

**Johanna Eleonora Petersen.** *The Life of Lady Johanna Eleonora Petersen, Written by Herself: Pietism and Women's Autobiography in Seventeenth-Century Germany.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xxix + 140 pp. \$18.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-66299-2.



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Lady Johanna Eleonora Petersen, née von und zu Merlau (1644-1724), was a Hessian noblewoman who was influenced by leaders of the new Pietist religious movement, and who subsequently gave up a promising career at court in order to follow a lifestyle more in keeping with her religious beliefs. Despite the widespread opposition to women speaking on religious matters, Petersen would eventually become the author of fourteen original religious works and an autobiography that included her analysis of the visions that had guided her spiritual development. In this volume, Barbara Becker-Cantarino provides an English translation of this autobiography and of two further short selections, thereby making more accessible a valuable resource for scholars and teachers of early modern Europe, and especially for those interested in gender, religious, and literary history.

Like all books in this series, this volume has a multi-part structure that opens with an identical general series editors' introduction. This nineteen-page introduction takes the reader on a whirlwind tour of what the editors call "the traditional,

overwhelmingly male views of women's nature inherited by early modern Europeans and the new tradition that the 'other voice' called into being to begin to challenge reigning assumptions" (p. ix). The more focused volume editor's introduction follows the series introduction. Here Becker-Cantarino traces Petersen's childhood during the final years of the Thirty Years' War, her life at court, her involvement in the emerging Pietist movement, and her marriage to and life with the Lutheran minister (and commoner) Johann Wilhelm Petersen. She then discusses Petersen's Pietism in greater detail, including a discussion of her theological views, the ways in which she justified her writings, and the link between her Pietism and the style of her autobiography. Becker-Cantarino concludes her introduction with a bibliography specific to this volume, not to be confused with the series editors' bibliography, which comes at the end of the book.

After the two introductions, which make up the entire first half of the volume, readers finally reach Petersen's actual autobiography (though it begins with yet another brief introduction on the

edition and translation). The autobiography, written in 1689, proceeds chronologically and, as Becker-Cantarino points out, clearly follows the style of a traditional conversion narrative. The entire purpose of this work, Petersen wrote, was "[s]o that you, dear reader, will know how wonderfully the Lord has guided me since my childhood and has drawn me to him on many occasions" (p. 61). Petersen further underlined the religious purpose of her work by adding, many years later, a final section discussing the revelations she had received from God since her childhood and that she believed had allowed her to understand some of the divine secrets hidden in the Holy Scripture. Among these secrets were that everyone would gain salvation, that the Jews and heathens would be converted, and that the holy Trinity contained a female element in the Holy Spirit. Her visions also guided her understanding of the nature of Christ and the meaning of the Book of Revelation.

The volume concludes with two appendixes, each with its own brief introduction. The first is a letter sent by Petersen to the magistrates of Frankfurt to appeal the city's decision to evict her, and the second is a religious epistle to her sisters in which she explained her ideas about how to achieve true spiritual renewal.

The question of the usefulness of this volume is complicated somewhat by its multi-part structure. The series editors' introduction provides nothing on Pietism or early modern religion in general, but it will be quite helpful for those without a firm basis in early modern European women's and gender history. It offers not simply a good historical survey but also a thematic summary of the principal problems faced by those who challenged traditional attitudes toward women or women's roles. In the conclusion of this introduction, however, the editors take on an overly enthusiastic tone that may confuse students. "The other voice," the editors state, was "a voice of protest" that "battered at the wall of prejudice

that encircled women and raised a banner announcing its claims" (p. xxvii). Yet most women and men of this period who challenged accepted roles for women did so quite cautiously. Petersen, for example, was careful to stress the conformity of her beliefs with those of her husband and her dedication to her role as wife and mother, and she justified her actions by claiming she had a sacred and humble duty to share the gift of illumination given to her by God. Petersen, in other words, was not marching in the streets with a bullhorn and a banner demanding an end to prejudice against women.

This important distinction appears clearly in Becker-Cantarino's introduction. To make this point she quotes heavily from some of Petersen's other writings, though these do not later appear as selections. This is a shame, since they offer compelling and important information on Petersen's understanding of her role as a religious woman writer--something that seems especially appropriate to this series dedicated to the "other voice" in European history. The rest of the introduction is also good and provides readers with a solid overview of Petersen's life, her religious ideas, and Pietism and Pietist circles in general.

As for the autobiography itself, the translation is smooth and clear and is well supplemented by footnotes. Students should be able to follow the text without too much difficulty and, at only thirty-seven pages, it is short enough to assign in full. Even with the explanation provided by Becker-Cantarino in her introduction, however, the second part of the autobiography might be a bit too theologically opaque for students in a gender studies class, and is probably only appropriate for classes on early modern religion. I would offer the same caution for Appendix B, Petersen's letter to her sisters on "The Nature and Necessity of the New Creature in Christ." I should also add here that while I found the two appended documents interesting, I saw no clear explanation of why

Becker-Cantarino chose them in particular, as opposed to any others.

As an early example of an autobiography written by a German woman, this document would also be useful in literary history classes, especially in conjunction with Becker-Cantarino's introduction, which provides a good discussion of the place of this work in the history of the genre. I was curious, however, about the omission of any mention of the almost exactly contemporary and well-known memoirs of Glückel of Hameln from Becker-Cantarino's analysis (or from her earlier work, *Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit*, for that matter).[1]

But such minor quibbles certainly do not take away from the overall value of this work. Indeed, *The Life of Lady Johanna Eleonora Petersen, Written by Herself* provides us with an interesting and useful example of an early modern woman's voice, and another valuable addition to the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series.

#### Note

[1]. Glückel of Hameln, *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*, trans. Marvin Lowenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1977); Barbara Becker-Cantarino, *Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit: Frau und Literatur (1500-1800)* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1987).

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