

“There’s No Friend like a Sister”: Sisterly Relations and the Rhetoric of Sisterhood in the Correspondence of the Aristocratic Stenbock Sisters¹

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This essay addresses a previously neglected topic in early modern Swedish history: sisterly relations, as represented both in the rhetoric of correspondence and in practicalities discussed in writing. More specifically, it will focus on the correspondence of five sisters of the aristocratic Stenbock family, who came to adulthood in the second half of the sixteenth century and lived into the early seventeenth century. Even though early modern sisterly correspondence is many-layered and often difficult to interpret, certain conclusions can be drawn. Aristocratic women were accustomed to using sisterly rhetoric in many contexts. For noblewomen, sisterhood was almost synonymous with intimate and benevolent relations. Sisterhood implied a close bond that was bound up both with family relationships and with people who shared a similar, if not always equal, social status. While rhetoric related to kinship was not limited to consanguineous relationships, the notion of consanguine sisterhood seems to have constituted a special form of intimacy. Sisterly relations were more family-oriented than brotherly relations or relationships between sisters and brothers. Yet because political matters were family matters for most aristocratic women of the time, women’s lives were also intertwined with the turmoil and power struggles of the age.

Introduction

My humble Loving Greetings in the name of God Almighty [...] My Gracious Queen, I have ordered a good amount of cabbage and ten tuns of carrots from Enköping by order of Y[our] M[ajesty] [...] My Gracious Queen, I send Y[our] M[ajesty] [some] plums,

1 This essay has been written as part of the project “Politics of Brothers, Neighbours and Friends”, funded by the Academy of Finland. It is partly based on my doctoral thesis (Lahtinen 2007). The original Swedish in the correspondence has been translated into English by the author. In translations, orthography and grammar have been modernised.

and I humbly ask Y[our] M[ajesty] not to think ill of me because I didn’t send them earlier to Y[our] M[ajesty], as they were not ripe earlier.²

Thus wrote Countess Cecilia Stenbock to her sister, Catharina, the Dowager Queen of Sweden, in the early seventeenth century. Her letter exemplifies aristocratic family correspondence in early modern Sweden. This correspondence is often conventional, pragmatic, and rich in expressions of social hierarchies. There are also frequent expressions of loving affection, but these do not seem to be equivalent to expressions that we would consider “genuine” today. For the modern reader, the layer of rhetoric may seem too thick to convey anything of substance about the writer or her family relationships.

I would argue, however, that these letters can indeed offer new insights into sisterly relations and the rhetoric of sisterhood. In analysing the correspondence of five sisters of the aristocratic Stenbock family,³ I will discuss sisterly relations as represented in both rhetoric and in practicalities discussed by the sisters in writing. Through sisterly correspondence a more multifaceted picture emerges of the lives of sixteenth-century Swedish noblewomen, who, at best, have been studied in relation to the men around them.⁴

The Stenbock sisters (fig. 1) were the daughters of Lord Gustaf Stenbock and Lady Brita Leijonhufvud. They came to adulthood in the second half of the sixteenth century and lived into the early part of the seventeenth century. Their family enjoyed close ties to the royal family and to other aristocratic families, and four of the sisters acquired higher noble titles through marriage: Countess Beata (d. 1583), Queen Catharina (d. 1621), Countess Cecilia (d. 1626) and Baroness Ebba (d. 1614). The only sister of the five who never married was Noble Maid Märta (d. after May 1624). Two

2 Cecilia Stenbock to Queen Catharina, Haga, 22 September [no year but before 1622], Ericssbergsarkivet, Autografsamlingen Vol. 202: Stenbock A-E, Svenska Riksarkivet (National Archives of Sweden), hereafter cited as SRA. Both the address and the style prove that the letter is directed to Queen Catharina, even though annotations in the folder by an archivist suggest otherwise.

3 To avoid confusion, I have used the family name Stenbock, which the family employed from the end of the sixteenth century. It should be pointed out, however, that family names were not normally used by early modern Swedish nobility. “Brahe” and “Fleming” were among the few exceptions. Ebba Stenbock, for example, wrote her name “Ebba Gustafsdotter”, that is, “Ebba, daughter of Gustaf”. Aristocratic women and men were often addressed with a combination of their title and Christian name (“Lady Ebba”, for example). Only in the late sixteenth century did it become common to use family names based on a family’s coat of arms, such as Stenbock (“Stone goat”, the coat of arms showing a goat by a stone wall) or Leijonhufvud, “Lion Head”. At the time, married women did not take the surname of their husband, but were identified by their patronym or their father’s surname.

4 See, for example, Anu Lahtinen 2001. Siskot ja veljet. Myöhäiskeskiaikaisen ylimysperheen sukupuolitetut elämänaalueet. In Anu Lahtinen (ed.) *Tanssiva mies, pakinoiva nainen. Sukupuolten historiaa*. Turku: Turun historiallinen yhdistys. 168–183; Anu Lahtinen 2002a. Arkea ja juhlaa Flemingien mailla. In Terhi Kivistö (ed.) *Arki ja läheisyys*. Turku: Turun historiallinen yhdistys. 151–172; Jan Samuelson 1997. En god och förnuftig matmoder. Adelskvinnor under stormaktsväldet. In Eva Österberg (ed.) *Jämmerdal och fröjdesal. Kvinnor i stormaktstidens Sverige*. Stockholm: Atlantis. 287–304; Svante Norrhem 2003. Normbryterska eller ansvarstagande hustru? In Börje Harnesk (ed.) *Maktens skiftande skepnader*. Umeå: Institutionen för historiska studier vid Umeå universitet. 141–156. Cf. Marjo Kaartinen 2001. Ädit ja tyttäret uuden ajan alussa. In Anu Lahtinen (ed.) *Tanssiva mies, pakinoiva nainen. Sukupuolten historiaa*. Turku: Turun historiallinen yhdistys. 225–238; Marjo Kaartinen 2002. Public and Private: Challenges in the Study of Early Modern Women’s Lives. In Anu Korhonen & Kirsi Tuohela (eds.) *Time Frames*. Turku: Kulttuurihistoria, Turun yliopisto, 101.

other sisters died at a young age, while there were also seven brothers, whose lives – like those of their sisters – were marked by warfare, violence and political turmoil.⁵

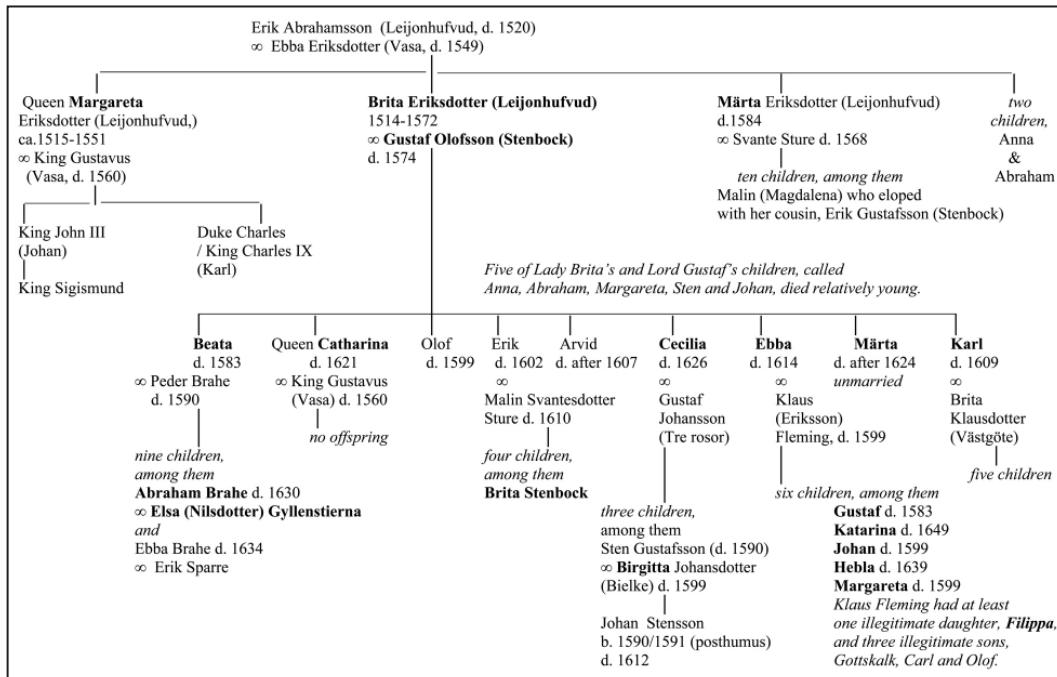


Figure 1. The genealogy of the Stenbock sisters. Beata and Catharina were the oldest, while Cecilia was born in the mid-1540s. The dates of birth of Ebba and Märta are unknown, but Ebba must have been born before 1555.

