

A Queer Perspective on Sexuality and Normality in Folk Legends **Maria Bäckman**

Harjunen, Catarina. 2020. *Att dansa med de(t) skeva. Erotiska möten mellan människa och naturväsen i finlandssvenska folksågner.* [To Dance With the Queer. Queer Perspectives on Erotic Encounters Between Humans and Nature Spirits.] Department of Nordic Folkloristics, Åbo Akademi University Press, 230 pp. Diss. ISBN 978-951-765-967-3.

Already on the third page of her well-written and in many ways fascinating thesis, Catarina Harjunen points out the main subject of the study. The overarching aim is to introduce, describe and analyse Finland-Swedish folklore about erotic encounters between humans and nature spirits, and thereby examine ideas of normality expressed in folk legends. Therefore, the legends are studied both with reference to how they co-exist with sexuality and gender, and with notions of nature and culture. The empirical base consists of more than a hundred (116) folk legends that Harjunen has found in archives and collections.

As stated in the title, the thesis focuses on presumed erotic encounters between human beings and nature itself, and with “erotic”, Harjunen means a spectrum which starts at a slightly intangible “ambience” and ends with “results”, i.e. the children produced in the encounters’. This creates a chronological approach to the material, the folk legends and their motifs, which recurs in the outline of the empirical chapters and, at the same time, reflects a contemporary view of the ideal development of a relationship between a man and a woman within the field of sexuality. In the empirical parts of the thesis, the presentation is thus structured by the following stepping stones: *meeting*, *courtship*, *sexual interaction* (and more seldom: marriage) and (the even more rarely occurring) *offspring*.

Two major research questions have guided the author in her work. The first is: how are normative sexual desires, practices and forms of relationships constructed in the realm of erotic encounters in legends? The second, addressing the same context, reads: in which ways does sexuality appear to be linked to nature?

These two overarching issues are accompanied by the observation that sexuality has often been described as something “natural”, while unwanted sexuality has almost regularly been portrayed as being “against nature”. In this very contradiction, Harjunen argues, lies one of most fundamental theoretical inputs of the thesis, namely thinking critically about legitimate forms of

sexuality/nature relations, which has been developed within the field of queer ecology. Likewise, another fundamental assumption is that the peasant society was, by its very nature, patriarchal, and that this hierarchy has significantly contributed to consolidating and preserving heteronormative structures.

There is, however, another essential understanding that has equally influenced the formal outline of the thesis. Folklore, Harjunen states, both *reproduces* and *creates* cultural norms. By studying folk legends, we can therefore get an idea of what was considered meaningful behaviour or a meaningful attitude during the time the legends were in use, and which historical period they accordingly reflect. But the reverse is also true, as follows from the argument, because the legends can be used for an interpretation that takes into account what is placed in the margins of intelligibility, that is, what can be said to be the productive *exterior* of the normal. In this way, the folk legends' narrative versions of the encounters between humans and spirits turn into a map of cultural anomalies that make up and confirm the very limits of normality. This dual quality of the material is often used as the starting point of the analysis.

The reading of the material is largely based on *erotic presence*, which has been Harjunen's generative tool when searching the Finland-Swedish material collected and archived a long time ago, and identifying and selecting the legends to be included in the present study. The time span of the material in the thesis ranges from the 1860s (a few findings) to the 1950s, and the geographical area is Swedish-speaking Finland. The category "natural spirit" is formed in the context of four beings, all of which are previously well-known in the field of folklore studies, and were assumed to reside in nature: trolls, two female spirits that were associated with either the forest (*skogsrå*) or the sea (*sjörå*), and the male water spirit known as the neck or nix (*näcken*).

Harjunen argues that the sheer existence of natural spirits in an erotic storytelling tradition must be comprehended as a crack in the heteronormative (and patriarchal) structure that advocates a certain kind of heterosexual life as legitimate as well as the most desirable. Therefore, she suggests, the folk legends and their content open up for questioning prevailing norms and notions of normality. What the erotic narratives implicitly say is that there are *other* ways for humans to live their lives than the ones perceived as culturally exemplary or idealised. In the language of the thesis, it can thus be observed that the stories, as well as the spirits and some of the humans who partake in the erotic encounters, deviate from the expected behaviours and orientations, in a queer manner.

To examine these constructs of alleged normality, Harjunen combines her queer ecological perspective with what she describes as a *queer close reading* (*närläsning*) of the material, which is also declared to form the basis of the

methodology of the thesis. This process of carefully contemplating the material is furthermore specified to include a *contextual close reading*, performed to confirm its findings. According to Harjunen, this means that her interpretation of the written sources takes place against the backdrop of the 19th-century peasant society, but also through queer, and thus also explicitly critical, glasses.

