig Ulrica had no children of her own, and her husband died in 1784, when she was thirty-two.

The Gustavian era is remarkable for the sudden blossoming of the arts. King Gustav III had a keen interest in literature, music, art and above all drama, and he became a great patron to Swedish artists. The literary system depended on patrons, where the king of course was the most important. One of the poets who viewed the De Geers as possible patrons was Carl Michael Bellman, probably the most

well-known writer of his time. He was also the great singer-song-writer of his age, and performed his poetry to an entranced audience.

In 1770, Bellman celebrated Hedvig Ulrica on her name-day with a charming little poem, depicting the young lively girl who wakes up and finds the name-day's party, with presents, food and – above all – drink. The wine is sweet, no face should be sour, the poet says – or rather sings, because this poem was sung to the same melody as one of his most famous songs, “Gubben Noak” (Old Man Noah).

Hedvig Ulrica liked Bellman, or at least his poetry. Her friend Anna Charlotta von Stapelmohr shared her interests, and Stapelmohr was also a close friend of Bellman's. We know that Stapelmohr made copies of Bellman's works. These are now lost, but when Hedvig Ulrica decided to copy his poetry, she may have used Stapelmohr's copies as a master text. Copying literary texts was not an uncommon pastime among eighteenth century nobility.

Hedvig Ulrica de Geer's copies consist of four densely written volumes of between 120 and 200 pages each. These volumes are now kept at the Royal Library in Stockholm. She seems to have worked on the four volumes simultaneously. The first one starts with Bellman's main work, *Fredman's Epistles*, a strange and fantastic mixture between contemporary life among whores and drunkards in Stockholm and a lyrical, mythological world, where the same protagonists merge into gods and goddesses. Sometimes she discovered better versions of the texts and added stanzas by sewing them into the volume. In one instance, there is a correction made in pencil by another hand, which might be Bellman's own. Hedvig Ulrica's versions of the text are quite good, and unlike some copies made by women quite uncensored. She never shies away from drink, sex or other excesses – at least not in poetry.

Both the *album amicorum* and the copies of Bellman's poetry carry Hedvig Ulrica de Geer's ex libris with the coat of arms both of her husband's family, the Dohnas, and of the De Geers. (Fig. 2) Her initials are handwritten, apparently in her own hand. She continued to use her maiden name, which was quite common in the eighteenth century. The ex libris was created after her marriage, and as it occurs



Figure 2. Hedvig Ulrica de Geer's bookplate.

in the *album amicorum* we can be sure that she brought the book with her when she married. As for the copies of Bellman's works, she probably started the work in the seventies and continued at least into the eighties. The latest dateable poem was composed by Bellman on Boxing Day 1787. By this time, Hedvig Ulrica was 35 years old and had been a widow for three years.

Sometime between Hedvig Ulrica's death in 1813 and the publishing of Lilliebjörn's catalogue in 1907, about 250 volumes from Hedvig Ulrica's library were returned to Leufsta. (Fig. 3) Her niece Vilhelmina Gyldenstolpe had died in December 1858, aged 79, and might have inherited her books. At least we know that Hedvig Ulrica's copies of Bellman were purchased by The Royal Library "at the Gyldenstolpe auction" in October 1859. A large part of the books



Figure 3. Part of
Hedvig Ulrica
de Geer's library
at Leufsta.

now at Leufsta are represented in the catalogue from this auction and include both widespread novels and rare books like Joseph de La Porte's clandestine *L'Esprit de L'Encyclopedie* (1769). Probably some of Hedvig Ulrica's books were bought at that auction and donated to Leufsta, while some ended up in other collections. Seven volumes with her ex libris are now in the Borgström collection of erotica at The Royal Library. All these books are in French, published between 1789 and 1802 and perhaps more titillating than pornographic. At least one of these has later belonged to the librarian and bibliophile Christoffer Eichhorn (1837–1889), who had started his collection at the time of the Gyldenstolpe auction and might have attended it. Hedvig Ulrica De Geer's *album amicorum* was purchased at an antiquarian bookshop in Uppsala in 1999.

Hedvig Ulrica's books are kept in one of the smaller rooms in the library. The books are printed between 1655 and 1808, and every volume contains her bookplate. With two exceptions the books are in French, several of them translated from English or German. Nearly all the books are in pristine condition – they could have been delivered from the bookbinder yesterday – but this goes for most books in the Leufsta library. The De Geers were careful readers.

