

Inger Lövkrona, Lund

Gender and Sexuality in Pre-Industrial Society: Erotic Riddles¹

Little research has been carried out into the social and cultural construction of gender in pre-industrial Swedish society. Women are very often depicted as having been independent, firm and powerful, responsible for all domestic work and the social equals of their husbands. This description is based on studies of the division of labor between the sexes. The structure of gender relations, the gender system, has been thought of as symmetric and complementary, as something 'natural' and functional. Men and women are different but equal to each other. The biological difference, the fact that women give birth to children, is supposed to have predisposed men and women to separate working areas, generating gender-specific qualities, abilities and behavior. Other aspects of the lives of men and women, such as reproduction and sexuality, tend to be overlooked in this perspective.

Studies of sexual norms and behavior, however, indicate a more complex and, in several aspects, a somewhat contradictory picture. Like other European countries, pre-modern Sweden was a patriarchy. Women were regarded in legal terms as being underaged minors. So long as they were unmarried, they remained under the guardianship of their fathers; and when married they fell under that of their husbands. They were by law excluded from certain public activities and decision-making, and their ownership and property rights were also restricted. In these respects, thus, the gender relation was unequivocally asymmetric and male dominated. It is seldom today that these circumstances are taken into consideration and held to reflect or to have had any impact on social behavior and cultural norms².

Erotic Folklore and Folk Discourse

Erotic folklore is, in general, an important source of folk discourse on gender and sexuality. The notion of 'folk discourse' is used here in the sense of how people 'talk' and 'think' about such matters. Folk discourse is one of the means

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² These studies are discussed in Lövkrona, Inger: Nyckelknippans semiotik. Den starka bondkvinnan – myt eller verklighet? In: Nordisk etnologi och folkloristik under 1980-talet (Etnolore 9. Skrifter från etnologiska institutionen Uppsala universitet). ed. Anders Gustafsson. Uppsala 1990, 179–218.