

THE TRICKY FARMHAND AND THE INNOCENT MAID.  
EROTIC NARRATIVE AND CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN PREMODERN SWEDEN.

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Ingress

The main goal of my study is to illuminate in what ways erotic narrative has contributed to construction of gender and to legitimize gender differences and male hierarchy in premodern Sweden. Cultural identities are constructed and negotiated in social action both through social experience and through discourse. In these processes narrative performance played an important role. I combine narrative analysis with postmodern theories on gender and identity construction. This work takes as a tacit assumption that premodern women and men also thought of themselves as gendered subjects.<sup>1</sup>

Erotic narratives and their "history".

Voluminous collections of erotica from medieval times onwards are stored - more or less openly - in European and American archives.<sup>2</sup> The folklorists' interest in these existing collections and in collecting further erotic folklore was elicited by Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytical school at the end of 19th century. Although some has been published in special journals and books, the main body of the material is still not available in print. The principal reason is that for a long time the use of the collections was restricted due to the double standard concerning sexuality. On the one hand, it was considered urgent and legitimate to collect erotic folklore, on the other hand it could not be printed either in anthologies or in scientific publications.<sup>3</sup> The Scandinavian collections are proportionately modest, and have been brought together more or less by chance, mainly during the first half of the 20th century.

In earlier studies the functions of erotic narratives have been emphasized according to the dominating functionalist school. Erotic narratives have been ascribed erotic, entertaining, psychological and social functions.<sup>4</sup> The theoretical framework was formulated in the fifties by William Bascom in "Four functions of folklore" (1954) based on Sigmund Freud's culture theory (Bascom 1965). Above all the psychological approach has been favoured. Erotic folklore was, and is sometimes still, considered to be an "outlet" for repressed sexual desire and frustrations. This Freudian interpretation is grounded on a view of sexuality as "a natural force" in human beings, a force which all cultures tend to suppress and control by their social and cultural norms. The social function of folklore is closely connected to the psychological. Erotic narrative was seen as mirroring societal and cultural norms regarding sexuality, and as such its function was to reinforce and legitimize these norms (Röhrich 1982).

The question whether sexuality was suppressed or not in the past has been addressed by Michel Foucault, who contests the idea of repressed sexuality as a scientific construction created by the psychoanalysts. Foucault advocates the opposite: sexuality was freer in the past than in modern society (Foucault 1978:103ff). The existence and the use of erotic narratives, however, are not a proof of either Freud's or Foucault's theories. Erotic folklore is as abundant in modern as it was in premodern society.

I do not reject the assumption that erotic folklore has a psychological function, but this function has little to do with repressed sexuality. The social function of erotic folklore as demonstrating and preserving social and cultural sexual norms can also be questioned. The erotic narratives contradict the legislation regarding sexual behaviour: premarital sexual relationships are permitted and even encouraged in the texts and extra-marital sex is not treated as adultery.

The erotic and entertaining aspects of folklore are however unquestionable, a matter I will return to, but from a different perspective.

Meaning and politics - my analytical approach.

Erotic narrative is an oral narrative folklore genre, a folk discourse, representing gender in sexual

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<sup>1</sup> This is a summing up of a major study carried out within my research project entitled "Gender, power and sexuality in premodern Sweden". Some results have already been published in Lövkrona 1993. The most complete version is published in Lundgren, Lövkrona, Martinsson 1996. There will be a second study within the same project built on accounts from court trials concerning child murder, focusing on the child murderess and gender as social experience.

<sup>2</sup> It is assumed that the most extensive collection of erotica is kept in the library of the Vatican (sic!); almost as extensive are those in the British museum in London and in the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Indiana (Hoffman 1973:13).

