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“Courting Is Like Trading Horses, You Have to Keep Your Eyes Open”

Gender-Related Proverbs in a Peasant Society in Northern Sweden

ABSTRACT Proverbs offer insights into normative symbolic systems of meaning. In this article, proverbs collected in Northern Sweden that mirrors an older agrarian environment are studied with a specific subset of such a normative meaning system in focus: masculinity and femininity. The analysis is centered on three important domains of human experience: The Marriage Market, The Household and The Sexuality. It is argued that the gender conceptions found in the proverbs form a system of gender hegemony, with hierarchically superior masculinity and hierarchically subordinate femininity. Furthermore, a possible cultural model found in the proverbs, that of The Successful Household, is outlined and discussed.

KEYWORDS proverbs, gender, gender hegemony, Northern Sweden, nineteenth century, agrarian environment, masculinity, femininity

Proverbs are found in languages throughout the world. As pithy ready-made formulations they provide traditional wisdom to be used to “free

complex situations from ambiguity" (Mieder 2003: 155), in other words to help us make sense of the world.

Besides this categorical function, the proverbs contain explicit and implicit evaluative statements that brings with them directive force (White 1987: 151). Their authority comes, at least in part, from having survived the test of time and from echoing the authoritative voice of previous generations.

In this article, I analyse proverbs that deal with the relationship between and characterization of men and women; the setting is an agrarian environment in nineteenth and early twentieth century Northern Sweden. The focus lies more specifically on three domains of human experience that are brought to the fore by the material: *The Marriage Market*, *The Household* and *The Sexuality*. I argue that the gender conceptions found in the proverbs form a system of gender hegemony that supports masculine superiority and feminine subordination.

Nineteenth Century Northern Sweden and Its Proverbs

Proverbs that were used in an old agrarian environment in Northern Sweden have been collected by Swedish folklore archives, individual authors and various dialect groups; all examples in this article are drawn from a corpus of 199 gender-related proverbs, which is composed of predominantly written records from the above-mentioned sources.¹

All examples have been collected in Lapland, Norrbotten, Ångermanland and Northern Jämtland and, although it is hard to determine which are unique to this geographical area, have been in use in Northern Sweden as expressions of popular wisdom (cf. Mieder 1993: 178 on proverbs from Vermont).

The proverbs were probably used at least during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. This is an estimation based upon date of collection, age of the informants and a known effort by the collectors to "rescue" knowledge and information from an older and disappearing peasant society (see Lilja 1996; Andersson 2009: 39–41). It should be noted, however, that proverbs have extraordinary long lifespans and that it is notoriously difficult to ascertain the absolute origin of most of them (see Mieder 1993: 12, 174). Some of the proverbs in the corpus have survived and are still in use, while others have disappeared from everyday language.

The proverbs' linguistic form is in most cases dialectal; regional dialects constituted people's first language in this time and place, although, as Edlund (2003: 12) states, a standard Swedish variant was used in certain specific situations.²



Map 1. Parishes in Northern Sweden where the proverb examples were gathered. Thanks to Fredrik Palm at Humlab, Umeå University, for help with constructing the map.

Much has changed in Sweden since the agrarian environments in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The economy, for example, was characterized by farming: in 1840, approximately 90 per cent of the population in the studied area lived by agriculture (Sundbärg 1910: 115), primarily animal production (Winberg 1977: 33). Other important sources of income and food were hunting and fishing (Sporrong 1970: 36) and, later, the expanding sawmill industry (Wik 1950: 80–82). A majority of people today live in cities and knowledge that once was vital for survival has long since been replaced. Changing living conditions also lead to changes in beliefs and values, but there are differences. Although, for example, the intricate practice of horse trading most likely is unknown to an urban IT-consultant in the twenty-first century, it is not necessarily so that equally old ideas and beliefs about men, women and their relationship have disappeared in the same way. By looking at gender conceptions in nineteenth century Northern Sweden, through the lens of proverbs, we also gain further insight into our own gender systems today. And, in doing this, we also shed light on the role folklore plays in maintaining normative systems of meaning.

Defining and Analysing the Proverb

Despite many definition attempts, there is no consensus among proverb researchers about what is the best one. This difficulty is famously expressed by Archer Taylor (1931: 3) who refers to an "incommunicable quality" that defines proverbs. A viable approach is to use sets of criteria or markers (Arora 1984; Norrick 1985) to determine what constitutes a proverb. An advantage of that approach is the possibility of recognizing differences in degree of proverbiality. An often cited definition is found in *American Folklore. An Encyclopedia* (Mieder 1996: 597): "Proverbs [are] concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk."³ I use these previous efforts, but build on Seitel's (1981: 124)⁴ claim that the definition of the proverb cannot be separated from the type of material studied. Therefore I use a definition specifically designed to this study in order to sort out proverbial phrases, idioms and wellerisms, material often included in collections where proverbs are found. In order to be considered a proverb in this study, an item needs to: constitute an independent utterance, that is be syntactically independent, contain a "wisdom" or experience of some sort and not refer to an originator. Since the study groups and archives gathered material that had been in use in different dialects and areas, the commonly used criteria *traditional* (cf. Mieder 2004: 3) is here superfluous.

