

## IN SEARCH OF HIDDEN SEXUALITY

Old Age and Sexuality in the Light of Humorous Narration<sup>1</sup>**Sinikka Vakimo****University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu**

This article deals with the perceptions of the elderly from the agrarian culture of early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Finland. It focusses especially on how the sexuality and corporeality of old women are defined in humorous oral narration. The research materials include archival anecdotes about old age and sexuality. The research draws upon theoretical discussions presented in feminist cultural gerontology and folklore studies. The figure of the old woman emerges here as a strikingly complex sexual agent, a figure whose body and sexuality are visible in anecdotes and not hidden.

Keywords: cultural conceptions, age and sexuality, body, humour, folklore

## Introduction

Ever since its inception as a field of research, cultural gerontology has preoccupied itself with the cultural definitions and varying attitudes and perceptions of old age. The analysis of historical materials, including, for example, European art and literary works from antiquity, have enabled researchers to perceive certain mental models of old age common in Western culture. Although researchers acknowledge the diversity and context-bound nature of definitions of old age, they still concur that the prevailing cultural definitions have generally been, and continue to be, negative. Old age, especially female old age, is invariably associated with physical and mental decline as well as loss of social, economic and sexual power (Beauvoir 1986: 99–311; Covey 1991: 161–174; Falkner and Luce 1992: 4–5; Soden 2012: 84–85; see Minois 1989). In spite of the tremendous societal and cultural changes that have occurred, many of these perceptions continue to inform present-day images of old age circulating in the media and popular culture (see Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Dolan and Tincknell 2012; Swinnen and Stotesbury 2012; Ylännä 2012).

The present article seeks to shed some light on the area of popular thought and inhering notions of gendered old age in recent history. My investigation concentrates on cultural models of thinking which are situated in early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Finland, when face-to-face communication still figured more prominently in the production and circulation of ideas and information than in the media-centred society of today. Therefore the empirical investigation concentrates on orally-transmitted folk narratives. Oral folk narratives are firmly bound to their narrative communities and to the cultural models for collective thinking and experiencing (Siikala 1989: 189–190). That industrialisation, urbanisation and subsequent structural changes in livelihoods took place in Finnish society relatively late (Virrankoski 2012) is evident in the cultural models of thinking represented in folk narration; their origins

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can be traced back to the traditions of older agrarian culture, its gender and age systems and the basic moral principles underpinning social life in rural communities.

I will address the cultural conceptions and images of old age generated and represented in oral narration by paying particular attention to the concepts related to body, gender and sexuality. The frame of reference of this investigation rests upon theoretical discussions in feminist cultural gerontology (see Pearsall 1997; Woodward 1999; Vakimo 2001; Faircloth 2003; Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Dolan and Tincknell 2012). I examine oral narration as signifying practices in which meanings are articulated and cultural concepts constructed, deconstructed and interpreted in everyday social interaction (see Hall 1997; Grossberg 2010). Oral narration can thus be regarded as an everyday means of making sense of the world and building a community's local knowledge and social values in social interaction (Siikala 1989: 189–190). Cultural representations of old people are generally examined using materials from various media sources (see Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Dolan and Tincknell 2012; Swinnen and Stotesbury 2012; Ylänné 2012); thus my analytical work on oral narration offers a new kind of contribution, with an emphasis on popular thought, to cultural gerontology.

Ageing femininity has been not only culturally invisible but also relatively neglected as an area of study. Moreover, at least implicitly, the assumption in research has been that cultural representations would be reserved for the young and that the theoretically created gaze would only be interesting when directed at the youthful body, a body regarded as attractive and beautiful (Woodward 1999a; Dolan and Tincknell 2012a). At the same time, however, earlier mainstream gerontological research has been linked to its socio-medical background and to the concepts of old age prevalent in the culture of the West and examined old age largely as a problem and viewing gender and corporeality mainly from essentialist perspectives. Thus, old age has been understood through bodily manifestations as androgynous and asexual and the aged body as sick and frail by nature, one approaching death (Katz 1996; Calasanti and Slevin 2006a; Marshall and Katz 2006; Tulle-Winton 2010).

