

'WHAT DOES WOMAN WANT?' MÆR AND MUNR IN SKIRNISMÁL

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Introduction

In recent years, Skirnismál has yielded some challenging readings grounded in formalist and structuralist theory,¹ put forward by male scholars, who, perhaps unsurprisingly, have not been troubled by the unsettling implications of the reading position which Skirnismál demands. For the male reader, alignment with Freyr and Skirnir is not difficult, but for the female reader this gendered reading position is more problematic. Where uneasiness in reading is so markedly gender-related, and especially where the text deals specifically with a woman's sexual response, it seems probable that feminist theory can locate and illuminate the sources of this uneasiness. This paper will suggest some ways in which this might be done.

What sort of feminist theory though? Feminist literary practice has usually distinguished two activities: woman as reader and woman as writer, or, as Elaine Showalter (1981) has termed them: 'Images of Women' criticism, and 'gynocritics'. The latter – the study of texts created by women – is of limited use when dealing with early texts whose authorship is unknown (although see Patricia Belanoff's spirited application of French feminisms to the 'Frauenlieder' of Old English (Belanoff, 1990)). 'Images of Women' criticism² has been discredited both by its excision of representations of women from the cultural and historical conditions under which the text has been produced, in order to yield misleadingly 'positive images', and by its universalist or essentialist insistence on a one-to-one nexus between such images and 'reality', 'women's experience' (Purkiss, 1992). Lönnroth's reading of Skirnismál, which identifies Gerðr with an archetypal Icelandic chieftain's daughter (Lönnroth, 1977, 162), and Mitchell's equation of Gerðr with the motif 'exchange of gift' in the settlement of feud (Mitchell, 1983, 122) both circumscribe the meaning of the poem in this way.

If neither of these critical strategies is appropriate, how are we to approach Skirnismál as feminist readers? The theory of the 'resisting reader' (Fetterley, 1978) argues that women readers of male-produced texts will tend to resist the male position of reader allocated to them, reading 'against the grain'. This provides a standpoint from which to read, encouraging us to interrogate the 'natural', that is, the 'ideological' structures which the poem presents: the deployment of a number of strategies intended to force an unwilling woman to cooperate. Once these strategies have been laid bare, further meaning can be recovered through a Machereyan approach, (here summarised by Eagleton):

It is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make 'speak'. The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things; in trying to tell the truth in his own way, for example, the author finds himself forced to reveal the limits of the ideology within which he writes. He is forced to reveal its gaps and silences, what it is unable to articulate. Far from constituting a rounded, coherent whole, it displays a conflict and contradiction of meanings; and the significance of the work lies in the difference rather than unity between these meanings. (Eagleton, 1976, 34-5)

From the 'gaps and absences' in the text, we can retrieve that which is repressed, and which, as Juliet Mitchell (1974) points out, then returns to unsettle the text (also Purkiss, 1992). Since in patriarchal culture it is precisely the feminine which is silenced, we may thus be able to recuperate Skirnismál's meanings for women - firstly and crucially for us as women readers - but, perhaps, also for women in the cultural contexts in which the poem may have been produced, contexts 'in which a whole set of different structures (ideological, economic, social, political) intersect to produce precisely those textual structures.' (Moi, 1985, 94)

The Poem

To summarise: Skirnismál is about a woman, apparently autonomous and with unhampered access to wealth, who is sitting at home one day when a man arrives and demands that she arrange a sexual rendezvous with a second man, Freyr. She refuses. Bribes and threats are offered and rejected. Finally a complex runic curse brings about her submission and she agrees to meet the importuner.

I have used the words 'woman' and 'man' instead of 'god' and 'giantess' (Skirnir's 'racial' status is unclear) to highlight the gender implications which other readings have tended to slide over. Just as in Lokasenna Loki's criticism of the goddesses' promiscuity only makes sense if judged by human social criteria (Larrington, 1992, 2.6) - as a fertility goddess Freyja is surely bound to engage in a large number of sexual encounters? - so the sexual politics of Skirnismál are meaningful primarily as representations of human behaviour.

Few critics have faced squarely the problem offered by a poem which asks its audience to accept and to identify with a hero who coerces a woman into having sex with him. Snorri suppresses the threats and curse entirely and regularises the relationship with marriage (SnE 37) and a child (Ynglinga Saga 10). Lönnroth suggests that Gerðr has 'asked for it': since Freyr became 'enchanted' by gazing at her (albeit without her knowledge), it is therefore 'legitimate' to use magical means on her: 'Därför blir det legitimt at bruka en för övrigt olagliga kärleksmagin för at vinna henne. Hon besegras så att säga med sin egen medecin' (Lönnroth, 1977, 169). Mitchell's glib identification of woman with gift (Mitchell, 1983, 116-17) ignores the fundamental

difference between gift-objects and women, illustrated, with comic irritation, by Hávamál 90. Women have a mind of their own:

Svá er friðr kvænna,
þeir er flátt hyggja,
sem aki ió óbryddom
á ísl hálom,
teitom, tvévetrom,
ok sé tamr illa,
eða í byr óðom
beiti stíórnlæuso,
eða skyli haltr henda
hrein í þáfialli.