So, what did an aristocratic lady with literary interests read in the late eighteenth century? From the extant collection, we can surmise that Hedvig Ulrica had eclectic tastes. There are some works on the Enlightenment, to which I will return presently, but also many books that can be classified as entertainment, both novels and some memoirs and biographies. The latter could have some political implications.

There is no poetry preserved in Hedvig Ulrica's library, but she owned Nicolas Ragots de Grandval's comic-heroic epic *Le Vice Puni ou Cartouche* in an edition from 1761. This copy is exceptional in her library for being extremely well-loved. The epic had a reputation for being daring. It uses a lot of slang and even contains a dictionary of *argot*. Only two collections of drama belong to her library, the ten volumes of Goldoni's comedies and nine volumes of Boissy's *Oeuvres de theatre* (1766). These are among the oldest books in the collection, published when Hedvig Ulrica was a child and probably given to her or bought second hand.

In the Gustavian era, theatre and poetry were the dominant genres in Sweden. It seems unlikely that Hedvig Ulrica spent so much time copying Bellman's works, but did not buy *Fredman's Epistles* when they were printed in 1790. She probably also owned the works of other contemporary Swedish poets and perhaps the odd printed drama or opera libretto, that for some reason were not returned to Leufsta.

By far the largest group of books consist of novels. There are 30 titles and 80 volumes, printed between 1789 and 1808. All the novels are in French, some of which are translated from English. There are

imitations and sequels of famous novels, such as Le Suire's *La Paméla Française ou Lettres d'une jeune Paysanne et d'un jeune ci-devant; Contentant leurs Aventures* (1803) and Dauphin's *La Dernière Héloïse, ou Lettres de Junie Salisbury* (1790). Some seem rather racy, like *La Religieuse et sa Fille* (1808), *Alphonsine, ou les Dangers du Grand Monde* (1789) and *La Seduction ou Histoire de Lady Revel* (1795). Hedvig Ulrica's copies of Bellman's quite explicit poetry shows that she was no prude, and her library confirms this. It is hardly a coincidence that some books from her collection are included in the Borgström collection of erotica. Among her books at Leufsta are two novels – in ten volumes – about the charming libertine Chevalier de Faublas, whose sexual adventures include crossdressing and seducing women while disguised as a girl. These books were extremely popular and quite typical of the libertinage of the time. Some of the novels in Hedvig Ulrica's library indicate a fascination for exoticism, such as *Thaira et Fernando ou Les Amours d'une Peruvienne et d'un Espagnol* (1801), *Bythis ou l'Elève de l'Africain* (1802) and *Odisco et Félicie ou la Colonie des Florides* (1803).

Most of the novels were published late in Hedvig Ulrica's life, when she had been a widow for more than a decade. One could see these books as a way of escaping a woman's dreary days, but it is important to remember that Hedvig Ulrica was a wealthy aristocratic woman who probably had a rich social life. During the same period, she bought more demanding books, such as of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in French translation, printed in 1800. She also took an interested France itself, and seems to have concerned about the French revolution. Some of her books are biographies on royal women who were killed during the revolution, such as Elisabeth Guénard's *Mémoires Historiques de Marie-Thérèse-Louise de Carignan, Princesse de Lam-balle* (1801) and *Histoire de Madame Élisabeth de France, Sœur de Louis XVI* (1802). Charles Montigny's book *Mémoires historiques de mesdames Adelaïde et Victoire de France, filles de Louis XV* (1802) tells the story of the two unmarried princesses – “mesdames” – who left France in 1791 to make a pilgrimage to Rome, were briefly ar-



Figure 4. Charles Montigny's book *Mémoires historiques de mesdames Adelaide et Victoire de France, filles de Louis XV* (1802), vol. II. The elderly princesses – Mesdames – visit the Roman campagna.

rested but released. They spent the rest of their lives abroad. Many of the books have beautiful plates, and in the first volume we see *mesdames* leaving their castle and in the second they visit the ruins of the Roman campagna (which does not look much like Rome at all). (Fig. 4)

Another book connected to the revolution is *Correspondance amoureuse de Fabre d'Églantine* (1796). Fabre d'Églantine was a revolutionary and the initiator of the new revolutionary calendar, but was himself executed by guillotine in 1794. Hedvig Ulrica

also owned some novels set during the Reign of Terror, such as *Le voyageur sentimentale en France sous Robespierre* (1799) and Le Bastier's *Dorbeuil et Céliane de Valran. Leurs Amours et Leurs Malheurs pendant la Tyrannie de Robespierre* (1795). These books are anti-revolutionary, and perhaps one rather expects this view from a wealthy noblewoman.

