

"Don't forget the books!"

Kristina of Sweden as a Reader

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Introduction

Just before the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648),¹ when her booty-laden cousin Karl Gustav² was preparing to return from the battlefield, 22 year old Kristina of Sweden (1626-1689), the reigning monarch for four years, sent him a message before he departed for home, "Don't forget the library!" (Buckley 121, Nylander 2). "I loved my books with a passion," stated Kristina (Buckley 76). Her books were a combination of handwritten texts and books made on the printing press (Nylander 3).

Kristina "is undoubtedly the most discussed of all queens in history, second only to Cleopatra," according to one historian (Stolpe xii), and indeed her life has been studied at great length from a variety of angles. Traditional histories of Sweden, Europe and the world have, however, briefly "sandwiched" her between Swedish warrior kings.

Kristina's place may be re-evaluated from the perspective of history of reading, as that forum examines intellectual history and cultural development, a fresh historical perspective from what was for so long a focus on territories gained or lost in war.

Kristina has been the subject of plays (Strindberg; Gems), movies (Harwood; Wolff), and hundreds of books and articles. A few biography titles may provide a clue to interpretations of Kristina's life: *The Sibyl of the North* (Cassell 1931), *The Outrageous Queen* (Cartland 1956), and *Queen of Caprice* (Lewis 1962). The most recent English

volume is subtitled "the restless life of a European eccentric."³ Why all this interest and the provocative titles? For those who may not be familiar with Kristina, the following is a very brief biography.

Biography

Hailed as a male heir to the throne when she was born, by candlelight Kristina's birth caul disguised her sex, and her deep-voiced infant's cry deceived those who surrounded her. Upon learning the truth, Kristina Vasa's father, King Gustav II Adolf Vasa (Gustavus Adolphus II)⁴ declared that though she was female, she was to be raised and educated as a prince. Gustav Adolf died in battle when Kristina was five,⁵ and her mother, Maria Eleanora of Brandenburg, was arguably not fit to oversee her upbringing. Kristina was trained to ride horses and to hunt. She was crowned king (Goldsmith 24) at age 18 in 1650 (Cartland 97). Kristina cross-dressed,⁶ and crossed-over, converting to Roman Catholicism from the Lutheran church which Gustav Adolf had championed throughout northern Europe. She largely abandoned his military pursuits and instead spent the royal coffers on books and art. Called "The Minerva of the North" after the Roman goddess of wisdom (Minerva), Kristina brought academics, artists and musicians to her court in Stockholm to include the philosopher René Descartes, who died in her castle (Derry 129).

Boasting an extensive library⁷ and with knowledge of many languages, Kristina ultimately abdicated the throne at age 27, citing religious reasons. She knew if she converted she would have to leave the

country, as Catholicism in Sweden was against the law. She continued to study, travelled to Denmark, Germany, Belgium, and then onto Italy (Cartland 142) to settle at the Vatican where she established the Arcadian Academy for scholarly discussion (Kamen 69). From there Kristina travelled throughout Europe creating great controversy and interest wherever she went. Kristina attempted in vain to attain the crown of Poland and of Naples for monetary gain (Nylander 7). She returned to Sweden twice later in life to visit. Kristina died in 1689 at age 62 and is the only female ruler buried in St. Peter's cathedral in Rome.

Research Question

What can we know about Kristina's reading practices? Many scholars (Åkerman, Cavendish, Kajanto, Peterson) and biographers (Goldsmith, Lewis, Masson, and Meyer among others) have debated her beliefs and reasons for conversion and abdication, thereby referencing her reading. There has been some scholarship on Kristina's libraries and librarians (Nylander, Wieselgren), and there are visual images of Kristina amongst books to analyze.⁸ By reviewing biographies and other scholarly work on Kristina while keeping in mind theories on history of reading, we may paint a refreshing portrait of her, that of Kristina as a reader.

Such a study is timely in light of recent work by historian Erik Thomson. His 2007 piece in the *Sixteenth Century Journal* is on

Kristina's sometime guardian, would-be father figure and political mentor, Swedish chancellor Axel Oxenstierna (1583-1654) and books.

Professor of library and information science Christine Pawley's 2002 outline of a methodology for "named readers" included reviewing correspondence and "other sources of biographical material" to look at reading practices. She wrote in *Book History*,

This method is especially appropriate for the members of cultural elites—men and women whose privileged access to education and other cultural resources was facilitated by such factors as their race, class, geographical location and religion. After uncovering details of the individual's life, the researcher may conjecture from what is known about that place and period the social and institutional circumstances that together helped to constitute the reading community of which the individual was a part (Pawley 145).

