

## The Old Game by Hans Sachs - 1554

This remarkably modern-sounding piece tells us a considerable amount about the roles and relationships in the marriage of the two characters represented. How much one can use it to infer things about roles and relationships in sixteenth century marriages generally is another matter altogether.

The piece starts with Hans describing his ideal wife, who would be “humble, willing and obedient”. The fact that she does not appear to be particularly humble, willing or obedient says much about her independence of spirit, and is the cause of the friction between the couple. The rewards promised to her if she is humble, willing and obedient are that he will “share my last crust of sour bread with you, and to see you lack no clothing nor finery.” Hans naturally assumes the role of the provider of essentials as well as luxuries, and sees himself as the owner of what food there is available. It is he that “gives her good counsel”, not the other way around, so he clearly expects to be the dominant partner giving the orders. It is he who decides how the house should be managed, and he does not seek her opinion about it but merely “points it out” when she, in his judgement, gets it wrong. No wonder she is “always crossing” him. He freely admits that his mood depends on her behaviour, but appears to have no consideration of how *her* mood can be affected by *his* behaviour.

A significant passage is when he complains that “anyone would think I was the wife and you the husband! That's not right!” In some communities in the sixteenth century it was quite a serious matter if the wife assumed too much authority, and the other villagers were likely to intervene if that happened. Later in the play the neighbours do have an important role in the development of the story.

Finally in this extract we see the wife dismissing the arguments as trivial and petty, and stating her clear long-term fondness for him, which gets “stronger and brighter every day”.

*Wife:* Then, when is it you love me best?

*Hans [readily]:* Why to be sure, when you do as I bids you, like a humble, willing and obedient wife. Then I'm ready enough to share my last crust of sour bread with you, and to see you lack no clothing nor finery. then, it's a pleasure to look after you, and give you good counsel. If I'm a bit cold and stern at times, why 'tis your own fault entirely.

*Wife:* And how is it my own fault pray? When is it I act as you don't like?

*Hans:* I can give you a short answer to that. When you go against my wishes, either behind my back, or in front of my eyes.

*Wife:* But tell me just what it is I do.

*Hans:* Oh, no end of things. Every day I suffer torments from what you say and do.

*Wife:* [*very persistently*] And what is it I says and does?

*Hans:* [*peevishly*] Aren't I telling you? You don't manage the house as it ought to be managed, and when I points it out, you are angry and answer me back. you are always crossing me. I can't never do nothing right. Why anyone would think I was the wife and you the husband! That's not right! It puts a man against you!

*Wife:* Now husband, if you let such petty things upset you, your love is worth no more than that! [*She snaps her fingers.*] If you was as fond of me as I am of you, 'twouldn't flicker in and out, but get stronger and brighter every day.