

## When Skaði Chose Njörðr

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In her presentation of *Bridal-Quest Romance* in the North, Marianne Kalinke noted that even if the motif occurs, “. . . the quest of a woman for a man was never the determinant of plot in any saga.”<sup>1</sup> As far as I know, this statement holds for all sagas, not just the *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*. Within the topsy-turvy world of myth, however, we might term Skaði’s marriage to Njörðr as indeed the result of the quest of a woman for a man, even if both actors belong to non-human mythological races and the quest is not at first portrayed as matrimonial in nature. Myth allows or even encourages the unexpected, to be sure, but it is always in the end plausible, if only in the way that dreams are plausible, and we must accept Skaði’s quest for what it is, the quest of a Jötunn woman for a man from among the Æsir. This quest is indeed not portrayed as matrimonial in nature, but as Margaret Clunies Ross has pointed out, if Skaði carried rather than wore her armor, as the text suggests (“En Skaði, dóttir Þjaza jötuns, tók hjálm ok brynju ok öll hervápn ok ferr til Ásgarðs” [But Skadi, daughter of giant Thiassi, took helmet and mail-coat and all weapons of war and went to Asgard to avenge her father]),<sup>2</sup> she may have

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1. Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, *Islandica* 46 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 22.

2. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, ed., 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: Gad, 1926), p. 70; *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, transl Anthony Faulkes (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1987), p. 61.

been seeking settlement rather than a move within the structures of bloodfeud.<sup>3</sup> What better settlement than a husband?

The story of Skaði's choice of Njörðr indeed subverts generic expectations in Old Icelandic literature, but it is not quite without parallels. In what follows, I will examine two important analogues to the myth that appear to offer suggestions on how it might be read. Both analogues are known; what I hope to do is use them to bring out some important and hitherto less discussed aspects of the myth.

We have the story of Skaði and Njörðr from only one source, the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (ca. 1220–30). It would be difficult to find a known medieval Icelandic author less interested in romance than Snorri seems to have been, despite his stay at the Norwegian court in 1218–20 and his continuing connection with king and court. The poem he composed on the occasion of his visit to the court of King Hákon Hákonarson and the regent Jarl Skúli Bárðarson was a *tour de force* in the old skaldic style, and it probably served as the basis for the composition of his entire *Edda*.<sup>4</sup> Skaldic poetry was clearly a sort of intellectual capital for Snorri,<sup>5</sup> and the romances that arrived at Hákon's court six years after Snorri's departure could not have been helpful to him.

The story that concerns us is part of the very first extended narrative in *Skáldskaparmál*. It is not elicited by a question put by Ægir to Bragi but rather is simply presented as the first of many things which Bragi told Ægir; that is, it is not part of the question-answer frame which Snorri attempted in the first part of *Skáldskaparmál*. This fact might suggest that the initial story bears special significance or in some way stands apart from the narratives that are elicited by a question Ægir puts to Bragi. That initial story is of course Loki's betrayal of Iðunn

3. Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, The Viking Collection 7 ([Odense:] Odense University Press, 1984), p. 122.

4. Elias Wessén, "Introduction," in *Codex Regius to the Younger Edda: MS n. 2367 4to in the Old Royal Collection in the Royal Library in Copenhagen*, Copus Codicorum Islandorum Medii Ævi 14 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1940), pp. 1–30.

5. Kevin Wanner, *The Distinguished Norseman: Snorri Sturluson, The Edda, and the Conversion of Capital in Medieval Scandinavia*, Diss. (University of Chicago, 2003); cf. Torfi Tulinius, "Snorri og bræður hans: Framgangur og átök Sturlusona í félagslegu rými þjóðveldisins," *Ný saga* 12 (2000), Viðar Pálsson, "'Var engi höfðingi slíkr sem Snorri': Auður og virðing í valdabaráttu Snorra Sturlusonar," *Saga* 41 (2003), and Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

and her apples to the giant Þjazi and his subsequent recovery of them. Þjazi dies in pursuit, and the marriage of Skaði to Njörðr is part of the compensation package the Æsir offer to Skaði when she arrives at Ásgarðr in helmet and byrnie with all her weapons.