To gain new insights both into sisterhood and into correspondence in the early modern period, I will first address the general problems of studying family correspondence and in particular female or sisterly correspondence. Second, I will discuss the meanings given to sisterhood in sixteenth-century Sweden and comment on the general challenges of undertaking studies of siblings. Using letters produced by the Stenbock sisters, I suggest that while kinship rhetoric of the time was not used only for consanguineous relationships, sisterhood seems to have fostered a special intimacy.

I will also discuss the intertwining of hierarchal and emotional rhetoric, sisterly cooperation and conflict, and the similarities and differences in social status of the sisters. Two of the five sisters – Queen Catharina and Countess Cecilia – became widows at a young age (in the 1560s), while Countess Beata died in her fifties, leaving behind a husband and a great number of children. Countess Cecilia also had children, to whom she was devoted. Catharina, however, became a young dowager queen, without royal offspring of her own. She played a minor role in court politics and spent much of her time in the company of her sisters and their families. Baroness Ebba's life, on the other hand, was marked by ill health and troubles brought on by the position of her husband, Baron Klaus Fleming, in the power

⁵ For an overview of the Stenbock family genealogy (albeit misinformed in some details), see Gustaf Elgenstierna 1932. *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor med tillägg och rättelser VII. Schildt–Sture*. Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag, 568–571.

struggles between King Sigismund and his uncle, Duke Charles (“hertig Karl” in Swedish) in the 1590s. Finally, the spinster’s life led by Maid Märta displayed features characteristic of unmarried noblewomen of the time.

My study has been inspired by Ulla Koskinen’s research on the “brotherly and friendly” correspondence of early modern Swedish noblemen as well as Anu Korhonen’s discussion of emotions in hierarchical relations.⁶ I also take into consideration the observations of Leonore Davidoff, who has criticised the tendency of family historians to focus on parent-child and wife-husband relationships, and who has pointed out the significance of sibling relationships, in family dynamics.⁷ Davidoff has also emphasised that historians need to be conscious of the ambiguities surrounding the seemingly easy concepts of “sibling”, “sister” and “brother”. She observes that varying cultural, social and biological meanings have been attached to these concepts over the course of time. Her reflections have been further developed by Maarit Leskelä-Kärki, who has analysed the multifaceted, often tense, yet warm and close relationships between same-sex siblings.⁸

Discovering and reading the correspondence of early modern Swedish sisters

Compared to studies of similar material in England, for example, very little attention has been paid to sixteenth-century Swedish family correspondence and its conventions or to its importance as a means of negotiating social relationships. Occasionally, letters between family members have been used as sources for assessing events of a political and national nature. The correspondence of close female relatives, however, has largely been overlooked.⁹

6 Anu Korhonen 2002. Constructing Emotion in a Culture of Hierarchies: A Love Story. In Anu Korhonen & Kirsi Tuohela (eds.) *Time Frames. Negotiating Cultural History*. Turku: Kulttuurihistoria, Turun yliopisto, 59, 64–66, 68; Ulla Koskinen 2005. Friends and Brothers. Rhetoric of Friendship as a Medium of Power in Late-Sixteenth-Century Sweden and Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of History* 30, 238–248.

7 Leonore Davidoff 1995. *Worlds Between. Historical Perspectives on Gender & Class*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 206.

8 Maarit Leskelä-Kärki 2002. Passive to Active: The Lived Spaces of a Religious Woman. In Anu Korhonen & Kirsi Tuohela (eds.) *Time Frames*. Turku: Cultural History. 105–123; Maarit Leskelä-Kärki 2003. Towards a Cultural History of Sisterhood: The Lives and Writings of the Krohn Sisters. In Eva Helen Ulvros (ed.) *Kön makt våld*. Göteborg: Historiska institutionen, Göteborg universitet. 131–139; Maarit Leskelä-Kärki 2006. *Kirjoittajan maailmassa. Krohnin sisaret ja kirjallinen elämä*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura.

9 For English studies see, for example, James Daybell (ed.) 2001. *Early Modern Women’s Letter Writing, 1450–1700*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave; James Daybell (ed.) 2004. *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700*. Aldershot: Ashgate; and James Daybell 2006. *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. For studies using Swedish early modern family correspondence, see Ellen Fries 1895. *Teckningar ur svenska adelns familjelif*. Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & söners förlag; Fridolf Ödberg 1907. Fru Anna Hansdotter Tott och hennes tid (1478–1459). *Vestergötlands fornminnesförenings tidskrift* 2, 1–48; Fridolf Ödberg 1908. Om Hogenskild Bielkes moder, fru Anna Hogenskild till Dala och Åkerö, och hennes tid (1513–1590) I. *Vestergötlands fornminnesförenings tidskrift* 2, 6–84; Fridolf Ödberg 1909. Om Hogenskild Bielkes moder, fru Anna Hogenskild till Dala och Åkerö, och hennes tid (1513–1590) II. *Vestergötlands fornminnesförenings tidskrift* 2, 1–87; Gudrun Utterström 1968. *Fem skrivare*.

These shortcomings are the result of traditions characteristic of historical studies and archival methods in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Sweden and Finland (which was part of the Swedish realm during the early modern period). For a long time, archivists and historians concentrated on searching for the origins of the Swedish state or the Finnish nation. They amassed huge volumes of documents that seemed best to illustrate the development of the official administration and political decision-making.¹⁰ Correspondence not produced by officials, including most correspondence between women, was apparently considered “private”, or, in other words, not as important to national history.¹¹ Women’s letters were often consigned to loosely organised files with labels such as “Miscellanea”.

Printed collections of source material were also shaped by the same attitude, the result of a desire by editors to focus on “official” correspondence by men and to omit what the editors perceived as “private” sections about family relationships and other “trivia”. This practice, logical as it may have seemed at the time, is now criticised by historians who have called into question previous notions of private and public, lest the multiplicity of the past be ignored.¹²

Nor are archivists and historians solely to blame for the obstacles faced in studying early modern women’s correspondence. Early modern Swedish women were unlikely to be involved in sending and receiving letters, because much of the correspondence was carried out under the aegis of their male relatives or male servants.¹³ This situation also helps to account for the small number of surviving archives that preserve the personal materials of early modern Swedish women.

Owing to these problems – of historical traditions, editorial attitudes and scarcity of women’s archives – it is important to examine the extant, original female documentation and the volumes of “miscellanea” in order to study early modern Swedish family correspondence in general, and women’s family correspondence in particular. The letters of the Stenbock sisters offer an excellent opportunity to make such a journey of exploration.

Most of the surviving letters, which were mainly sent by Queen Catharina, can be found in the archives of Countess Cecilia.¹⁴ Additional letters can be found in

Metta Ivarsdotters brev till Svante Nilsson. Studier i senmedeltida svenskt brevspråk. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell; Jan Samuelson 1994. 1500-talets sätesgård som centrum för bygdens offentliga liv. In Peter Aronsson, Börje Björkman & Lennart Johansson (eds.) ... *och fram träder landsbyggdets människor* ... Växjö: Högskolan i Växjö. 162–173; Norrhem, Normbryterska eller ansvarstagande hustru?; Koskinen, Friends and Brothers.

10 See, for example, the series Acta Historica and Voudintilit (Bailiff’s Records) in Kansallisarkisto (National Archives of Finland), hereafter cited as KA; Riksregistratur and Kungliga arkiv, SRA.

