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“The evidence for the inferior intellectual capacity of women is so obvious and overwhelming that anyone who can lightly set it aside must be defective in their *attitude* to evidence [...]” (David Stove 1990)

Swedish Women Online (SWO) from the Middle Ages to the Present A Biographical Dictionary of Swedish Women, in Swedish and English

Why are there no female artists, philosophers, scientists, politicians, or authors? This question surfaces every time the history of art, literature, medicine, and philosophy are to be written. One important reason is that writing history is based on the existing biographical dictionaries where the principle of selection is gender biased. Only five to ten percent of the entries in the large Swedish biographical dictionaries are women. Therefore, if writing history is to become less misleading, then the very point of departure – the source material – has to be revised.

As Jenny Teichman says in her response to David Stove (above): “Stove treats the supposed connection between lack of achievement and lack of capacity as on par with the connection between achievement and capacity. But this is a mistake.” (Teichman 2001: 150)

The paper presents a project with aim to create an online Biographical Dictionary of Swedish Women – hereafter abbreviated as SWO – which would be linked to other online digital resources and works of reference dealing with Swedish women; this on-line dictionary will itself instigate and contribute to further research and scholarly work.

Theoretical reflections

The women who are represented in the existing biographical dictionaries tend to have been married to prominent men or to have been active in various cultural professions, for example as actors, singers, or writers. This kind of representation mirrors the male hegemonic view on what constitutes an important woman rather than being a real assessment of the impact of women on the development of society. In order to obtain a realistic picture of women’s role in this development, prominent women in the areas of politics, science, popular movements, etc., must also be represented and given a biography even though they may not, for various reasons, ‘have made’ as big ‘a name for themselves’ as their male colleagues (cf. Steedman 2001). Women’s unpaid work, for example, was of great importance to the stability of society for a long time. Women of various professions executed their work in the shadow of a man and/or together with a man with the result that achievements that might have been considered as having being accomplished by women were not acknowledged as such. Women’s entrance onto the public scene also needs to be rendered visible, even though it took place at a later point in time than that of men.

Thus, in order for women to be included in a national biography, the SBL’s criterion – that those with biographies must have “made a name for themselves within all areas of society” – needs to be interpreted differently than the established and male based way. The historical context must be taken into consideration (Derrida 1996, Steedman 2001, Ricœur 2005).

Method

In accordance with the results of a pilot project, led by Lisbeth Larsson, the SWO will be using the following criteria for selection: (a) women who have connections to Sweden and have contributed to the development of society in general and/or made efforts internationally

and/or at a regional level; (b) historical women of significance who have lived in Sweden; (c) women who were pioneers in different areas; (d) women of significance in the struggle for gender equality; (e) women of regional significance; and (f) women with a connection to Sweden who have made contributions of international significance. Just like SBL, the concept of Sweden and Swedish in SWO follows the historical realities; Finland prior to 1809 will therefore be included. The technical solutions will be developed in collaboration with Språkbanken (the Swedish Language Bank <<http://spraakbanken.gu.se/eng>>), meaning that the work on SWO will be able to both draw upon and inform the digital humanities research infrastructure being developed under the auspices of SWE-CLARIN <<https://sweclarin.se/eng/home>>, where Språkbanken is the coordinating partner.

Expected results

SWO will offer a great number of different search options, such as dates, professions, activities, organizations, political affiliations, and other criteria. With many and diverse search and visualization options, it will be possible for the user to quickly find single pieces of information as well as to make more systematic searches in order to focus upon, for example, professional groups, political networks, time periods, and geographical areas.