En æsirnir buðu henni sætt ok yfirbœtr ok it fyrsta, at hon skal kjósa sér mann af ásum ok kjósa at fótum ok sjá ekki fleira af.

Þá sá hon eins manns fœtr forkunnarfagra ok mælti: ‘Þenna kýs ek. Fátt mun ljótt á Baldri’—en þat var Njörðr ór Nóatúnum.<sup>6</sup>

(But the Æsir offered her atonement and compensation, the first item of which was that she was to choose herself a husband out of the Æsir and choose by the feet and see nothing else of them. Then she saw one person’s feet that were exceptionally beautiful and said:

‘I choose that one; there can be little that is ugly about Baldr.’  
But it was Niord of Noatun.)<sup>7</sup>

Discussing this passage some years ago, I pointed out that the parallels with the Cinderella narrative that have long been in the literature<sup>8</sup> are not helpful (although parallels with other Märchen may be), and indeed that any choice of a spouse based on physical characteristics was a doomed venture.

To a medieval Icelandic audience, we can guess that such compensation was not worth a great deal. If marriage was essentially a political affair worked out for the interests of and approved (if not arranged) by the relevant fraternal interest group,<sup>9</sup> Skaði had little hope of bettering her position when she had to choose solely by the feet.<sup>10</sup> In that same

6. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 70; cf. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar: Udgivet efter håndskrifterne*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Gyldendal/Nordisk forlag, 1931), p. 81.

7. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 61.

8. E.g. Friedrich von der Leyen, *Das Märchen in der Göttersagen der Edda* (Berlin: Reimer, 1899).

9. Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvefninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 18–19.

10. John Lindow, “Loki and Skaði,” in *Snorrastefna: 25.-27. júlí 1990*, Ed. Úlfar Bragason, Rit Stofnunar Sigurðar Nordals 1 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992), p. 132.

discussion, I also drew attention to some possible parallels within European medieval practices of punishments involving shame, such as making defeated warriors parade barefooted, bare-headed and beltless before their victors, a practice attested, for example, in the reconciliation of the archbishop and city council of Cologne in 1265:<sup>11</sup> “When a line of barefooted or barelegged æsir stands before Skaði, presumably with their faces covered, she plays the role of the triumphal figure of authority, always male, in such ritual contexts.”<sup>12</sup>

My reading of the story, then, was that the Æsir engaged in a high medieval act of contrition and basically tricked Skaði out of more meaningful compensation. I concluded that the hand of Snorri is easily discerned in the story. I now feel that there is more to it, and I am no longer completely convinced that Skaði’s choice was just a trick. I am led to these conclusions through a consideration of the two parallels, to which I now turn.

The first is from the mythic realm, and it involves Freyr and the giantess Gerðr, that is, another would-be marriage between one of the Vanir and a member of the giant race. This analogue has long been noted, and what I wish to do here is to focus on the aspects of the Freyr/Gerðr story that can help illuminate Skaði’s choice of Njörðr. The most important of these for my purposes now is the mental state of Freyr. According to the prose header of *For Scírnis*, he suffered mental anguish (“hugsóttir miklar”) as a result of his having seen Gerðr. If there is a parallel here too, then what happened to Freyr when he saw Gerðr’s arms happened to Skaði when she beheld Njörðr’s feet, and she made what we might term an irrational choice of her life partner. Perhaps this parallelism is what drew Skaði into the poem—or at least into the prose header, which makes her the speaker of the first stanza, addressed to Skírnir. In any case, her seemingly irrational choice of old Njörðr, because of his feet, may find a parallel in Freyr’s situation: if not one of the Æsir or elves wishes Freyr and Gerðr to be joined (*For Scírnis*, st. 7), that would only underscore the irrationality of his choice. Make no mistake, the situation is dangerous. Snorri elaborates on the “hugsóttir miklar” which plague Freyr:

11. Lizzie Carlsson, “Pliktpallen i belysning av medeltida skamstraff,” *Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift* 57 (1957): 33–343; cf Lizzie Carlsson, “Staven: En maktens och ringhetens symbol,” *Rig* 34 (1951): 6–8.

