

Joaquin Martinez-Pizarro  
State University of New York at Stony Brook

### Woman-to-Man Senna

There are in Old Norse literature a number of duels of invective, or sennur, between men and women. The senna is a familiar form, and we have become used to the idea that it can involve individuals of both sexes.<sup>1</sup> This possibility, however, is more surprising than has been noticed to date, because the exchange of insults (Eng. flyting, Ger. Streitgespräch), both as type-scene and genre in world literature, is overwhelmingly restricted to male figures,<sup>2</sup> and the ritual insults of various cultures, brought to light by anthropology and regarded as possible real-life correlatives or models for the literary form, are generally the pastime of young males.<sup>3</sup> So the question arises quite naturally: How did women get into the senna? In the next few pages I will consider Germanic, and particularly Scandinavian sennur between the sexes as a separate category. Since my aim is not to describe this particular variety of the exchange of insults, but to outline a hypothesis as to its possible origin and development, I will limit my discussion to a very few representative specimens.

1. Rumetruda. At least one early Germanic instance of the match of invective between man and woman has come down to us. It appears in the Historia Langobardorum of Paul the Deacon, which has preserved only the narrative context of the exchange, and not the actual words of the participants.<sup>4</sup> In the first book of the Historia, going over the causes of an early sixth-century war between the Langobards and the Heruli that ended with the victory of his people, Paul tells the story of the Langobardic princess Rumetruda who, impressed by the retinue of a foreign visitor, inquired who he might be and, on learning that he was prince of the Heruli, sent him an invitation to come and drink

with her. ["Germanus Rodulfi regis ad Tatonem serendae pacis gratia venerat. Qui cum expleta legatione patriam repeteret, contigit, ut ante regis filiae domum, quae Rumetruda dicebatur, transitum haberet. Illa multitudinem virorum nobilemque comitatum aspiciens, interrogat, quis iste esse possit, qui tam sublime obsequium haberet. Dictumque illi est, Rodulfi regis germanum legatione perfuncta patriam regredi. Mittit puella, qui eum invitaret, ut vini poculum dignaretur accipere."] We have here anything but the premise for a match of invective. The incident, indeed, recalls the classical beginning of a chanson de toile, with the young woman who sees a handsome hero ride by. But Rumetruda's guest proves, on appearing before her, to be small in size, and she turns on him with words described by Paul as scornful or mocking, but unfortunately not quoted. ["Ille corde simplici, ut invitatus fuerat, venit; et quia erat statura pusillus, eum fastu superbiae puella despexit, verbaque adversus eum inrisoria protulit."] The prince reacts with both shame and indignation, and replies in terms that bring even greater disorder and confusion upon his hostess. ["At ille verècundia pariter et indignatione perfusus, talia rursus verba respondit, quae ampliorem puellae confusionem adferrent."] Her resentment is so strong that she arranges secretly to have him murdered on the spot, and her order for a servant to mix the drinks serves as the appointed signal for her assassins to stab him in the back. This last feature may surprise those familiar with flyting and senna, which almost never lead directly to violence.<sup>5</sup> But here the murder is needed to motivate the war between his people and hers, and the entire sequence is known to be a very rough piece of narrative patchwork.<sup>6</sup> We should therefore not assume that the guest's death was the direct outcome of his dialogue with Rumetruda in Paul's traditional Langobardic sources.

That the exchange involved the harsh sexual invective we commonly associate with the senna is made very likely by the motivation of Rumetruda's sudden hostility in her guest's disappointing physique. Other elements of the scene, however, and particularly the prince traveling abroad on an embassy, and