Relatively speaking, cultural conceptions of old age, the body and sexuality have received only scant scholarly attention in Finnish historical research. It is clear, however, that the processes of civilisation and modernisation have not only complicated the ways of conceptualizing of the body and sexuality but have also placed the body under stricter observation and control, a form of regulation and basis of social categorisation that also extends to the elderly (Featherstone 1995; Faircloth 2003a; Marshall and Katz 2006; Öberg 2003). Defined by the cult of youth and the youthful structure of the look (Woodward 1999a), today's medicalised and consumerist culture gives pride of place to the young and functional body, which is perceived as beautiful, while stigmatising the physical changes accompanying old age, especially in the case of women (see Sontag 1997). The visible signs of ageing on the body are viewed with abhorrence, as signs of decay that need to be prevented, hidden and corrected; like the disabled or handicapped body, the aged body is seen as abnormal and thus becomes a culturally repudiated and, in a sense, "rejected body" (see Wendell 1996). Therefore, the aged body can also be interpreted and experienced as a prison of concealment, an interpretation also reflected in the gerontological concept "the mask of ageing" (Faircloth 2003a: 17). Thus it is no understatement that the relationship to the ageing body and sexuality is difficult and fraught with contradiction (Öberg 2003; Marshall and Katz 2006; Cronin 2007). No doubt, it will be interesting to observe how these intersections of old age, gender and corporeality are played out, not to mention how gendered old age itself is talked about, in the oral discourses located in the period that we clearly recognise as socially and historically prior to late modernity.

## Empirical focus and frames of interpretation

The empirical sections of the article deal with anecdotes in which the humorous focus is on the treatment elderly people's sexuality. I examine the formation of images of gendered ageing in a corpus that I have selected from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society; the anecdotes in question were preserved in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is only a negligible collection of such anecdotes classified, a fact which may be due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter: old age and sexuality were an incongruous pair in agrarian cultural thought. The material I have used contains about 50 anecdotes that are written, though based in the oral tradition. They have been preserved in the folklore archives amidst other folk narratives such as folk tales, humorous tales and legends collected during various periods and places in Finland.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, the tellers and collectors of sexual anecdotes have been men and the field of sexual humour in Finland has largely been regarded as a male domain.

As a genre of folklore, anecdotes are characterised as narratives about situations or issues regarded as comical; these narratives are typically made up of contents that are concrete and related to everyday life. The narration is often extradiegetic, laconic and matter of fact; the figures who populate the anecdotal world also tend to be stock characters, which are characteristically flat and unchanging (see Rimmon-Kenan 1983). Usually the point of the joke is made through the dialogue or comments uttered by the characters. As a rule, anecdotes begin with a brief account of the setting, thus grounding the story and its characters firmly in reality. The events or situations appear real – or at least plausible. The tellers of anecdotes do not seek to take their audiences into the realm of fantasy or the supernatural, but instead construct possible worlds (Knuutila 1992: 125–129). Anecdotes, therefore, as a form of humorous narration bound to the real world offer the researcher a wealth of material amenable to cultural interpretation (see Ashplant 1998).

I selected humorous narration, specifically anecdotes, as my research subject because humour is a fundamental part of everyday social interaction that often comes in handy when people have to communicate about or come to grips with a painful, awkward or disagreeable topic (Mulkay 1988: 122–133; see Oring 2008; Raskin 2008). The combination of old age and sexuality, to be sure, counts as such a theme in Finnish culture.

According to Elliot Oring (2008), anthropological and folkloristic interest in humour has dealt primarily with joking relationships, the ritual use and meanings of humour and various folk genres of it (see also Apte 1985); the scope of my investigation falls into the final category mentioned. Moreover, the wider phenomenon of humour has compelled generations of researchers from diverse research traditions to tackle the subject from a number of different angles (see e.g. Krikmann 2006; Raskin 2008; Knuutila 2010). My interpretation of the meanings generated by humour is based on the assumption that the humorous mode is produced in a narrative or a situation through an ambivalent, incongruous or surprising element. It can take the form of a conflict, which can be, among other things, emotional, conscious, linguistic, logical, or social (Knuutila 1992: 44–46; Oring 2008). For instance, Victor Raskin's semantic theory on verbal humour explains that the humorous mode in narrative is produced through a clash of opposing cultural scripts, such as true / false, to cite one example of opposition (Raskin 1985: 99–117.)

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<sup>2</sup> Anecdotes resemble other traditional narrative genres so much that their classification has proven vexing to both the researchers who study them and the archivists who have sought to classify them – a case in point would be the placement of anecdotes in the Tale Type Index (see Aarne and Thompson 1981).

Michael Mulkay, by contrast, has underscored the complexity of the humour mechanism in narration; he argues that the humorous mode not only creates a clash of opposing categories but also blends these categories. It is therefore essential that we do not equate humorous narration and its semantic field with discourse about reality, but rather recognise that humorous narration is constructed by the blending of truths and non-truths (Mulkay 1988: 39–56; see Knuuttila 2010).