11 Samuelson, En god och förnuftig matmoder, 287–288.

12 Amanda Vickery 1998. *The Gentleman’s Daughter. Women’s Lives in Georgian England.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press; Mary Beth Norton 1996. *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc; Kaartinen, Public and Private, 89–94, 100–101; Anu Lahtinen 2006. Suojatit, apurit ja kiistakumppanit. Flemingin sukupiiriin vähäosaiset jäsenet. In P. T. Kuusiluoma (ed.) *Suomen Sukututkimusseuran Vuosikirja.* Helsinki: Suomen Sukututkimusseura. 75–100.

13 See, for example, Lahtinen, Arkea ja juhlaa, 152–157.

14 Cecilia Stenbock’s archives, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5 (Miscellanea), SRA.

various places, such as among the voluminous correspondence of contemporary Swedish kings and noblemen. In order to understand and contextualise particular letters, which total twenty-five, supplementary information has to be sought in the correspondence between other relatives and close family acquaintances.¹⁵

Searching for documents, of course, is only the beginning, because problems of interpretation arise immediately. As mentioned previously, early modern letters are often laden with conventional greetings and wishes that, to the modern reader, may appear to be merely empty formulae. Formulae aside, most of the letters focus on transmitting practical information, such as news of births, deaths, marriages, warfare, invitations, festivities and even economic hints, such as where to get the best prices for stored corn. Correspondents seldom dwell on their inner feelings in the modern fashion.¹⁶

There were many reasons for the prevalence of formulae and practical information, but these kinds of formulations were especially important in maintaining the hierarchies and values of early modern culture. Everyone was expected to show knowledge of their proper place in society, a place that had been granted by God.¹⁷ Even close family members paid attention to proper hierarchical forms of address, such as the polite use of the third person singular or the second person plural.¹⁸ Queen Catharina was often familiar when speaking to her sisters, addressing them as “Dear Sister”, while they addressed her as “Your Majesty”, as can be seen in a letter by Countess Cecilia: “I am always willing to show Y[our] M[ajesty] all humble loving service, in all ways possible to me, and I wish y[our] M[ajesty] the gracious protection and guardianship of God, now and always”.¹⁹

These formulae may have been primarily for the benefit of other people rather than for the receiver herself. The practice of writing preserved many elements of oral, or semi-oral, culture.²⁰ It was anticipated that letters would be read aloud,

15 For documents in other files, see Cecilia Stenbock to Queen Catharina, 22 September [no year, but before 1622] Ericssbergsarkivet, Autografsamlingen Vol. 202: Stenbock A-E, SRA; Ebba Stenbock to Queen Catharina, Castle of Turku, 5 June 1597, Kopiikirja 1592–1601 (“the Book of Copied Documents 1592–1601”), 131–132, KA; Queen Catharina to Beata Stenbock, Stegeborg 23 February 1553; published in Johan Axel Almquist (ed.) 1906. *Konung Gustaf den förstes registratur XXIV* (1553, 1554). Stockholm: Riksarkivet, 37. For other examples of family correspondence, see Abraham Brahe’s archives in Skoklostersamlingen 2:7 and 2:8, SRA; Samuel S. Loenbom (ed.) 1767. *Historiska märkvärdigheter till upplysning af Swenska häfder 2*. Stockholm: Kongl. Finska Boktryckeriet, 124–126.

16 James Daybell 2001. Introduction. In James Daybell (ed.) *Early Modern Women’s Letter Writing, 1450–1700*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2–3. On self-conscious, in-depth family correspondence in the early twentieth century, see Leskelä-Kärki, *Towards a Cultural History of Sisterhood*, 131–138, and Leskelä-Kärki, *Kirjoittajan maailmassa*, 474–517.

17 Roger Dalrymple 2001. Reaction, Consolation and Redress in the Letters of the Paston Women. In James Daybell (ed.) *Early Modern Women’s Letter Writing, 1450–1700*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 17.

18 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Kastelholm, 17 December 1577, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

19 Cecilia Stenbock to Queen Catharina, Haga, 22 September [no year but before 1622]. Ericssbergsarkivet, Autografsamlingen Vol. 202: Stenbock A-E (microfilm), SRA.

20 Walter J. Ong 1991 (1982). *Orality and Literacy*. London and New York: Routledge, 102–105;

overheard, stolen or confiscated, so it was important that their contents and style be presentable to a potentially wide audience. Sensitive and confidential topics, such as politics and intimate family matters, were mentioned with caution. A messenger often revealed more information by word of mouth, or a sender might suggest meeting for a more open discussion.²¹

If letters were formulated to impress listeners and to function as a mere support for oral communication, can they convey the intent of the signatory? Can female correspondents be regarded as the authors of letters they did not necessarily write or formulate? These difficulties are characteristic not only of Swedish material; similar problems have been encountered by English scholars, for example. Surviving letters are undoubtedly poor echoes of past events. However, women can be seen to operate through letters, where, at least indirectly, they express their wishes, aims or objections, report on their activities and inquire about news.²² Finally, as has been emphasised by Ulla Koskinen, conventional formulae were not merely empty words: they could be used to strengthen, question or negotiate relations between sisters and their relatives.²³ This role emerges clearly on a closer study of the correspondence.

The special bond of sisterhood?

The rhetorical devices of hierarchy on the one hand and familial affection on the other should not be understood as being in opposition, with the former representing “formality” and the latter “true affections”. Rather the rhetorical devices of kinship and affection were part and parcel of the conventional formulae used in early modern correspondence. In fact, noblewomen in early modern Sweden commonly addressed each other as “Sister”, irrespective of whether they were full sisters, half-sisters, step-sisters, cousins, sisters-in-law or sisters in rank. For noblewomen, sisterhood was practically synonymous with intimate and benevolent relations or at least indicates a willingness to strive for these relations. In the same way, noblemen would call each other “Dear Brothers” or “Dear Brothers and Friends”.²⁴

To some extent, the rhetoric of sisterhood/brotherhood and friendship overlapped. It should be remarked, however, that relations between siblings were presented as an ideal form of togetherness that was imitated by friends. Friendship was not yet seen by Swedish letter writers as a relationship between kindred spirits. Like

Daybell, Introduction, 1–3. See also Elizabeth S. Cohen, 1993. *Between Oral and Written Culture: The Social Meaning of an Illustrated Love Letter*. In Barbara B. Diefendorf & Carla Hesse (eds.) *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 181–201.

21 Jennifer C Ward 2001. *Letter-Writing by English Noblewomen in the Early Fifteenth Century*. In James Daybell (ed.) *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450–1700*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 32; Anu Lahtinen 2004. *Familjen i senmedeltida brev*. *Finsk tidskrift*, 138.

22 Daybell, Introduction, 3; Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, 102–115.

23 Koskinen, *Friends and Brothers*, 239–240.

24 Koskinen, *Friends and Brothers*, 239–241.

many other early modern Europeans, they still saw friendship in terms of loyalty among peers and members of the same network.²⁵ In the same way, people in more distinctly hierarchical relationships would sometimes present parent-child relations as the ideal model for protectors and protégés.²⁶

These practices call into question any attempt to limit definitions of sisterhood to biological or genealogical terms.²⁷ Sisterly terms, supported by notions of friendship, implied a closeness that was associated both with family relationships and with people who shared a relatively similar, if not entirely equal, social status: noble “sisters” were all well-born, even though some of them may have had a higher status than others. The significance of the same social status for sisterly rhetoric is illustrated by the fact that women of illegitimate birth were excluded from the sisterly network. Even if they had been acknowledged by their noble fathers, they were not referred to as “sisters” by their legitimate half-sisters or half-brothers. They were merely accepted as trusted servants of the household.²⁸

The culture of the Nordic aristocracy was not as sophisticated as that of their peers on the Continent or in England. This difference was reflected in the art of writing as well. Some male Swedish aristocrats were familiar with letter-writing manuals in Latin, such as that of Erasmus of Rotterdam. It seems, however, that very few sixteenth-century Swedish noblewomen knew Latin or had studied the theory of rhetoric. Unlike their English contemporaries, they had no vernacular manuals to resort to; it was only in the seventeenth century that Swedish noble men and women both started to receive a more thorough education.²⁹ Nevertheless, the above-mentioned terms, and the sisterly rhetoric connected with them, were already well known and widely practiced in medieval Swedish correspondence and very skillfully used in sixteenth-century noblewomen’s letters.³⁰ Some documents

25 Luuc Kooijmans 1997. *Vriendschap en de kunst van het overleven in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 14–18; Koskinen, Friends and Brothers. See also English and later Swedish noblewomen’s use of the words “cousin” and “friend”, Ylva Hasselberg 1998. *Den sociala ekonomin. Familjen Clason och Furudals bruk 1804–1856*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 86; Barbara J. Harris 2004. Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women, 1450–1550. In James Daybell (ed.) *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 39. By contrast, see, for example, Erasmus’s definitions of friendship in his letters, Lisa Jardine 1996. *Reading Shakespeare Historically*. London: Routledge, 87–97.