12. Lindow, “Loki and Skaði,” p. 136.

Ok er hann kom heim, mælti hann ekki; ekki svaf hann, ekki drakk hann; engi þorði at krefja hann málsins.<sup>13</sup>

(And when he got home, he said nothing, he neither slept nor drank; no one dared to try to speak with him.)<sup>14</sup>

Freyr is rendered speechless and he withdraws from participation in the social life (drinking and talking) of the Æsir. The Jǫtnar have, in other words, incapacitated one of the gods. This withdrawal is especially serious if we consider the mythology from the Odinic point of view: wisdom is to be found in speech, and drinking makes at least a metaphoric nod to the mead of poetry, where wisdom is seated. The Odinic viewpoint suggests itself not least because according to Snorri (but not *For Scírnis*), Freyr's act of hubris ("mikillæti") in climbing up into Hliðskjálf caused the problem.

Drawing in Hliðskjálf suggests a contrast between Óðinn, who can handle the sight (and seduction) of female Jǫtnar, and Freyr, who apparently cannot. In either case, there is a crisis precipitated by contact between the mythological races, and involving the desire or need of the Æsir to move females from the realm of the Jǫtnar to their own.

For Snorri, the love-sickness that Freyr suffers seems to have been the equivalent to his giving up his sword to obtain Gerðr: that is, he was permanently unarmed, and thus made less than a man. Lest there be any doubt on this point, see Guðrún Nordal's comments on the implications of Sturla Sigvatsson's nickname "Dala-Freyr."<sup>15</sup> We must assume that Skaði too laid aside her weapons and armor when she got Njörðr in marriage. Thus the parallel between Freyr and Skaði shows a gender fault line, at least for Snorri. Their manic love (I take the term from Bjarni Einarsson<sup>16</sup>) unmans each of them, and that is bad for Freyr and good for Skaði. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen

13. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 37; cf. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 40.

14. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 31

15. Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, The Viking Collection 11 ([Odense:] Odense University Press, 1998), p. 58 and esp. pp. 178–79.

16. Bjarni Einarsson, "The Lovesick Skald: A Response to Theodore M. Andersson," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 4 (1971): 21–42.

pointed out, the armed woman is a positive figure in medieval Icelandic literature, but she needs to be overcome, to give up her weapons and her male role, and then to marry.<sup>17</sup>

I am tempted to regard *For Scírnis* 7, in which Freyr expands on his love for Gerðr, as highly exaggerated, not so much mythology but rather pathology.

Mær er mér tíðari enn manni hveim,  
ungom, í árdaga;  
ása oc álfa þar vill engi maðr,  
at við sátta sém.<sup>18</sup>

(The maiden is dearer to me than to any young man,  
in days of old;  
of the Æsir and elves none wishes  
that we be reconciled.) [My translation, as throughout unless otherwise noted]

Thus I do not take *í árdaga* as setting the narrative *in illo tempore*. Rather I propose to read the first half stanza as a lovestruck exaggeration: “no one even in days of yore ever fell in love as I have done.” And the second helming, too, which scholars usually take literally, I propose to read as another lovestruck exaggeration: “no one wants us to marry.” There is actually no external evidence to the effect that the Æsir (or elves) objected to this marriage, and no real reason why they should have done so, since the situation is one of acquisition of a desired commodity from giantland for the benefit of the gods.

Gerðr’s reluctance to give herself to Freyr finds no parallel in the account of Skaði’s choice of Njǫrðr. However, the marriage between Skaði and Njǫrðr fails. This part of the story, not how she chose or how Loki made her laugh, is the most widely attested from the Middle Ages. We have not only Snorri’s quotation in *Gylfaginning* of two *ljóðabáttr* verses in which each complains about the noisy abode of the

17. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Nordic Society*, The Viking Series 1 ([Odense:] Odense University Press, 1983), pp. 22–24.