The analysis of the proverbs includes suggesting a possible *base meaning* (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1981), a conventional meaning shared by a group of

people. Such customary meaning is described by Norrick (1985) as *standard proverbial interpretation* (SPI) and corresponds to Prahlad's (1996) social level of meaning. A base meaning can be described as a short paraphrase: *No rose without a thorn*, for example, can be paraphrased with "there is no pleasant thing without some unpleasant aspect" (Norrick 1985: 2). Although such a short paraphrase by no means captures a proverb's full potential and all facets of meaning it is a good point of departure for a discussion of gender conceptions. It is also important to recognize that, for example, different interpretations of metaphors can lead to several base meanings for the same proverb within a speech community (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1981: 119).

To avoid introspective interpretations it is important to take into consideration all available ethnographic data in the interpretative process (see Prahlad 1996: 26). This means using all comments on the proverbs, given by the collectors and informants, and analysing the dialectal words as well as the material world used in metaphors and similes, but also in the literal proverbs. Analyses of the metaphors and similes are especially effective when trying to "unlock" the often enigmatic proverbs.

Proverbs can be used in different social contexts with different purposes, giving rise to a whole array of *performance meanings* (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1981; see also Norrick 1994). One could for example with the same proverb in one situation console someone and in another use it to convey an insult. Because many of the proverbs in the corpus lack descriptions of use, such performance meanings are often out of reach in the present study.

Conceptions of gender can be found in proverbs in mainly two different types: as part of the base meaning or as prerequisite and/or background information. This can be illustrated by the following two proverbs:

(1) A hit on the elbow is like widower grief, it hurts but quickly disappears (Norsjö)⁵

(2) The old fence will probably stand as long as no one steps on it (Umeå)

A possible base meaning of the first proverb is that 'when you hurt your elbow, it hurts a lot but only for a short time.' This meaning is however transmitted through a simile where knowledge about the widower is used as background information. The conception needed to fully understand the proverb is that a man that loses his wife quickly remarries and this conception is re-created every time the proverb is actualized, in communication or thought.

The second example, on the other hand, is figurative and lacks any explicit mentioning of either men or women. There are five variants of this

proverb in the corpus and besides descriptions of specific performances one collector gives the following possible base meaning: "The old maid will probably remain unmarried, as long as no suitor signs up" (ULMA 3560: 8). The old fence referred to is a commonly used wooden fence, so-called *gårdsgård*, which over time has decayed and become fragile. This structure corresponds to an apparent female chastity that will burst as soon as a suitor shows interest. Without discussing this proverb in more detail, it is apparent that this base meaning contains gender conceptions.

I will now introduce the concept of *Gender Hegemony*, which will be applied in the analysis.

The Concept of Gender Hegemony

Gender is individual—a part of individual identity—and at the same time collective—a cultural system of a normative nature. Analysis of the proverbs gives us insights into a symbolic system of gender conceptions, or "regulatory structure" (Butler 1990) that governs the individual when she or he is "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman 1987). The gender conceptions can be described as a system of gender hegemony, where *hegemony* should be understood as control by consent (e.g. Talbot 2005: 471; Schippers 2007: 90) or ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 832). Such gender hegemony supports a hierarchy where masculinity is superior to femininity.⁶ I understand masculinity and femininity as configurations of properties and practices that in a certain cultural context are attributed to men and women.

The understanding of gender hegemony adopted here follows Schippers (2007) and focuses on the relationship between masculinity and femininity. The idea is that there exists an ideal relationship between masculinity and femininity, with hierarchically superior masculinity and complementary, hierarchically subordinate femininity. This system is supported by men and women that act in certain ways and show certain properties, for example hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity.⁷ Configurations of properties and practices that do not support this ideal relationship are socially unwanted and Schippers (2007: 95–96) describes these as *pariah femininity* and *male femininity*. Basically, male femininity is men showing properties and/or practices associated with hegemonic femininity, and pariah femininity women showing properties and/or practices associated with hegemonic masculinity (see Schippers 2007: 95–96). This focus on socially (un)wanted practices and characteristics makes proverbs a very convenient empirical material. This is because proverbs most often are either *ideal-conforming* or *ideal-disconforming* (Honeck 1997: 139); the former contain cultur-

ally preferred configurations of masculinity and femininity while the latter contain culturally unwanted ones.

It is now time to turn to the empirical data, and the first theme to be explored is found on The Marriage Market.

Chooser and Chosen on the Marriage Market

A large number of the proverbs, 61 out of the 199 in the corpus, contain gender conceptions relevant to the practice of finding a husband or wife (the system of meaning found in the proverb material is without exception heterosexual). This important part of human experience is often described using the market metaphor where both women and men view themselves as commodities (e.g. Eckert 1996) and it is in this way that the metaphor is used in this article.

One central theme in these proverbs is *the choice*, manifested in conceptions about who is supposed to make the choice, how it should be made and what criteria it should be based on. Choice on the marriage market is important because it entails a hierarchical structure where the position as chooser is hierarchically superior to the one who is chosen: the chooser has the power to influence and control the development of the marriage market.

Choosing is described as a masculine practice in the proverbs together with the practice of close examination in order to ensure a good choice; to be passive and to be chosen is described as a characteristic of femininity. This pattern is illustrated by the following example:

- (3) Courting is like trading horses, you have to keep your eyes open
(Edsele)

Left uncommented by the collector, this proverb transfers cultural knowledge about horse trading, through simile, to the domain of the human marriage market. The horse belonged to a masculine domain of responsibility in the agrarian environment in Northern Sweden and the practice of horse trading was prototypically carried out by men. The historian Rosemarie Fiebranz (2002: 139) states that all activities relating to the horse were strongly gender coded and that the horse was a symbolic representation of masculinity. To trade with horses meant that there was a risk that a bad deal could be made and there was always the chance of being swindled. In the proverb the man corresponds to the horse trader and the woman to the horse, that is the traded commodity. The proverb's main focus is on the practice of careful examination, which is carried out by men in order to prevent a bad choice.