26 Lahtinen, Familjen i senmedeltida brev, 139–140; Anu Lahtinen 2007. *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset. Naiset toimijoina Flemingin sukupiirissä 1470–1620*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 89.

27 See Davidoff 1995, 207–208.

28 Lahtinen, Suojatit, apurit ja kiistakumppanit.

29 On English vernacular manuals, see Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen 2003. “Best patterns for your imitation”: Early Modern Letter-Writing Instruction and Real Correspondence. In Risto Hiltunen & Janne Skaffari (eds.) *Discourse Perspectives on English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 167–195. On Swedish letter forms, see Stina Hansson 1988. *Svensk brevskrivning. Teori och tillämpning*. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 21, 144–145. Very little is known about the education of Swedish women in the sixteenth century, but see Stina Hansson 1993. *Salongsretorik. Beata Rosenhane (1638–1674), hennes övningsböcker och den klassiska retoriken*. Göteborg: Göteborg universitet, for information on the education of women in the seventeenth century.

30 For a medieval example, see Lucia Skälge to her sister-in-law Brita Svärd in 1472, published in *Finlands medeltidsurkunder IV*, document no. 3657.

suggest that young people from noble families were guided by their elders to comprehend and use correct forms of address when writing letters. In addition, their scribes may have studied rhetoric.³¹

A slight distinction existed, for example, between the more intimate “Heart’s Dear Sisters” (“hjärtans kära systrar”, that is “very dear sisters”), which usually suggested consanguineous or close filial relations, and “Dear Sisters and Friends” (“kära systrar och vänner”) – a form of address often used between sisters-in-law, and almost always between distant relatives and unrelated noblewomen. The use of “Heart’s Dear Sister” may also have been a strategic and manipulative device, used to give the impression of intimacy for certain purposes. Personal benefit may have been the motive, for instance, when Baroness Ebba addressed the young wife of her nephew in the following manner:

High-Born Countess, Heart’s Dear Sister, it is always my pleasure to receive good news about the well-being of my Heart’s Dear Sister and brother and their beloved protégés, and I want to thank my D[ear] S[ister] lovingly for all the sisterly, affectionate benevolence shown [...] which I am willing to compensate with all loving gratitude and sisterly, faithful benevolence, by any means God will grant me [...].³²

This greeting was quite characteristic of its time, with its wishes, thanks and promises of reciprocity, and its references to kinship as a basis for the closeness of the correspondents.³³

These rhetorical tools could even be used to impose moral obligations. In this respect, letters between “sisters” were similar to those written between “brothers”. In the letter cited above, Baroness Ebba linked her greetings to a request for economic help. Correspondents would expect certain services from a “Dear Brother/Sister” or a “Dear Friend”. In return they would eloquently promise future services. Requests could be accompanied by small presents, such as a mirror or a small box.³⁴ If a person had little chance to reciprocate, she could appeal to the fact that God would eternally reward generous individuals.³⁵

31 For a more distant letter, see Märta Boije to Margareta Banér, Reval, 25 May 1594, a copy of which is in the Reinhold Hausenin arkisto (“the Private Archive of Reinhold Hausen”), Vol. 20, KA; For a sisterly letter, see Brita Stenbock to her cousin Anna Banér, Strömsholm, 17 July 1603, Stenbockssamlingen, Stenbockska familjepapper Vol. E 5658, SRA; Hansson, *Salongsretorik*, 100–125; *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 109–110.

32 Ebba Stenbock to Elsa Gyllenstierna, Drottningholm, 21 May 1606, Elsa Nilsson Gyllenstiernas brevväxling, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

33 Koskinen, Friends and Brothers, 242.

34 Elin Fleming to Anna Hogenskild (erroneously called Bielke), 1 July 1578, Handlingar och brev rörande släkten Bielke, Vol. X 255d, Uppsala universitetsbibliotek (Uppsala University Library); Märta Boije to Margareta Banér, Reval, 25 May 1594, a copy in Reinhold Hausenin arkisto (“The Private Archive of Reinhold Hausen”), Vol. 20, KA. See also Koskinen, Friends and Brothers.

35 Ebba Stenbock to Axel Oxenstierna, Strömsholm, 26 March 1613, Axel Oxenstiernas brevväxling B:1, Inkomna brev och ansökningar Vol. Steinecker–Stiernkors, SRA; Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 58–60, 174–176.

If rhetorical devices of sisterhood were so commonly used, were any special meanings attached to the relationship between consanguineous sisters? Although the Stenbock correspondence does not offer explicit analysis of consanguineous sisterly relations, the topics and formulae of the letters may still reveal some special features of consanguine sisterhood, as Queen Catharina of Sweden’s letter to her sister, Countess Beata, in February 1553, shows:

Our special grace and loving greetings etc. Since you, my heart’s dear sister, Lady Beata, have spent such a long time away from our company, we are now greatly longing [for you] and ask for the opportunity to discuss [matters] with you etc. It is, therefore, our gracious and loving request that you take the trouble to come to us in Upland, if it is convenient to you; we are willing to compensate it with grace and affection.³⁶

In the previous year, Catharina had become the third spouse of sixty-year-old King Gustavus of Sweden.³⁷ As queen, Catharina was entitled to use the royal plural and to greet her sister Cecilia with grace. To her sister, however, she could not – or would not – give a direct order to visit her court, as she might do with people other than near relatives. Instead she expressed her affection. The royal terms of grace (*nåde*) were accompanied by, or even substituted for, affectionate references (*kär, kärilige*). In the same way, her sisters, while expressing their humility, used terms of affection alongside terms of subjection (*underdånighet*).

What may be more relevant, however, is the emphasis Queen Catharina placed on the longing for her sister’s company. In its contemporary context, it is the strong expression “to long greatly” (“*längta mycket*”) and the allusion to personal conversation together with the *relative* brevity of formal greetings that give the letter a certain degree of simplicity and intimacy. In this sense, the letters by Queen Catharina resemble the correspondence between her aunts, Queen Margareta and Countess Märta Leijonhufvud.³⁸ The relative straightforwardness may also reflect the young age of both the Queen and Lady Beata, who were about seventeen and twenty years old respectively. In the years to come, the aging sisters would adopt more formal terms of address.

The desire to discuss matters with her sisters is a recurring theme in Queen Catharina’s letters. It seems to testify to a special closeness between the sisters. A number of topics, such as marital plans and political issues, were usually shared only with near relatives. As I have argued elsewhere, even elderly female relatives or mothers- and sisters-in-law could be important resources.³⁹ Still, both the

36 Queen Catharina to Beata Stenbock, Stegeborg, 23 February 1553; published in *Konung Gustaf den förstes registratur* XXIV, 37.

37 Lars-Olof Larsson 2002. *Gustav Vasa – landsfader eller tyrann?* Stockholm: Prisma, 304–306.

38 See the genealogy of the Stenbock sisters (fig. 1). The original letters are in De la Gardieska samlingen, Historiska handlingar 1:4 (Margareta Leijonhufvud), Lund universitetsbibliotek (Lund University Library), hereafter cited as LUB.