<sup>3</sup> The Austrian scholar Friedrich Krauss, who was deeply inspired by Freud's theories, published (1883-1911) *Kryptadia*, an annual journal for erotic folklore; the same Krauss published (1904-1923) *Anthropytheia*, a journal for South Slavic erotic folklore. Other well-known published collections are *Futalitatis*, *Latrinalia* and *Maledicta*. The publishing of *Kryptadia* resulted in Krauss being qualified by a German court as "the most dangerous pornographer in the world" (Hoffman 1973:289, note 3, see also Hoffman for references).

<sup>4</sup> Legman 1970, 1973, Röhrich 1977, 1982.

relationships. In a humorous way the narratives relate sexual actions between men and women in a rural context. The texts are mostly very outspoken and direct in their descriptions of sexual actions and in their use of sexual language. The actors of the erotic narratives represent the most common social, age and gender roles of old peasant society - the young unmarried maid, the farmhand, the journeyman, the peasant and his wife, including the old peasant couple. In the poetic versions of the narratives, male and female organs sometimes substitute for the actors themselves.

The primary context of the erotic narratives is the preindustrial Swedish society. Until the end of the 19th century most Swedes still lived in the countryside and earned their living by agriculture. The political and cultural ideology was patriarchal and it is within this frame the erotic narratives were produced and reproduced.

The meaning and the politics of the erotic narratives is focused in the analysis. How were the erotic narratives understood by men and women in premodern Sweden? How were they used and by whom? Whose view or perspective do the narratives represent and promote? The politics of folklore texts also concern the production of discourse and further touch upon the question of social power. These questions concerning the politics of folklore lead over to gender scholarship and the discussion of gender and power (Hanks 1989:118, Briggs & Bauman 1992:185, Schuman 1993:71f).

There are divergent opinions on what meaning is and where meaning is located - in the text, in the context, or in both. I am taking the same standpoint as that of performance analysts. Folklore genres are viewed as ethnic or folk models, which communicate messages through their textual structures. The meaning does not reside within the text, but is created by individuals in narrative performance. It emerges in an interplay between genre, text and context, in an interplay between discourse and its users in their specific social and cultural environment (Ben-Amos 1976, Bauman & Briggs 1990).

In historical study, of course, the users themselves cannot be asked about their interpretations. The main method applied in the analysis has been to reveal the textual structures and the messages they mediate. The texts have then been contextualized by linking the messages regarding gender to the gender roles connected to the age and civil status of the users, all in a life cycle perspective. The meaning and the politics of the texts are seen in relation to the social gender roles and how they were constructed regarding sexuality at the time.

#### The text and its interpretation.

Swedish erotic narratives form part of the international corpus of erotic folklore. My analysis is based on approximately 100 texts collected from oral tradition in the late 19th and in the first part of the 20th centuries.<sup>5</sup> The main goal in the analysis of this corpus will be their textual structures and the messages they vehicle. The primary methodical tools for the text analysis have been borrowed from linguistic and literary narrative analysis. The narratives are analysed according to theme, plot structure, "voice" or "eye" and intertextuality.<sup>6</sup>

The theme is derived from a synopsis of the content, and it represents the lowest level of abstraction. From this level I am able to describe the gender stereotypes. The theme also reveals the character of the sexual relationships established in the narrative.

The plot structure analysis entails a further abstraction of the content into subject, action, object and the result of the action. This analysis uncovers the power relations between the actors, that is who the subject of the plot is and who the object acted upon. Furthermore, the abstract gender roles of the actors - unmarried/married, young/old etc - might be identified through the plot structure. The interaction between these roles tells about the gender qualities and behaviour ascribed to these roles, that is the gender constructs.

Thematic analysis and plot-structure analysis lead to conclusions about the messages regarding gender and gender relations communicated in a text. Intertextualization is in this phase an important analytical tool. The texts are compared in order to illuminate each other, and thus support or violate the interpretation of the messages. The texts are thus put into a dialogue, first with each other and then with

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<sup>5</sup> The texts are all to be found in Swedish folklife and folklore archives and are mainly unpublished. The Swedish - and the Scandinavian - erotic folklore has so far not been submitted to a comprehensive study.