the princess who offers him a drink in the foreign hall, we recognize as features of a wholly different and apparently incompatible type of narrative: the bridal quest or Brautwerbung.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, Paul was familiar with both man-to-man flyting and bridal quest. Later in book I, in the story of Alboin and Turisind, he has preserved an exchange between a Gepid prince and an anonymous Langobardic warrior in which the traditional mare-insult of the senna is bandied,<sup>8</sup> and in book III, chapter 30, he tells the story of king Authari's courtship of his future wife, the Bavarian princess Theudelinda, with the king present incognito in a Langobardic embassy to the Bavarians, and a scene in which the princess, at the request of the ambassadors, goes around serving wine to the guests in her father's hall. Paul's account of Authari's courtship, which is extremely coherent and true to Brautwerbung type, helps us understand a feature of the dubious and illogical Rumetruda episode. Authari himself, unrecognized by the Bavarians, demands the customary physical inspection of the bride by the groom's envoys. ["... ad regem Garibaldum propinquius accedens ait: 'Dominus meus Authari rex me proprie ob hoc direxit, ut vestram filiam, ipsius sponsam, quae nostra domina futura est, debeam conspicere, ut, qualis eius forma sit, meo valeam domino certius nuntiare.'"] It is in the light of this traditional formality that we can make some sense of Rumetruda's rage on finding her visitor so small: he has failed his physical. Any attempt to explain the incident between Rumetruda and the Herulian prince as a transformation of the bridal-quest interview will also have to take into account that the roles of male and female have been inverted, so that it is his body that is inspected in this case.

1. Hríngerdr. I want to focus now on the "Hríngerdrarmál", the didic senna between the hero Helgi Hjörvarðsson, his friend and helper Atli Iðmundarsson, and Hríngerdr, daughter of the giant Ati. Though it constitutes an episode of the "Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar" [hence HHv.], "Hríngerdrarmál" is written in jóðahátt, unlike the rest of the poem, and stands as a semi-independent unit within it, which has given rise to speculation

about its possible later origin and eventual addition to the lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson.<sup>9</sup> In two ways, at least, however, "Hrímgerðarmál" can be said to belong in its context: HHv. is a proto-fornaldarsaga, and flytings between heroes and giantesses are a standard feature of that genre,<sup>10</sup> and "Hrímgerðarmál" is fully integrated into the plot of the lay, and contains many references to Helgi's love for the valkyrie Sváva, which determines the action of the second half.

I will discuss "Hrímgerðarmál" as a prototype of the sennur between heroes on the one hand, and giantesses or mermaids on the other that can be found in the legendary sagas and constitutes the most common type of senna between the sexes in Old Norse. "Hrímgerðarmál" consists of stanzas 12-30 of HHv. Helgi has just been given his name by Sváva, and has avenged his maternal grandfather Sváfnir. The senna is introduced by the last two sentences of a prose passage, which tell us that Helgi killed the giant Hati, who had been sitting on a cliff, that he lay at anchor in the eponymous Hatafjord, and that his friend Atli kept watch for the first part of the night. Hrímgerð then appears and carries on the senna with Atli up to stanza 23. After the mutual identifications that open the exchange, she announces that her mother is blocking the fjord, and that she herself plans to drown Helgi. Hrímgerð then switches to the traditional line of horse-invektive but with a peculiar twist: she presents herself as a mare in the act of sexual provocation, raising her tail for Atli who, as she puts it, might neigh in response if he had not been gelded:

'Gneggja myndir þú, Atli, ef þú geldr né vaðfir,  
brettir sinn Hrímgerðr hala;  
aptarla hiarta hygg ec at þitt, Atli, sé,  
þótt þú hafir reina rødd.' HHV. 20

Atli threatens her with violence, and promises to pull down her tail, which must be understood both as sexual rejection and a challenge to fight:

'Reini mun þér ec þiccia, ef þú reina knátt  
oc stíga ec á land af legi;  
öll muntu lemiaz, ef mér er alhugat,  
oc sveigia þinn hala, Hrímgerðr.' HHV. 21

At this point, Hrímgærd turns to Helgi, asking him to spend one night with her in compensation for her father. Helgi, who now takes over from Atli,<sup>11</sup> promises her instead the worst of giants as a husband, and Hrímgærd replies that the female he wants must be Sváva, who has spent the night protecting him with a company of twenty seven valkyries. Having delayed her with talk, Helgi now tells Hrímgærd to look at the east, and the rising sun turns her to stone.