18. *For Scírnis* 6, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962), p. 70.

other, thus suggesting a lost eddic dialogue poem, and his statement in *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 8, that they separated and Skaði remarried Óðinn, but also his quotation in *Skáldskaparmál* of a verse from the eleventh-century Icelandic skald Þórðr Særeksson alluding to their separate abodes. People knew that Skaði and Njörðr had separated after their marriage. I am among those who see the nine nights that Freyr must wait for Gerðr as a failed parallel to the failed vanic marriage of his father. Skaði and Njörðr separate after their wedding; Freyr and Gerðr remain, at the end of *For Scírnis*, in a state of separation. Freyr is not cured of his heartsickness; rather the poem ends with a lamentation over the time he must wait. Snorri, of course, marries them off, both in his *Edda* and in *Ynglinga saga*, just as he adds Skaði to the guest list of every banquet he mentions in his *Edda*, but the evidence of the Eddic poem is that both male Vanir are in a state of separation from their Jötunn wives.

I take these, then, as some implications of the Skaði/Njörðr Freyr/Gerðr parallel: Each made an irrational choice, which I have attributed to manic love. Skaði gets a stubborn old man who won't move away from home and with whom she is clearly incompatible, and Freyr gets sick; Skaði and Njörðr part ways, and Freyr and Gerðr come together only in our imaginations. The first marriage is an outright failure, the second a dangerous (Freyr is without his horse and sword) possible future event. Even if Freyr and Gerðr are married in the mythic present, may I be permitted to wonder about the success of a marriage in which one partner has a compulsive love for the other, who only agreed to the marriage under the compulsion of powerful mythological threats?

If Skaði's sexuality is ambiguous, so must be that of Njörðr. It is not just that he is the one chosen by a woman dressed as a man and that he can therefore symbolically be seen as dressed as a woman. An analogy from the homespun romance that is *Kormáks saga* underscores the fact that Njörðr is in a woman's role. I refer to the moment when the poet Kormákr first catches sight of Steingerðr, who has just been introduced, toward the beginning of the text.

Þorkell hét maðr, er bjó í Tungu; hann var kvángaðr, ok áttu þau dóttur, er Steingerðr hét; hon var í Gnúpsdal at fóstri.

Þat var eitt haust, at hvalr kom út á Vatnsnes, ok áttu þeir bræðr

Dǫllusynir. Þorgils bauð Kormáki, hvárt hann vildi heldr fara á fjall eða til hvals. Hann kaus at fara á fjall með húskǫrlum. Maðr hét Tósti; hann var verkstjóri ok skyldi skipa til um sauðaferðir, ok fóru þeir Kormákr báðir saman, þar til er þeir kómu í Gnúpsdal, ok váru þar um nóttina; þar var mikill skáli ok eldar gǫrvir fyrir mǫnnum. Um kveldit gekk Steingerðr frá dyngju sinni ok ambátt með henni. Þær heyrðu inn í skálann til ókunnra manna. Ambáttin mælti, “Steingerðr mín, sjám vit gestina.” Hon kvað þess enga þǫrf ok gekk þó at hurðunni ok sté upp á þreskjöldinn ok sá fyrir ofan hlaðann; rúm var milli hleðans ok þreskjaldarins; þar kómu fram fœtr hennar. Kormákr sá þat ok kvað vísu.<sup>19</sup>

Nú varð mér í mínu  
menreið jǫtuns leiði  
réttumk risti snótar  
ramma-óst fyr skǫmmu;  
þeir munu fœtr at fári  
fall-Gerðar mér verða  
alls ekki veitk ella  
optarr an nú svarra.<sup>20</sup>

(It happened one fall that a whale washed up at Vatnsnes, and the Dallason brothers [Kormákr and Þorgils] had the rights to it. Þorgils asked Kormákr whether he wanted to go up into the mountains or to the whale. He chose to go into the mountains with the men. There was a man called Tósti. He was a supervisor and was to see to the shepherding, and he and Kormákr went together until they came to Gnúpsdalr, and they spent the night there; there was a big hall, and fires had been made for the men. In the evening Steingerðr got up from her bed and her maid with her. They heard unknown men in the hall. The maid said: “Steingerðr, let’s take a look at the guests.” Steingerðr said there was no need of that, but still she went up to the door, stood on the threshold, and looked over the top of

19. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. *Vatnsdæla saga. Hallfreðar saga. Kormáks saga. Hrómundar þáttur halta. Hrafnis þáttur Guðrúnarsonar*, Íslensk fornrit 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), pp. 206–7.