39 Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 109–119. On female networks, see also Harris, *Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women*.

rhetoric and the topics of the letter seem to express a special intimacy between consanguine sisters. A definite closeness seems to be expressed in a letter written by Queen Catharina, who was planning to spend the summer with her sisters, all of whom were then in their thirties, on the Åland Islands (Ahvenanmaa), a fiefdom belonging to Catharina:⁴⁰

Our Sisterly Loving Greetings now and always with Almighty God [...] We are heading for Åland as soon as possible, provided that God grants us health, and it would please us to see our dear sister join us there. In that case, our sister could also talk with our dear sisters, Ebba and Märta [who will be there as well]. And we have learnt about my⁴¹ sister Ebba's condition that she is expecting [to give birth] now at Midsummer, would to God that everything would go well [...] Times are beautiful and the summer is drawing closer, so we are expecting our D[ear] S[ister] to arrange her errands so that we can spend time together.⁴²

There are also signs of a special identification with siblings of the same sex. In her letter, Catharina expresses good will towards her brothers, but does not entertain any special hope of meeting them. This is hardly surprising if one thinks of early modern culture, in which the roles and tasks of women and men were often defined in starkly different terms. Because of this, women's letters were more focused on family affairs than those of men, even though this difference is not categorical.

The family life cycle was one of the essential factors shaping the lives of these aristocratic sisters: births, marriages, and deaths. In the letter cited above, Queen Catharina referred to Baroness Ebba's pregnancy and to her coming childbirth. A year and a half prior to this, Queen Catharina had organised the wedding of Ebba and Baron Klaus Fleming, the future Steward of Finland and Livonia.⁴³ Now it was the time for near relatives to gather together in order to witness and help their sister in labour. Their presence continued to be important afterwards, when the child was baptised and influential relatives arrived to participate in the christening festivities and to act as godparents.⁴⁴

40 It had been supposed that Queen Catharina never visited her fiefdom after she was widowed. (See, for example, Reinhold Hausen 1934. *Kastelholm slott och dess borgherrar*. Helsingfors: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 76.) There are, however, letters and other references to her visits there. Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Kastelholm, 17 December 1577 and 3 December 1585, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA; Voudintilit (Bailliff's Records), Vol. 2812, fol. 11r, KA. See also Per Brahe to Cecilia Stenbock, Svartsjö, 10 July 1577, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA; Anu Lahtinen 2005. Kastelholmasta Käkisalmeen ja takaisin. Flemingin sukupiiri ja sen yhteistyöverkostot. *Orpana. Tampereen seudun sukututkimusseuran jäsenlehti* 4–6.

41 A slip from the royal first person plural.

42 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Strömsholm, 31 May [1575?], Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

43 Queen Catharina to Hogenskild Bielke and Anna Sture, 8 September 1573, Hogenskild Bielkes samling Vol. 2, Bielkesamlingen E 1976, SRA.

44 O. Walde, 1922. Några kalenderanteckningar av Erik Sparre. *Personhistorisk tidskrift* 23, passim; Carl Magnus Stenbock & Reinhold Stenbock (eds.) 1920. *Abraham Brahes Tidebok*. Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag, passim.

Queen Catharina often assumed a central position in family gatherings. With her royal prestige, she was a welcome guest, protector and godparent, and her hospitality was recorded in notebooks kept by her relatives.⁴⁵ She was happy to accommodate her sisters’ children, and, furthermore, to take charge of their upbringing.⁴⁶ In one of her letters she mentions the presence of her little nephew (fig. 2). Catharina was staying at Kastelholm over the winter together with the family of her sister Ebba. In a postscript the Queen states that Gustaf Fleming, her nephew, “has helped us to write, which is why this letter is so well written”.⁴⁷ Gustaf could not have been more than three years old at the time. Moreover, the letter is not well written. The paper is blotted, as if it has been wiped with a cloth while the ink was still wet. Thus, the sentence can be read as gentle irony, typical of its time, and a humorous excuse for the young child’s playing around and interfering in the writing process.

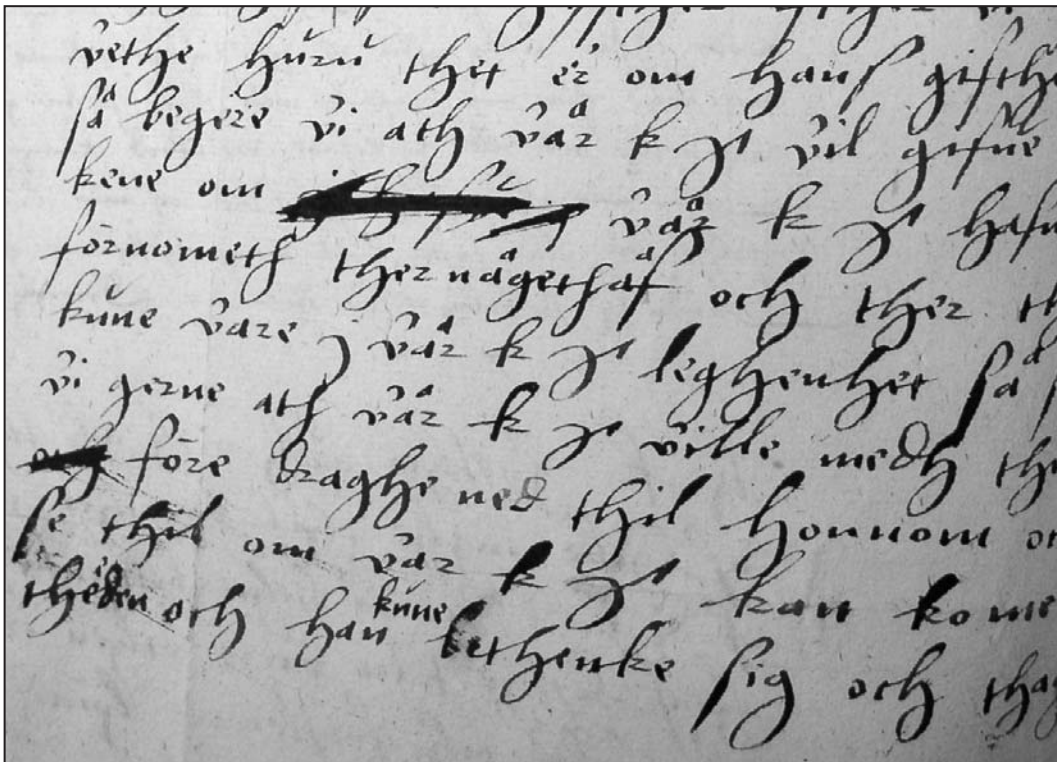


Figure 2. Letter of Queen Catharina to her sister Cecilia, possibly “joking” about Gustaf Fleming. Extract of a postscript by Queen Catharine to her sister Cecilia. At the end of the letter, the Queen explains: “Dear Sister, Gösta Fleming has helped Us to write, which is why this letter is so well written” (“K[äre] S[yster] gösthe flemingh hafuer hulpet os ath skrifue therföre är thethe bref så vel skrefueth”).

45 Queen Catharina to Elsa Nilsson Gyllenstierna, Drottningholm, 18 March 1608, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA; Stenbock and Stenbock 1920, 5 et passim; Walde, Några kalenderanteckningar, 29.

46 Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 152–157.