Theories of humour can indeed be regarded as loose interpretive frames allowing the researcher to see “a rainbow of meanings” (Halliwell 2008: 11) that subsequently guide the process of interpreting oral humour as meaning-making bound to both cultural context and narrative situation (see Oring 2008: 196–203) as opposed to a single truth or perspective. It must be noted that although anecdotes have primarily been told to entertain and amuse, they have also served to maintain the status quo of a social group. Indeed, humorous narration often is more than simply a neutral medium for evoking laughter, for while it may operate to alleviate conflicts, it may also simply reproduce social hierarchies and thus be used as a means of subordination and constructing distinctions between in- and out-groups, between us and them (Knuuttila 1992: 164–188; Norrick and Spitz 2010).

Like all oral traditions, folk narratives tend to be at least in part reconstructed during performance, wherein the meanings they hold are also liable to change. Therefore, any example of oral tradition has to be understood within a specific narrative situation and its broader cultural context (Siikala 1989, 2002). However, when it comes to older archived materials, the lack of contextual information, such as descriptions of narrative situation or biographical details about narrators, renders these texts a challenge to contemporary researchers seeking to reconstruct narrative situations and meanings produced in performances. In addition, it must be noted that when oral tradition, which by nature is characterized by variation, is committed to the written record, it loses its characteristic tendency to fragmentation as well as its repetitive and interactive elements; the narration becomes even more formulaic and is condensed into a single written narrative (see Honko 2000; Pöysä 2000). Nonetheless, the folklorist working with archived, oral-based written anecdotes can view the texts as mediated, condensed and textualised representations of narratives and narrative situations.

In his analysis of Finnish anecdotes, Seppo Knuuttila has observed that the central theme of sexual humour is the rivalry for phallic domination, often manifested in a struggle between a person of higher rank (a priest or a master) and a person of lower rank (a servant or a vagabond); women in these stories are merely objects and instruments for struggles fought between men. Power hierarchies in sexually humorous narration are often subverted with the figures of lower status defeating those of higher status and likewise younger figures defeat their elders (Knuuttila 1992: 339–340). In the anecdotes I have studied, however, corresponding struggles between different groups are not strikingly evident. Nonetheless, many of these anecdotes are more readily understood when their functions and contexts of use are considered in light of the cultural conventions of humorous narration as outlined by Knuuttila.

In my reading of anecdotes I seek not only to highlight what the gist of the humour reveals about the juxtaposition of sexuality and old age but also the significance of agency and presence – or absence – in the narrative setting for understanding intersections of old age and sexuality. I pay particular attention to the narrative’s events and actors and also to the humorous elements they generate vis-à-vis the figures of elderly people in the narratives and the ways in which age markers (Harwood and Giles 1992) and the body are constructed. During my exploration of the materials, which has been inspired by close reading practices

(see Pöysä 2015), I have repeatedly read my anecdote corpus with the entirety in mind, thus seeking to reflect individual anecdotes against the entire corpus “out loud”. Furthermore, throughout the reading process, I have kept in mind the masculine character of anecdotes – that is to say, that as a genre of oral narration, anecdotes have for the most part prevailed in a patriarchal and heteronormative culture, wherein the female figure is perceived as both an object of male desire and also of mockery and ridicule. Below I present my analytical reading in two sections, and thereafter I will raise a few concluding remarks about my reading.

## Continued sexual desire and function in later life

The empirical case study examines anecdotes in which the humorous focus is on the treatment of elderly people’s sexuality. In order to determine the approach, I have thematically divided the anecdotes into three groups, the first of which I will examine concerns the sexual ability of the ageing man, the second deals with the sexual desire of the old woman while the third considers the old woman as a sexual partner.

The first group of anecdotes contains a thematic focus on the sexual capacities of the elderly man. The actors discussing the matter are either elderly women or elderly men. When the interlocutors are elderly women, the topic is discussed in a matter-of-fact way in an everyday situation.

Outside the church, an old woman asked another old woman this question: “Can your old man still do it with you?” The other one said, “Oh, yes, thank the Lord, a little.” (1938)

Old women at the church. Each asks the other whether she is still doing the night shift. (1888)

The settings in this type of anecdote are briefly characterized as places regarded as customary or natural for an elderly woman, for example, the church or the road leading up the hill to the church, the home or its environs, a graveyard or a doctor’s office. In the narrative world constructed it is taken for granted that the man naturally plays an active sexual role and the woman’s sexuality is dependent on this. At the same time, the anecdote also carries the assumption that a man’s sexual performance declines with age; indeed, this assumption is present in the word *still* uttered in the questions. The narration contrasts the old man’s declining sexual ability with the older woman’s continued interest in sex. Within the structure of the anecdote, the old woman occupies the role of active agent, the one who can assertively respond to the questions. Depending on the different anecdote variants, she responds to the question by expressing her satisfaction in the man’s virility, a sense of indifference, or even her feeling of being tired of it. The alternative conventional responses in the different variants show that the woman’s response has no impact on the humorous (comic) twist, but rather it takes place in the plot through the clash of cultural expectations brought about by the elderly women discussing sex, a taboo-like subject in the traditional agrarian culture, especially in the environs of the church, a place dedicated to the sacred.

