

‘Käringamöte’: a masterly Elin Wägner tale – in English at last
Sarah Death

Earlier this year, the first English translation of Elin Wägner’s ‘Käringamöte’ was published in the journal *Swedish Book Review*, available here: swedishbookreview.org/old-wives-meeting

As *Bergsluft* readers will know, this story is one of the linked short stories in Elin Wägner’s mid-career collection *Gammalrödja: skildring av en bygd som ömsar skinn* (1931, *Gammalrödja: A Country District Sheds its Skin*). The story came back to prominence in Sweden recently when was selected for inclusion in an anthology of the best Swedish short stories from the early nineteenth century to the present day. As a result, it is hopefully reaching a new generation of readers.

The translation into English will, with luck, have a similar effect. I have not translated any of Wägner’s short stories for some time, but I have been looking for an excuse to do so. A few years ago, I heard about the project ‘Virginia’s Sisters’, which aimed to publish an anthology of writing by women who were contemporaries of British novelist Virginia Woolf, to help raise funds for a statue of her on the banks of the River Thames in Richmond.

The anthology was published in 2023; it includes work by Virginia Woolf herself and many British and US writers of the period as well as work in translation including texts by Magda Isanos, Gabriela Mistral, Marina Tsvetaeva and May Ziadeh.
www.aurorometro.com/product/virginias-sisters/

Sadly my Wägner translation was not selected for inclusion. The feedback on its non-selection included a throwaway comment that rather took me aback: the publisher thought some elements of the story too primitive and raw.

Maybe the busy publishers, for whom Wägner was a new voice, overlooked the full depth and breadth of this wry and ingenious story. I can only speculate about whether they possibly found it too flippant, but if they did, that would at least signal that my translation was able to convey some of Wägner’s waspish irreverence. I would like to think that the editor caught at least some of the delicious irony with which her story is suffused.

‘Käringamöte’ opens with these words:

Det är lyckligt för två äkta makar när deras värld är uppdelad i två riken.

Det blir alltmera sällsynt, ty hemmet är snart inte något rike mer, och någon drottning behöver det inte.

(It is fortunate for a man and wife if their world is divided into two kingdoms. It is becoming increasingly rare, for soon the home will no longer be a kingdom, and will have no need of a queen.)

But although the story opens with a disagreement between the dean and his wife over whether strict observance of the Sabbath is more important than the suffering of fish left struggling in nets and is ostensibly an account of their tussle for dominance of the marriage, it is an ingeniously constructed narrative that ranges widely over evolving views in society,

changing perceptions of women's role and the clashes that inevitably occur between tradition and innovation, faith, superstition and modern progressive urges. For me it is primarily a tale of archetypal human failings like self-regard, pride, suspicion and hypocrisy, and although deeply rooted in the Småland of the early twentieth century, it is in many ways timeless.

The quest for a publisher continued. I had brought the English translation of Wägner's masterly story into existence and I was determined not to let it go to waste. I was therefore delighted when the editor of *Swedish Book Review* accepted it for publication. This is a journal that has been in existence for over forty years and its editorial team has a good awareness of Swedish literature in the original language. Elin Wägner's oeuvre was not an unknown quantity to them. In part thanks to my efforts and those of my much-missed friend and colleague Helena Forsås-Scott, translated extracts from Wägner's texts, plus articles aspects of her life and work, have quite often featured in its pages over the years, first in the printed magazine and now in the online edition.

As to the earlier potential publisher's perception of 'Käringamöte' as 'primitive', it is true that the passages about Söderbergs' Sara are unsparingly visceral. The poor woman is trapped in lowly servitude; she knows herself to be considered a mere 'husgeråd' and is depicted as a hapless victim of her female biology and the cycle of unwanted childbearing it imposes. Her suffering seems less important to her casual employer Mrs Springer than that of the fish struggling in the nets. But this willingness to shock readers with the brutal and gory nature of women's lives in the past is certainly not unique to Wägner, and Sara is not the only downtrodden and exploited female figure in the author's output. Wägner's female writer contemporaries had similar preoccupations; we could think particularly of working-class writers like Moa Martinson. Nearer our own time Söderbergs' Sara also puts me in mind of some of the female characters in the early volumes of Kerstin Ekman's *Katrineholm quartet*, with its ambition of viewing the emergence of a railway town through the eyes of its women. Ekman gives us another Sara, the wretched but pugnacious Sara Sabina Lans in *Häxringarna* (1974, translated by Linda Schenck as *Witches' Rings*, Norvik Press), who we meet on the very first page:

Hon rökte skinkor åt bönderna. Det var hennes renligaste arbete. Annars fans det ingenting så grovt, så skitigt och så slabbigt att hon inte åtåg sig det.

(She smoked hams for farmers. This was her cleanest job. Otherwise there was nothing so coarse, so filthy or foul that she wouldn't do it.)