Hedvig Ulrica also owned books on travel. De La Harpe's *Abrégé de L'Histoire Générale des Voyages* (1780) in twenty-four volumes almost takes up a whole shelf. Moreover, there are books on a journey to Russia, about Englishmen in India and a *Voyage autour du Monde* (1750) by the British admiral George Anson.

Hedvig Ulrica de Geer was interested the Enlightenment and owned works on its ideas. She also owned two volumes by Francesco Algarotti on *Le Newtonianisme pour les Dames* (1739), a sort of eighteenth century popular science. Both her father and her eldest brother bought forbidden books: 108 of the 720 titles listed by Robert Darnton in *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France 1769–1789* (1995) are represented in the library at Leufsta. Among these “philosophical” books are the great works of the Enlightenment, such as *L'Encyclopédie*, Voltaire's *Traité sur la Tolérance* and Helvetius' *De l'Esprit*, but also scandalous and obscene literature. Her father bought Voltaire's *La Pucelle d'Orleans* in two different editions, and it is possible that one of the few copies imported to Sweden of *Thérèse Philosophe* once belonged to the Leufsta library. Three of the works in Hedvig Ulrica's library are to be found in Darnton's corpus. One is *Correspondence de Monsieur Le Marquis de Montalembert* (1777). Montalembert was a military engineer, employed in the Swedish army during the Pomeranian war and an expert on fortification. Why this book interested Hedvig Ulrica de Geer escapes me, as does the reason why it was forbidden in France.

A much more obviously philosophical book is Joseph de La Portes *L'Esprit de L'Encyclopédie* (1769). This is “the best of L'Encyclopédie”, a selection of articles in four volumes. In Hedvig Ulrica's copy, 24 pages are cut out of the article “Bibliothèque”. It is not a cancellation, and



Figure 5. One of the plates in *Conte de J. Bocace* (1779).

it would seem likely that these pages were censored. No other copy of this book seems to exist in Sweden, but a copy at the Bodleian library is digitised and thus available. Except the kind of sallies against religion which one expects from *L'Encyclopédie* these pages do not appear particularly subversive. The criticism of contemporary Greece is a bit harsh, but otherwise it is just a history of libraries, from antiquity onwards, enumerating libraries in different corners of the world, most of them “très-belles”. I am at a loss as to why the pages were cut out.

The third clandestine work in Hedvig Ulrica's library is a classic, not only due to its literary qualities but also as an erotic work:

Ten beautiful volumes of Boccaccio's *Decamerone* in a new French translation, *Contes de J. Bocace* (1779), with plates by among others Boucher. The plates are sensuous, but not too daring, showing people in bed without being pornographic. (Fig. 5) An imitation, *Le Décaméron Française* by Louis d'Ussieux, on the other hand, claims that all its stories are "agréable du morale".

Just like the rest of the Leufsta library, Hedvig Ulrica de Geer's collection is agreeable to the eye and mind, although perhaps not always to the morals. It is the library of a woman who took an interest in the world around her and in her own times, but also read extensively for pleasure. At the end of her life, she turned to novels, perhaps in a reaction to contemporary international events (like so many readers after her), perhaps just because she started to find the genre rewarding. She read her books with care, and wrote her initials in ink on their ex libris.

Hedvig Ulrica de Geer belonged to the most privileged class, but we know next to nothing about her life and thought. Only her books remain. There is no doubt that she was an intellectual lady.

Suggested Reading

Unprinted Material

UUB Y 37 De Geer, Hedvig, "Stambok" (*Album amicorum*). Digitised in the Alvin portal, <<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:alvin:portal:record-153852>> (retrieved 15 October 2022).

The National Library (KB), Vf 24 De Geer, Hedvig, "Bellmansvisor". Three of the four volumes are digitised <<https://arken.kb.se/se-s-hs-vf24>> (retrieved 15 October 2022).

Printed Material

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- Lilliebjörn, E. G. (1907), *Katalog öfver Leufsta bruks gamla fideikommissbibliotek*. Uppsala.
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