The narrative point of view regarding male sexual functionality undergoes a change when the actor is an elderly man. For example, the old man may face the decline in his sexual ability with a certain resignation, though in the second example a cure is found.

An old Russian priest had a housekeeper, but he could no longer keep her satisfied. In the evening the priest made the sign of the cross over his eyes and prayed before an icon: "Dear God, please take the desires away since you've already taken away the abilities." (1937)

A very beautiful girl once stepped onto a crowded bus. An older gentleman who was already seated invited the girl to come and sit on his lap. "Of course you can sit on the lap of an old fellow like me." The girl thanked the gentleman and sat down. The bus started moving. After a while, the gentleman began to twitch restlessly, finally saying, "Please, young lady, could you stand up, for I am not quite as old as I thought." (The gentleman still had the "urge"!)" (1939)

The first anecdote features an elderly priest, thus once again juxtaposing the societally esteemed frame of the church and religion with the profane world of sexuality, along with the cultural expectations of a man's declining sexual abilities as he grows older ("he could no longer keep her satisfied"). The anecdote's humorous mode is produced by the real world's subversion of the social hierarchy: the priest is humbled and weakened by old age, a condition which rather paradoxically combines enduring sexual desire with the loss of sexual functionality. The point of the latter anecdote, however, resides in the assumption that a man automatically loses sexual potency in old age ("an old fellow like me"); in other words, the elderly man cannot present a sexual threat to a young woman. Nonetheless, the narrative suggests that the mere physical proximity or touch of a young, beautiful woman suffices to cure his impotence, with perhaps a tacit understanding that the old man has a wife, but who is also advanced in age and therefore no longer sexually desirable. This anecdote, similarly to others in my material, conveys a notion also pervasive in 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinking in sexual humour: youth is equated with beauty. In this way women are inevitably seen to lose their physical attractiveness and consequently their sex appeal as they age, and are thus utterly unappealing to men. This also serves as an explanation for the older man's impotence (Legman 1968: 614).

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that not all folklore portrayals of the elderly man highlight his failing sexual powers. My corpus, in fact, contains a few anecdotes that underline the sexual prowess and astonishingly active sex life of an elderly man. In addition, there is also a body of more contemporary international humour grappling with sexual potency versus impotence – for example, there is an abundance of Swedish jokes representing old men as either hopelessly impotent or sexually insatiable. In today's popular culture the notorious "dirty old man" figure has its roots in the older cultural traditions (Legman 1968: 614–628; Palmenfelt 1996: 134–140; Eklund 1996: 26–41). All of a sudden, the elderly man's sexuality emerges as an uncontrollable force, which, regardless of the man's own personal will, appears as either a failing ability or a vigorous and obsessive sexual impulse. In addition, the observation reveals the multiplicity of voices in humorous speech in general, and how it can present possibilities for reconciling contradictory perspectives on the world.

While the humorous twist of the first set of anecdotes in my study refers to the sexual capacities of the ageing man, those in the second set likewise consider sexual desire and its longevity in the older woman. This is yet another recurring theme in collections of humorous folklore from around the world. According to Legman, expressions of sexual humour from a male point of view occasionally reflect hostility to the longevity of the female sex drive and sexual abilities. Masculinist humour regards the ageing woman's continued interest and sexual potential as not only shameful but also in contrast with the elderly man's greater vulnerability vis-à-vis his sexual potency or impotency (Legman 1968: 633–634; Eklund 1996: 26–28).

Finnish tellers of anecdotes and jokes also ponder the seeming contradiction between sexual desire and the cultural conception of elderly women as asexual. The narration rests on the burning question as to whether women ever become too old to desire or enjoy sexual intimacy. In the following anecdotal narrative below, several “half-grown”, that is to say, relatively young women or “schoolboys” discuss this very problem:

Two schoolboys are talking about matters of the heart. They are particularly concerned about when a wife stops craving for menfolk. One of the boys decided to go and ask a seventy-year-old crone, who promptly told him to go and ask someone older. (1891)

Several women are talking about how long women continue to have the lusts of the flesh. They aren't even real women yet, barely half-grown. This is, however, a grave matter of enduring importance. Along comes a toothless crone of 82 years. The women ask her when a woman ceases to hanker after a man. Though short of breath, she manages a whisper: “Ask someone older! How should I know?” (1961)