So is the love of women,
those who think falsely,
like driving a horse with unspiked hooves
on slippery ice,
a frisky two-year-old,
and badly broken-in,
or in a raging wind,
steering a rudderless boat,
or having to catch when lame
a reindeer on a thawing hillside.

Though the man seeks to control the woman, driving her like a horse or a boat, she is intent on going in quite a different direction. What the man defines as 'flátt hyggja' - thinking falsely, is in fact the woman's sense of herself as autonomous subject. Women do not always cooperate with the patriarchal plan.³

Although by the displacement of the dirty work onto Skírnir, Freyr's status as 'romantic' hero is uncompromised, so that in the Lokasenna Tyr can claim of Freyr: 'mey hann ne grætir / né mannz kono,' (Ls. 374-5), the poem's resolution remains unsatisfactory unless we can retrieve some sense of why Gerðr capitulates. Must we read Skírnismál simply as an example of violent male bullying, or can we 'make speak' the curse to recover further meaning which resists the patriarchal premises laid bare by the poem's visible structures?

Central to Skírnismál is the word *munr*: mind, heart, desire - especially 'Mands Attraa efter en kvindes Kjærlighed', but also 'hvad der tjener til at gjøre en Ting, et Forhold bedre' (Fritzner) - repeated eight times during the course of the poem, more frequently than any other semantically charged term,⁴ and carefully distinguished through use of a possessive adjective, 'my *munr*', 'your *munr*'. Ostensibly Skírnismál is about the achieving of Freyr's *munr*, but this is rapidly subordinated to Skírnir's *munr*: a *munr* grounded in a discourse of domination. Gerðr's *munr* is invoked only to be thwarted by Skírnir's (357-10), but persuading her that her own *munr* and Freyr's can coincide is the key to Skírnismál's resolution. Yet how can this be achieved without discovering what Gerðr's *munr* actually is?

Gerðr's capitulation can be elucidated by a reading strategy which finds, in the 'gaps and absences' of the curse, a recognition of female desire, a textually constituted and culture-specific answer to the question, asked plaintively by Freud, and after him, Lacan: what does woman want?

What women don't want: patriarchal coercion

The main elements of the curse threaten Gerður with:

- a) Being invisible (26⁴⁻⁶); being a public spectacle (28)
- b) Unbearable sexual frustration (29; 34⁵⁻⁸; 36³⁻⁴)
- c) A physically repulsive husband (31¹⁻³)
- d) Low social status and loss of autonomy (30; 35⁴⁻¹⁰)
- e) Disapproval (33)

The threat that Gerður will become a public spectacle, stared at by everything: 'á þik hotvetna stari; / víðkunnari þú verður / en vgrður með goðóm' (28⁴⁻⁶) may be connected with theories of the gaze (Berger, 1972; Kuhn, 1985). Looking is not an innocent activity - it is locked into discourses of sexuality, knowledge and power. To look is to constitute oneself as subject, to be looked at is to be constituted as object. Typically the spectator - patron of art, consumer of pornography, building-site worker - is male, and the object of the gaze, female - an object of desire. The spectator has power over the object; he chooses when to look and when to stop looking; the object lacks such choice. Hrímnir who will stare at Gerður is inseparable from Hrímgrímnir who will possess her sexually: 'Hrímgrímnir heitir þurs / er þik hafa skal' (35¹⁻²). Thus for Gerður, to be stared at makes explicit her loss of autonomy; she will be unable to occupy a subject position, to determine how she is looked at.

The threat that 'gumna synir' will never see Gerður is a corollary of this argument. Under patriarchy, the woman internalizes the expectation of being the object of male attention, and becomes herself complicit in the looking. It is an important constituent of her sexual identity that she should be looked at:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at ... The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision, a sight. (Berger 1972, 46-7)

The looker must however be appropriate: it is a role to be filled not by a frost giant, or an indiscriminate group of voyeurs: 'á þik hotvetna stari', but by a human being, since the normative world against which the curse defines itself is a human one (Dronke, 1962, 258; Lönnroth, 1977, 171).