20. Roberta Frank, “Onomastic Play in Kormákr’s Verse: The Name Steingerðr,” *Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (1970): 29.



the door; there was a space between the bottom of the door and the threshold; her feet stuck out there. Kormákr saw that and spoke a verse. [My translation.]

There has come a mighty love into my mind (fair wind of the woman of the giant); the necklace-bearer stretched out the instep of her foot to me just a little while ago; the feet of *fall-Gerðr* shall be fateful to me on other occasions. I know nothing else of the woman.)<sup>21</sup>

Here the sex roles are correct: a man spies a woman's physical charms and is smitten. When Kormákr gushes in later stanzas about Steingerðr's eyes, one may entertain arguments, however conflicting, of courtly or Troubadour influence and of an "Orkney connection,"<sup>22</sup> but the feet are another matter.

Roberta Frank saw that the two sets of feet, those of Steingerðr and those of Njörðr, were parallel.<sup>23</sup> She also saw—this is the major argument of her 1970 analysis—that the structure of *Kormáks saga* may have followed the structure of the myth of Freyr and Gerðr, given the onomastic play she demonstrates so convincingly in Kormákr's verses about Steingerðr. She finds the curse that Þorveig placed on Kormákr's love for Steingerðr to be a clumsy attempt to follow the mythic structure of Freyr's delayed marriage to Gerðr; it would equally cover Skaði's failed marriage to Njörðr.

Kormákr's stanza is difficult. Frank would emend *fall-Gerðr* to *fjall-Gerðr* "'mountain-Gerðr' = Stein-Gerðr,"<sup>24</sup> and that seems a reasonable suggestion. The rest of the clause containing that kenning is, however, quite clear: the feet of the mountain-Gerðr (or of the *fald-Gerðr* "headdress-Gerðr," the emendation which Frank proposes to replace) will be dangerous to Kormákr on additional occasions.

21. Frank, "Onomastic Play," p. 29.

22. Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur: Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldsagnanna fornu* (Reykjavík: Bókautgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1961); Bjarni Einarsson, "The Lovesick Skald," pp. 21–42; Bjarni Einarsson, *To skaldesagaer: En analyse af Kormáks saga og Hallfreðar saga* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1976); Theodore M. Andersson, "Skalds and Troubadors," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 2 (1969): 7–41, Alison Finlay, "Skalds, Troubadors, and Sagas," *Saga-Book* 24 (1995): 105–53; Alison Finlay, "Skald Sagas in Their Literary Context 2: Possible European Connections," in Russell Poole, ed., *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 232–71.

23. Frank, "Onomastic Play," p. 28, fn. 42.

24. Frank, "Onomastic Play," p. 29.

The noun used here is *fætr*, which was also used in the prose for what Kormákr saw, and is, of course, precisely the lexeme in Snorri's description of the moment when Skaði chose Njörðr. And just as these feet will prove harmful to Kormákr, so did the actual Gerðr's arms prove dangerous to Freyr, as I have shown above.

Another term is used in the first half of the stanza: *rist* ("in step of the foot"), which Kormákr says the woman stretched out toward him (*réttumk*). The form *risti* would be a unique accusative form,<sup>25</sup> but no one seems troubled by it. So, Kormákr saw first one in step, then both feet. The move from one to two constitutes a move toward the story of Skaði and Njörðr. The final clause makes the parallel certain. "I know nothing else of the woman," Kormákr declares, just as Skaði could have known nothing else of the potential spouses offered to her by the Æsir.