47 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Kastelholm, 17 December 1577, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

Tensions and tender worries

While the letters express a desire for reunions, they also suggest that the sisters spent long periods apart. In her later years, Catharina often lamented her sense of loneliness.⁴⁸ When apart, the sisters inquired about one another's condition, and displayed an intense interest in the health of relatives.⁴⁹ In 1588, for example, Queen Catharina wrote to Cecilia regarding Ebba's illness. The Queen suggested that Ebba should put lettuce and lettuce seeds mixed with almonds and a little rose-water on her temples. After numerous fashionable pieces of medical advice, the Queen expressed her strong feelings in a way that was likely to be directed only to close relatives:

Almighty Eternal God give us good news from her, And we ask our D[ear] sister [Cecilia] to inform us at once if she gets news about our D[ear] sister [Ebba], as God knows we cannot well be at ease until we hear about the condition of our D[ear] sister.⁵⁰

It seems that a special feeling of togetherness and care was constructed in the letters, at least on the part of Queen Catharina. The assumption seems to have been that "there is no friend like a sister" – an assumption that could also be used for manipulative ends. The sisters, however, would not always live up to the ideals that were set for them. Like English noblewomen, even Swedish sisters might notice that obligations to a husband or children could relegate siblings to second place.⁵¹ In 1591, Queen Catharina complained about just such an event. Countess Cecilia had been prevented from visiting, apparently because her daughter-in-law, Lady Brita Bielke, who had recently been widowed, was weak after giving birth to a son.⁵² The Queen's tone expresses discontent and possibly some reproach:

[...] our Dear sister had planned to visit us here at the Strömsholm Castle during the Easter festivities, but now our Dear sister has been hindered because of the weakness of Lady Brita. Now it does not please us that our Dear sister would not have the opportunity to come to us, may God Almighty help Lady Brita back to health again, and God knows that we have been looking forward to and longing to converse with our Dear

48 Queen Catharina's correspondence with Cecilia Stenbock, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA. See also Brita Stenbock to Anna Banér, Strömsholm, 17 July 1603, Stenbockssamlingen, Stenbockska familjepapper Vol. E 5658, SRA.

49 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Strömsholm, 20 July 1588 and 4 December 1597, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA; Margareta Fleming to Johan Fleming, Stockholm, 24 February 1598, Strödda historiska handlingar 18, SRA; Queen Catharina to Abraham Brahe, Strömsholm, 14 April 1610, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

50 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Strömsholm, 20 July 1588, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA. See also Ödberg, *Om Hogenskild Bielkes moder*, 31.

51 Barbara J. Harris 2002. *English Aristocratic Women, 1450–1550. Marriage and Family, Property and Careers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 201–203.

52 On the context of the letter, see Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 146–150.

sister, because it is a long time since we two met, and we have experienced much grief and many departures since then.⁵³

It can be mentioned in passing that Lady Brita’s illness may have served as an excuse for Cecilia’s absence. It was not the habit of contemporaries to object openly to the wishes of their relatives, least of all to royal personages. Instead, people would refer to *forces majeures* and sweeten their letters with expressions of affection, reverence and future obedience.⁵⁴

When displeasure was to be expressed, even the Queen tended to resort to inverted phraseology, with such formulations as “we cannot appreciate this decision”. The style may have been meant to preserve the dignity and good manners of a noble person or to avoid creating written evidence of a break-off of relations. In one postscript, written in her own hand, Queen Catharina expressed her exasperation at her younger brother’s wedding plans:

Heart’s Dear Sister, God knows that we are not a little annoyed that our brother Karl [...] is selfishly going to cast aside his property inherited from our late lamented parents. And we have so often given him our loving and sisterly advice and urged him to act to his own advantage and to bring some joy to his relatives. But he has not once written to us or answered in any way [...] we are asking our D[ear] S[ister] to let us know if our D[ear] S[ister] has any news [...] whether he might heed our advice and be obedient to those who want the best for him.⁵⁵

Once again, royal and sisterly roles are intricately intertwined. Queen Catharina refers to “loving and sisterly” advice, but not to her royal authority, while her choice of the phrase “be obedient” (*lyda*) seems to imply the expectation of an authority more persuasive than merely that of an older sister. The example also implies that even though sisters were often subordinate to their brothers, higher age or social status could turn their positions around – a shift unthinkable in the more hierarchical relationship between parents and children.⁵⁶

It seems that it was Karl’s idea for a morning gift (*morgongåva*) that caused displeasure. A morning gift was paid by the groom to the bride in landed property after the wedding night and served as an annuity for the wife should she be widowed. Karl’s plan entailed giving his future wife the important family estate of Tofta, an intolerable prospect for Queen Catharina.⁵⁷ The case serves as an

53 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Strömsholm, 1 April 1591, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

54 See, for example, Cecilia Stenbock’s letter draft, explaining to Queen Catharina why she cannot come to visit her. There is no date, but the draft is written on the same paper as Queen Catharina’s letter to Cecilia Stenbock, Rydboholm, 26 June 1594, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

55 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Kastelholm, 17 December 1577, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

56 Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 126.

57 Korpiola, Mia 2004. *Between Betrothal and Bedding: The Making of Marriage in Sweden, ca. 1200–1610*. Ph. Thesis. University of Helsinki; Loenbom, *Historiska märkvärdigheter*, 124–126. On

example of clashing economic interests, which, then as now, had the potential to strain relations between siblings.⁵⁸

Despite certain tensions, the sisters and brothers supported each other. In many cases, Queen Catharina used her authority to help her siblings when they were tried for crimes or were suspected of treason.⁵⁹ As I have stated above, sisters were more focused on family affairs than on politics, but these two subjects were often intertwined – a trait typical of both early modern Sweden and of other West European cultures of the time.⁶⁰ In the 1590s, sister Ebba became deeply enmeshed in political turmoil. Her husband, Baron Klaus Fleming, the Admiral and Steward of Finland and Livonia (then parts of the Kingdom of Sweden), was an intimate of King Sigismund of Poland and Sweden. Sigismund resided principally in Poland, and thus it fell to Klaus Fleming to defend the King's position against the Swedish pretender to the throne, Duke Charles.

In 1597, Klaus Fleming died in the midst of military preparations. His death is recorded by Baroness Ebba in a letter to her sister, Queen Catharina. The description is akin to medieval and early modern formulations of *mors beata*, or a beautiful death.⁶¹ Baroness Ebba emphasised that Klaus's departure had been decreed by God, not by evil forces as suggested by her husband's enemies:⁶²

Neither do I doubt that those who did not wish him well during his lifetime would like to spread false rumours of his Christian departure. That is why I want humbly to inform Your Majesty that he departed in the Lord's grace [...] and asked his barber-surgeon, Master Marcus, to read holy texts to him, and entrusted his life and soul to the hands and will of God Almighty, and passed away in a dignified manner, so that I can have consolation of it through all the sorrowful days of my life [...].⁶³

morning gifts, see also Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 56–58, 94–102, 124–125.

58 See, for example, Lahtinen, *Siskot ja veljet*.

59 King John III to Queen Catharina, 12 March 1574, Riksregistratur 1574, fol. 48r-v, SRA; Duke Charles to Queen Catharina, 4 May 1574, Hertig Karls registratur 1574, fol. 31r, SRA; Duke Charles to Queen Catharina, Nyköping, 11 January 1599, Hertig Karls registratur 1599, SRA; Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Strömsholm, 5 November 1597 and Stockholm, 5 March 1600, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA.

60 See, for example, Harris, *Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women*, 43–44.

61 Göran Stenberg 1998. *Döden dikterar. En studie av likpredikningar och gravtal från 1600- och 1700-talen*. Stockholm: Atlantis, 145–150.

62 On speculation in connection with Klaus Fleming's death, see *Suomi* 1/1842, 37–39; Yrjö Koskinen 1877. *Nuijasota. Sen syyt ja tapaukset. Toinen, uudistettu painos*. Helsinki: Yrjö Koskinen, 377; Berndt Federley 1947. *Claes Fleming i hävdateckning och skönlitteratur*. In *Historiska och litteraturhistoriska studier* 23. Helsingfors: Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland, 429; Carl Jakob Gardberg & Daniel Toijer (eds.) 1962. *Diarium Gyllenianum eller Petrus Magni Gylleni Dagbok 1622–1667*. Karlstad: Nya Wermlands-tidningens boktryckeri, 158; Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 73–75.

63 Ebba Stenbock to Queen Catharina, Castle of Turku, 5 June 1597, Kopiokirja 1592–1601 ("The Book of Copied Documents 1592–1601"), 131–132, KA.