<sup>6</sup> I have adjusted a method developed by Sato Apo on the basis of van Dijk's narrative scheme (Apo 1992, van Dijk 1980). See also Preston 1993.

other genres representing gender.<sup>7</sup>

A message is sent from one person to another, from a sender to a receiver. The sender can be recognized by the "voice" or "eye" of the narrative; voice is not (always) identical with the "narrator I", but with the subject actor of the plot. The voice unmasks whose perspective is manifested in the texts and with whom the narrative wants the users to identify (Preston 1993:319f).

The poetic texts can in part be analyzed using the same methods, though sometimes the narrative structure is very simple. The messages of the poems are also to be found in the language, the rhyme schemes and the perspective adopted.

The gender constructs - positive and negative masculinity and femininity.

Erotic texts under study play out a great variety of interrelated themes on sexual relationships between men and women. Each of these themes is expressed in various types of erotic narrative. The most common themes are:

1. a young farmhand uses trickery to seduce a (sexually) innocent/ignorant maid/girl;
2. a young farmhand "helps" a virgin in sexual need;
3. a young farmhand "seduces" a wanton maid;
4. a wanton maid tries to seduce a farmhand;
5. a young farmhand takes advantage of a wanton and vain wife;
6. a lewd wife initiates sexual intercourse with a farmhand;
7. a displeased wife seeks help for her impotent or sexually inexperienced husband;
8. a horny husband is tricked by an unwilling maid;
9. an old impotent husband is "seduced" by his (lewd) wife.

The gender constructs found are both positive and negative from the viewpoint of the plot structure: who is being "punished" or "rewarded". The positive male and female constructs can be summed up as follows: a positive masculinity represented by the young unmarried man, virile, potent, smart and decisive, always "ready" to seduce, without distinction of his partner - a young woman, a wife or an old woman or widow. The positive femininity is represented by the young, unmarried, sexually innocent, longing, willing, satisfied/gratified woman.

The negative stereotypes are constructed as their opposites: negative masculinity is represented by men - young and old, unmarried and married - who fail to satisfy or seduce a woman, and men who are impotent and sexually inexperienced. Negative femininity is represented by women who are wanton, lewd, sexually almost insatiable, and who take sexual initiative regardless of their age and civil status.

In the following texts and brief analysis I offer several examples of the methodology I use to begin understanding the archival materials. The first theme - the young tricky farmhand and the innocent girl, may be illustrated by the following story:

A farmhand was digging a ditch for his master and the maid was sent to him with supper. The farmhand was more experienced in "the mysteries of love" than the maid and he let his prick dangle outside his trousers. "What's that?" the maid asked. "Oh, this is my best friend," said the farmhand. "Isn't he hungry?" the girl asked. "He likes only berries", was the answer. "Then I will go and pick some berries for him", the girl said and went to the meadow for wild strawberries. The farmhand told her: "He is not able to eat them unless you put them on your stomach". The girl didn't suspect anything and lay down on her back. The farmhand placed the strawberries on "a certain place" where he wanted them to be. Then he lay down on the stomach of the maid in order to have his friend "eat". How he was eating is not hard to understand. And the girl liked it very much.

In this narrative the woman is an object for the man's sexual desire and he takes the liberty of seducing her, irrespective of her approval. He does so knowing she will be satisfied and grateful, although she does not realize it until afterwards. He is the subject of the plot, she the object of his actions. The outcome is positive for both of them; the man is successful in his seduction and his masculinity is confirmed. The woman's sexual desire is awakened and recognized by her; she is sexually gratified and she is grateful ever after. Neither of them is punished though they do not behave according to social and cultural norms.

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<sup>7</sup> Briggs & Bauman 1992:145ff, Tarkka 1993:178.