So much has been written about Kristina that filtering it for evidence of reading is a daunting task.

Kristina's Books

In her youth, Kristina no doubt benefited from books kept at the castle by her tutors and by Chancellor Oxenstierna. The chancellor had been a student at Wittenberg (Thomson 712) where Martin Luther nailed his famous Ninety-Five Theses against Catholicism to the church door during the early part of the 16th Century (Whitford).

Oxenstierna's book collection is assumed to have been among the largest in Sweden in the 17th Century, "easily containing a few thousand books" (Thomson 708). Most of his books were, according to Thomson, "neither exotic nor expensive. They were printed and were

usually in Latin, though the occasional Greek book as well as German, French, Swedish, and (extremely rarely) Italian books also appeared" (711). Thomson told how Kristina began to acquire her own texts,

Young Swedish noblemen brought home chests of books from their peregrinations on the continent, and many took care to maintain contacts with agents and networks after they returned home so they could procure books that were otherwise unavailable in Sweden (710).

Kristina sometimes came in to relatively hard economic times and had to make choices on behalf of Swedish state resources. One author assumed that she may have caused her own hard times because of her book-buying habit. When she needed to sell possessions to rectify state accounts, she seldom chose to sell books (Nylander 7).

Biographer Barbara Cartland stated,

Her representatives travelled far and wide in Europe buying up complete libraries in Italy, searching in Greece for classical statues, ranging through the great chateaux of France to purchase pictures.

This mass of material arrived at the Palace in Stockholm to add to the congestion of the loot obtained from Central Europe by the Swedish armies. Room after room was crammed with books. They stood in piles in the passages while alterations were made to turn yet another room into a library. The complete lack of knowledge on how such fragile things should be stored meant that many of them were ruined in the damp and draughty passages (92).

By 1651, Kristina's librarian⁹ had cataloged her books into twenty-one categories and assembled them into two handwritten volumes (Nylander 3).¹⁰ The pope bought her library at her death (Cartland 253) and the catalogs are now housed in the Swedish Royal Library (Nylander 3).

Kristina and History of Reading

What can we learn about Kristina and her realm¹¹ when we approach her life from the perspective of history of reading? This field, also called book history, or history of print culture, traces its history's roots to France in 1958 and scholar Lucien Febvre (Jenisch 230).

Interest in this discipline has grown and expanded to many countries. The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing (SHARP) was founded in 1991 (Jenisch 232). In 1998, as the editors of a new journal for the field, historians Jonathan Rose and Ezra Greenspan wrote, "This is a new journal for a new kind of history...our field of play is the entire history of written communication" (J. A. Rose). Rose and Greenspan went on to list a great number of disciplines and people that this new area could encompass:

...academics and nonacademics, to scholars of history, literature, sociology, economics, art, education, the classics, communications, journalism, religion, and anthropology, as well as to publishing professionals, book collectors and librarians (ibid).

Since Rose and Greenspan's journal dedication a decade ago, this new, freewheeling field continued to evolve. In 2002, Pawley asserted that "the history of the book is shifting from texts to readers" (142).

Library science scholars have leaped into the foray. Rose and Greenspan observed,

Librarians, once consigned to the margins of academia, are now venturing into the mainstream of social and cultural

history, exploring the role of libraries in shaping reading tastes (x).

Scholar-librarians may "break out," as Rose put it in 2003, of what he has seen as a "scholarly ghetto," and "enter the mainstream of academic discourse" (50).

What Kristina Read

When Kristina began her schooling, the Swedish Riksdag, or house of parliament, put together guidelines for her education. Sweden was then considered "distant, backward, and sparsely populated," and "not taken seriously by the rest of Europe" as Renaissance ideas spread across the continent (Nordstrom 125). Lutheran clergy were the only scholars in Sweden at the time, so they were recruited to tutor Kristina (Goldsmith 18).¹² The members of the Riksdag stated, "she must read only those books which had been approved by learned men of suitably moral temper," according to Buckley (62-3). They stated,

She was by no means to read frivolous books, much less pernicious ones; she was not to be imbued with the errors either of the Pope or of Calvinism, nor was she to be given false ideas prejudicial to the liberties of her subjects (Clarke 230).

As a child, Kristina's command of Latin showed her schooling was above the norm. "Only a few years after Christina's birth," wrote Buckley, "with the country at war with Poland, there was not a single diplomat available with enough Latin to conduct negotiations with the enemy" (66), yet Kristina studied religion from Latin books (ibid 69). By age twelve Kristina was also reading in German and French and by her early teens she had read Thucydides and Polybius in the original Greek

(Goldsmith 37). She loved learning languages, and taught herself Spanish and Italian (ibid). Flemish, Finnish, Danish, Hebrew and Arabic were additional languages with which she had some familiarity (Clarke 232).

