Literary and Cultural Historiography: Telling Early Modern Life Stories from a Gender Perspective

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Early Modern Europe experienced numerous powerful women who not only were the targets of malicious rumors and gossip, but who also were important figures in written discourse—in popular texts, historical accounts, and learned treatises. Research has shown that ruling women were considered in many ways exceptions to an often vaguely defined norm in a society that by tradition had chosen and preferred male rulers; they were simply regarded as threats to a socio-political hierarchy dominated by men. The representation of the lives of these powerful women in various texts seems to have played a central role in the shaping of early modern gender roles and stereotypes as well as in shaping the early modern biography. By using the lives of well-known women as positive or negative examples and very freely adding, dropping, or changing ‘the plot’ – their life story – the authors were able to discuss gender matters and gender relationships and to claim their own view as the “true” one.

This lecture explores the question of what was important to the 17th century male biographer, to the writer of the life story of a much debated queen. Queen Christina of Sweden lived a life in the public, a life that was written and rewritten over and over again - even before her death in 1689. While trying to fit this controversial woman into conventional narratives and common gender stereotypes appropriate to a queen, Christina’s early modern biographers wrote in a tradition that still had to be developed in order to be a “biography” as it is known today. The presentation discusses the narratological aspects of biographical writing in the early modern period and the discrepancy between factual knowledge and the need to tell a story – an exciting life story. It focuses on the rhetoric and narrative strategies of the biographers, on the importance of telling not only a life, but the life story of a woman who at all times refused to adapt to the common norms of behavior ascribed to women of her time. The presentation thus oscillates between the factual and the fictional in its search for structural patterns of the early modern biography.