These types of anecdotes share one especially striking feature: the shift to the humorous mode takes place through an emphasis on the woman's advanced age in combination with her ailing and weakened body. To be sure, the age difference between the youthful poser of the question and the old woman further underscores on the narrative level the sense of astonishment about an old woman's sexual desire. These anecdotes lay bare the contradiction between the received cultural wisdom about the supposedly asexual elderly woman and her continued interest in sex. The original motivation for the plot may reside in mere curiosity or a more malevolent wish to ridicule the sexual yearnings of elderly women. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, offers the latter interpretation in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. Indeed, de Beauvoir, who paints a rather bleak image of women's ageing in her work (Dolan and Tincknell 2012a: ix-x), uses also a variant of the above-mentioned anecdote. In the French variant, however, the woman who makes the retort is a “princess”, a social designation used to indicate her high status, and she is aged sixty-five (Beauvoir 1976: 459). It appears that in the France of the 1940s the age of sixty-five already sufficed to produce the comic effect. The variation evident between these two internationally known folk narratives aptly reflects the historical and intercultural character of cultural representations – in this case notions about women's old age and their enduring appetite for sex.

Nonetheless, there are other anecdote types that describe the sexual desires – in most variants of elderly women – in a spirit of affirmation. These anecdotes depict the protagonist either in the setting of the home or at deceased spouse's graveside, where the protagonist reminisces contentedly about their conjugal happiness (see Palmenfelt 1996: 138). The following examples capture the elderly character in a state of private reverie:

An ailing old granny suddenly laughs aloud to herself. When asked about the reason for her laughter, she offers this explanation: “I just remembered the wedding night.” (1936)

An old beggar sitting on the cottage bench suddenly bursts into tears. When asked why, the old fellow responds: My late wife Maija's pussy just came to mind.

In these anecdote types, the key actor is usually an old woman, though an elderly man can also take her place. The creation of a humorous edge merely requires the elderly figure to gleefully reminisce about bygone times, the days when he / she was still sexually active. Indeed, this image once again suffices to produce a clash of cultural concepts necessary for a comic effect. Sexual activity or agency in the present, in old age, however, are lacking in this

humorous narration, though sexual feelings and desire endure, as clearly suggested in the anecdotes.

To sum up the above-cited sexual anecdotes, in which an old woman and an old man occupy the stage of the sexual drama as lovers, we can discern that in these narratives the sexuality of old people becomes crystallized in the dilemma between sexual desire and ability. In the case of the elderly man, the dilemma is concretised in the scrutiny of his physical inability; for the woman, the problem centres instead on the old man, her impotent spouse, or his conspicuous absence in the narrative setting. While many narratives portray the ability of a young woman to restore an elderly man's sexual agency, only one anecdote in the corpus features an old woman who, with a flurry of activity, successfully cures an elderly man's impotence. Generally speaking, the simultaneous presence of the old woman and the old man in the narrative setting suggests the impossibility of sexual intercourse.

### The elderly woman as a sexual partner

In the third category of sexual anecdotes the elderly female protagonist confounds (our) cultural expectations of the old woman in relation to sexual activity. Not only does she assume an active role in initiating sex, but in some types of anecdotes she also turns out to be a perfectly suitable object of male sexual desire. This category of sexual anecdotes also deviates from those earlier discussed insofar as the context of narration can be more clearly outlined. In other words, the anecdotes have been selected from the materials generated through a collection campaign initiated in 1969 by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society to preserve forestry workers' reminiscences of their own traditions. Originally told among labourers in forestry work sites and logging camps, the anecdotes were written down and sent to archives by them.

Generally speaking, the contributors were mostly men who lived and worked in relative isolation from other people in forest camps; moreover, they were often regarded as a marginal group in the social hierarchy of agrarian culture. Accordingly, their oral traditions were strongly defined as masculine and especially the humorous talk was often constructed on efforts to subvert the social hierarchies of the real world and to strengthen the position of the forest workers in the world of the narratives. These humorous narratives have a number of common characteristics – namely, the emphasis on the figure of the forest worker as a free and indeed heroic agent, frequent use of masculine boasting and hyperbole, straightforward commentaries and accounts of deeds as well as graphic descriptions of sexuality and vulgar language (Pöysä 1997). Many of these anecdotes are also long and reminiscent of legends, and thus more descriptive than the anecdotes dealt with above. Because the narratives are rather extensive, I will not present samples of the material in their entirety.

Far from old and infirm, the male characters, who also usually act as first person narrators, in these narratives are robust men whose actions and behaviour correspond to heteronormative cultural expectations; thus, in keeping with the norms of hegemonic masculinity, the male actors populating these sexual anecdotes are always seeking sexual gratification from women. These female figures tend to be young and beautiful, though the object of the heroic male's interest may be the wife of the minister, the forestry official or the foreman, a man that the hero of the narrative deceives and whose higher status is cheapened in the social hierarchy of the real world. Nevertheless, the figure of the old woman is not marked as the



wife as part of the narrative subversion of the social hierarchy, but instead she always appears as an independent agent, a woman who lives alone.