A possible base meaning is that a man should carefully examine the women before courtship.

Capacity for work is put forward in the material as a property that the man on the marriage market should look for in a future wife. This is illustrated in proverb (3) through the correspondence between the horse and the woman on the marriage market: the horse was valued for its capacity for work, which through analogy suggests that the chooser should look for such properties in a future wife. This message is explicitly expressed in the following proverb:

(4) It's better to look for your wife in the barn door than in the church door (Överkalix)

This proverb is shortly commented on by the collector with: "the father's advice to the son" (ÖHÅ 1957: 15), while a second variant in the corpus is more elaborately explained: "they meant that you could better see what a woman was like when she worked" (ULMA 6696: 6). The door to the barn and the door to the church symbolize, through metonymy, capacity for work and beauty. In the church the woman was clean and well dressed, properties that meant little in the day-to-day life in the agrarian household, where women among other areas of responsibility (see section Division of Labour and Power in the Household) took care of the cows and other animals. A possible base meaning is that a man should choose a wife based on capacity for work rather than beauty.

The conception that a man should examine the future wife before making his choice is also present in ideal-disconforming proverbs, which further emphasize the importance of this practice. One such example is found in the following proverb:

(5) He who proposes in the dark, has to take what he gets (Edsele)

This proverb is present in three variants in the corpus with slight differences in pronouns: one has an initial generic pronoun (*den*, sing.) but a masculine pronoun in the second clause and one has generic pronouns in both positions (*de*, pl.). Given that masculine pronouns in Swedish dialects (as well as in standard Swedish) are often used generically, and no comment is made by the collectors in regard to the proverbs' meaning, it is, at least, possible that a common base meaning of these proverbs is generic in nature: if you make a choice without careful examination you have to settle for what you get, even if this is not what you wanted. Even with such a gender-neutral base meaning, the proverb evokes, as background information, the

practice of courting, which in the older agrarian Northern Sweden was seen as something carried out by men. The type of masculinity found as background information in this proverb embodies the practice of choosing, but not the practice of examining.

The proverbs warn against women practicing choosing on the marriage market and the result of such practice is exclusively described as having negatively valued results. Two examples of these ideal-disconfirming proverbs are:

(6) If the girl says no to a lot of suitors, she eventually has to propose herself (Edsele)

(7) Choose among the clover and stay in the sedge (Edsele)

The figurative no. (7) is found in two versions in the corpus, explained in the following way by the collectors. “This can happen to the girl who, while time passes, finds it hard to settle for the suitors that have been available” (Bergfors 1981: 30) and “[this] is said to a girl who rejected advantageous proposals and to avoid turning into an ‘old maid’ finally had to take what was offered” (DAUM 3864, covering letter without date). White clover, superior as fodder and also visually more elaborate, corresponds to attractive suitors, for example with regard to appearance, capacity for work and material assets. The less attractive suitors correspond to the more inconspicuous sedge. Similar base meanings can be suggested for these examples: if a girl is picky when courted she could end up either alone, as implied by the phrase “have to propose herself,” or with a husband with lesser qualities than previous suitors.

This chooser–chosen relationship, which is also an active–passive one, is part of a system of gender hegemony, that is an idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity. The practice of choosing and examining positions places masculinity in a hierarchically superior position vis-à-vis femininity. The passive characteristic of the chosen woman supports this idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity. These positions are also complementary because neither of them could exist without the other. The active and choosing women on the marriage market do not support this idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity and could be described as an instance of pariah femininity (Schippers 2007: 95), that is hegemonic masculinity enacted by a woman. Correspondingly, male femininity, that is men embodying hegemonic femininity (Schippers 2007: 95), is found in the man not playing the part of the careful examiner.

Division of Labour and Power in the Household

The agrarian household in nineteenth century Northern Sweden often included several generations (Egerbladh 1989: 259, 261) and was primarily a production and consumption unit (Egerbladh 1989: 249). Historians and ethnologists have suggested that the household functioned as a cognitive model for how reality works (Fiebranz 2002: 32) and also as the base for political and social order (Lövkrona 1999: 21). The proverb corpus contains conceptions about the division of labour in the household, where the chores are divided into male and female areas of responsibility. This division of work creates a complementary relationship between masculinity and femininity. In this section I will look more closely at these conceptions and argue for an understanding of this relationship, not only as relational and complementary, but also as fundamentally hierarchical.

It is described in the proverbs as a masculine practice to bring resources, for example food, wood and money to the household and as a female practice to utilize these resources in a wise way. The following proverb exemplifies how this complementary gender relationship is expressed in the proverb corpus:

(8) What the man drags home with horse and sleigh, the wife can carry out in the apron (Nederkalix)

The collector gives the following explanation: "What the man earns, a foolish woman can waste on trifles" (DAUM 3906, no. 36), which also constitutes a possible base meaning. Two symbolic items are used in the proverb: the horse, which has been shown earlier to be strongly tied to a masculine domain and the apron, an effective symbol of the domestic work. There is a drastic difference in the proverb between the husband's efforts when he drags home resources to the household, with horse and sleigh, and the small pockets on the apron, with which the wife, seemingly without effort, carries it out again. This proverb draws on background information regarding the division of labour in the household: the husband is responsible for earning resources and the wife is responsible of managing the same resources in a wise way.

