

**K**laus von See, Beatrice La Farge, Eve Picard, and Maria-Claudia Heß. *“Skírnismál”*: *Modell eines Edda-Kommentars*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1993. 101 pages.

A group of scholars headed by Professor von See (Frankfurt University) has undertaken an ambitious project, namely, to bring out a new detailed commentary of the Elder Edda. Detter-Heinzel's and Gering-Sijmons's explications are partly outdated, so the Frankfurt initiative deserves the support of everyone interested in Old Norse literature. The idea of updating Gering-Sijmons on selected lays has occurred to a number of people since 1927–31. The authors mention Ursula Dronke's *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1, *Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) that was never followed by a volume 2, David A. H. Evans's *Hávamál*, Text Series 7 (Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986), and Tim William Machan's *Vafþrúðnismál*, Durham Medieval Texts 6 (Cambridge 1988). In the commentary, there is a brief reference to Maria Elena Ruggeneri's edition of *Lokasenna* (*La invettive di Loki*, Testi e studi di filologia 2 [Roma: Il Calamo, 1979]). One can add to this list Carla del Zotto's *Hymiskvidha e la pesca di Thórr nella tradizione nordica*, Testi e studi di filologia 1 (Roma: Il Calamo, 1979), Bernard Kummer's *Die Lieder des Codex regius (Edda) und verwandte Denkmäler*, vol. 1, *Mythische Dichtung, erster Teil: Die Schau der Seherin (Völuspá)*, vol. 2, *Helendichtung, erster Teil: Die Dichtung von Helgi und der Walküre* (Zeven: Gisela Lienau, 1959–61), and Ólafur Briem's unpretentious but convenient edition of all the poems (*Eddukvæði*, Íslenzk úrvalsrit 5 [Reykjavík: Skálholt, 1968]).

*“Skírnismál”*: *Modell eines Edda-Kommentars* is a trial volume designed to show how the four-volume commentary will be organized. It consists of an introduction in which the objectives of the project are laid out (5–18), a list of abbreviations, a general bibliography (close to fifty primary and three hundred secondary sources, 24–34), an article on *Skírnismál* (35–49), and the com-

mentary (50–101). The article on *Skírnismál* (“Einleitungskommentar”) contains the following ten rubrics, to be used throughout the commentary: (1) “Bibliographie” [a special bibliography for *Skírnismál*], (2) “Überlieferungszustand” [the manuscripts], (3) “Forschungsgeschichte” [the state of the art], (4) “Stoffgeschichte und literarisches Nachleben” [history and later reworkings of the plot], (5) “Gedankliche Konzeption” [plot concepts], (6) “Komposition” [composition], (7) “Strophen- und Versform” [the strophic makeup and meter], (8) “Wortschatz und stilistische Eigentümlichkeiten” [vocabulary and stylistic peculiarities], (9) “Literaturgeschichtliche Standortbestimmung” [the literary-historical background], (10) “Datierung” [dating]. Sections 2 and 10 are brief; the others are from one to three pages long. Although the authors' goal is not to produce a variorum edition of the Edda, they summarize and evaluate all the reasonable ideas on the text and its history. The book is characterized by an excellent knowledge of the subject, the subdued, courteous tone of the polemic, and a skillful maneuvering between the authors' and other people's opinions.

Numerous references to post-1927–31 sources are the best proof of how necessary a new comprehensive commentary of the Elder Edda is, and yet the ointment with which I am only too happy to present the authors is not without a small fly. A glance at the research done on *Skírnismál* in the last sixty odd years will show that the quality of this research is hardly commensurate to its bulk. Most of what has recently been said about the dating, vocabulary, etc., of *Skírnismál* was in principle known to Gering-Sijmons and even to Detter-Heinzel. It seems that an encyclopedic philological work written at the end of the twentieth century should give more prominence to the aspects of scholarship peculiar to our time, indeed not to the trendy approaches or jargon that may not (let us hope: will not) survive their creators, but to the new expectations with which we open a medieval text.