The second theme deals with a young longing maid and a helpful farmhand. In these narratives the girl takes the initiative and the man is an object for her desire. However, she is not supposed to seduce the man using trickery, but to beg him for "help". And, of course, the man never hesitates to perform his "duty", and she ends up satisfied and healthy. In fact, virginity in these narratives is depicted as an illness or disease. The plot structure, though, reveals that the woman is gradually transformed from a subject into an object for the man's actions. The narrative has an anonymous narrator, but the "voice" is unmistakably male in that the woman is made an object for the man's action.

The second theme is manifested in several similar stories and the following represents a slightly different one:

As everybody knows, young girls do not wish to be pregnant before marriage - but they want a man or somebody who will do the "job". This is how the peasant daughters thought. The two girls slept in a separate bedroom together with the maid. The girls had made a fake "thing", a kind of bag out of soft cloth and filled it with rye to make it stiff. The maid was asked to bind this object around her waist and in the night perform the man's "job". The girl who was on line to enjoy this shared the bed with the maid.

The maid finally had had enough of this. She asked her brother to show up. He came late in the night when it was dark and replaced the maid in her bed. The two peasant daughters didn't notice the change. During the night one of the girls approached the bed. The other girl, waiting for her turn, became impatient, since it was taking a long time. "Why don't you go back to your bed?" she asked. "It has never been as good as this before" the other girl said. "But, the bag is broken and the rye is pouring out".

There is an additional message for women in this narrative: be patient and wait for a 'real man': no 'short cuts' to sexual satisfaction are accepted. A woman is not according to positive femininity entitled to be active, just willing and waiting. This message is also prevalent in the poems, where the man urges a woman not to use a candle, but wait for him. Women's sexuality is seen from the man's point of view. The initial subject position taken by the women are turned into object positions and they are in the end subjected to men's control.

In the narratives with married men and women as actors three themes are developed. The following two stories may illustrate the themes of the horny husband and the unwilling maid; and of the lewd wife and the farmhand.

There was a travelling salesman who asked for lodging in a farm one evening. There was a beautiful maid, and the salesman wanted to have some "fun" with her. He hadn't been at home to see his wife for a long time. The maid seemed to be interested when he made his proposal. "Yes", she said, "let's meet over there tonight" she said and pointed at a small door in one of the outhouses. After dark the salesman discreetly crept to the outhouse, opened the door, slipped in and shut the door. Then he started to grope around, and said in low voice: "Are you there?" "Oink, oink" it said. And he understood that the damned maid had enticed him into the pigsty.

The maid is not conforming to the expected behaviour of a young woman in that she does not submit herself to the man's desire. Thus, she represents a negative femininity and constitutes a threat to the man. Being horny is basically a positive gender quality, but his failure to seduce turns him into a fool and into a negative male role. He is not "punished" because he is about to commit adultery, but because he cannot live up to the positive masculine role. However, the story is told by a male voice - it forces identification with the tricked man and pity him for him, rather than identification with the "damned maid". Men are supposed to use trickery in seducing women, women are not supposed to trick men, but to subject to their will.

This happened at a farm. The farmer's wife was young, but her husband was old. They had a young farmhand the husband was pretty jealous of. Once during the harvest they got help from their neighbours whom they then invited for supper. The farmer's wife was eager to mess around with the farmhand, but didn't know how. But women are inventive when it comes to the erotic. She told her husband that the farmhand had left for a while, but in fact he was hiding in the bench. In the seat there was a big hole. The wife placed herself over this hole. The room was rather dark, so nobody noticed how she arranged her skirts.

However the farmhand could hardly move under the seat, so the wife had to help him. For supper they had pork. As it was the custom to do so, the housewife served everybody their food. She pretended to show concern for her guests, as she rose from her seat a bit asking them: "Would you like some more meet?" etc. All the while she bumped up and down until the "process" was over.