The curse will also bring about excessive and frustrated sexual desire: 'Tópi ok ópi / típsull ok óþoli' (29¹⁻²). The recognition of the existence of female desire is in striking contrast to those Greek narrative types found, for example, in Ovid's Metamorphoses where the consequence for the woman who resists the god is metamorphosis and frigidity, abnegation of her sexual nature, not its magnification. Only

twentieth-century re-interpretation notices Daphne's sexual frustration:

Too late
to wish that I had not run from you, Apollo,
blood moves still in my bark-bound veins ...
I build the air with the crown of honor; it keys
my out of time and luckless appetite. (Sexton, 1981, 17-18)

Gerðr will be prevented from achieving satisfaction or fulfilment by the absence of a suitable lover. Instead of caresses, she will suffer the pinching of fiends (30¹);⁵ Skírnir makes her deprivation explicit:

þú skalt hverian dag	every day you shall
kranga kosta laus,	creep without a choice
kranga kosta vǫn;	creep without hope of choice. (30 ⁵⁻⁷)

The multiplicity of meanings for *køstr*: choice, opportunity, sexual partner, condition (Fritzner) emphasises the constraints to which Gerðr will be subjected: she will neither have a lover nor any choice or hope of one. Again her previous autonomy, the sexual choice which she used to have, is exchanged for a lack.

Related to, indeed cause of, Gerðr's sexual frustration is the husband who will be provided for her, a physically unattractive 'þursi þríhögðuðóm'. Although we might logically expect, with Reichardt (1939), that Gerðr should feel herself racially akin to such beings, the assumptions of the poem, as we have seen above, link her to the human world, where it is the 'gumna synir' who are desirable.

Not only is the husband ugly, he also has no social rank – and it is the man's status which defines that of the woman who belongs to him. Gerðr's new position is characterised by lowliness and marginalization – at the edge of the world, on the eagles' tussock (27¹⁻³), she will sit below all other beings, at the roots of the tree, 'fyr nágrindr neðan' (35³). That potent signifier of a gracious life in hall, the mead which Gerðr first offers Skírnir in 16¹⁻³, is transformed into goats' urine, the antitype of the divine mead which the goat Heiðrún provides for the gods. Just as Gerðr will lose her autonomy as sexual being, her *køstr*, so she will lose her social status as mead-providing lady in hall. Her *munr* for a different drink becomes irrelevant, overridden by Skírnir's *munr*:

œðri drykkio	no better drink
fá þú aldregi,	shall you ever get,
mær, at þínom munom	girl, at your desire
mær, at mínom munom.	girl, at my desire. (35 ⁹⁻¹⁰)

The gods, the collective patriarchal powers Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr, will be furiously angry with Gerðr. Far from being a 'good girl', colluding with male wishes, Gerðr's resistance marks her as an 'uppity woman', literally an anathema to patriarchal society. She is condemned, as we have seen, to be marginalized, disempowered, victimized, both sexualised and desexualised; a familiar range of strategies for keeping women in their place.

What Women Want: Gerðr's *munr*

When J. Lacan bemoans: 'I beg them on my knees to tell me what they want and they tell me nothing', why does he not hear what is at issue here? It is because he situates himself in the functioning of language and of desire in which women cannot say anything, and in which he cannot hear them, even if they were to begin to speak to him. what limits him is his phallogocentric power: he cannot bear that someone else speaks anything but his truth as he describes it. And it is up to him describe what is the pleasure of the woman, not a woman! (Irigaray, 1977, cited from Cameron, 1990, 91).

Gerðr does not tell us what she wants; her responses to Skírnir are limited to refusals and capitulation, and there are no words for her to express her desire in this male-constituted discourse.⁶ From the terms of the curse, from its 'gaps and absences' we do learn what it is that women want, what, in the socio-historical context of Skírnismál, constitutes female desire.

By showing what women, be they giant or human, do not want, the curse allows us to construct an understanding of what is wanted – the converse, not simply the absence, of the elements of the curse. As the Wife of Bath tells us, both explicitly and through the subtextual in her monologue, women desire autonomy over their bodies and their lives, recognition of their own sexual desire, choice in the matter of sexual partner, social valuation and approval. That these desires should be mediated through patriarchal structures is unavoidable; to use Shirley and Edwin Ardener's terminology,⁷ the 'muted' group – 'usually women ... where sexual polarity is pertinent' (Ardener, 1978, 20) – may only speak through the 'dominant' mode. Nevertheless, the fact that the text is 'ideologically forbidden' to speak of what Gerðr herself wants suggests that the repressed, the voice of the 'muted' is encoded here and can be recuperated.

I am aware that my interpretation is necessarily refracted through my own ideological predilections and understanding of patriarchy as I have experienced it, but, as I shall show, the meanings of the curse and its 'gaps and absences' are not present simply in the twentieth-century feminist reader's response, but can be apprehended elsewhere in Norse literature, both in the Family Sagas, with their pretensions towards mimesis⁸ and in other texts. Some examples are briefly delineated below.