Other examples of this complementary division of labour in the household are found throughout the proverb material. It is for example described as a male duty to make sure the firewood is dry and a female duty to manage the fire. To clean and cook, manage textiles and to take care of the children are also described as female duties. The man is instead represented outside

the household as the one who creates the resources, for example as a lumberjack (see Andersson 2009: 183–185).

The managing of firewood provides an interesting meeting between gendered areas of responsibilities: although it was a masculine duty to cut and prepare the firewood, managing the fire was closely tied to the women's domain of responsibility (Fiebranz 2002: 146–148). This division of labour is effectively conveyed by the following pithy proverb:

(9) Wet wood—surly wife

Lost in translation is the homonymic pun utilizing the word *sur* 'wet' and *sur* 'surly.' The proverb lacks a verb phrase but the juxtaposing of the two noun phrases creates a causal link between them: wet wood leads to a surly wife. This is also a possible base meaning.

The gendered division of labour in nineteenth century Northern Sweden, however relational and complementary, could be interpreted as a relatively equal arrangement; an interpretation that some ethnologists and historians have made in the past (see Lövkrona 1990: 194, 179). However, the proverb material is clear about the power hierarchy in the agrarian household, with the man as master and the one who is supposed to make the important decisions. The following figurative example effectively conveys this hierarchy:

(10) It's the cock that should crow (Ytterlännäs)

This proverb, which exists in two variants in the corpus, is explained by the collectors with: "It is the man that should decide" (DAUM 3864, no. 256) and "it is the rooster that should crow (not the hen)" (Bergfors 1981: 28, 73). A possible base meaning of this proverb, which gathers its authority from the fact that cocks, not hens, crow, is that the man has the right to decide, not the woman.⁸ This natural order found in the animal kingdom, where the rooster also has a clear superior position against the hens (see Odén 1994: 33), possibly conveys the conception that a hierarchical relationship between men and women, with a masculine superiority, also is natural. The reference to the rooster in the singular definite form and in the cited explanations of the man or the rooster and the hen indicates that the proverb could be used to comment on relations between a husband and wife, and not only on a general gender hierarchy.

This household hierarchy is also tied to a more general masculine superiority, expressed in proverbs such as the following:

(11) The man is the man (Umeå)

This proverb is explained with: "the saying wants to emphasize the man's superiority" (DAUM 372, no. 114) and in another record (ULMA 3704): "when a boy and a girl are wrestling, and the male strength departs with victory." A possible base meaning is that the men are superior to women, and as the second explanation shows, this superiority can specifically refer to physical strength.

That every household needs a strong master is expressed in the following proverb:

(12) A house with no master is no house (Nederluleå)

This proverb is present with four variants in the corpus and explained with: "Refers to the notion that there needs to be someone in every house that rules the roost" (Nordström 1980 [1925]: 49) and "if nobody pushes on in a house, it's no home" (*Verla däänsch upa i kålvråmp* 2000: 12). The word *kuse*, used in the original proverb, is found in the compound *huskuse* ('house-') with the meaning 'strict master of the household' (Swedish *husbonde*)⁹ (Dorotea, ULMA 2314 = DAUM 3257; Sorsele, ULMA 2967 = DAUM 3256). This proverb seems primarily to comment on how a household should be governed and a possible base meaning is that a good household needs someone that pushes on. As a consequence hereof it conveys the conception that the husband in a household should "push on" and "rule the roost," in order to be a good *husbonde*, that is master of the household. This household power structure must be seen in conjunction with the widespread patriarchal ideology found in the Lutheran ideology of the three estates (church, state and household), where, the married man (Swedish *husfadern*) had material and spiritual responsibility for the members of the household. This ideology is expressed for example in the house table (Swedish *hustavla*), which is included in the Hymn Book and several catechism editions (Fiebranz 2005: 143; also Pleijel 1967), and widely embraced in eighteenth and nineteenth century Sweden.

Taken together, the strict division of labour in the household and the positioning of masculinity in a hierarchically superior position to femininity could be argued to be an example of gender hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity would then be to do the masculine encoded chores and to practice authority in the household, and hegemonic femininity would be to do the feminine encoded chores and to exhibit submissive behaviour in the household.

I will now turn to the third and last of the three major themes discussed

in this paper, Sexuality, here mainly divided into male sex drive and feminine fertility.

Masculine Sex Drive and Feminine Fertility

Researchers in the field of language and gender (see for example Cameron & Kulick 2003; Cameron & Kulick (eds.) 2006) have paid a great deal of attention to sexuality in the last 20 years. Here I follow Bucholtz and Hall's (2004: 470) definition of sexuality and include those conceptions of gender where the body is construed as either an "eroticized and/or reproductive site." This means the inclusion of conceptions that involve sexual desire or ability as well as conceptions about fertility.

One prominent gender conception in the proverb corpus is that men have a strong sex drive that is hard to control and/or leads to irrational behaviour. This is expressed in the following explicit proverb:

(13) When the cock stands, half of the sense is gone (Norsjö)

The phrase *when the cock stands* refers metonymically to male sexual excitement and a possible base meaning is that a man loses his judgment when he gets sexually aroused.