The sexual desire of an adult man appears in these anecdotes as a uncontrollable force of nature always in need of satisfaction; old men have no place in these narratives, not even indirectly in the narrative setting as the absent husbands of old women. Accordingly, these anecdotes portray the sexuality and sexual agency of old women in relation to an adult male.

Because young women are the most important objects of sexual desire in this humorous narration, we can easily assume that merely replacing a younger woman with an older one works as a significant element in the plot. In the anecdotes the old woman ends up in bed with the male protagonist for one reason or another: by accident, for practical reasons or simply for her own pleasure. She may, however, have intercourse with the male protagonist through an act of trickery, a strategy often used for getting younger women into bed as well (Pöysä 1997). The entire point of the narrative humour converges on the old woman and her role as a sexual partner, culminating in the sexual encounter between her and the male protagonist.

Despite the inhering sense of comedy, an old woman ultimately emerges as a suitable sexual partner in the narrative world of these anecdotes. For example, in one rather extensive anecdote, which is narrated in the first person, a lumberjack heading home from a day's work stops by at a remote cottage whose owner happens to be "a lonely old granny". While they are chatting and drinking coffee, the lumberjack, as though it were a completely appropriate topic of conversation between two strangers, mentions his craving for sexual gratification. The humorous mode rests on the continuation of "an illusion of normalcy", after the old woman says that she would be willing to satisfy his needs. Her offer of sex is made casually, much in the same way one would offer more coffee or another snack in the name of conventional hospitality and good manners. After their sexual encounter, the protagonist and narrator pronounces her an adequate partner. He also pays for her "services", once again in the framework of seeming "normalcy". And so the story narrated in the first person concludes with the final coda, which enables the production of the humorous twist:

I gave her five marks in payment. But, I could barely contain my laughter when the granny said: "For 70 years I've been sitting on a money chest and only now I've realised it".

As the narrative unfolds, we learn that an elderly woman can be an adequate partner in bed, especially for lack of a more attractive alternative. This is further underlined when the lumberjack voices his satisfaction with the experience. Nonetheless, even though the protagonist laughs at the granny, his laughter within the narrative is kindly and accepting, more akin to a conspiratorial laugh among partners than the derisive laughter of mockery. Similarly, we also hear the voice of the old woman: she verbalizes her sense of pleasure at the financial reward obtained from the sexual act. Finally, it must be noted that this narrative contains no description of the old woman's body, which therefore does not serve as an age marker here.

The next type of anecdote, however, is characterised by a dismissive view of the old woman as a potential partner in bed. In these anecdotes, the male protagonist mistakenly has a sexual liaison with an old woman. Narrated in the first person, the anecdote recounts the traveller's arrival at a strange house on a dark winter's evening. The protagonist, who also happens to be the narrator of the story, has gone to the house with one purpose – to seduce the farmer's daughter. When he arrives at the darkened house, all of the inhabitants are asleep. He settles down by the fireplace only to find the girl ready and waiting for him. After having his way with her, and expressing his satisfaction about the event in the narrative, he edges

away from her and promptly falls asleep. The narrative intensifies with the final coda, his discovery that his sexual partner of the night before was not after all the daughter of the house, but “the old and ugly” woman of the house, her grandmother, who is now offering him a cup of morning coffee, saying, “Well, well, young man, do come and have some coffee. It’s been at least seventy years since I’ve enjoyed such a rollicking night as I did with you last night.” The narrator closes the story by mentioning his sudden hurry to leave the house. And, without further ado, he flees the scene.

The anecdote type featuring the drifter who may even trick the old woman into sexual intercourse with him is also widely known outside of Finland; indeed, it is identified in the international folktale and joke type index under name of *Old woman substitute* (AT1441\*, see Aarne and Thompson 1981; see also Legman 1968: 627). The question the narrative explores is whether a young man is better off having sexual relations with a young woman or an old woman. After they have had sex, the old woman praises the young man for his sexual skills; nonetheless, merely thinking of her advanced age, which is highlighted with the epithet “the mouldy-assed missus”, makes him feel ashamed, thus compelling him to make a quick exit. In this type of anecdote, with its clearly discernible tone of self-irony, the pleasure the hero derives from his sexual conquest quickly turns into shame and embarrassment when the morning light reveals that his night of passion had been with an ugly old crone. Yet the narrator’s sense of irony leads to ambivalence. On the one hand, perhaps the anecdote is meant to poke fun at conventional real-world assumptions about elderly women and their presumed lack of sexual desire and loss of sexual appearance; on the other hand, the narrative also makes us laugh at the first-person narrator, that is, the hero-seducer, whose charisma suffers a blow at the close of the narrative.