The lewd wife in the last example may serve as a typical exponent of the negative femininity ascribed to married women of all ages and civil status. The woman is the subject of the plot and she is not transformed into an object, as women are in other narratives. She is active, inventive and not "punished" for her behaviour, but rewarded - she gets sexual gratification in front of her old and (presumably) impotent husband. Nevertheless, she represents negative femininity - the sexually insatiable, wanton wife, who stops at nothing to satisfy her needs, a message which is clearly expressed in many other erotic narratives. Nevertheless the non visible young farmhand representing positive masculinity is the one the story wants us to identify with; he is not turned into an object for her actions, but a companion. This story has an illusive female voice, which is also found in some other texts. The intertextual analysis, though, shows the male perspective.

#### Masculinity and patriarchy - the politics of erotic narratives.

Both men and women in erotic narrative are entitled to sexual desire and to enjoy sex; however the rules are defined by men, and women's lust is always supposed to be under men's control. The relation between positive masculinity and positive femininity can be characterized as hierarchical with male dominance. The gender relation is not, as assumed in studies on premodern Sweden, to be complementary and symmetric (Lövkrona 1990). Nor are the gender relations dichotomous, where femininity would be construed as the opposite of masculinity. This study of erotic narratives proves that women are not seen as "the Other" in terms of difference, as in modern gender constructs, but as "the Same".<sup>8</sup>

The way gender and gender relations are represented in these erotic narratives is in tune with messages communicated in other genres representing gender relationships - erotic riddles, jokes and joke ballads, jests, fabliaux, folktales and fairy legends etc.<sup>9</sup> Folklore genres thus convey a relatively uniform value-system regarding gender and gender order. This value-system was only partly in accordance with the juridical and the religious in premodern Sweden. Jointly these value-systems affected people's behaviour and understanding of social reality.

I would like to suggest that the general politics of erotic folklore was to legitimize and sustain male power structures. Positive masculinity and positive femininity can thus be seen as the ideal and the norm. To judge from the many negative stereotypes that functioned as warning signs, masculinity was obviously a fragile item that had to be defended and confirmed. The politics of erotic folklore was not to demonstrate societal and cultural norms. But the gender constructs in the erotic narratives do support the basic ideology of the patriarchy. Patriarchy is then understood according to a feminist definition, which includes men's control of women's sexuality.<sup>10</sup> The male-dominated, hierarchical gender relation is functional only from the viewpoint of a patriarchal society. Masculinity and patriarchy are the two concepts which explain gender construction and gender relation in erotic folklore. The erotic narrative thus played an important role in the (re)production and legitimizing of gender differences and hierarchies.

Furthermore, these erotic narratives advocate a male perspective on gender and sexuality. In some narratives the "narrator I" is a woman, but the view expressed and the topic dealt with are typically male; the intertextual comparison thus proving that these stories do not differ from the others. However, it does not indicate that erotic narrative was exclusively a male narrative tradition, which has been assumed by some authors.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Laqueur arrives at a similar conclusion regarding the human body and gender constructs. He finds that in the premodern world, before the 17th century, male and female bodies were hierarchically ordered versions of one sex and the distinction between them was more a matter of degree than of type (Laqueur 1994: 30f).

<sup>9</sup> Roth 1977, Moser-Rath 1978, Rhodin 1982, Lövkrona 1993, Selberg 1995, Apo 1995.

<sup>10</sup> For a definition a patriarchy see Lerner 1986:239.

<sup>11</sup> Most texts treated here have a male informant, which assumingly is due to circumstances connected with the way they were collected. Male scholars were embarrassed to ask women about "daring" folk narratives and women embarrassed to tell these to upper class men (See f. ex Köhler-Zülsch 1991 p.102ff).

In patriarchal societies, men provided the models for interpretation of reality, but women too used these models to create their own meaning. They normally accepted the male models, but at the same time they gave them another meaning. This "other meaning", which can be termed "women's voices", is not based on the textual structures, but contradict the narratives' messages. In the following analysis I suggest a method that will provide a hypothetical answer to how women created this other meaning from the erotic texts. How the negative femininity might have been used as identification and strategy in order to negotiate the ideal femininity and to challenge male power. I use the process of meaning creation as closely related to that of identity construction.