One can test our achievements in a simple way. If August Schleicher, Eduard Sievers, and Sophus Bugge came alive, what could we tell them that would be eye-opening news to them? We would be able to

explain the difficulties of recognizing the *Stammbaum* to Schleicher; Sievers would have to adopt a functional view of speech sounds, and Bugge would learn that medieval literature is not only “antiquities” but also art. I find it regrettable that sections 6 and 8 of the “Einleitungskommentar” are so uninspiring and dry. It would be most interesting to read a thorough analysis of Skírnir’s rhetoric and of the obscure words occurring in his monologue (of their semantics and emotional character, not only etymology: curses always contain frightening, unintelligible words and formulas like *tópi ok ópi*). Many details are mentioned in the commentary (“Stellenkommentar”), but they are lost among other miscellaneous items. Consider the use of *hrím* in this poem: the giant who will torment Gerðr is called Hrímnir (28.3), Hrímgrímnir will be her spouse or jailer in the kingdom of the dead (35.1), and hrímþursir are invoked as witnesses to Skírnir’s curse (34.2). When Gerðr gives in, Skírnir is offered a *hrímkálki* full of mead (37.2). The authors note the *hrím*-motif (just as they note the persistent use of *munr* ‘desire’), but stay away from discussing the artistry of the poem: they are satisfied with “stylistic peculiarities.” A few stray remarks on the commentary are offered below for what they are worth.

P. 40. In the section “Stoffgeschichte und literarisches Nachleben,” the Icelandic periodical *Skírnir* conceived as a *cursor mundi* could perhaps have been mentioned.

*Skm.* 3.2 (52). In the authors’ opinion, *fólkvaldi goða* as a form of address does not tell us anything about Freyr’s position among the gods and should be taken as an attempt to improve Freyr’s spirits. Seeing that Freyr usurps so many of Óðinn’s functions in *Skírnismál* (cf. p. 47, c), the dismissal of *fólkvaldi goða* as a meaningless compliment does not carry conviction, and the phrase cited as another expression of fulsome flattery (“beztr allra ballriða ása gørdom í”) is not “parallel”: to call a person the best, the wisest, the bravest, or the most beautiful (all these forms being elatives rather than superlatives) is not the same as to address him as Generalissimus.

*Skm.* 3.4–5 (52–53). In connection with the form *sali* (see also 14.3: “rønnom í,”

p. 65, and 17.6: “salkynni,” p. 68), the authors discuss the stylistic function of the plural. But such plurals were lexicalized very early in Germanic, as evidenced, among other things, by *hús* (pl.) in the meaning of ‘farmstead’ (= all the buildings on a farm). Centuries later, it is still natural to speak about Kew Gardens and Hollywood Studios. We go to the pictures/movies (for which there is some justification in the technology of film production) and to the woods (= forest), come off with flying colors, etc. In Icelandic, with its numerous words like *jól* (n.pl.), the line between the singular and the plural was (is) even more blurred than in the rest of Germanic, so it is better not to say that the plural *sali* in “hví þú einn sitr ennlanga sali” emphasizes Freyr’s solitude.

*Skm.* 10.3–4 and 10 prose (60–61). In the telegraphese of our etymological dictionaries, one often runs into curt dismissals: Walde, Feist, and Jan de Vries would cite an opinion they do not like and kill it with the peremptory *abzulehnen*. Against the background of the unhurried discussion characteristic of this book, such unsubstantiated verdicts sound like dissonances. The use of *galdralag* in 10.3–4 is a problem the authors cannot solve. Lönnroth suggested that 10.3–4 were part of a magical formula; he is criticized for “probably having gone too far.” One expects counterarguments, but none are offered. Short shrift is also given to Phillipotts’s idea that Skírnir rides over the wall of fire because he could not pass by the dogs. Phillipotts may have been wrong, but some refutation would have been in order.

*Skm.* 13.1–3 (62–63). “Kostir ro betri, heldr enn (at) klökkva sé, hveim er fúss er fara” [A resolute man (literally, a man ready to set out) knows better than to whimper]. The authors suggest that Skírnir quotes a proverb, though no such proverb has been found. More likely, we have here a variant of the poetic formula: “It is better for an [epithet] man to act than to mourn,” cf. *Beowulf* 1384b–85: “Sēlra bið æghwæm, þæt hē his frēond wrece, þonne hē fela murne” [It is better to avenge a friend than to lament long].