The male sex drive is even construed as a sign of good health, at least in the following proverb:

(14) If the men are well they probably want something dirty (Grund-sunda)

The use of the phrase *something dirty* with reference to sexual activity emphasizes the sinfulness of this type of activity or desire. A possible base meaning is that men, if healthy, want to engage in sexual intercourse. An interesting consequence of this conception is that those men that do not have this desire are not healthy.

Female sexuality in the proverbs, fertility aside, is almost exclusively described as complementary to male sexuality; it is both the object of the male sex drive and something potentially threatening. The following example illustrates this complementarity:

(15) The dirty water puts out the fire (Ytterlänäs)

The proverb is explained by the collector with "answer when somebody wonders how men can 'visit' ugly and unpleasant women" (Bergfors 1981: 70). In this figurative proverb male sex drive corresponds to fire and female sexuality to water with the ability to dowse this fire. A possible base meaning is that women who are neither physically nor socially attractive can satisfy a man's sexual desires. Interestingly the correspondence between fire and masculine sexual ability/sex drive is found in several other examples in the corpus.

The scarcity in the corpus of conceptions about female active sexuality is in a way made up for with examples where fertility is described as something inherently positive. Worth noticing is also that female fertility is described in a similar fashion as the male sex drive/potency, with the use of similar metaphors. One example is when both the male and female ageing body is compared to an old and dead tree in the following two proverbs:

(16) It happens sometimes that a dry spruce starts to grow (Sorsole)

(17) No matter how rotten the wood is, the twig is healthy (Överluleå)

The first example is explained by the collector (DAUM 3863, no. 14): "Said about a woman or old maid that got pregnant in old age" and the second: "about older men's appetite for women" (*Verla däansch upa i kålvråmp* 2000: 136). The apparently dead spruce starts to grow, implying that even a woman with an old body can become pregnant, that is be fertile. The twig, in turn, is surprisingly unaffected by decay (due to its high tar quality), implying that even a man who has an old body still has a high level of potency.

Active female sexuality exists only in one example in the corpus:

(18) No grass grows on a public road (Åsele)

This proverb, which exists in three variants in the corpus, is explained in the following ways: "explanation of why floozy women do not have children" (Bergfors 1981: 70), "to excuse a pregnant girl" (DAUM 3857, no. 459) and "a harlot is infertile" (ULMA 3312, no. 51). This metaphorical proverb contains a public road with many travellers, which corresponds to a woman who has many sexual partners and the conception conveyed in this proverb is that she is barren. The first two explanations contain descriptions of performance meanings, both supporting a possible base meaning close to the third quote: a harlot is infertile. This base meaning conveys the conception that a woman that has a lot of sexual partners becomes infertile. As in (16), female fertility corresponds to vegetative growth. The performance

meaning “to excuse a pregnant girl” is very interesting here since it seems to excuse pre-marital sexual contact. Such a conception is found in similar descriptions of performance meanings tied to two other proverbs in the corpus, not discussed here. This can be explained by the courting customs in nineteenth century Northern Sweden, which were less formalized than in the south (Löfgren 1994: 246–247; also Löfgren 1969: 35). This probably led to a less strict view of pre-marital sexual contacts (cf. Westum 1999: 202) and to the notion that children could be conceived outside of marriage without being considered illegitimate (Löfgren 1994: 247–248).

The strong and active masculine sex drive and the female instrumental and passive sexuality are part of a hegemonic gender system. This ideal relationship is based on an active/passive dichotomy that could be construed as hierarchically asymmetrical: male sexuality is active and has important consequences while female sexuality is passive and instrumental. Female sexuality could also be said to lack agency. The woman with many sexual partners embodies hegemonic masculinity, that is having an active sexuality, which could be interpreted as an instance of pariah femininity.

The analysis so far has been centred on three themes: The Marriage Market, The Household and The Sexuality. I will now look more closely at two central conceptions: that of the nagging/quarrelsome wife and the highly valued capacity for work. These, it seems, can be interpreted in different ways, with implications for a possible system of gender hegemony.

What about the Nagging/Quarrelsome Wife?

One recurring gender conception in the proverb corpus, present in 28 examples, is that of the nagging or quarrelsome wife. These conceptions are often accompanied by conceptions of pain or discomfort that this nagging or quarrelling inflicts on the husband. The following proverb, which is present in five variants in the corpus, is one example:

- (19) Feet blisters and a wife’s nagging are the worst things that can happen to a human being here on earth (Vilhelmina)

The original proverb contains the word *käringgnag* (‘wife gnaw’) which is described by the collector as “the wife’s bickering on the husband” (ULMA 884, 427). Blisters on the feet involve a recurring physical discomfort that repeats itself with every new step one takes. The pain grows more intense because the spot that hurts is constantly rubbed and can become agonizing. This physical experience is transferred to the human domain and used

to represent a husband's experience of his wife's nagging. A possible base meaning is that a wife's nagging is very unpleasant for the husband.

To be quarrelsome seems at first glance to contaminate the idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity, hence disturbing the gender hegemony. In fact, the quarrelsome wife has previously been interpreted as challenging male supremacy (cf. Svahn 1999: 66). This could be a correct assumption but there are arguments in the material that suggest otherwise. First there is the large number of proverbs that include this stereotype. Other contaminating characteristics and practices in the material, such as the sexually active woman in (18) "No grass grows on a public road," are few and deviate from the norm. However, the sheer number of proverbs that include the quarrelsome wife seems to suggest that this is the norm.