Making their readers' guts churn is clearly all part of the mission for twentieth-century Swedish women writers aiming to shine a spotlight on their sisters' hidden stories.

Translating Wägner's story into English was a lot of fun but also had its challenges. I was very glad to be able to approach my old friend and fellow member of the Elin Wägner Society Solveig Hammarbäck, who has always been happy to answer my questions about Wägner, Småland and Swedish language and linguistics. Solveig kindly picked up on a few slips I had made, and our discussions covered several other specific topics such as: how to translate archaic vocabulary, such as the verb 'tryta' as a euphemism for 'to die'. We talked about the difficulty of translating the title of the story, 'Käringamöte'. This Swedish superstition asserts it is bad luck when setting out on a journey or task if the first person one meets is an old woman. We do not have the same superstition in Britain.

My solution in English was to try to capture something with similar connotations: ‘old wives’ links to the English phrase ‘old wives’ tale’ which is a phrase often used negatively and refers to some kind of fiction or myth dreamt up by gossipy old women. Beyond that, I hoped that the reader would be able to deduce the nature of the folk superstition from the events described in the story.

I asked Solveig if I had correctly understood what ‘lillklockan’, “the little bell”, the church bell that the dean’s wife and Sara hear as they row home, ringing out its first call to service across the quiet lake. She sent me this fascinating reply:

När det gäller “lillklockan” så har jag frågat min goda vän Birgitta Staaf, som är uppvuxen i kantorsbostället i grannsocknen Ormesberga, nära kyrkan. Där höll man noga reda på när det skulle ringas med bara en klocka (för att kalla folk till kyrkan i god tid före högmässan) och när det var dags för båda, men man talade aldrig om klockorna som den lilla eller stora. Kanske beroende på att det just där inte var så stor skillnad mellan dem. Men din översättning “the smaller of the two bells’ täcker absolut “lillklockan”.

(As for “lillklockan”, the small bell, I asked my good friend Birgitta Staaf, who grew up in the cantor’s house in the neighbouring parish of Ormesberga, close to the church. There they were always alert to when only one bell should be rung (to call people to church in good time for the morning service) and when it was time for both, but they never referred to the bells as the small one or the big one. Maybe because just there, there was no great difference between them. But the translation “the smaller of the two bells” definitely covers it.)

Planning this piece for *Bergsluft* has made me reflect on the problems involved in trying to introduce English-language readers to a foreign writer of a previous century by means of short stories or extracts alone. Firstly, it can be hard for readers to orientate themselves in a disembodied extract or story if they have not encountered the author’s work and style before. The delicious irony that suffuses this story, for example, can easily be missed if the reader is presented with an extract without knowing the author’s wider work.

Secondly, compilers and editors frequently face a problem in selecting short stories for anthologies: there is always the question of ideal or specified length. ‘Käringamötet’ lends itself to anthologies because of its moderate number of pages compared to other stories in the volume. Perhaps the rise of so many online literary magazines can work in our favour here? Building up a collection of a writers’ stories would potentially help to overcome the problematic lack of sufficient background and context. This is not the first story from *Gammalrödja* that I have translated. ‘Yste med köpelöpe’ (literally ‘Making Cheese with bought rennet’) was published in my English translation as ‘The Cheesemaking’ in the *Longman Anthology of World Literature by Women*, edited by Marian Arkin and Barbara Schollar (1989) but that volume is no doubt long out of print. My translation could however be resuscitated in digital form and the two stories would then form a core to which I, and perhaps other translators into English, could gradually add. It is an interesting possibility in an online age.

It has been fascinating to work on Wägner's stories again at the same time as being part of a team of translators in two British projects – one for Penguin Classics and one for Norvik Press – that will publish selected stories by Wägner's forerunner Selma Lagerlöf. Lagerlöf is an author whose international popularity as a storyteller never seems to wane. And perhaps it is in times of great uncertainty and rapid change that we reach for the comfort of stories more than ever? 'The cure for the horror is story,' wrote Will Storr in his 2019 book *The Science of Storytelling*. We find ourselves back in times of political upheaval, war and pandemics and facing an environmental emergency, a renewed set of negative circumstances that would have filled Elin Wägner with dismay; for better or worse, our appetite for stories seems set to grow and grow.

Sarah Death 2024

Litterature:

Ingrid Elam and Jerker Virdborg (red.): *Svenska noveller från Almquist till Stoor*. Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2018.

Leigh Hatts: Virginia Woolf on the Path at Richmond.

www.thamespath.org.uk/2022/11/16/virginia-woolf-on-the-path-at-richmond/

Ingrid Littberger Caisou-Rousseau: Bländas ömkliga ättlingar eller det inhiberade käringamötet hos Elin Wägner. *HumaNetten* Nr 45, hösten 2020

<https://open.lnu.se/index.php/hn/issue/view/167>