*Skm.* 16.4–6 (66–67). The authors are most probably right in stating that the shepherd was not killed by Skírnir. In such

scenes, the shepherd (or guard) is never the target of the protagonist's wrath. Even Loki does not kill Eldir, and the murder of Fimafeng is unmotivated. Incidentally, the social status of the guard varies depending on the work's genre: it is low in myth but high in heroic poetry (Wulfgar in *Beowulf*).

More problematic is the use of *bróðurbani*. Gerðr invites the messenger in, even though she fears that her *bróðurbani* has arrived. Nothing is known about Freyr's (let alone Skírnir's) successful attempt on Gerðr's brother, so this line has given rise to endless speculations. The authors cut the Gordian knot by suggesting that *bróðurbani* meant 'mortal enemy' and that the passages in which it occurs do not contain reference to any actual events. This is an ingenious solution borrowed, without acknowledging the source, from Cleasby-Vigfusson (see *bróðir* and their gloss 'deadly foe'), but some difficulties remain. In *Beowulf* 587 ("þeah ðū þīnum bróðrum tō banan wurde"), all the words are used in their literal sense, and *Beowulf* predicts that the fratricide Unferth will burn in hell (see also line 1187).

At a certain stage, *bróðurbani* must have meant 'brother's murderer'. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that some ancient practice was no longer understood in medieval England and Scandinavia (cf. Ursula Dronke's article in *Tolkien Studies* referred to on p. 66). Such situations are not uncommon. In ritual, a virgin is sacrificed to a totemic animal, but in epic poetry the monster is killed by the hero: people know the tale ("Beauty and the Beast"), wonder at it, and rescue the victim who was allowed to perish as long as the ritual retained its religious significance. A thousand years ago, there must have remained a lingering memory of unpunished fratricide (assuming that *bróðir* is 'brother' and not a generic term for 'kinsman') among the Teutons. They disapproved of what they could only view as a heinous crime but did not reshape the traditional motif. Returning to *Skírnismál*, we must admit that some "kinsman slaying" by the gods could indeed have happened: consider the Þjazi-Skaði myth.

*Skm.* 27.1–2 (75–76). Whatever the connection between eagles and the tussock (*ara þúfa*) on which Gerðr is doomed to sit if she

does not succumb to Freyr, there could have been a custom of exposing girls on a grassy hillock, in the middle of a swamp. In a nursery rhyme known throughout the English-speaking world, "Little Miss Muffet / sat on a tuffet / eating of curds and whey; / there came a big spider, / who sat down beside her / and frightened Miss Muffet away." The etymology of *tuffet* is obscure, but *tuffet* and *þúfa* are probably related and designate the same object. Nothing good happened to females who were put on a "tuffet."

*Skm.* 36.1–2 (89–91). Here the problem is the enigmatic line "Þurs rist ek þér ok þriá stafi." The authors lean to the conclusion that Skírnir carved the rune *þurs* three times. But did he not first and foremost show Gerðr a picture of the three-headed *þurs* with whom she would henceforward spend her days (31.1–2: "Með þursi þríhöfðoðom þú skalt æ nara"), that is, the rune *þ* with some embellishments?

*Skm.* 37.4–6 (94). It seems that the authors did not do full justice to stanza 37, in which Gerðr declares that she has given up and will comply with Freyr's wishes. Gerðr's response comes as a complete surprise. Equally surprising are stanzas 25–36. Most eddic poems are composed in dialogue form, and a soliloquy consisting of twelve stanzas incorporated into a drama has no analogues. One would expect something like: Skírnir: "For ever and ever will you dwell with a three-headed monster, you, husbandless hussy! May your juices run dry and your grief multiply! Be like a useless thistle thrown onto a heap of grain!" Gerðr: "May three-headed monsters seize you on your way home! Three times nine do I curse you and your master. Speak not of thistles: each of my kinsmen is like a noble leek in a field full of weeds, etc." In other words, one could expect a *senna*, but Gerðr is completely silent while Skírnir promises to kill her father with Freyr's magical sword (cf. *málfár* [25.2] and the *brogdenmæl* [damascened] sword in *Beowulf*), to tame her with a wand used for just such purposes, and to banish her from the sight of men, to the kingdom of the dead, where food and sexual intercourse will become a detestation and loathsome giants will torture her. He promises her many other punishments, but there is no escalation of

horror. Although a bully, Skírnir is not a great orator. He even rambles a bit. In stanza 26, he threatens Gerðr with a taming wand, and in stanza 32 he describes going to the forest to cut a wand endowed with magical properties. Why does he need a second one? Gerðr could have broken down at any moment, but, well-versed in the art of verbal abuse, the poet allows Skírnir to deplete his whole word-hoard.