The thesis is thus grounded, above all, in the theorization by Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin. Nonetheless, the discussion is also built up with reference to posthumanist influences, mainly Donna Haraway's concept of *companion species* and *natureculture*. Other crucial contributions to the analysis are based on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological conceptual apparatus, such as *orientation* and *stickiness*.

What characterises the outline and objectives of the thesis is that the stated aim of the study, clearly placed within a folkloristic academic tradition, can be described as both descriptive and exploratory. As Harjunen aptly writes, her study is concerned with using new conceptual tools to explore a field that has so far been left largely untouched. Thus, the thesis fills two knowledge gaps. Firstly, it draws attention to Finland-Swedish erotic folklore, which, as proclaimed by the author, has until now attracted only limited academic interest. In addition to this spotlighting of seemingly under-researched material, the author intends to establish a non-heteronormative presence in the archived collections of legends.

In this context, it should be stressed that Harjunen aims to join the long and vehement tradition of folkloristic scholars, but she also wants to introduce a new perspective, to add to the already established ones. Accordingly, the study opens up for new ways of addressing notions of normality, at least in relation to Finland-Swedish folklife material. It is an exciting objective, which there is every reason to applaud. So how does the author achieve her task?

There is much good to say about this thesis. For one thing, the language and the outline of the empirical parts are impressive: as a reader, it is easy to be swept away by the large number of intriguing analyses and observations. What is described is a dynamic relationship between humans and natural spirits, a meandering, bumpy – sometimes pliable and sometimes reckless or even hostile – *dance with the queer*, where the actions, desires and bodies of beings, due to their own deviation, violate established norms. Through their way of interacting with these natural spirits, people, too, often fail to live up to societal and cultural ideals.

The boundaries between natural spirits and humans, and between ideals, norms and the very acts that oppose or challenge those norms, are thus unstable. The existence of spirits, as those beings appear in legends and folk tradition, can thus be understood to offer a different kind of reality. The narra-

tion of erotic encounters, and sometimes even marriage or cohabitation, with trolls, forest spirits, sea spirits or the neck thereby becomes a way to express forbidden desires and put forward notions of other possible lives.

Notwithstanding the appealing character of these findings, the thesis project also suffers from some quite serious shortcomings. Its strength lies primarily in the author's theoretical approach. By looking at the legends through an updated prism of queer theory, queer ecology and posthumanism, Harjunen infuses new blood into material that for a long time has not attracted so much research interest. However, it is also here, in the apt, yet inspiring, theoretical drive that the thesis shows both its best and worst sides.

Using well-founded theoretical perspectives on legend material that has already been researched to some extent surely is an inspiring effort, with the potential to create new insights. Still, the thesis often seems to create an unnecessarily sharp distinction between older and newer research paradigms. There are surprisingly few occasions when the author takes advantage of, or even searches for, analytical possibilities that can be found in the interface between older and newer folk legend research. Consequently, the thesis would have benefitted from a more bridging approach and links between different scholars, research questions and perspectives. A broader view on the discipline's previous stances would also have helped to clarify the specific contribution of the thesis to the study of erotic encounters between humans and nature spirits in folk legends.

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that Harjunen's argumentation as to why the particular set of legends examined in the thesis should be perceived as "erotic" is substantially vague. Quite a few of the examples discussed lack distinctly sexual elements. The explanation given in the thesis that the included legends can be thought to be dealing with a natural spirit because they are, on a more general level, imbued with an erotic/sexual ambience, or associated with such a motif, is not sufficiently clear. The author's interpretations of individual legends are thus in danger of being perceived as tendentious since she has given herself the opportunity to place statements and described events within her own theoretical matrix rather than anchoring the analysis to the legend material itself.

Another limitation is the author's tendency to apply circular reasoning. The discussion of empirical examples often tends to repeat what has already been laid down in the theoretical starting points described in the introductory chapter. Furthermore, and this is perhaps the most serious shortcoming, it can be argued that Harjunen often lacks the desired accuracy in her handling of the secondary sources that form the basis of her historically oriented "contextual close reading". Given the fundamental importance of this close reading for the conclusions of the thesis, it is troubling that this read-

ing does not seem convincing in all aspects. Finally, there are also recurring shortcomings in the reference technique of the thesis.

These are no small drawbacks, which should have been resolved. At the same time, there is no doubt that Harjunen has made a significant contribution to her discipline. The reader is presented with new interpretations and analyses of folk legend material that has for long been left largely untouched. With her thesis, Harjunen therefore shows that there are still new and exciting questions to be asked in relation to older archive material. This makes her study a welcome and inspiring contribution to ethnological and folkloristic research in this area.

AUTHOR

Maria Bäckman, Associate Professor in Ethnology, is a University Lecturer at Stockholm University. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, Crip Theory, and materiality studies.