It is with the giantess's use of the mare-and-stud imagery against Atli that the content of the dialogue comes closest to man-to-man senna. And yet the twist that she is obliged to give to this traditional form of phallic aggression reveals the intrinsic difficulty of having sennur between men and women: the invective, created for exchanges between males, has to be rephrased.<sup>12</sup> The traditional insult is "mare", yet here Hrímgærd must present herself as a mare, and attack Atli with the less common charge of being gelded.

The plight of Hrímgærd is modelled on that of Skaði, who, according to "Skáldskaparmál", took up arms and went to Asgard to avenge her father, the giant Þjazi.<sup>13</sup> The gods' compensatory offer of one of themselves as a husband, the grotesquely incomplete physical inspection that follows, limited to the legs of the gods, and Loki's comic genital display, which makes Skaði laugh, all suggest that the episode in the Snorra Edda is a burlesque version of the bridal-quest interview. Unlike Skaði, Hrímgærd fails in her quest for compensation and sex; she is also the one to display her genitals, as implied by the raising of her [mare's] tail.

In spite of the decisive influence of the Skaði narrative, "Hrímgærdarmál" points explicitly at the Eddic "Skírnismál" [hence Skm.] as its model.<sup>14</sup> Skm. is generally recognized as a bridal quest in its plot, whatever its status as myth and, for that very reason, it has surprised some critics by the unusual harshness of the dialogue between the giantess Gerðr and Skírnir, the messenger of Frey.<sup>15</sup> At a certain point in Skírnir's intimidation of Gerðr, we seem to be very close indeed to the senna,

as he threatens to carve runes of ergi, madness, and torment against her:

Þurs ríst ec þér oc þriá stafi,  
ergi oc óði oc óþola;  
svá ec þat af ríst, sem et þat á reist,  
ef goraz þarfar þess.' Skm. 36

But Skm. remains a bridal quest, in the first place because of its happy outcome, but also on account of Gerðr's words welcoming the messenger and offering him drink before any identification, and of the relative absence of invective, instead of which we have expressions of reluctance from the prospective bride, and increasingly violent threats and curses from the messenger. There is in Brautwerbung, which generally presupposes a quest for a wife among an alien people, an inherent possibility of conflict: the bride, or her menfolk, may be hostile to the suitor and challenge his virility. But Skm. shows no attempt at this, and no sexual insults or charges. There is also no need for physical inspection, since Frey has already seen Gerðr from his seat up in Hliðskialf. It is this unactualized possibility of aggression, nonetheless, that made the author of "Hríngerðarmál" choose Skm. as his model for the confrontation between Atli, Helgi, and the giantess. Helgi quotes one of Skírnir's threats:

Helgi: 'Loðinn heitir, er þic scal eiga, leið ertu mann-  
[kyni;  
sá býr í þolleyio þurs,  
hundvíss íqtunn, hraunbúa verstr;  
sá er þér macligr maðr.' HHv. 25

Skírnir: 'Hríngrínnir heitir þurs, er þic hafa scal,  
fyr nágrindr neðan;  
þar þér vílmegir á víðar rótom  
geita hland gefi!' Skm. 35

Two other shared features are important. In the first place, a trait that is prominent in Skm., and in bridal quest in general, the suitor's use of an agent or messenger, seems far less motivated in "Hríngerðarmál" and in any senna at all, since a contest of vituperation cannot be won by proxy, and a delegate's performance proves nothing about his master's eloquence. Atli,

who performs this role in "Hríngerdarmál", had earlier been king Þjórvarðr's agent in the courtship of Sigrínn, Helgi's mother, and when he confronts the giantess as Helgi's delegate, he is carrying out the same function in different circumstances, or perhaps a comic inversion of that function. I would suggest, then, that delegates and other third parties in sennur between the sexes are secondary, preserved or taken over from bridal quest, where they properly belong, and that this is another indication that sennur of this type represent an adaptation and recasting of bridal quest. In them, the potential hostility present in any unsuccessful Brautwerbung is developed as an exchange of insults, and the physical inspection of the bride is reinterpreted as an aggressive sexual/genital display. A second trait shared by the two poems is the meter. "Hríngerdarmál" is conceived as a negative variation on Skm., and the ljóðaháttur that sets it off from the rest of the lay should be read as a direct reference to its model.<sup>16</sup>