In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri quotes several stanzas of Kormákr's, although not of course this one. He does, however, twice quote this half-stanza:

Eykr með ennidúki  
jarðhljótr día fjarðar  
breyti, hún sás, beinan,  
bindr. Seið Yggr til Rindar<sup>26</sup>

(The land-getter, who binds the mast-top straight, honours the provider of the deities' fjord [the mead of poetry, whose provider is the poet] with a head-band. Ygg [Odin] won Rind by spells.)<sup>27</sup>

The occasion for quoting the stanza is in the first instance to illustrate the kenning "wife of Odin" for earth; in the second, to illustrate the usage of the word *díar* for gods. To the best of my knowledge, the word *díar* is only attested here and in ch. 4 of *Ynglinga saga*.<sup>28</sup>

25. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. *Vatnsdœla saga*, p. 208; cf. Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon Poeticum Antiquae Linguae Septentrionalis: Ordbog over det gamle norsk-islandske skjaldesprog*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: Møller, 1931), p. 467, s.v. *rist*.

26. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 76 and 128; *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 90 and 166.

27. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 68, 133.

28. Richard Cleasby and Gudmund Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), p. 100, s.v. *díar*.

Although the usage is not quite the same—with *díar* Snorri seems to mean “heathen priests” in *Ynglinga saga*—it seems not unlikely that Snorri got the word from Kormákr’s verse. Certainly Snorri knew of and referred to Óðinn’s siring Váli on Rindr, as he refers to it twice in *Gylfaginning*.<sup>29</sup> The second of these references immediately precedes his presentation of the story of Freyr and Gerðr.

Snorri cites none of the verses attributed to Kormákr that are found in *Kormáks saga*. Even so, we may perhaps imagine that he knew them, since he knew and cited so many others, and since they are rich in kennings with goddess names as base words; also, the kenning *stallr Hrungnis fóta* for shield (or perhaps sword<sup>30</sup>) echoes an important story Snorri told in *Skáldskaparmál*. Whether Snorri knew Kormákr’s first *lausavísa* or not, anyone who did—that would include readers of *Möðruvallabók* and presumably those of AM 162 F fol., for the fragment in that manuscript starts midway in the scene in which Kormákr first encounters Steingerðr<sup>31</sup>—could have seen the parallel with the myth. In some sense, Kormákr’s experience is the prototype, for as I have said, the gender roles are right. Why, then, would the myth (or Snorri’s version of it) have the reversal, with the man’s feet triggering the woman’s affection?

Here I am not interested in Greek or Indic parallels,<sup>32</sup> Bronze Age rock carvings,<sup>33</sup> or notions of ritual imprints of divine footsteps,<sup>34</sup> but rather things that a medieval Icelandic audience might know or things that Snorri might have had in mind.

Let us return the story to the context of a woman (an *ásynja*) on

29. Snorri Sturluson: *Edda*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 31, 37; cf. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 33 and 40.

30. See John Lindow, “Thor’s Duel with Hrungrnir,” *Alvíssmál: Forschungen zur mittelalterlichen Kultur Scandinaviens* 6 (1996), pp. 7–8.

31. Kr. Kálund, *Katalog over den arnamagnæanske håndskriftsamling*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1889–94), vol. 1, p. 124.

32. Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 1: *Einleitung—Vorgeschichtliche Perioden—religiöse Grundlage des Lebens—Seelen- und Geisterglaube—Macht und Kraft—Das Heilige und die Kultformen*, vol. 2, *Die Götter—Vorstellungen über den Kosmos—Der Untergang des Heidentums*. 3rd ed. *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie* 12: 1–2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970), vol. 1, p. 105, vol. 2, p. 336.