My data also includes a number of anecdotes in which the idea of the old woman as a sexual partner remains as only an idea. As is often the case, humour arises through misunderstanding. While one party speaks about an old woman, the other is speaking about a bicycle. The broken down bicycle serves as a metaphor for the weakened body of the elderly woman. All in all, however, depictions of the aged female body rarely occur in the sexual anecdotes analysed here. Nonetheless, compared with the depictions of the older man and his diminished sexual powers, the body of the elderly woman turns out to be strikingly more fit and functional; moreover, the female figures in the sexual anecdotes in my material appear far more active and open to sexual experiences than their male counterparts.

All in all, the figure of the old woman in the sexual anecdotes told by forestry workers appears relatively rarely. The anecdotes I have studied articulate little interest in the sexual desire of elderly women or in the possibility of its continuation as a woman ages, but rather in these narratives the figure of the elderly woman replaces that of the younger woman as the counter actor to the man, and, as such, the old woman too assumes the role of actor in the narratives.

## Conclusions

In this article I have sought to apprehend the contextually variable articulations of meanings bound to the popular thought underpinning the traditional agrarian culture and the prevailing gender-age system in Finland, the source from which ideas about old people and the sexuality of the elderly woman have been constructed. My study of the corpus of sexual anecdotes is based on a close reading, the approach that has better equipped me to under-

stand individual anecdotes because I have been able to consider single items in light of the entire corpus and with a knowledge of how a predominantly masculine culture and voice informs and pervades these anecdotes. Without doubt, the sexual anecdotes examined rest on the assumption that male sexuality is a force of nature, which then is set up as a norm against which other sexualities are measured and regarded as Other. Correspondingly, the heterosexual norm of age dictates that a young woman, and therefore also her body, is considered beautiful and full of erotic allure, and thus more suitable for satisfying a man's sexual needs. I divided the anecdotes into three groups: the first group of anecdotes dealt with the sexual ability of the ageing man, the second with the sexual desire of the old woman, and the third the old woman as a sexual partner.

If we consider how the theme of masculine old age is presented in the anecdote texts, the main preoccupation is sexual potency or impotence. An old man's impotence often appears in the world of the anecdote as a self-evident assumption – indeed, it often serves as the *raison d'être* of the narrative. Impotence emerges as a largely unavoidable fact of life, a topic rarely examined on the narrative level. The figure of the elderly man usually appears either with an elderly woman, in which case his sexual ability is marked as unfit or dysfunctional, or with a young woman, in which case his sexual ability is marked as hopelessly dysfunctional, dysfunctional but curable, or then as extremely functional, to the point of hyperbole. The old man featured in the sexual anecdote is occasionally a prisoner of his own desire and inadequate sexual ability, especially when he is paired with an old woman; with a younger woman, however, he emerges as a sex-crazed maniac who can satisfy every desire, the perfect male fantasy of sexual agency in old age.

As a protagonist, the old woman articulates a different range of meanings in my corpus. Sexuality and sexual desire is a constant feature in a woman's life in these anecdotes, no matter how aged and infirm she becomes. The figure of old woman is linked to sexuality largely through her position in a narrative setting that also contains male actors. When her counter actor is an old man, her sexuality is marked as functional, whereas the presence of younger adult men in the narrative setting marks the old woman in a more nuanced and multi-faceted way. And so, the narratives portray her looking back on her sexual life or conversing about it in a matter-of-fact way; she seeks sexual gratification with a partner, agrees to it for reasons of convenience or practicality; she also maintains that sexual desire or intercourse is a natural part of life. In the anecdotes, ambivalence defines the adult male's attitude to the old woman, depending on the type of anecdote, with either the aid of a masculine narrator external to the text or a narrator who also appears as an actor in the text: though the elderly female figure may bring him sexual satisfaction, she may also bring him shame and taint his sexuality.

Concerning age markers and the meanings attached to age in the semantic field created in sexual anecdotes, a woman's old age is highlighted either through precise mention of her chronological age or with an epithet referring to an old woman (old woman, granny). Narrators have also employed descriptions of a weakened and infirm body as age markers. The old woman's body no longer serves as an adequate object of male sexual satisfaction; in the masculine sphere of sexual action and conquest, the body of the old woman is something to be shunned and rejected as a useless object to man. Loathsome and repugnant to man, the old woman's body may even be the ultimate cause of the aging man's impotence. The negative interpretation of an old woman's sexual body is in line with the standard view of sexual humour: more often than not, it is sexist, ageist and degrading to women. Yet, interestingly enough, the tradition of carefully itemizing and laughing at the parts of the ageing female – or male – body is only barely present in my materials, unlike in the European humorous genres

that emerged for instance in the classical or the early modern era (Falkner and de Luce 1992; O'Higgins 2003; Korhonen 2013).

