When Skaði Chose Njǫrðr

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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.”¹ 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 Njǫrðr 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, dottir Eíazas Jötuns, tók hjálm ok brynju ok þil 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]),² she may have

been seeking settlement rather than a move within the structures of bloodfeud. 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. Skaldic poetry was clearly a sort of intellectual capital for Snorri, 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 Skaldskaparmál. 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 Skaldskaparmál. 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 Íðunn

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When Skadi Chose Njörðr

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

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

På så hon eins mans feetr forkunnarfagra ok mælti: ‘Penna kys ek. Fátt mun ljótt á Baldri’—en þat var Njörðr ór Nóatúnum.6

(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.)7

Discussing this passage some years ago, I pointed out that the parallels with the Cinderella narrative that have long been in the literature8 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,9 Skadi had little hope of bettering her position when she had to choose solely by the feet.10 In that same

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 1265:11 "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."

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 Gerd, 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/Gerd 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 Gerd. If there is a parallel here too, then what happened to Freyr when he saw Gerd’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 Skirnir. 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 Gerd 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:

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When Skaði Chose Njörðr

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

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

Freyr is rendered speechless and he withdraws from participation in the social life (drinking and talking) of the Æsir. The Æsir 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 Hlíðskjálf caused the problem.

Drawing in Hlíðskjálf suggests a contrast between Óðinn, who can handle the sight (and seduction) of female Æsir, 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 Æsir 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 Sighvatsson’s nickname “Dala-Freyr.”15 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 Einarsson16) unmans each of them, and that is bad for Freyr and good for Skaði. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen

14. Snorri Sturluson: Edda, trans. Faulkes, p. 31
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.\textsuperscript{17}

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

\begin{alltt}
Mær er mér tiðari enn manni hveim,  
  ungom, í árdaga;  
ása oc álfa þar vill engi maðr,  
at við sátt sém.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{alltt}

(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 \textit{í árdaga} as setting the narrative in \textit{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 Njörðr. However, the marriage between Skaði and Njörðr 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 \textit{Gylfaginning} of two \textit{ljóðahátr} verses in which each complains about the noisy abode of the

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

\end{footnotes}
When Skaði Chose Njörðr

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 Skaldskaparmál 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 Kormák r 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 kvángadóttur, 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
(It happened one fall that a whale washed up at Vatnsnes, and the Dallason brothers [Kormákr and Porgils] had the rights to it. Porgils 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 sheepherding, 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

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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.21

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

Roberta Frank saw that the two sets of feet, those of Steingerdr and those of Njǫrdr, were parallel.23 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 Steingerdr. She finds the curse that Þorgeir placed on Kormákr’s love for Steingerdr to be a clumsy attempt to follow the mythic structure of Freyr’s delayed marriage to Gerðr; it would equally cover Skagi’s failed marriage to Njǫrdr.

Kormákr’s stanza is difficult. Frank would emend fall-Gerðr to fjall-Gerðr “‘mountain-Gerðr’ = Stein-Gerðr,”24 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.

The noun used here is *fatr*, 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 Njótr. 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* ("instep of the foot"), which Kormákr says the woman stretched out toward him (*rétthjótr*). The form *risti* would be a unique accusative form,25 but no one seems troubled by it. So, Kormákr saw first one instep, then both feet. The move from one to two constitutes a move toward the story of Skaði and Njótr. 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 enmidúki
jardhljótr dír fjárðar
breyti, hún sá, beinan,
bindr. Sæ Ygg til Rindar26

(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.)27

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 *diar* for gods. To the best of my knowledge, the word *diar* is only attested here and in ch. 4 of *Ynglinga saga*.28
Although the usage is not quite the same—with *días* 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*. 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) 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 *Móðruvellabók* 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—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, Bronze Age rock carvings, or notions of ritual imprints of divine footsteps, 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
a quest for a man (one of the Æsir), with whom she will mate. She is to choose her future sexual partner by his feet. Now, feet are not innocent body parts in this mythology, for the proto-giant—Skaði’s direct ancestor, presumably—had feet that were active sexual partners. The result of this union was anything but good. The giant Vafþrúðnir put it this way:

Undir hendi vaxa qvário hrimþursi
mey oc mog saman;
fótir við fæti gat ins fróða iotuns
sexhþoðaðan son.35

(Under the arm of the frost giant they say
A maid and lad grew together;
One foot on the other begat
The six-headed son of the giant.)

Snorri paraphrased the verse in Gylfaginning. He added the details of sweat in the armpit and specified it as the left one—both additions typical of medieval thinking, and, like Thor with Starkarðr’s arms, Snorri reduced to normal the number of heads of the offspring of the feet—typical of his objection to the truly fantastic. Snorri also made the monstrous procreator into Ymir, whom, he says, the frost giants called Aurgelmir—another Snorronic touch.

When Snorri wrote that Skaði was to choose on the basis of the feet and invited his readers or listeners to imagine a scene in which all the Æsir reveal their feet to her, then, Aurgelmir’s or Ymir’s monstrous, promiscuous, incestuous feet present themselves inevitably. The Æsir reminded Skaði of one of the many defects in her ancestry, and at the same time they showed that they had perfectly normal feet, without any sexual appetites whatever. To some extent, then, they would have mitigated the act of contrition I posited in my earlier piece on Skaði and would also have been mocking her.

Indeed, the metaphorical value of feet was generally quite positive. To be a fóturn was and still is to be awake and conscious, not asleep, and a fótheill person is healthy, while one who is fótrumr is decrepit.

In other words, the feet are sometimes metonyms for the entire body and metaphors for consciousness. Offering up their bare feet to Skaði certainly echoes an act of contrition, but it may also be a demonstration not only of the superiority of the ancestry of the Æsir, but also of their well-being as a whole, even when forced to compensate Skaði.

If the myths of Skaði-Njörðr and Freyr-Gerðr are indeed parallel, and there is anything to my drawing in the proto-giant’s monstrous reproduction, then Gerðr’s arms deserve attention. It is true that For Scîrnis poses a problem of terminology: there it is Gerðr’s upper arms (armar) that attract Freyr, whereas it is the lower arms (hendr) that made the children in Vafþrúðnismál 33.

I Gymis gördum ec sá ganga
mér tóða mey;
armar lýsto, enn af þáðan
alt lopt oc lógr.36

(In Gymir’s holdings I saw walking
a maiden dear to me;
her arms shone, and from them
all the sky and sea.)

On the other hand, Snorri’s paraphrase restores the parallelism.

[O]k er hon tók upp hóndunum ok lauk hurð fyrir sér, þá lýsti af hóndum hennar bæði í lopt ok á lógr ok allir heimar birtusk af henni.37

(... and when she lifted her arms and opened the door for herself, light was shed from her arms over both sky and sea, and all worlds were made bright by her.)38

Since Snorri so clearly knew For Scîrnis 6, the slight shift in body parts is interesting. Whatever Snorri did with sweat and armpits is

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 Jótunn 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 armarr (For Scrinis) or the gleaming upper part of the hýnd, 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. Fatt mun ljött um Baldri: “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 ljóðabátt 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.39 Margaret Clunies Ross is quite convinced that it was a deliberate trick;40 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’re 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


When Skaði Chose Njörðr

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 Hvitingr 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 Porvarðr, 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 blótrísi 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.

Bibliography


Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland


When Skaði Chose Njörðr