Another argument that supports this interpretation is the imagery in some of the proverbs that is used to convey this message. This will be illustrated by the following proverb, present in the corpus in five variants, where the arguing wife is likened to a thunderstorm:

(20) Weather from the east and a wife's arguing start with a storm and end with wetness (Älvsbyn)

The only comment given on this proverb is: "a true sign" (ULMA 31001, 15) and it is unclear if it alludes to the weather or the wife's behaviour, or both. This specific weather phenomenon is described as having a set course: storm (replaced with *lightning* in another variant of the proverb) and rain. This course is transferred to the human domain and characterizes a wife arguing; the analogy with a storm creates an understanding of the arguing as violent and the following rain corresponds to her tears. The wife's behaviour is described as natural, following a natural order. Instead of appearing as something deviant and unwanted, her arguing "nature" becomes natural.

One way to explain the stereotype of the nagging/quarrelsome wife and its place in a hegemonic gender system is that it plays an important role in the idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity. If the wife is construed as quarrelsome, then everything she says could be interpreted as an expression of her quarrelsome nature. Consequently, because the husband does not have to listen to her, her position as hierarchically subordinate is legitimized. Such an understanding would mean that hegemonic femininity in the household does not involve being tempered and compliant, but in fact quarrelsome.

Another frequent conception found in the corpus is that of the highly valued capacity for work, a conception also found to be susceptible to different interpretations.

A Non-Hierarchical Capacity for Work?

Conceptions about capacity for work are frequent in the proverb material and there is no doubt this was an important trait for both women and men. Ella Johansson (2003: 78), who studies the construction of masculinity in life stories of loggers in Northern Sweden, born between 1840 and 1900, finds that “gender was a muted discourse” and that “the ability to work took precedence in notions of respectability.” She concludes that “masculinity [...] was more connected to maturity—and thus skill—than to the contrast with femininity” (Johansson 2003: 78). Mimi Schippers (2007: 97) refers to Johansson’s study¹⁰ and states that because these masculine characteristics were “not juxtaposed to inferior and complementary characteristics valued in women” they are examples of “idealized gender characteristics that do not perpetuate male dominance and therefore can be viewed as positive and valuable.” I will here argue that conceptions in the proverbs about male and female capacity for work are in fact part of a hierarchical gender relationship.

The following two examples are illustrative of the masculine ability to work, as described in the proverbs:

(21) The power of God is great, but the power of men is even greater
(Nederluleå)

(22) A seven-year-old horse and a man in his twenties are best
(Skellefteå)

The first proverb exists in seven variants in the corpus and is explained with the following descriptions: “The wife/woman that has prayed to God for a long time to give her a cowshed, but finally has to hire the ‘man power’” (Nordström 1980 [1925]: 55) and “if a women has received help from a man to do something, that she couldn’t do herself, she could thank him by saying [the proverb]” (DAUM 3881, no. 31). One possible base meaning is that the practical work, carried out by men, is highly valued. Taking the above cited comments into consideration, the physical work, enacted by men, is here contrasted with female inability and thus positioned in a hierarchically superior position.

In the second proverb the masculine practice of horse-trading is evoked (as in example (1)). This suggests that the advice, rather than being directed to a woman on the marriage market, was more likely to be passed among men. The seven-year-old horse is best with regard to its capacity for work,¹¹ and through analogy the 20-year-old man could be considered best in the same respect.

I do not believe that these examples contain "idealized masculine characteristics that do not perpetuate male dominance" (Schippers 2007: 97). Instead, they can be viewed as part of a hegemonic relationship. When female capacity for work is mentioned in the proverbs, it is often as in example (4) "It's better to look for your wife in the barn door than in the church door," as advice to the man on the marriage market: he is told to choose a wife with this capacity, while male capacity for work is highly valued on its own.

Even though not especially salient, the hard working woman is also found in proverbs concerning the agrarian household, an institution that we have already seen was patriarchally organized with the married man as master and with the right of decision. When the proverbs stress the importance of the woman's work in the household, it is always within this overarching power structure. In order for the household to function, the woman as well as the man has to perform according to the gendered division of labour, and in doing so, create a successful household, and maintain the household structure. The female capacity for work is in this regard essential for the survival of the household, and the household structure.

The question raised here could be said to concern the particular structural level on which conceptions of certain characteristics are seen to adhere. If the female ability to manage the household resources is viewed strictly on the basis of the level of division of labour in the household, it could be argued that it—however relational—does not subordinate women to men and perpetuate male dominance. However, if it is viewed within a larger structure in which the married man is master of the household and with the right of decision, and in which this female practice is something essential for this system's survival, then it could be said to do just that.

Looking at gender conceptions and grouping them into themes always involves deciding what level this theme should be constructed at. There is always the possibility that superordinate structures need to be taken into account. The next section will suggest such a structure: the cultural model of the successful household.

The Cultural Model of the Successful Household

According to White (1987: 155, 152–153), proverbs express *key understandings* about everyday life and can therefore be used as sources of knowledge about cultural models, that is taken for granted models of the world (Quinn & Holland 1987: 4). He also suggests that proverbs presuppose cultural models and that these play an important part in the interpretation of proverbs (White 1987: 154). The proverb material indicates the presence of a cultural

model of the successful household that structures goals and exhorts action (see Strauss 1992: 3). Such a model must be seen as heavily influenced by the Lutheran ideology of the three estates discussed earlier. The evidence from the proverb material suggests that such a model awards men room to manoeuvre and assigns passive positions to women.

