THE POETS AND THE GODDESS

Lotte Motz

This paper wishes to point to a way in which certain story patterns of Germanic tradition were changed when they were employed in variant Scandinavian genres. I relate the difference in treatment of the themes to the difference in the audience to which they were addressed.

Eddic poetry, as we know, contains the so-called mythical and the so-called heroic poems, the former treating the adventures of the gods and the latter the adventures of human heroes. While both kinds were collected within one body and while both belong to Germanic tradition even a superficial perusal shows great differences in their outlook and their value system.

While the heroic poetry is grave and tragic, informed by high seriousness, the myths are often farcical. The tales of human heroes lay stress on the nobility of men, on their stand in the face of disaster, and their lives often end in untimely death. The poems of the gods lay stress on defeating an opponent and the aim is survival; the gods, moreover, are not squeamish in their means. We also find, on a closer examination, that very similar figures are treated in a different way. In the myth the god invariably humiliates his opponent, while in the human environment the humiliated creature seeks revenge. The dwarf-smith-craftsman Allvíss is defeated by Þórr in the myth, and the smith-magician Völundr, attacked and subjugated, takes vengeance on a human king. A giant always is outwitted and undone by a god, but the giantesses Menja and Fenja, ultimately triumph over their tormentor. Both Gerðr and Brynhildr are wrested from their flame-ringed enclosure. Gerðr ultimately submits in meekness to the god. While Brynhildr shatters and destroys the man.

The difference in treatment is especially striking in the figures of the women, the wives, brides, and mothers of the gods, and the wives, mothers and brides of human heroes. I will concentrate on this phenomenon and suggests an explanation. I will also include some prose accounts of Snorri's Edda in my delineation.

Three main types of women emerge through the examination of heroic poetry: that of a maiden who was wronged and violated (Brynhildr), that of a woman deeply embedded in her family, sometimes as its victim, and at times as its defender (Guðrún), and that of a warrior's superhuman bride and inspiration (Sváva-Sigrún), who must also suffer the sorrows of a human woman. These women match the heroic stature of the men by giving what they love the most to satisfy the demands of honor. Some minor characters are helpless victims of their fate; the others are of towering effectiveness and valor. It is through them that the action of the story is set

in motion and propelled. No woman is accused of cowardice or lack of chastity.

Let us now turn to the goddesses. They have no share in the creation of the protection of the cosmos and their help is not demanded in the final battle. Frig and Freyja are supposedly the 'noblest' of the female deities, yet they are shown, above all, in their impotence. Freyja wanders through the landscape, unable to find a husband who has left her, and Frigg seeking to protect her child, is unable to save her son from death. Idunn is the owner of a precious gift, the apples through which the Aesir keep their youth. She, in her turn, is inept in guarding her possession, lured by Loki into a forest, captured by a giant, and brought back only through another of Loki's tricks.

Freyja surely is the most important of the female godheads; she is casually promised to a giant for the building of a stronghold (though later the decision is regretted); and it is suggested that she give herself in marriage to a giant so that Þórr may regain his hammer.

Let us now turn from their position to their character. They are frequently pictured in their lust. Freyja, so it is asserted by Loki, lay with each one of the Aesir and the Elves. Gefion received a jewel from a lad about whom she had wound her thighs. Frigg slept adulterously with her husband's brothers; and Idunn slept with her brother's slayer.

Skadi, who became a goddess though she was of giant origin, came to the household of the Aesir to avenge her father's death. She was easily deflected from her purpose and her sorrow by the promise of a husband from among the Aesir and by the coarseness of a ribald jest.

Two creatures only are shown as models of devotion and of love: Baldr's wife who died of grief when she saw her husband's lifeless body, and Loki's wife who followed him to the grim place of his captivity.

What is left to the other goddesses, devoid of power and of moral stature, is their physical loveliness, as that of Sif, the golden-haired, and of Freyja 'beautiful in tears'.

We shall now compare some specific instances.
The shieldmaiden is common to both genres, the tales of gods and the tales of men. Sigrun and Brynhildr are drawn as creatures of great dignity, powerful in their protection, terrible in their wrath, unswerving in their loyalty. Skadi of myth also is a woman bearing arms, for she hunts with bow and arrows in the snow-covered landscape of the North. She arrived in full armor in the gods' dwelling to avenge her father's death. She was easily persuaded to desist by the promise of a husband. Allowed to see her feet she chose Njördr whom she didn't want, thinking

he was Baldr. She accepted the disappointment, but she stipulated that she be made to laugh. This was accomplished, as we know, when Loki tied his scrotum to a goat's beard, and when he later fell on Skadi's 'knees'.

