

Inherited fashion

Pia Olsson

Seija Johnson 2018. *I den folkliga modedräktens fotspår. Bondekvinnors välstånd, ställning och modemedvetenhet i Gamlakarleby socken 1740–1800.* [In the footsteps of a common folk fashionable dress. The wealth, social position, and fashion awareness of farmers' wives in Gamlakarleby parish 1740–1800.] Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 339. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä. 269 pp. ISBN 978-951-39-7368-1. Permanent link: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-7368-1>.

What can clothing reveal about the 18th century woman's economic and social status? This is the question Seija Johnson disentangles in her dissertation focussing on Ostrobothnian rural women's clothing. On a very concrete level the research concentrates on examining specific items of clothing and the research material regarding these items over six decades (1740–1800).

In the Finnish ethnological context, research on dresses and dressing has become somewhat more general in the 21st century than it used to be in earlier decades. This has also emphasised new theoretical and methodological viewpoints in the research of material culture. Compared with these studies, Seija Johnson has chosen a more classical approach. This does not mean that she chose the easy way out, though. On the contrary, the close reading of the estate inventory deeds that form the foundation for the research has been a demanding process with a need for creative solutions.

The author emphasises the research focusses with slight differences in different parts of the introduction. This reflects the different phases and emphases during the research process. The essential questions asked are: 1) What kind of picture can be created of farmers' wives economic and social position in the Gamlakarleby parish through estate inventory deeds? 2) How can the dresses used by this specific group be characterised from the point of view of clothing research? 3) What kind of picture do the current national dresses give of 18th-century dresses? This means that the focus of the research is not so much on the clothes as the object but rather on the ways women have clothed themselves and how this reflects their social status and opportunities to adapt to European fashion.

The last question reflects the author's background in working with national costumes, which was the impetus at the beginning of the research process for the author to look closer at the dresses that were the inspiration for these later modifications. However, this last part of the research is not as thoroughly

dealt with as the rest of the work and would have benefited from being dealt with in a separate study.

The concepts used and analysed in the study derive from the research subjects, folk dress [folkdräkt], demotic fashion [folkligt mode] and demotic fashion costume [folklig modedräkt], with the last being the most focal. The use of more theoretical concepts might have helped in structuring the analysis and the thematic framework. Fernand Braudel's idea of everyday life, Georg Simmel's theory of ownership and Thorstein Veblen's theory of leisure class were, however, used as inspiration when creating the perspective for the study.

Seija Johnson defines her research as microhistorical, but as an ethnological work she describes it as also drawing from anthropology, social history and research on clothing. The researcher has distanced herself from the research process in the text in a way that somewhat conceals the microhistorical research process. As the sources used are challenging, it would have been interesting to read more on the author's methodology for close reading when searching for the leads in her material.

As a microhistorical study, the reader is overwhelmed by the quantity of sources used. This abundance of information is presented also in tables, which helps the reader to absorb it more easily. However, sometimes the idea arises that less indeed could be more. This hope is linked both to the somewhat quantitative nature of the study but also because of the expanding focus of the work. Although concentrating on rural farmers' wives, the author additionally discusses the clothing of some burgess women to understand the changes in fashion and the opportunities to adopt it. This brings a positive tension to the research and makes the analysis more multidimensional than what it would have been if concentrating only on farmers' wives, although this viewpoint is not much present in the research questions.

Altogether 65 rural women and 12 burgess women are included in the study. Despite the difference in numbers, the analysis of the burgess women is also thorough and revealing. Although the estate inventory deeds are the main source of the study, these have been supplemented by data such as population registers and genealogy plus letters. The amount of sources is understandable as the author describes her main sources as something 'that reveal greatly but hide even more'. This nature of the sources is readable from the text and somewhat explains the need to cite the multitude of examples in the text.

The author highlights the overflow of extravagance that is visible in the estate inventory deeds of the burgess women. Fashion trends changed quickly in the city, but rural women also adopted some of the new trends. During the six decades under study, these opportunities grew as the economic situation improved and because of the local characteristics of the parish, such as the

ability to export goods. The clothes women possessed were acquired by parents and husbands, but the study shows that an inheritance was also an important way of improving one's selection of clothes. All this reflects women's social standing in society and the hierarchies that defined it.

Clothes were one of the most valuable parts of women's possessions and were a method for them to display their affluence. Imported textiles especially made this possible. The opportunities to do this varied, however, within the group of farmer's wives.

The descriptive part of the study is substantial and detailed, and the analysis convinces the reader through its diligence. The aim is to historically contextualise the sources used, and dialogue between the individual and general is achieved. The microhistoric point of view is most present in the case of Maria Laiberg, who also according to the author is 'the centrepiece of the study' around which the analytical circles have taken shape. As the author writes, there is not much research to build on when focusing on 18th-century rural women as the choice of sources is limited. Despite the fragmentary nature of the sources used here, the author manages to create an over-all description of the everyday life of 18th-century women using clothes and clothing as her starting point and, furthermore, of the mechanisms that affected this everydayness.

AUTHOR

PhD, Docent Pia Olsson is a University Lecturer in European ethnology at the University of Helsinki. Her research is currently focusing on questions of urban ethnology.