Kristina's tutor or "preceptor," clergyperson Johan Matthiae, emphasized religious education, particularly directing Kristina's attention toward the Lutheran Catechism (Buckley 63). She learned this by heart at age twelve, and asked a lot of questions about it, which worried Matthiae (Goldsmith 42).

Kristina read Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*,

a popular *mélange* of fact and fiction then widely read by schoolboys. Christina admired the faultless Cyrus, but did not seek to emulate him. Caesar and Alexander, though rougher diamonds, produced, she thought, a greater light (Buckley 71).

Alexander the Great became Kristina's teenage hero after she read about him. Her concerned tutors gave her the Latin biography of Queen Elizabeth I.¹³ Kristina read it and told them she preferred Alexander (Goldsmith 42). Soon after this, Oxenstierna returned from a lengthy stay in Germany, and presented Kristina with a copy of Tacitus' *Annals* (Thomson 714).

By 1639 when she was thirteen, Kristina's tutor reported to the Swedish State Council that she had begun reading *Les Dialogues*

Français by Samuel Bernhard, and that she had also begun studying the *Pentateuch* (Goldsmith 40).

Ironically, the fact that Kristina was raised a Protestant may have contributed to her ultimate conversion and abdication. Book history scholars, when comparing Protestant to Catholic reading, have found that Protestants read significantly more in Kristina's era (Altick 444, Chartier 167).

I have not as yet¹⁴ found many parallels of Kristina's early reading to other royal children, which might constitute what historians of print culture refer to as a "reading community." However, historian of Europe M.L. Clarke reported in 1978,

Christina claimed that as a girl she was advanced for her age and sex. For her sex perhaps, though we should remember that Lady Jane Grey was reading Plato at a much earlier age than Christina. But compared to a really precocious boy like Edward VI of England, she does not seem to have made very rapid progress. Edward began Greek and French several years earlier than she did. He was reading Aristotle's *Ethics* at an age when she had done little or no Greek, and in Latin had not got beyond the simpler historians. Her Latin exercises are elementary and unexacting compared with the Latin orations that Edward was composing at the same age; and the elaborate French essay he composed, attacking the supremacy of the Pope, was written at an age when she had not even begun French (232).

In Kristina's defense, she didn't need as many formal language lessons as she had learned German from her mother at the cradle, and her aunt and others in her childhood household spoke French.

A few years later when Kristina began to rule the country in her own right, she worked so hard that a contemporary at Kristina's court became worried about her health. Kristina allegedly slept as little as three hours each night, yet she read for five hours each morning (77). The courtier went on to write that Kristina "reads all Treaties and State Papers, and explains them in Latin to those who don't understand them" (qtd in Goldsmith 77-78).

Frenchman Pierre Chanut "was one of Christina's first friends of her own choosing. The stories of his travels stimulated her imagination, she listened eagerly to his experiences at the various courts of Europe. He recommended new books to her..." (Goldsmith 87). On one long journey Kristina discussed Descartes' *Principes de la Philosophie*, and Chanut was obliged to explain any passages Kristina did not understand (Goldsmith 88). She had enjoyed that so much that Chanut later gave her Descartes' *Méditations métaphysiques* in 1646 (Masson 111). *Mémoires de Chanut* was published after his death. Kristina made notes in the margins of her copy (Masson 116).

"By the time Christina reached her majority she had presumably proceeded from Terence to the major Latin poets, and from Caesar to the more difficult prose writers," argued Clarke (230). In 1648, Clarke added, "Chanut reported that she read a passage of Tacitus every day, calling it a game of chess" (ibid).

By 1649-1650, "her desire to collect men of learning round her, as well as books and rare manuscripts, became almost a mania," Goldsmith wrote (101). She asked questions of the elderly Descartes to include whether it was worse to misuse love or misuse hatred (ibid 110). When Kristina's tutor Matthiae wrote a book, which "suggested a possible basis for uniting all Protestant forms of faith,"¹⁵ Kristina, who found Lutherans "intolerant," was fond of it (Masson 98). That year was also marked for Kristina with a struggle over the "Liber Concordiae" (ibid), the collective documents of the Lutheran confession.

Intellectual historian Susanna Åkerman authored a dense book in 1991, searching for meaning into Kristina's beliefs and behavior. She took on some large questions. Åkerman explored whether Kristina's abdication was a political act, as had been suggested by previous scholars. She mentioned Kristina's reading of Vergil during sermons in Brussels in 1654 (considered blasphemy). Åkerman explained why she thought Kristina stated that the philosophy of Lucretius was her religion (due to the spiritual atomism of the Swedish-Baltic philosophers), and on a more mundane level that Kristina knew Petronius Arbiter's lewd poetry by heart (Åkerman 3).