33. Régis Boyer, *Yggdrasill: La religion des anciens scandinaves*, Bibliothèque historique (Paris: Payot, 1981), p. 70.

34. Franz Rolf Schröder, “Njords nackte Füße,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 51 (1927): 31–32, and Franz Rolf Schröder, “Rituelle Barfüßigkeit,” *Germanisch-Romanisch Monatsschrift* 16 (1928): 167–68.





irrelevant to the fact that Skaði saw feet and according to Snorri, Freyr saw *hendr*; that is, each saw one of the paired peccant parts of Jötunn prehistory. If there is anything to this line of thinking, it would indicate a vital difference in the two situations. Skaði the giantess sees and is attracted to the feet, the unmediated extremities that in her ancestor reproduced, whereas Freyr, the god, sees either the *armar* (For *Scírnis*) or the gleaming upper part of the *hønd*, not the armpit that lies beneath it (Snorri). Perhaps the difference lies in the nature of Skaði's ambiguous sexuality at this point. As a woman playing a man's role, she perhaps invited thoughts of improper sexual activity and unnatural procreation. *Fátt mun ljótt um Baldr*: "There can be little that is ugly about Baldr." It is perhaps noteworthy that this line, catchy as it is, will not scan into the *ljóðahátt* that Skaði and Njörðr speak about the other's dwelling according to Snorri in *Gylfaginning*. Was this line not part of the underlying poem that Snorri seems to be quoting?

Most observers think that Skaði made a mistake here, looking for attractive feet so that she might marry Baldr. Scholars have tried to rationalize this potential mistake; for example, Njörðr might be expected to have clean feet because they are so often wet, he being a god of the sea.<sup>39</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross is quite convinced that it was a deliberate trick,<sup>40</sup> and I have been on record saying the same. But what if Skaði's choice is neither a mistake nor the result of a trick? What if she has fallen for that pair of feet, feet that are exceedingly fair to her, and jubilantly wants to justify her choice: "I love those feet—they've the most beautiful feet I've ever seen; and so it's obvious they're Baldr's!" This would be manic, vanic love, just like that of Freyr and not unlike that of Kormákr in tenth-century Iceland.

In my reading, then, all three cases, not just the two from myth but also the third from the more recent and immediate past of early Iceland, are tales of compulsive, ambivalent, ambiguous, damaging, and ultimately self-destructive love. Despite his prowess, after succumbing to manic (vanic?) love, Kormákr fails to show up for his

39. Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991), p. 138; Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, p. 123; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 63.

40. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, pp. 122–27.

own marriage, fails to avert the marriage of Steingerðr to Bersi, never gains Steingerðr, and quietly accedes to her final refusal.

Is the theme of manic-vanic love played out in Kormákr's many duels? Before the first duel, against Bersi, Kormákr says first that he will oppose Bersi's sword Hvítigr with a great and sharp ax; does he not have a sword? Freyr does not, having given it to Skírnir in his manic-vanic attempt to win Gerðr. Kormákr must borrow a sword from Miðfjarðar-Skeggi, but he fails to follow the instructions for its proper usage and it malfunctions in the duel, causing him to lose by a technicality. In the two later duels against Þorvarðr, Kormákr uses a sword blunted by the witch Þórdís, and on both occasions he uses the blunted sword like a cudgel, or even, we might say, like the horn of a hart, which Freyr famously but mysteriously used to kill Beli. It is certainly true that Kormákr has and uses a sword in his final battle, against the *blótrisi* in Scotland, but it too fails him, in that he receives mortal wounds, and thoughts about the sword, and sword imagery, occupy his final three stanzas. It is almost as if he protests against the swordlessness, both real and symbolic, he shares with Freyr.

Romance is about getting to a marriage. The myth of Skaði's choice of Njörðr might therefore from a purely narrative point of view be taken as romance. Unlike romance, however, the myth goes on to the marriage itself, and it is an unhappy one. The two analogues taken up here also allow the relationship to continue, but without a marriage, either in the nine days of compressed mythic time in *For Scírnis* or the sad years that pass during the rest of Kormákr's life. In romance, a chance gaze can trigger a plot, and it does so in these three narratives as well, but when the eye falls on arms or feet, there are problems of mythic precedence and the abnormal procreation of the Other world. Vanic-manic love destroys. Kormákr may be a lovesick skald, but we should think more of pathology than of romance.

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