. Gro. Courtship or sexual advances between different nations, or species, the use of delegates, and the practice of physical inspection are then primary in Brautwerbung and secondary in our woman-to-man sennur. The recasting of a bridal quest into senna form seems to be triggered primarily by failure, accompanied in earlier Germanic tradition by gender reversal, whereby the female takes the initiative and the male ends up as object of the physical inspection, and in Old Norse by the attempt of a giantess or giant, troll or troll-woman, to marry a god or a human being and/or to have intercourse with him.<sup>17</sup> This hypothesis casts some light on the ambiguities of the Rumetruda story, and helps solve uncertainties generated by later medieval texts. The conversation between the Danish king Gram, his friend Bessus, and the Swedish princess Gro in the first book of Saxo's Historia Danorum is a case in point.<sup>18</sup> Bessus dominates the dialogue as Gram's intermediary, though his master steps in at the end for a happy resolution. But the tone of the exchange is uncommonly hostile, and the favorable outcome is determined only by Gro's physical inspection of Gram. The reason for this is that Gram's initial motive for visiting Sweden was to liberate

Gro from betrothal to a giant, which seemed to him disgraceful for a woman of her royal blood, and that, in order to travel safely, he disguised himself as a giant. Gro's distaste for the looks of her self-appointed deliverer is expressed vehemently: "Quis spina digitos fovet?/ Quis sincera luto misceat oscula?/ Quis membra iungat hispida/ levibus impariter locatis?/ Cum natura reclamitat,/ haud plenum Veneris carpitur otium,/ nec congruit monstribus amor/ femineo celebratus usu." The mere suggestion of a giant, introduced by Gram's disguise, changes the tone of the dialogue, jeopardizes the bridal quest, and makes gender reversal necessary in the physical inspection, for Gram must prove that he is not what he seems to be. The episode, in every respect a Brautwerbung interview, comes for a moment under the generic attraction of the senna, which obscures its primary logic. It is worth pointing out that the very element which creates the confusion, the hero's use of disguise, belongs by right in the bridal quest, where the royal protagonist is often forced to hide his identity in order to visit his prospective wife.

D. Gǫtvara. The secondary, unoriginal character of woman-to-man senna seems to be contradicted by another episode in Saxo: the notorious "battle of words" ["altercandi...certamen"] between Erik the Eloquent and Gǫtvara at the court of Frode Fredegod.<sup>19</sup> In it, we seek in vain for any bridal quest elements. There is no sexual or matrimonial interest on either side; instead, Gǫtvara is defending her position of privilege at court, while Erik strives to bring down her influence. Delegates, physical displays and the hospitable offer of drink are equally absent. Instead, the characteristic traits of man-to-man senna are fully in evidence: both participants are portrayed as skilled in verbal warfare; the contest is public; the subject is phallic aggression. Gǫtvara, being a woman, is unable to present herself as phallic aggressor, and must phrase her insult accordingly; Erik, on the other hand, counters with an explicit image of heterosexual penetration, very uncommon in this context.

Their words show remarkable similarity to the exchange of kviðlingar by Gísli and Þorgrímr in Gísla saga, which they resemble not only in topic, which is not surprising, but in the



skillful linking of charge and countercharge by common images and concepts. This exceptional scene does not present an insurmountable objection to my hypothesis. The Erik-Gǫtvara senna could be entirely the creation of Saxo, who earlier in the story had staged an elaborate altercation between Erik and Gǫtvara's son Þrep, and may have wanted a symmetrical exchange between Erik and another member of the family. But the obscene linked charges seem too close to tradition to be wholly of Saxo's creation, and there is another possible explanation for them, this one far more speculative, and harder to work out in detail. Gǫtvara confronts Erik only after he has killed all her sons. She stands before him as a bereaved mother, and a woman in her position most often performs a hvǫt, both to lament her loss and to encourage revenge.<sup>20</sup> A hvǫt characteristically puts in doubt the manliness of the prospective avenger; "I might as well have had daughters as sons", say the bloodthirsty crones of the sagas. On occasion, the hvǫt may even involve obscenity, as in a story preserved by Predegar according to which the mother of Theoderic the Goth came to meet her son as he fled from the battlefield and told him: "Non est, ubi fugias, fili, nisi ut levi vestimenta mea, ut ingredias utero, de quo natus es."<sup>21</sup> If Gǫtvara and her senna with Erik existed in tradition before Saxo, it is possible that she goaded the men of the Danish court against Erik, seeking revenge for her dead sons. Charges of unmanliness, or the presence of obscenity in her speech would have brought the scene under the influence of the senna, and moved Saxo to modify it accordingly.