Truly the tale is farcical and coarse. Skadi is tricked, like Brynhildr, into marrying a man she does not want. She was intent on vengeance, like Brynhildr; but unlike her, she forgot her sorrow and her purpose at the prospect of 'social advancement' and of sexual gratification. We may compare Brynhildr's harsh laughter when the bloody deed is done with Skadi's laughter at the sight of Loki's genitals. Let us compare Brynhildr's proud withdrawal from caresses, her refusal to have 'two husbands in one hall' with Skadi's acceptance of bodily contact from one who was involved in the murder of her father. The tale surely shows, among other things, that a woman bearing arms is vilified and mocked in Eddic myth.

Let us point to the different ways in which the hero Sigurðr and the god Óðinn gain a precious gift. Sigurðr awakens the sleeping Sigrdrífa and accepts from her in respect and gratitude a mead of horn and her instructions in magic runes. Óðinn, wanting to obtain the drink of wisdom and of inspiration, forces his way through rock and stone to the place where the mead is guarded by a giant's daughter. For three nights he shares the bed of the young woman, and she allows him, she being grateful, three sips of the draught. He gulps it all in three giant swallows, and he escapes, leaving her to weep. It is also said that he betrayed her father. The maiden, as it seems overwhelmed by Óðinn's virility, showed herself as inept in guarding the mead, as Iðunn was in guarding her apples.

I shall now attempt to find an explanation for the difference in the treatment of the women.

A national mythology and religion arise when various components of belief are gathered together to form a whole. Divinities of local cults, gods of conquered nations, spirits that came from abroad through immigration or trading contacts become united in an extended family which shares a dwelling in lesser or greater harmony. The blending is never perfect or complete, and curious shapes and relationships may be created. Óðinn and Þorr, father and son, are of a very different kind. Each might have been the chief god of his group. Freyja and Frigg are almost parallel divinities. Each might have been the great female goddess of her tribe.

The systems are created by the intellectuals of their society, the poets, philosophers or priests. We know that in Greece it was Homer and Hesiod, above all, who shaped a pantheon from a bewildering crowd of spirits. In the realm of the Germanic nations we find no strong class of priests in the periods of which we have some knowledge. We are very much aware, however, of the importance and the high social standing of the poets, for these performed significant tasks in the shaping of Germanic society.

Charms were chanted to overcome danger and affliction; by composing a slanderous song an enemy could be defeated. Through a poem of praise the memory of a king or leader was retained. Songs and poetry preserved the history of the tribe. Poetry was recited to rouse warriors to deeds of glory. Tacitus reports that the 'deeds of Hercules' would be recited before a battle. The Bjarkamál was sung when the warriors of St. Olaf met their enemy. The poems, gathered in the Edda, enshrine and record the adventures of the gods. We cannot doubt that the poets, both, expressed and shaped the ethos of their time.

The Germanic poets, as we know them, were frequently attached to a king's court, as part of his retinue, those chosen men who received food, drink, and weapons from their Lord and who repaid his generosity with their bravery in battle and their loyalty in peace. The poem of Beowulf, among others, transmits the picture of such a group, the king's chosen fighters, as they feast in Hrothgar's hall, and as they listen to the poet's song.

We may understand that the court poet's creation was meant to please, inspire, and glorify the way of life of professional warriors, who were frequently unmarried and landless men. And this consideration may shed light on the image of women in Germanic myth. Women had no function in the life of soldiers who did not fight for family and home, but for glory and for gold. Men as these, not bound in loyalty to women they left behind, but to their companions and their king, would focus their emotions on the friendships and the entertainement of the hall.

The noble women of their nation were to them as decorative, unattainable, and marginal to their serious pursuits of life, as Queen Waeltheow who poured the brimming cups in Hrothgar's hall. More exciting were the women of the enemy, for these might be subjugated and possessed. The Eddic poem For scirnis indeed describes the subjugation of Gerdr, who is beautiful and of the race of giants with whom the Aesir are at war. The manipulation of Skadi, named the 'shining bride of the gods', has already been discussed.

To roving adventurers women would represent the challenge and the sport, like gold, the prize to be gained in the 'storm of arrows', the exhilarating game of waging war. Ódinn speaks recurrently of the wenches he has had in foreign parts.

> ...five full years I stayed
> on an island, name of Algroen, there was much to do
> battles to fight and men to kill
> plenty to learn and girls to taste.

He gave pleasure to a 'linenwhite' and 'gold bright' maiden while he was abroad, and at one time he had seven sisters for his fun, for he knows the charms by which 'white-armed women ' may be brought to bed.

It must be through the, probably wishful, eyes of roving warriors that women are shown as helpless victims of their desire before the splendors of male potency: Gunnlöð giving up the mead, as she lies in Óðinn's arms, and Skaði immediately pliant at the sight of the glorious gods, the Ásynjur slipping easily and frequently into men's beds.

It may also be the soldier's outlook which accounts for the coarseness of some scenes. We may imagine the sound of laughter above the cups at Freyja's farting when she was caught in an embrace, or at the picture of Gefion with her thighs around a lad.