Yet a reading of the sexual anecdotes in my study also reveals alternative standpoints on age and femininity; indeed, established age and gender systems can be overturned when the elderly woman usurps the active male protagonist as the agent of sexual humour. Unlike that of the sexually more vulnerable old man, the sexuality of an old woman is an enduring source of power that no one in the narrative world of the anecdote is able to undermine, be it with shame or other means. It is suggested that patriarchal culture, which primarily assesses women by their reproductive value (i.e. ability to produce offspring) or their sexual value as objects of male gratification, allows the elderly woman to slip into an intermediate state between male and female – in other words, old age ultimately turns her into an asexual subject. Yet this position has also traditionally offered aged women some advantages – for instance, compared to their younger days, old women can begin to enjoy certain social liberties and more freedom (see Apo 1998; Gowing 2003; O'Higgins 2003, Marshall and Katz 2006; Korhonen 2013). Interestingly, through these sexual anecdotes, now the body of the elderly woman has been brought out into the open for discussion, creating a space for asking questions about her sexual activities and her desires. From this perspective, she has achieved liberation as a sexual agent. Considered within this interpretive framework, the anecdotes are divested of their traditional elements and no longer appear to depict the cultural rejection of the ageing female body.

Interpreted in the light of theories on humour, the incongruity between sexual desire and the elderly creates an element of surprise and contradiction, thus making the listener take stock of reality and enter into a space of non-reality. And thus the narratives create a humorous twist: sex and old age represent an incompatible pair in our culture (Palmenfelt 1996: 138–142). The observation that old age and sexuality are rather unusual themes in older humorous narration also supports this interpretation.

However, if we consider sexual anecdotes in terms of Mulkey's perspectives (1988: 39–56), which thus ascribe more meaning to texts in their narrative context and also suggest that humour is constituted through an either / or relationship to reality, the worlds created in the anecdotes would be realistic and entirely imaginable realities (see Knuuttila 1992: 239). Using the anecdotes, the performers and audiences have had the opportunity to join each other in laughter and also to ponder various aspects of ageing and sexuality; to be sure, laughter often expresses cultural uncertainty and a desire to deal communally with issues either painful or troubling (Korhonen 2013: 179–181). Perhaps telling anecdotes about old age gave young men an outlet for contemplating their own future of physical decline, a possibly disturbing thought. On the other hand, if we seriously factor in the element of aggression and abuse of power connected to joking, we can suppose that younger men told anecdotes to undermine the status of their elders, male or female, by making them ridiculous.

Different interpretations do not ultimately cancel each other out, as long as we keep in mind the multiplicity of voices in humorous discourse. To be sure, this discourse has no single predominant attitude or point of view, instead, for each emergent moment, what we have is context-bound speech – in this case vis-à-vis a woman's old age. In contrast with the youthful and highly sexualized body ideals that prevail as well as the everyday practices of hiding representations of the aged body in late modernity (Öberg 2003), the figure of the old woman in the archived anecdotes comes across as a strikingly more complex and active sexual agent, a figure whose body and sexuality are visible, not hidden. The body of the old woman is not seen as a prison of concealment. Moreover, she is not deprived of a voice.

Indeed, the female figures in the anecdotes express themselves and speak up about their sexual needs, though they often do so at risk of making themselves vulnerable and ridiculous, as objects of masculine needs and activities. In a semantic field that is both ambivalent and changeable, the Finnish tradition of humorous narration can be placed along a continuum of cultural representations of old women in European history and thus linked seamlessly with internationally widespread – though diverse and even contradictory – notions of the old woman and her sexuality.

Translated by Leila Virtanen

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U potrazi za skrivenom spolnošću. Starost i spolnost u svjetlu humorističnih naracija

## Sažetak

Ovaj članak bavi se percepcijom starijih osoba u finskoj agrarnoj kulturi u razdoblju od ranog do sredine 20. stoljeća. Posebnu pažnju posvećuje se načinu na koji se spolnost i tjelesnost starijih žena definira u humorističnoj usmenoj tradiciji. Građa za ovaj članak temelji se na arhiviranim anegdotaama o starosti i spolnosti. Feministička kulturna gerontologija i folkloristički uvidi korišteni su kao teorijska podloga članka. Lik stare žene u tekstu se pojavljuje kao iznimno složen spolni akter čiji su tijelo i spolnost vidljivi i ne prikrivaju se u anegdotaama.

Ključne riječi: kulturi koncept, starost i spolnost, tijelo, humor, folklor