This letter was perhaps meant to be copied – and indeed it survived as a copy – and to be distributed to other relatives and peers. Baroness Ebba, whose own position depended on the posthumous image of Klaus Fleming, swore to defend the reputation of her husband and appealed to her royal sister for help and advice. In the style of some other noble Swedish widows, Ebba made use of her late husband’s authority and of information transmitted from his inner circle in trying to fulfill his plans.⁶⁴ At this time, Sweden was under the rule of Duke Charles, while officers in Finland and Livonia were still faithful to King Sigismund. In the autumn of 1597, Duke Charles came to Finland to vanquish his opposition. Baroness Ebba herself took part in the defence of Turku Castle.⁶⁵ This action subsequently led to her and her daughters’ imprisonment and the confiscation of their landed property.

Queen Catharina was suspected of helping King Sigismund’s party with advice. She too faced steep losses, as her “Dear Son”, Duke Charles, confiscated victuals from her fiefdom and used them to maintain his armed forces.⁶⁶ In none of the surviving correspondence, however, did Queen Catharina openly comment on these conflicts. It might well have been dangerous to leave written evidence of her political sympathies.⁶⁷ Instead, she wrote of anxiety for her “D[ear] Sister Lady Ebba”, who was now imprisoned in Stockholm along with their sister, Maid Märta, and Ebba’s teenage daughters. Ebba was very ill, which caused the elder sister deep concern:

[...] would to Almighty God who can help in everything that He would help her [Ebba] back to health so that she could still live here with her children and that we, who are her siblings [...] would have the delight of seeing her gaining her health and strength once again, and we can well suppose that her weakness has been caused by the deep grief and sorrow and persecution which she has had to go through.⁶⁸

Even though Queen Catharina did not mention the name of Duke Charles, her use of the word persecution (*förföljelse*) suggests that the Queen was thinking of the person who had imprisoned her sister.

64 Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 70–84.

65 “Berättelse om Åbos belägring 1597”, *Strödda historiska Handlingar* 18, SRA, published in *Suomi* 1/1842, 40–44.

66 Rasmus Henriksson’s report from Åland in 1596, *Acta historica* 1596, KA; Letter of attorney by Duke Charles, 15 July 1597, Hertig Karls registratur 1597 II, fol. 38v-38(b)r, SRA; Duke Charles to Queen Catharina, Nyköping 11 January 1599, Hertig Karls registratur 1599, SRA; Hausen 1934, 88.

67 See, for example, “Förhör med tvenne båtsmän 13 July 1599”, *Strödda historiska handlingar* 18, SRA; Torvald Höjer & Lars Sjödin (eds.) 1909. *Svenska riksdagsakter under tidehvarvet 1521–1718, IV 1597–1598*. Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 355–356; Daniel Almqvist (ed.) 1954. *Stockholms stads tänkeböcker 1596–1599*. Stockholm: Stockholms stadsarkiv, 340–344; *Svenska riksdagsakter IV*, 423–424.

68 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Strömsholm, 4 December 1597, *Skoklostersamlingen* 2:5, SRA. See also Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Strömsholm, 5 November 1597, *Skoklostersamlingen* 2:5, SRA.

During these troubled times, many male supporters of King Sigismund fled to Poland, while their wives and daughters remained in Sweden. With their property confiscated, many turned to Queen Catharina, who then appealed to Duke Charles on behalf of her relatives for economic support.⁶⁹ It is in the company of Queen Catharina that Baroness Ebba was mentioned in the early years of the seventeenth century, when she and her daughters were released.⁷⁰ Networks of female relatives provided these women with crucial support and protection.

Motherly Maid Märta

Sixteenth-century Swedish documents and historical studies of the period tend to focus on married people. Relatively little information exists concerning those, like Noble Maid Märta, who remained unmarried. As to the reasons why Märta remained single, one can only speculate: mental or physical handicap, family strategy, economic or political obstacles, even personal choice or accident? Whatever the reason or reasons, her unmarried state had an enormous impact on her life. According to the Law of the Realm, an unmarried woman, regardless of her age, always remained under the guardianship of a relative – a father, a widowed mother or, if the parents were dead, other male relatives. Even though the law was not always strictly followed, many spinsters were tightly bound to their parents and siblings.⁷¹

Maid Märta received an annuity from the estates that had been allotted to her, but after her death, this inherited property returned to her siblings and their children. In official documents, Märta was mentioned in passing or at the end, which reflected her dependent position.⁷² The hierarchy is perceptible in the following document pertaining to the division of inheritance; siblings and brothers-in-law are ranked according to their social status, marital status and age:

69 Malin Sture to Queen Catharina, 23 July 1602, to Cecilia Stenbock, 25 July 1602, and to Karl Stenbock, 1 Aug 1602, Stenbockska familjepapper E 5658, Stenbockssamlingen, SRA.

70 Brita Stenbock to Anna Banér, Strömsholm, 15 July 1603, Stenbockska familjepapper E 5658, Stenbockssamlingen, SRA; Ebba Stenbock's contract of her pledge to Anna Hordeel, Strömsholm, 26 June 1604, Biographica Minora (Ebba Fleming [sic!]), LUB, published in Per Wieselgren (ed.) 1831. *Dela-Gardiska archivét, eller, Handlingar ur greffl. Dela-Gardiska bibliotheket på Löberöd*. Stockholm: Wieselgren Per, V, 3–4, with some misspellings; Märta Stenbock to Abraham Brahe, Drottningholm, 20 April 1608 and 3 June 1608, Skoklostersamlingen 2:7, SRA; Queen Catharina to Abraham Brahe, 28 January 1606 and 14 April 1610, Skoklostersamlingen 2:6, SRA; *Abraham Brahes Tidebok*, 48, 61.

71 Mia Korpiola 2005. Marrying off Sons and Daughters: Attitudes Towards the Consent of Parents and Guardians in Early Modern Sweden. In Grethe Jacobsen, Helle Vogt, Inger Dübeck & Heide Wunder (eds.) *Less Favored – More Favored: Proceedings from a Conference on Gender in European Legal History, 12–19th Centuries*. Copenhagen: The Royal Library, 4; Anu Lahtinen 2004. Gender and Continuity: Women, Men and Landed Property in Medieval Finland. In Anu Lahtinen & Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen (eds.) *History and Change*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 32–45; Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 152–157.

72 See also Johannes Rudbeckius 1622. *Een Christeligh JordeFerdz Predikan [...] Then Höghborna Frw och Förstinna Frw Catharina etc.* Oluf Olufsson [Helsing], fol. 159v.

We,

Catharina, by the Grace of God the Queen of Swedes and Geats etc.

Peder, Count of Visingborg and Baron of Rydboholm, *drots* [Steward of the Realm] etc.
[on behalf of his late wife, Countess **Beata**]

Cecilia, Countess of Bogesund and Lady of Haga

Olof Gustafsson, Baron of Lena etc.

Erik Gustafsson, Baron of Öresten, *lagman* [a supreme judge] of West Gothia and Governor of Älvsborg etc.

Klaus Fleming, Baron of Vik, Admiral of the Realm [on behalf of his wife, Baroness **Ebba**]

Arvid Gustafsson, Baron of Boxholm and *ståthållare* [Steward] of Vadstena etc.

Karl Gustafsson, Baron of Tofta etc.

make it known with this open letter of ours, that we,

as well as our Noble and well-born dear sister, Maid **Märta**,

have been here at Strömsholm Castle and have met for a friendly and legal division of inheritance between siblings.⁷³

As Cordelia Beattie has emphasised, official documents and observations by outsiders do not encompass the full diversity of family relations.⁷⁴ In the family correspondence, Maid Märta is referred to often, and in ways that imply her importance to her sisters and other relatives. When the sisters were in need of company, nursing or other help, they turned to Märta. She could be counted on to report the condition, wishes and greetings of her sisters and their family members when they were too ill or too busy to respond to letters themselves.⁷⁵ Märta also acted as an intermediary for relatives who hoped to receive favours from her royal sister.⁷⁶

As mentioned above, Märta seems to have shared the captivity of her sister, Baroness Ebba. It was Märta who reported on Ebba’s condition, and letters sent by Ebba’s children at that time also mention the presence of their “Dear Aunt, Maid

73 Estate account of the children of Gustaf Stenbock and Brita Leijonhufvud, Strömsholm, 16 May 1584, Slägtarkiven: Stenbock 1aa, De la Gardieska samlingen, LUB. Published in Samuel S. Loenbom (ed.) 1767. *Historiska märkvärdigheter till upplysning af Svenska häfder 1*. Stockholm: Kongl. Finska Boktryckeriet, 121–123.