It has recently been pointed out that, inversely, among the skaldic poets of the Hlaðir Jarls, the subjugation of a land is pictured in the image of sexual surrender. Folke Ström states: "repeatedly the subjugated land is pictured as a woman in the conqueror's embrace".

We may recognise the bias of skaldic poets also in their handling of some heroic story matter. They were acquainted with the tales of the Sigurðr cycle. All but ignoring the acts of women the poets placed their stress on the deeds of men. Of the one hundred and sixteen references to the tales only four relate to the heroic women. The accomplishments of Sigurðr find especial resonance in the metaphors. Gold is frequently paraphrased as 'the burden of Grani', or as 'Fáfnir's bed'. If we relied on the skaldic images alone we would think that the women hardly mattered in the plots.

Some such selective fashioning might have taken place when the stories of the gods were recited in the royal courts. We must not forget, however, that local cults and archaic notions do not disappear when new systems and concepts are created. And potent women of Germanic faith, who do not share the dwellings of the Aesir, might have been worshipped on the farmsteads and the cots which lay distant from the royal hall.

Let us now turn to the group to which the poems of human heroes might have been directed.

These poems clearly bear imprints of a very different kind. Sigurðr's slaying the dragon, acquiring wisdom from a superhuman woman, and entering upon marriage, as well as Helgi's setting out on the path to brave and glorious deeds belong with the scenario of boys growing into manhood, the valkyrie's release from enchantment and her marriage, to a girl's entering the world of adult women. The sorrows of the heroines reflect the emotions experienced so frequently by the wives and mothers of warlike men. The forceful role of the avenging and inciting woman finds a parallel in those societies in which blood vengeance is enacted.

We may conclude that the themes of heroic poetry did not take shape within a special class but in the whole of the community,

a community, moreover, in which the honor of the family must be restored by bloody vengeance (as in the Lay of Hamdir). The enactment of the blood feud points to the preservation of some aspects of the kinship system. In such a system the family wreaks vengeance or exacts compensation for violence suffered by members of its group, and it also accepts responsibility for their crimes. The laws concerning wergild, recorded in codes of the Middle Ages, testify to the presence of the system, though it had greatly weakened by medieval time.

If it was the family to which loyalty was primarily accorded then the fight within a family or between families is the stuff of which the tragic conflicts, remembered in song or tale, are created. The poignant situation of the woman is that in which she stands between two families, in which husband and brothers deal deadly blows to one another, as it happens in the life of the Eddic heroines. The variation in the woman's loyalty, sometimes given to her husband, sometimes to her cognate family, might reflect the confusion of loyalties which came with the disintegration of the kinship group.

Some of the heroic poems bear the imprint of yet another environment. In archaic communities the lives of women run separately from the lives of men. Women possess their own rituals, their own social traditions, and their own gods. These are special to their needs, concerned, above all, with the functions of childbearing and caring for the young. Some heroic poems exhibit aspects which belong with the special sphere of women.

Deities of childbirth are named by Sigrdrífa. She has told Sigurðr of the runes which must be cut to help a woman in travail, and then, she says, one must await the dísir. Sigurðr also learned from the dying dragon that through the Norns a mother is 'separated' from her child. Healing runes, of use to those who tend the young, also are revealed by Sigrdrífa, while a charm of how to get a woman into bed, as it was known to Óðinn, significantly are not named by the Valkyrie.

The poems are fully expressive of women's emotions: the bitterness of a girl who has been deserted and betrayed, the bereavement of a widow, the pain of departing to an unloved husband in an alien land, the loneliness of the mother who lost her child, the driving passion to restore the honor of the family.

In some poems only women's voices are sounded. Others picture women's social traditions: Oddrún relates her woes after she has helped in the delivery of a child. Women assemble around Guðrún to console her in her grief.

A number of the lays thus belong less to the community at large than to the special sphere of women. It has been suggested in this paper that the tales of myth were conditioned by the warriors of a king; it is further suggested that the tales of human heroes frequently took shape and were narrated in places where women gather

for their garments, [illegible] flax, or weaving cloth, or helping at the time of birth.

In Eddic poetry the tales of women are interwoven with the tales of men: i.e, Sigurðr's slaying a dragon, or Hörli's and Hamðir's death. It may be this blending of women's emotions and men's deeds, of courage and of pain which gave these stories their enduring appeal.

The difference in the treatment of women of heroic poetry and of the myths has been traced in this paper to a difference in the surroundings in which the story themes of each genre had developed, one shaped and styled by the community the other by the royal courts.

We do not know why the communal versions were preserved in the heroic tales and were forgotten in the myths. But we may assume that outside of Eddic myth there were goddesses who were as powerful, loyal, and effective, as the women of the heroic lays.