Åkerman disagreed with Swedish historian and Kristina scholar Curt Weibull's claim that Kristina's readings were "merely an intellectual fashion" (Åkerman 7). This longstanding debate is key to understanding what Kristina's reading meant to her. Åkerman argued,

Unlike the tradition, I do not treat Christina's skepticism and religious anomaly as merely transitory. Curt Weibull

in particular has argued that the evidence of a libertine period in Christina's life is exaggerated and that such claims in fact are based on nothing else than uninformed reports by persons without direct access to the inner circles of the court. Weibull instead bases his work on diplomatic material with strictly political content containing reports on her high morality, such as the memoirs of the French ambassador Chanut (7-8).

Åkerman concluded that Weibull's portrayal of Kristina is "an improbable diplomatic hagiography showing Christina as a political strategist undaunted by existential qualms" (8). There seems to be a lot at stake when scholars spar about what Kristina really thought.

Conclusion

When what book history scholar Robert Darnton calls "cultural history"¹⁶ in Scandinavia is emphasized over the more commonly taught military history, Kristina's legacy may be given a few more paragraphs in history textbooks. The story of Kristina as a reader asks to be told not only because of her passion for reading, but also because she increased the academic and cultural connections between Sweden and the rest of Europe. It allows us a new way to explore her fascinating, flamboyant, controversial life.

There is much more to study examining Kristina of Sweden as a reader. The researcher may find inspiration and motivation in the words of Margareta Björkman, who surveyed book history scholarship in Sweden. Björkman wrote,

Because there is still so much to do, so many archives to waken up from their long sleep, so little known about the way the printed book influenced the life of all layers of

the population, it is time for scholars to come together in starting new projects (117).

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Notes

¹ For a brief overview, see <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/history/A0848495.html>.

² Swedish version of name. Many English sources refer to him as Charles Gustavus.

³ British version.

⁴ See his myspace page for an entertaining introduction, includes an image of Kristina (Gustav Adolf the Great).

⁵ Sources vary as to whether Kristina was five or six years old.

⁶ For recent (March 2008) documentary treatment of this, see *Thou Shalt Not: Sex, Sin and Censorship in Pre-Code Hollywood* <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1200078/>>.

⁷ "Gustavus Adolphus used captured Jesuit libraries to expand Uppsala University's library, but it was Queen Christina who first attempted to form a library that could stand comparison with the greatest on the continent, drawing upon the help of Mazarin's librarian Gabriel Naudé" (Thomson 709).

⁸ One common image of Kristina shows her in her library filled with scholars. In the portrait with her are Pierre Chanut, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes, the

mathematician Mersenne, and Prince de Condé. Painted after her death by Louis-Michel Dumesnil, Buckley called it "fiction," (inset) but perhaps it was a visual memorial in line with Naudé's notion that "the librarian should also note in a book all the names of the people who were admitted to the library" (Thomson 709).

⁹ Issac Vossius

¹⁰ *Bibliothecae Christiniana Catalogus*

¹¹ Kristina's Sweden was larger than we know it today. Due mostly to the conquests of her father, Sweden's kingdom extended into areas we now know as Norway, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, Germany and Poland. For a map, see "History of Sweden" at howstuffworks.com, <http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://static.howstuffworks.com/gif/willow/history-of-sweden0.gif&imgrefurl=http://history.howstuffworks.com/european-history/history-of-sweden4.htm&h=442&w=365&sz=14&hl=en&start=55&um=1&usg=__OCKpXI3qBldUxTO4aF_kDUDyWku=&tbnid=jtzL9IrOh2dJgM:&tbnh=127&tbnw=105&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dterritory%2Bof%2Bgustavus%2Badolphus%26start%3D54%26ndsp%3D18%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26rls%3Dcom.microsoft:en-us:IE-SearchBox%26rlz%3D1I7GGIG%26sa%3DN>. There was even a Swedish colony in what is now Delaware, USA. <<http://www.colonialswedes.org/History/History.html>>.

¹² "Luther prescribed that it was a father's duty to teach his children and servants the catechism. Each person had to understand Luther's questions and answers and to learn about the doctrine of salvation himself. For this reason...the printed word gained a strong position in Lutheran society" (Furuland 8).

¹³ *Annales rerum Anglicarum et Hibernicarum regnante Elizabetha*

¹⁴ This is ongoing research for the author of this paper.

¹⁵ Book was entitled *Idea boni ordinis in Ecclesia Christi*.

¹⁶ Referenced in Björkman (89).