#### Gender, meaning and identity.

Meaning is here seen as both contextual and situational. The contextual meaning will emerge when the message of a text can be related to one's own social and cultural reality and experience. A text makes sense only if it is connected to reality and subjectivity. Situational meaning is directly connected to the performance, but it is always also related to the contextual, which is fundamental (Tarkka 1993:177).

Folklore scholarship on identity has favoured the creation of a shared cultural identity from the viewpoint of a person or a group - or in terms of positive identification. The identity construction process has been described as identification, imitation and invention in narrative performances (Bauman 1986:21, Fine & Speer 1992:8ff). The very process of how discourses affect identity construction and how identities are negotiated and questioned by means of discourse has seldom been addressed in folklore studies.

In order to tackle this problem I have turned to feminist theories on gender and identity. The philosopher Linda Alcoff states in "Cultural Feminism versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory", 1988, that identity is shaped not only by discourse but by subjective experiences and practice. Gender identity is created, constituted in social praxis when experience and discourse are confronted. Alcoff sees this creation of identity as an active, reflexive process within a given but changeable structural framework. Gender is further seen as a posit or a construct "formalized in a nonarbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices, and discourses". The process of creating meaning must be seen in relation to the posits a man or a woman occupies and this posit is the "vantage point from which identity is created through conscious actions" (Alcoff 1988 passim).

Users of erotic folklore - narrators and listeners - occupied the same social and gender roles or "posits" as the actors in the narratives. The way gender and gender relations are represented in erotic narratives is significant, when related to these roles. Individuals were able to identify with the gender roles and reflect upon the messages - but from different positions. The meaning of the erotic narrative was thus not identical for the young maid, the farmhand, the wife or husband.

The very process of meaning and identity creation is not addressed by Alcoff. The anthropologist Henrietta Moore, however, in her book A Passion for Differences, (1994), introduces a highly useful theory on how individuals become engendered subjects, a theory that can easily be combined with Alcoff's. Moore's theory includes both the reproduction of dominant categories and discourses, and examples of non-production, resistance and change. Resistance and complicity should, according to Moore, be seen not only as types of agency, but as forms or aspects of subjectivity. This problem should not be addressed solely in social terms, but should include an analysis of other dimensions such as desire, identification, fantasy and fear (Moore 1994:49ff). In conjunction Alcoff and Moore give means to understanding of archived narratives.

According to Moore, individuals reproduce the dominant cultural discourse through engagement and investment (emotional and social) in the subject positions provided by discourse. The degree of investment in a specific subject position an individual chooses depends upon the pleasure, satisfaction and reward he or she anticipates. Not all subject positions are equally rewarded or may even be negatively sanctioned by society; nevertheless they might give individual pleasure and satisfaction (Moore 1994:61ff).

In premodern Sweden it was only positive masculinity and femininity that brought social rewards and acknowledgement. The male subject position confirms ideal masculinity and male superiority; the female subject position is socially rewarding in that the woman accepts her inferior gender role and rejects negative alternatives. Nevertheless, positive gender constructs conflict in many ways with other discourses and practices connected to the social position of young unmarried men and women. The expected payoff promised in the narrative, in terms of success in seduction for the man and sexual gratification for the young woman, was acceptable neither to societal nor to cultural norms. Positive gender constructs furnish the subject position with a possibility both to challenge and to conform to normative gender roles. These constructs offer a positive choice as well as an extension of these roles. Likewise, identification with positive gender constructs will also result in legitimizing and reproducing a

patriarchal gender order.

From the point of view of patriarchy negative gender stereotypes are in no respect socially or culturally rewarded. The negative female constructs may, as subject positions, be interpreted in another way and become meaningful for women on both an individual and collective level. Moore notes that there are subject positions that can be characterized as "fantasies of identity", which are linked to fantasies of power and agency in the world. Fantasy in this context is used in the sense of ideas about the kind of person one would like to be, and the person one would like to be seen as by others. Moore characterizes these fantasies of identities as mainly emotional and subconscious and she traces them on the individual psychological level (Moore 1994:66ff).