3. Conclusion. Norsemen used the term senna very broadly, eventually applying it even to translated Latin dialogues of religious and moral-didactic argument.<sup>22</sup> As a genre, the senna was impressed scholars by its remarkable adaptability.<sup>23</sup> The classical dialogue of invective documented widely in world literature, and in Old Norse in the lays of Helgi Hundingsbani, has assimilated elements of the boasting contest, or mannjafnaðr, and of the scene of public defamation (e.g. Locasenna) that pitches one character against many in a verbal lion-tamer's act. The case of the woman-to-man senna, explored above, shows us more precisely how one scenic type can be taken over by another,

and how the senna is present, as a possibility, in almost any context of verbal aggression.

NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, Carol J. Clover, "The Germanic Context of the Unfer] Episode," Speculum 55 (1980), 444-468, esp. 449-450.
- 2 That flyting takes place primarily between males is the assumption of most recent scholarship on the subject; see Ward Parks, "Flyting and Fighting: Pathways in the Realization of the Epic Contest," Neophilologus 70 (1986), 292-306, and "The Flyting Speech in Traditional Heroic Narrative," *ibid.* 71 (1987), 285-295.
- 3 The best known anthropological studies of ritual insults are William Labov, "Rules for Ritual Insults", in Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 297-353, and Alan Dundes, Jerry W. Leach, and Bora Özkök, "The Strategy of Turkish Boys' Verbal Dueling Rhymes," in Directions in Sociolinguistics; the Ethnography of Communication, John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes eds. (New York, 1972), pp. 136-160, and editors' introduction pp. 130-133.
- 4 Paul the Deacon, Historia Langobardorum, L. Bethmann and G. Waitz eds. Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum langobardicarum et italicarum saec. vi-ix. (Hannover, 1878), book I, chapter 20 [pp. 57-59].
- 5 See Clover, "Germanic Context", p. 459, but also Parks, "Flyting and Fighting". That a stylized duel of insults can serve as an alternative to violence is understood by the New York rap singer Roxanne Shanté, who has made it part of her act to exchange sexual insults with male members of the audience, and who recently stated to an interviewer: "Rap is about using fighting words, instead of fighting. Instead of saying 'Let's fight,' people say, 'Let's battle'. I bet you rap has saved a lot of lives. Even though there were shoot-outs afterwards!" Lisa Jones, "Roxanne Shanté: Pussy Ain't Free," The Village Voice, January 19, 1988, 34-37.

- 6 See Dante Bianchi, "L'elemento epico nella Historia Langobardorum," Memorie storiche forogiuliesi 30 (1934), 117-168, and Otto Gschwantler, "Die Heldensage von Alboin und Rosimund," in Festgabe für Otto Höfler zum 75. Geburtstag, Helmut Birkhan ed. (Vienna, 1976), 214-254, esp. 241-243.
- 7 On bridal quest narrative, see most recently Theodore M. Andersson, "'Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar' and European Bridal-Quest Narrative," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 84 (1985), 51-73.
- 8 The Gepid prince says: "Fetilae sunt equae, quas similatis". The Langobard replies: "Perge in campum Asfeld, ibique procul dubio potueris experiri, quam valide istae quas equas nominas praevalent calcitrare;..." Historia Langobardorum I, 24. On the meaning of "fetilae equae", see Gerhard Eis, "Zum Turisindlied," Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum 79 (1942), 167-177.
- 9 I quote the Eddic poems from the standard edition: Edda; die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, Gustav Neckel ed., revised by Hans Kuhn. Fourth edition. (Heidelberg, 1962). On HHv. see Andersson, "'Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar'"; on "Hrímgerðarmál" see Joseph Harris, "Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The Evidence of Parallel Passages in the Helgi Poems for Questions of Composition and Performance," in Edda; A Collection of Essays, Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason eds. (Manitoba, 1983), pp. 210-242, esp. 219-220.
- 0 See Andersson, "'Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar'," 62-64.
- 1 Is it perhaps that Helgi's turn to keep watch begins at this point?
- 2 On phallic aggression in Old Norse literature, see Preben Meulengracht-Sørensen, The unmanly man. Concepts of sexual defamation in early Northern society, Joan Turville-Petre trans. (Odense, 1983), and Carol J. Clover's insightful review of the Danish edition in Journal of English and Germanic Philology 81 (1982), 398-400.