But, first of all, what did it mean for a household to be successful in the agrarian environment in Northern Sweden? The agrarian household was, as mentioned earlier, primarily a production and consumption unit and in order to be successful the production needed to be at least as high as the consumption, that is a sort of economic success. This usually involved hard work for husband and wife as well as children and servants if there were any. As previously discussed, the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity on the marriage market involves an active choosing man and a passive woman who is chosen. A cultural model of the successful household, with the man as creator and maintainer, enables this chooser–chosen pattern: in order to create a successful household, men need room to manoeuvre on the marriage market and the women should be available for their choice. The advice conveyed by the proverbs, that the man should look for a wife with good capacity for work, also fits this pattern.

The argument for such a model is further strengthened by some proverbs about the marriage market that convey the conception that material assets add value to women and guarantee them many suitors, as for example in the following:

(23) Many want to console a rich widow (Edsele)

(24) The one that marries a widow, he gets both tables and benches
(Vilhelmina)

A possible base meaning of the first example is that a widow with material assets has many suitors. One possible interpretation here is that by choosing such a wife the man is given a “head start” towards achieving a successful household. In the second proverb, tables and benches metonymically refer to material assets and a possible base meaning is that the one who marries a widow gets material assets.

The ideal division of labour in the household and the male supremacy could also be understood in the light of the cultural model of the successful household: the household’s production depended on the division of labour and if the creator of the household is a man, it follows that he is also responsible for its administration. From this it could also follow that he should have the right of decision.

It is also possible to view the high value of female fertility as something important for the successful household. Children meant extra labour (Winberg 1977: 60) but also possible successors and heirs. One of the other characteristics that add value to women on the marriage market is youth (see Andersson 2009: 130–131), which could also be connected to fertility.

Conclusion

In this article, it has been shown that gender conceptions found in proverbs in a peasant society in Northern Sweden form a system of gender hegemony that supports masculine superiority and feminine subordination. Hegemonic masculinity involves being active on the marriage market, choosing and examining women in order to ensure a good choice. In short, hegemonic femininity on the marriage market involves being passive and available for the masculine practice of choosing. In the household, hegemonic masculinity is to be the master of the household, that is to exercise power and hegemonic femininity to be hierarchically subordinated. Finally, hegemonic masculinity involves having a strong and active sex drive that leads to irrational and uncontrollable behaviour and hegemonic femininity to be sexually passive except as an instrument for the satisfaction of the masculine sex drive.

Two ambiguous clusters of gender conceptions have been discussed: the nagging/quarrelsome wife and the highly valued capacity for work. It is shown that the frequent stereotypical image of a quarrelsome wife could play an important role in the system of gender hegemony by allowing dissenting opinions to be dismissed as manifestations of a quarrelsome nature. The highly valued capacity for work is, it turns out, construed differently for men and women in the proverbs: masculine capacity for work is highly valued on its own while the feminine counterpart is described as either something the a man should look for in a future wife or something important in the household, which was patriarchally organized, and therefore a vital part of the hegemonic gender system.

What has been studied in this article are proverbs, items of folklore, but also a system of gender conceptions. Such a system is symbolic and not a direct reflection of how people lived their lives in an older agrarian environment in Northern Sweden. This could not be stressed enough. We do not know how many times a proverb was used ironically or in an emancipatory way (cf. Yitah 2007), or if other traditional communicative genres constituted a counterweight to the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity found in the present study. One illustrative example of the discrepancy between the symbolic and the real is found in the conceptions

regarding division of labour in the household, which in the proverbs are strictly gender coded. Such a system, where men and women have separate duties, would have been impossible to uphold, due to a long tradition in the Bothnian area where men, mainly because of hunting and fishing, stayed away from the household for extended periods (Edlund 2000: 97). The strict gendered division of labour should perhaps be viewed as an ideal, not always practised (see Hansen 2006: 11, 53–54).

With these reservations made the fact remains that this system of gender conceptions existed, and was actualised over and over again by proverb use. Whether or not people viewed them as correct, or incorrect, they were there, as something everybody had to relate to when they tried to make sense of the world, and themselves in it.

Finally, this is a study of a proverb corpus from a specific time and place, that is an older agrarian society in Northern Sweden. Further study is required, where contemporary gender-related proverbs, traditional as well as proverb modifications (anti-proverbs) as well as completely new items with proverbial status, are studied. Proverbs, as well as gender norms, are long-lived phenomena, and change is only visible through diachronic studies. Contemporary studies also have the advantage that research in context is possible, as well as desirable.

NOTES

¹ This study takes its point of departure in findings from Andersson (2009), where the corpus also is described in more detail (pp. 33–45).

² Standard Swedish was also present in sermons and widely spread religious books, like the Hymn Book and Luther's Catechism (Pleijel 1967: 7–8).

³ The definition continues: "More elaborately stated, proverbs are short, generally known sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorizable form and that is handed down from generation to generation" (Mieder 1996: 597).

⁴ First published in 1969.

⁵ The original dialectal proverbs are presented in the appendix, together with standard Swedish translations and source references.

⁶ The idea of multiple masculinities and femininities is often attributed Connell's theory of *hegemonic masculinity* (1987; 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

⁷ Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 848) use the concept of *emphasized femininity* instead of *hegemonic femininity*.