Njáls Saga furnishes several women whose behaviour shows awareness of the desires suggested above. Þórhildr skáldkona immediately recognises the significance of the male gaze when she catches her husband, Þráinn Sigfússon, staring 'starsynn' at Þorgerðr, Hallgerðr's daughter at Hallgerðr's wedding-feast; her 'kviðling' focusses explicitly on the stare as signifier of sexual desire. (Njáls Saga 34). The recognition that women are themselves capable of sexual desire is made explicit in ch. 7 when Unnr's marriage to Hrútr founders on the impossibility of his satisfying her sexually: 'Hann má ekki hjúskaparfar eiga við mik, svá at ek mega njóta hans', a reason for marital breakdown which her father readily accepts. Hrútr's gigantic tumescence has been wished upon him by Queen Gunnhildr who is consistently represented as taking the sexual initiative with handsome, younger men.

Although women often reject wooers on grounds of insufficient birth or reputation, in at least one case the physical attractions of the bridegroom are emphasised. Skaði comes to Asgarðr seeking compensation for the death of her father by acquiring a husband; only Baldr will do, but when she chooses on the basis of radiantly beautiful feet: 'þeNa kys ec, fatt mæn liott aBaldrí' (Jónsson, 214), she finds she has chosen Njprðr instead. This time marital breakdown occurs because of the incompatibility of the couple's favoured ways of living, but Snorri's narratives in both Skáldskaparmál and Gylfaginning suggest that the match, contracted despite Skaði's disappointment and at considerable risk to Loki's testicles, was doomed from the start.

Women vexed beyond measure because they are denied social status abound in the sagas: representative is Bergþóra's eviction of Hallgerðr from the high-seat in Njáls Saga 35 and the quarrel between Guðrún and Hrefna, symbolised by the contentious headdress in Laxdæla 46. Though such quarrels over precedence may seem petty, where a woman's social existence is defined only by such tokens they become as crucial to the woman's sense of herself as 'honour' does to a man.

Although nowhere set out as a manifesto of 'what women want' - for such a statement is impossible where women have no voice -, these constituent elements of female desire can be seen to inform a variety of narratives, both mimetic and didactic in their intention.

Where does this leave Gerðr? She decides to meet Freyr in the grove of Barri; no doubt Skírnir's threatening posture and the horrifying images proposed by the curse are partially responsible for her change of heart. Her interchange with Skírnir, framed by the offering of, and eventual pouring of mead, in 16¹⁻³ and 37¹⁻³, has made clear to Gerðr how the world really works. Skírnismál, it must be stressed, is not about movement from a pre- or non-patriarchal state into patriarchal enslavement, for Gerðr, unwittingly, has always been enclosed in the

patriarchal system. Her gold is her father's and she lives in his hall, even if he is never actually present in the text; a significant absence which perhaps has fed Gerðr's delusions of autonomy, an autonomy which is signified by the mead denoting her status as independent lady in the hall. Now both the fundamental premises of patriarchy and the exact latitude allowed to women's *munr* within that system have been laid bare, Gerðr may finally pour out the mead for Skírnir, but she does so to seal the subordination of her *munr* to Freyr's *munr* and his.

Yet, paradoxically, the curse recognises what women do want - intimacy with a lover, social standing, autonomy and choice - desires springing from the woman's sense of herself as subject; all these things are to be achieved only through being a good girl, through co-operating with the patriarchal plan. Gerðr's final choice is - like all women's - circumscribed by her existence in a patriarchal culture.

Writing about Penelope, a woman who successfully resists sexual coercion, Carolyn Heilbrun notes:

The old female plot provides security, social sanction, and, at the time, it matters most, the tremendous ego satisfaction of becoming an object of male desire. But to become the subject of one's own life is not only harder, it has all the qualities of that nightmare condition: finding oneself upon a stage, required to play a violin, an instrument one has not previously encountered ... 'Is our only choice Penelope's: to fend off the wiles of seduction, or to succumb?' (Heilbrun, 1990, 110)

Gerðr is not making a new female plot here; she is fully inscribed within the institutions of patriarchy, and there is no other choice for her to obtain what women desire than to allow her *munr* and that of Freyr to coincide. In the end, she can answer in any way that she likes, as long as she says 'the female word yes.' (Joyce, 1975, 285)

¹ See primarily Lönnroth, 1977; Mitchell, 1983.

² Epitomised by Susan Koppeiman Cornillon (ed.) 1972, criticised at length in Moi 1985, 42-50.

³ Compare, as does Dronke, 1962, 250-51, Rinda in Saxo and Billings mey in Hávamál 96-102.

⁴ Noted by Dronke, 1962, 256.

⁵ Not rape by ogres, as Paul Bibire, 1986, 32 glosses this line.

⁶ See Moi's important article (1986) for a lucid analysis of male and female roles and discourses in Andreas Capellanus.

⁷ Set out most clearly in Ardener, 1975.

⁸ For the ideological in the representation of women in the Family Sagas, see Frank, 1973; Jochens, 1980, 1986 a and b; and, most recently, Clover 1990.

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