- 13 Snorri Sturluson, Edda. Gylfaginning og prosafortellingene av Skáldskaparmál, Anne Holtmark and Jon Helgason eds. (Oslo, 1971), pp. 79-80.
- 14 The connection between the two poems has been pointed out in H.R. Ellis-Davidson, "Insults and Riddles in the Edda Poems," in Edda; A Collection of Essays, Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason eds. (Manitoba, 1983), pp. 25-46, esp. p.28
- 15 On Skm. as myth, see Ursula Dronke, "Art and Tradition in 'Skírnismál'," in English and Medieval Studies Presented to J.R. Tolkien on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday, Norman Davis and C.L.Wrenn eds. (London, 1962), pp. 250-268.
- 16 Additional evidence for the convertibility of bridal quest and senna can be found in the practice of fornaldarsaga authors, who often use the same settings and speeches for both. Compare chapters 12 and 14 in Hjálmþérs saga ok Olvis, where the senna between Hjalþér and the troll-woman Yma exactly parallels the later bridal-quest dialogue between Hǫrǫr and the princess Hervǫr in these respects.
- 17 The mythic and psychological thought that underlies this role of giants and giantesses is explored in Margaret Clunies Ross, "An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr's Encounter with Geirrǫr and his Daughters," in Speculum Norroënv. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre, Ursula Dronke et alii eds. (Odense, 1981), pp. 370-391.
- 18 Saxonis Gesta Danorum, J. Olrik and H. Raeder eds. Vol. I. (Copenhagen, 1931), I, iv, 3-10 [pp. 12-17]. On the story of Gram, see Georges Dumézil, From Myth to Fiction, Derek Coltman trans. (Chicago, 1973), pp. 157-170.
- 19 Saxonis Gesta Danorum, V, iii, 2-5 [p. 118]. That the senna is traditional and adapted by Saxo from the vernacular is made more than likely by the fact that it makes poor sense in Latin and seems to depend on double entendres only possible in Norse. Its meaning, and the original connections between Gǫtvara's question and Erik's reply, are established in J. Svennung, "Eriks und Götvaras Wortstreit bei Saxo," Arkiv

för nordisk filologi 57 (1942), 76-98. The recent translation and commentary of Saxo by Peter Fisher and Hilda Ellis-Davidson [Saxo Grammaticus, The History of the Danes. 2 vols. (Brewer-Rowman and Littlefield, 1979)] offers only a literal translation of Saxo's half-intelligible text.

10 On hvgt and its origins, see Carol J. Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," in Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature. New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism, John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber eds. (Odense, 1986), pp. 141-183.

11 Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici libri iv, Bruno Krusch ed. Monumenta Germaniae Historica; Scriptores rerum merovingicarum vol. 2. (Hannover, 1956), book II, chapter 57. In classical times, the gesture indicated only a woman's contempt at male cowardice; cf. Carl Sittl, Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer (Leipzig, 1890), p. 104.

2 On these dialogues as sennur, see the recent remarks of Barbro Söderberg, "Lokasenna - egenheter och älder," Arkiv för nordisk filologi 102 (1987), 18-99, esp. p. 53.

3 On generic adaptability, see Joseph Harris, "The senna: From Description to Literary Theory," Michigan Germanic Studies 5 (1979), 65-74.