Yet, identification with negative female stereotypes can also be regarded as political, and conscious, subversive strategies (Radner & Lanser 1993:11ff). All the negative female stereotypes in the erotic narratives are depicted as strong and independent. To be lewd, wanton, sexually active, etc. gives the female actors power and scope for agency. They not only pose a threat to masculinity, but also turn men into objects of ridicule. These roles can be seen as empowering women. There is no similar reward and satisfaction or power and agency for men to draw from negative masculinities.

Laughter is a subversive strategy that might well have been employed by women. As mentioned, erotic folklore is humouristic. The stories are designed to provoke laughter. But, who is laughing at whom and why? Both women and men could laugh at negative male and female stereotypes, but in different ways. Women had the power to laugh from their inferior gender position (Brown 1993:149f). They laughed both at impotent and failing men, and at negative female stereotypes. Identifying with the strong and active, albeit negative, portrait of women, they felt power and agency.

Men's laughter at negative male constructs cannot be considered subversive or empowering. Men did not laugh from an inferior position, since the perspective of the narratives is male. After all, there were no ways for men to identify with these negative male stereotypes; they could only identify with positive masculinity. From this subject position negative male stereotypes were just as amusing and ridiculous as the negative female ones.

The negative female stereotypes have been considered as expressions for misogyny by psychologically oriented folklorists. They have been interpreted as originating in men's fear of female sexuality (Legman 1973). The very concept of misogyny, though, is problematic in this context. Misogyny is a male biased concept. Erotic narrative also entails negative male stereotypes. Are these to be labeled as 'misandry'? I would argue that neither the female nor the male negative stereotypes have their origin in men's and women's despise or fear of each other. Nevertheless, the erotic narratives may have been used occasionally by men to express misogynistic attitudes and feelings.

#### Narrative performance and construction of gender.

Erotic narratives were performed in various contexts where men and women worked and amused themselves separately or together. Unfortunately, contemporary ethnographic accounts are rare, but give when taken together an idea of the performance situations (Lövkrona 1996:166ff). I will limit myself to one of these contexts, the collective work men and women performed, which always ended with a feast and with dancing and playing. In these situations both men and women used erotic folklore to amuse, to poke fun at each other, to tease, to show sexual interest, to brag, etc. At work men and women often laboured side by side and were in physical contact and this contact, intentional or unintentional, created an atmosphere of erotic tension.

The situational meaning was individual and due to the actual context. Simultaneously the narratives both reinforced and challenged the general politics of erotic narrative by means of the conventional meaning created in performance. The narratives confirmed masculinity and legitimized and sustained male power and patriarchy through the general patriarchal and masculine politics manifested in the texts. However, women's possibility to create an 'other meaning' and to identify with negative femininity empowered women and disempowered men. Laughter became a useful strategy in performance in order to negotiate gender. There was thus a close connection between 'narrated event' and 'narration event' (Bauman 1986:2). My analysis suggests that narrative performance played a significant role in the construction of gendered identity, that - above all - premodern women and men thought of themselves as gendered subject.

To conclude: the possibility that women had to identify with negative subject positions supports the suggestion that women listened to and told erotic folklore with pleasure. Women also had more roles or identities to choose from and thus more often than men could challenge the normative gender roles, and cross boundaries. They constituted their self-representations as engendered subjects through several

subject positions based on gender (Moore 1994:56). Women thus would act out more subject positions than men.

Furthermore, the meaning of erotic narrative cannot be reduced to a general cultural or psychological meaning, equally received and understood by all individuals. Neither can the politics of erotic folklore be construed solely as normative or oppressive - a male discourse may also empower women although it may not erase superiority or alter the gender order.

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