The authors look upon *Skírnismál* as a variation on the theme “Taming of the Shrew.” However, the similarity between *Skírnismál* and “King Thrushbeard” (the Grimms’ “König Drosselbart”) is not as significant as it seems. Gerðr is an “unwilling (reluctant) bride” of Brünhild’s type. Such a bride (a heroic maiden) is usually won by a male who can prove his worth, and once she is overcome, she turns into a faithful wife. If she is duped, tragic events follow, as is known from the *Nibelungenlied*. The shrew is opposed to marriage unconditionally and has to be coerced into accepting a husband. *Skírnismál* is an unnatural (and rather inept) blend of both plots: winning a heroic maiden and taming the shrew, a blend that could appeal only to people with “decadent” tastes. This mixture of genres is a decisive factor for the late dating of the poem. *Skírnismál* fails as a myth (that is, as a charter hallowing the existing practices), for when were young women ever wooed in such a way? It fails as a piece of heroic poetry, for there is nothing heroic in forcing an unwilling bride to drink goat urine (the authors explain that goat urine is particularly humiliating), and it fails as a ballad, for a classic ballad should center on the fate of star-crossed lovers. Humorous tales (*Schwänke*) of shrews could have existed at any time, but their penetration into godlore happened late. It is no wonder that Skírnir, a character with a transparent name that fits his horse better than him (*skírna* ‘clear up, brighten up’: cf. Glitnir), appears nowhere else in the Elder Edda.

There is no reason to doubt the existence of an ancient myth about Freyr or some other god paying court to a heroic maiden (a giantess), a myth in which he proves his superiority and elicits the reply: “Never have I thought that I could love one

of the Vanir.” The authors keep repeating that the encounter between Freyr and Gerðr should be looked upon not as a *ἔρως γάμος* (see, for instance, 40–41), but only as an amorous encounter (*Stelldichein*). This conclusion is the result of some strange misunderstanding. Was Zeus “married” to any of the women with whom he slept? Was Óðinn? What kind of a marriage can one expect in a myth? In any case, Snorri says “ok níu nóttum síðar skyldi hon þar koma er Barrey heitir, ok ganga þá at brullaupinu með Frey” [and in nine days she will go to a place called Barrey and be wedded to Freyr].

The ancient kernel of the myth, wording and all, is contained in stanzas 41 and 42. The rest is a fairy tale woven around precisely a *ἔρως γάμος* (“One day a young man looked out and saw a maiden of surpassing beauty. He immediately fell in love with her, etc.”) in which a messenger uses magic to procure a bride for his master. Many popular elements occur in this tale: a journey into the otherworld, a (flying?) horse, a self-fighting sword, and so forth. From the point of view of fairy tale morphology only one thing is unusual: everything is done by the helper in the absence of the protagonist. Scholars have elucidated all the obscure points in *Skírnismál*, but they tend to take this poem too seriously. Its theme is hardly the exchange of women for peace, the position of women, the revelation of women’s desires, or the tension between matriarchy and patriarchy. *Skírnismál* is a *Schwank* developed from a myth and thickly seasoned with invocations. The juncture between stanza 36 (the end of Skírnir’s threats) and 37 (Gerðr’s sudden surrender) cannot be plastered over, and it is clear that Gerðr’s words should have been addressed to the hero, not to the messenger. The authors do not take sides while presenting the many views on the poem (37–38). Their objectivity is admirable, but one sometimes wishes that their approach were marked by more strongly pronounced individuality. However, they may not have had a clear conception of the genre and genesis of the poem; in this case, an impartial, almost dispassionate survey was the best solution.

*Skm. 39.1* (95). Gerðr tells Skírnir that she will meet Freyr in a grove called Barri.