74 Cordelia Beattie 2001. A Room of One’s Own? The Legal Evidence for the Residential Arrangements of Women Without Husbands in Late Fourteenth- and Early Fifteenth-Century York. In Noël James Menuge (ed.) *Medieval Women and the Law*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 55–56.

75 Arvid Stålarms to Klaus Fleming, Narva, 22 January 1590, Acta Historica 1590, KA; Margareta Fleming to Johan Fleming, Stockholm, 24 February 1598, Strödda historiska handlingar 18, SRA; “Convol. IV 1599” including Johan Fleming’s letters to Ebba Stenbock, Acta Historica 1599, KA, published in Samuel S. Loenbom (ed.) 1770. *Anecdoter Om Namnkunniga Och Märkvärdiga Svenska Män*. Stockholm: Kongl. Finska Boktryckeriet, 15–16; Queen Catharina’s correspondence to Cecilia Stenbock, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA; Cecilia Stenbock to Beata and Ebba Brahe, 14 April 1617, Skoklostersamlingen 2:7, SRA; Abraham Brahe to Cecilia Stenbock (a draft), 1 June 1621, Skoklostersamlingen 2:8, SRA; Brita Stenbock to Anna Banér, Strömsholm, 15 July 1603, Stenbockska familjepapper E 5658, Stenbockssamlingen, SRA; Cecilia Stenbock to Queen Catharina, Haga, 22 September [no year but before 1622], Ericssbergsarkivet, Autografsamlingen Vol. 202: Stenbock A-E, SRA.

76 Märta Stenbock to Abraham Brahe, Drottningholm, 20 April 1608 and 3 June 1608, Skoklostersamlingen 2:7, SRA. About unmarried women as confidantes and mediators, see also Fries, *Teckningar ur svenska adelns familjelif*, 33–34; Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 95–96.

Märta”.⁷⁷ In this kind of politically sensitive situation, it may have been easiest for Märta to take care of her sister and to act as her mediator.

It may well have been Märta’s role as a confidante that inspired a family friend to call her “my dear mother, Maid Märta”, sending his “filial affections”.⁷⁸ While the tone of the letter may have been playful, contemporaries also used the word “mother” (*moder*) to express reverence towards elderly women who enjoyed high status.⁷⁹ This form of address also corresponds to the tasks of nursing and tending, considered the province of women. Märta is often described as undertaking these kinds of tasks. In 1608, she nursed Margaret Brahe, the grandchild of her late sister, Beata. Margaret’s father wrote to “My Dear Aunt”, expressing his gratitude:

[...] especially for My Dear Aunt’s great care, trouble and anxiety for my little daughter; I am not only obliged to thank affectionately My Dear aunt for her virtuousness, which I hereby diligently do; moreover, I want to compensate her deed with all good things in every way, and to be worthy [of her deed].⁸⁰

Maid Märta was equally favourable in her answer, assuring Brahe that it was no trouble at all to take care of the little girl and moreover, that she would always be “willing to do everything in my power for her welfare”.⁸¹

This harmonious rhetoric should not be taken at face value, as it may mask tensions and calculations. Nevertheless, it illustrates that Märta gained respect and gratitude for taking care of her relative’s child. Nursing may have seemed a natural way to live up to the norms of womanhood that were expected of and pursued by women, whether or not they were biological mothers. In serving relatives, an unmarried woman – whether in Sweden, England or France – could gain some agency and influence.⁸² It is likely, though, that young girls generally viewed the position of unmarried women as unenviable and recognised the benefits of marital status.⁸³

77 Queen Catharina to Cecilia Stenbock, Strömsholm, 4 December 1597, Skoklostersamlingen 2:5, SRA; Margareta Fleming to Johan Fleming, Stockholm, 24 February 1598, Strödda historiska handlingar 18, SRA; document “Convol. IV 1599” including Johan Fleming’s letters to Ebba Stenbock, Acta Historica 1599, KA, published in Loenbom, *Anecdoter*, 16–17.

78 Arvid Stålarms to Klaus Fleming, Narva, 22 January 1590, Acta Historica 1590, KA. Despite the annotations written in the folder by an archivist, it is clear from the contents of the letter that it is Maid Märta who is meant. Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset*, 155–156.

79 See the entry for the word *moder* in *Svenska akademiens ordbok*. Online. Available at <<http://g3.spraakdata.gu.se/saob/>>.

80 Abraham Brahe to Märta Stenbock (a draft), 12 April 1608, Skoklostersamlingen 2:8, SRA. The document is filed among the letter drafts addressed to Märta’s sister, Cecilia.

81 Märta Stenbock to Abraham Brahe, Drottningholm, 20 April 1608, Skoklostersamlingen 2:7, SRA.

82 Kristin E. Gager 1997. Women, Adoption, and Family Life in Early Modern Paris. *Journal of Family History* 22, 6–7, 14–15 and 19; Beattie, A Room of One’s Own?, 52; Kaartinen, Äidit ja tyttäret uuden ajan alussa, 176; Lahtinen, Kastelholmasta Käkisalmeen, 4–6.

83 Judith M. Bennett 2002. Ventriloquisms: When Maidens Speak in English Songs, c. 1300–1550. In Anne L. Klinck & Ann Marie Rasmussen (eds.) *Medieval Woman’s Song. Cross-Cultural Approaches*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 201; Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 96–98.

Conclusions

While early modern sisterly correspondence is often difficult to interpret, certain conclusions seem warranted. Aristocratic sixteenth-century Swedish women were not very familiar with the finer points of Renaissance epistolary rhetoric. However, they were accustomed to using sisterly rhetoric in many contexts, they knew the difference between “Dear Sisters” and “Heart’s Dear Sisters”, and they were capable of using this rhetoric for their own ends. While rhetoric related to kinship was not limited to consanguineous relationships, the notion of consanguine sisterhood seems to have constituted a special form of intimacy. As has recently been observed, sisterhood was one of the important bases for female networks in early modern European culture.⁸⁴

The tendency of the documents to focus on mutual interests may well reflect the relations between close family members in early modern culture. Close relatives were judicially, socially, politically, economically and even emotionally dependent on one another’s support. They had both mutual and conflicting interests in inherited property and the income from family estates. Political troubles faced by one sister could also affect the lives of the others. Furthermore, even though the sisters might spend long periods apart, they still shared many important experiences: the birth of children, imprisonment, death, sunny summer days and long winter evenings. Sisterly relationships were more family-oriented than brotherly relationships or relations between sisters and brothers. Yet because political matters were family matters for most aristocratic women, their lives were also intertwined with the power struggles and turmoil of the time, and they had their roles to play in these struggles.

Relations between the Stenbock sisters were not equal or free from conflict. The influential role of a dowager queen was quite different from that of an unmarried elderly noblewoman, and it is possible that different fates caused some degree of misery and bitterness between the sisters. On the other hand, early modern culture was not primarily oriented to the individual pursuit of fulfilling one’s personal hopes. While people certainly had personal interests, women in particular were brought up to take into account their obligations to, and dependence on, their families and peers, and to serve these aims and bow to the will of Providence.⁸⁵ They were less likely to face a severe conflict between personal vocation and family expectations, a conflict more characteristic of modern women.⁸⁶ Even unmarried sisters, like Maid Märta, might find the meaning of their lives in serving others and perhaps gain

84 See, for example, Susan Frye & Karen Robertson (eds.) 1999. *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens. Women’s Alliances in Early Modern England*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press; Daybell, *Women and Politics*.

85 Natalie Zemon Davis 1986. Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth-Century France. In Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna & David E. Wellbery (eds.) *Reconstructing Individualism. Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 61; Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter*, 8.

86 Leskelä-Kärki, *Kirjoittajan maailmassa*.

some influence through their sisters. In these respects, aristocratic Swedish sisters and their life courses had many similarities with their contemporaries in England and on the Continent.

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