⁸ Cf. Samper (1997).

⁹ Also the likely origin of English *husband* (OED Online).

¹⁰ Note that Schippers here refers to another article within the same anthology.

- ¹¹ Rolf Hedquist, an informant with great experience of horses said in an interview that "the horse can start to work at the age of three, but cannot handle the heaviest loads. At the age of seven, and a couple of years forward, you can demand the best" (3 August 2009, my translation from Swedish).

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| No. | Original | Parish | Source |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | Ärmbågasmälln jer-som aintjsårja, he schwi-deill men gå snart om Armbågsmällen är som änklingsor- gen, det svider till men går snart om | Norsjö | DAUM 3722 |
| 2 | Gamhagan stå no meda ingen kliv på-n Den gamla gärdesgården står nog så länge ingen kliver på den | Umeå | ULMA 3560 |
| 3 | Frie! ä söm tell å byte hästa, man fo ha yga vä sä Fria är som att byta hästar, man får ha ögonen med sig | Edsele | DAUM 3864, no. 337 |
| 4 | He jer better at do lait di kuno uti fäosdöro en uti körkdöro Det är bättre du letar din hustru i fähusdörren än i kyrkdörren | Överkalix | ÖHÅ, 1957, 15 |
| 5 | Han söm frie ti mörkre, fo ta dä han fo Den som friar i mörkret får ta det han får | Edsele | DAUM 3864, no. 338 |
| 6 | Säg jänta nej ti mange frijara, sæ for na te sist frije själv Säger flickan nej till många friare, så får hon till sist fria själv | Edsele | Bergfors 1981: 30 |
| 7 | Välje häri väpplingen å stäne häri stära ² Välja i väpplingen och stanna i starren | Edsele | DAUM 3864, no. 227 |
| 8 | Hä kjarn dra ein ve hest å slera, kjan kuno bära öut ini firikliren Det karln drar in med häst och släde, kan hustrun bära ut i förklädet | Nederkalix | DAUM 3906, no. 36 |
| 9 | Surn vö—sur a tjäring Sur ved—sur hustru | Ragunda | DAUM 3856, no. 207 |
| 10 | Dä ä kank'n ³ söm skö gæla Det är tuppen som ska gala | Ytterlännäs | Bergfors 1981: 28, also 73 |

| No. | Original | Parish | Source |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 11 | Karn je karn Karlen är karlen | Umeå | DAUM 372, no. 114, and ULMA 3704 |
| 12 | Där öyngän keos jer i heos, so jer ä öyngä heos Där ingen pådrivande husbonde finns i huset, så är det inget hus | Nederluleå | Nordström 1980 [1925]: 49 |
| 13 | Da kukn sta da jer halve hove ⁴ bort ⁵ Då kuken står är halva vettet borta | Norsjö | DAUM 3722 |
| 14 | Är kärarna frisk så nog vill dom nå furt Är karlarna friska så nog vill de något fult | Grundsunda | DAUM 4064, 6 |
| 15 | Lortvattne hläck ell'n Lortvattnet släcker elden | Ytterlännäs | Bergfors 1981: 70 |
| 16 | Hä hänn ju iblann att en torrgran rånopp Det händer ju ibland att en torrgran återigen grönskar | Sorsele | DAUM 3863, no. 14 |
| 17 | Om trede jer åldri se mårtne—no jer kwistn frisk Om trädet är aldrig så murknat—nog är kvisten frisk | Överluleå | Verla däensch upa i kålvråmp 2000: 136 |
| 18 | På allmän landsväg växer inget gräs | Åsele | DAUM 3857, no. 459 |
| 19 | Skoskav och käringgnag är det värsta en människa kan råka ut för här på jorden | Vilhelmina | ULMA 884, 425 |
| 20 | Östadväder och käringträta börjar med storm och slutar med väta | Älvsbyn | ULMA 31001, 15 |
| 21 | Guds mäkt jer ståor, män karamäkta jer enda störrä Guds makt är stor, men karlmakten är ännu större | Nederluleå | Nordström 1980 [1925]: 55 |
| 22 | N häst i sjuen å en karl i tjuen vara bäst En sjuårig häst och en tjuugoårig karl är bäst | Skellefteå | Ordspråksboken 2004: 23 |

| No. | Original | Parish | Source |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|--------------------|
| 23 | N rik änkes sorg är e mang söm vel tröste En rik änkas sorg är det många som vill trösta | Edsele | DAUM 3864, no. 403 |
| 24 | Daen söm jift sä vä änka, han fo bå bol å bänka Den som gifter sig med en änka han får både bord och bänkar | Vilhelmina | ULMA 884, 77 |

NOTES

- ¹ The word *frie* (*fria* in standard Swedish) used in the original proverb refers in relevant dialects to the practice of courting (a woman) (see Söderström 1994: 94b).
- ² The word *väppling* ['clover'] refers to white clover (ULMA 22759, OSDs) and *stära* ['sedge'], to a type of grass usually found in and around swamps (see Svahn 1991: 47).
- ³ The word *kanke* means 'rooster' in relevant dialects (see e.g. Multrå, ULMA 7643, OSDs).
- ⁴ The word *hov* is used in many relevant dialects with the meaning 'judgment, sense' (Larsson & Söderström 1979: 89b; Lundgren 1997: 112b; DAUM 3722).
- ⁵ Compare to Latin *Penis erectus non habet conscientiam* (Taylor 1931: 171).