The authors share the traditional derivation of *Barri* from *barr* ‘needle, bud’. The name, they say, refers to a mixed forest with coniferous and deciduous trees. If this is correct, a curious parallel is the name of Loki’s mother. She is *Laufey* ‘leafy island’ and *Nál* ‘needle’ (cf. the word *Nálgrund* structured like *Laufey*). Prickly needles must always have been associated with the male genitals. One of the three most obscene Russian words, *khuĩ* ‘penis’, is believed to be a cognate of Russ. *khvoja* (stress on *o* or *a*) ‘needles’ (collective). *Barri* would then be a perfect place for the lovers’ rendezvous. Meeting in a *lundr* may be a romantic motif typical of a ballad, as is pointed out in the commentary, but, on the other hand, groves are a well-known component of Germanic cults, and *Askr* and *Embla* were trees before they became human beings.

*Skm.* 39.3 (96–97). Although not without hesitation, the authors explain *lundr lognfara* as a ‘quiet, windless grove’. At the beginning of their note, they say that, except for Collinder (“Eddica,” *Nordisk tidsskrift for filologi*, 4. række 10 [1922]: 23), everybody understands *logn-* as *logn* ‘quiet, stillness’. It seems that when a reference of this type is made, the readers should not be left guessing. We are naturally curious to know the dissident opinion. *Nordisk tidsskrift for filologi* is not easily available, so a one-line summary of Collinder’s interpretation would have been welcome. Besides that, ‘windless grove’ is hardly a correct gloss: the suggested epithet is obviously “uneddic.” The order of words, even though not in a compelling way, also suggests that *lognfara* is the genitive of \**lognfari*. Collinder identified *logn-* with a word for ‘flame’, deciphered ‘flame traveller’ as *Þórr*, and the grove as a place where marriage could be consecrated. This hypothesis is rather shaky, but *lognfari* is, most likely, a kenning for some deity, perhaps Freyr himself.

*Skm.* 42.6 (99–100). Freyr’s answer is translated so: “One night is long, and two nights are long; how shall I endure three? Often has a month seemed shorter to me than this half a night of agony.” *Hýnótt* is explained as ‘thrall night’ (Finnur Jónsson’s gloss). I have no solution to this crux, but the interpretation given in the book cannot

be correct. First of all, it presupposes logical stress on the nonalliterating pronoun *siá*, which is out of the question. Secondly, it makes no sense. Freyr must be saying approximately the following: “One day is long, two days are even longer; three are unendurable. How shall I survive nine? A month has often seemed shorter to me than these nine days will.” I have replaced *night* by *day*, for, as is well known, the Teutons counted time by nights, and *nótt* has no erotic overtones in this passage.

*Hýnótt* understood as ‘wedding night’ or ‘this night’ is extremely strained (see this word in Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon’s *Íslensk orðsifjabók* [Orðabók Háskólans, 1989], and cf. OHG *hî-naht*, Modern German dialectal *hinte* ‘this past night’; strangely enough, the authors do not discuss the possibility of a pronominal *hý-*). But the variant offered in the book is equally untenable. The phrase *hálf hýnótt* must mean ‘nine nights’ and belong with time units like *misseri*. I have no idea what charms can reveal the hidden sense of *hýnótt* ‘eighteen nights’. Perhaps *hýnótt* originally designated fourteen nights (a fortnight) and *hálf hýnótt* a sennight, with *hý-* being a prefix related to *hé-* (as in *hégomi* ‘vanity’) and *hjá-* (as in *hjátrú* ‘superstition’). The problematic word in *hálf hýnótt* is not *hýnótt* but *hálf!* We do not know how long Skírnir was absent, but ‘half a night’ is nonsense. Who ever counted time by half days (nights)?

A reviewer has a temporary advantage over the author(s). By putting forward such a fanciful explanation of *hýnótt*, I have deliberately made myself vulnerable: Professor von See and his associates will now have no trouble filling my life with *tópi ok ópi* or even putting me on a tuffet. But I hope that they won’t do so, because, despite some disagreements and quibbling, this reviewer thinks highly of their work. Producing a commentary on the entire Edda is not much easier than winning a giantess. We will be waiting with impatience for the outcome of their labors, though many a *hýnótt* will pass before the last volume of their series arrives at our libraries.

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