

“What Does Woman Want?” Mær und munr in *Skírnismál**

Introduction

In recent years, *Skírnismál* has yielded some challenging readings grounded in formalist and structuralist theory (primarily Lönnroth 1977; also Harris 1975, Mitchell 1983). These have been put forward by male scholars, who, perhaps unsurprisingly, do not appear to have been troubled by the unsettling implications of the reading position which *Skírnismál* demands. For the male reader, alignment with Freyr and Skírnir as subjects is not difficult, but for the female reader this gendered reading position is more problematic. Where uneasiness in reading is 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 study will suggest some ways in which this might be done.

What sort of feminist theory though? Anglo-American feminist literary practice has usually distinguished two activities, involving woman as reader and woman as writer, or, as Elaine Showalter ([1981] 1982) 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 [1990]). “Images of Women” criticism¹ has been discredited on two counts: firstly by its excision of representations of women from the cultural and historical conditions under which the text was produced, in order to yield misleadingly “positive images.” An example of this kind of thinking, typical of Anglo-American feminist criticism in the late sixties and early seventies, would be the appropriation of the Greek myth of the Amazon, and other Rule of Women myths from a variety of different cultures, by radical feminists eager to accept these myths as evidence that there had once been functioning matriarchal societies which had been ruthlessly suppressed by patriarchal forces. They failed to consider why the

* I am grateful to the participants in the 1992 “Gender and Medieval Studies” Conference held in Cardiff for many thoughtful responses to an abbreviated form of this article.

1. Epitomized by Cornillon 1972, criticized at length in Moi 1985, 42–50.

male producers of these myths had generated them in the first place; no doubt very often to validate the patriarchal status quo by creating a mythical matriarchal stage when women had ruled ineffectively, violating taboos and oppressing men (see in particular Bamberger 1974; White 1992; Harvey 1992).

“Images of Women” criticism has also been taken to task for its universalist or essentialist insistence on an absolute one-to-one nexus between such images and “reality,” “women’s experience” (Purkiss 1992), that is, a failure to take into account the “literariness” of literature. Some recent writing on the representation of women in the sagas (Frank 1973; Jochens 1980, 1986a, 1986b, 1990) has attempted to show how ideological programs, for example the promulgation of the desirability for women’s consent in marriage, affect, though they do not completely determine, the depiction of women in sagas, undermining received ideas about the “historicism” of saga narratives. Lönnroth’s reading of *Skírnismál*, 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 *Skírnismál* by insisting on a one-to-one relationship between poem and “social phenomenon.” Against this, Paul Bibire’s article (1986) is to be welcomed for the attention it pays to the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the poem, meanings produced by different audiences at different times. The reading which I offer here then is intended to add to, not to displace, the sum of readings already available.

If neither of these critical strategies outlined above, “Images of Women” nor “gynocritics,” is appropriate, how might one approach *Skírnismál* as a feminist reader? 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 apparently “natural,” that is, the “ideological” structures which the text presents: in the case of *Skírnismál* we interrogate the deployment of a number of strategies intended to force an unwilling woman to co-operate, strategies embodied in the curse. Once these strategies have been laid bare, further meanings can be recovered through the kind of approach developed by the French critic Pierre Macherey (here summarized 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, 34–35)

From the “gaps and absences” in the text, we can retrieve that which is repressed, and which, as Juliet Mitchell (1975) points out, then returns to unsettle

the text. Since in patriarchal culture it is precisely the feminine which is silenced (Purkiss 1992), we may thus be able to recuperate some of *Skírnismál*'s meanings for *women*—firstly and crucially for the woman reader—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

I shall now summarize the plot of *Skírnismál*, aligning us as readers with Gerðr rather than, as the text invites us to do, with Skírnir: *Skírnismál* is about a woman, apparently autonomous, and with unhampered access to wealth, who is sitting at home in her hall one day when an unknown 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 violent threat to the very core of her female identity brings about her submission and she agrees to meet the importuner.

I have used the words “woman” and “man” instead of “god” and “giantess” (Skírnir’s “racial” status is unclear) to highlight the gender implications which many other readings have tended to slide over. Just as in *Lokasenna* Loki’s criticism of the goddesses’s promiscuity only makes sense if judged by human social criteria—for as a fertility goddess Freyja is surely bound to engage in a large number of sexual encounters (Larrington 1992b)—so the sexual politics of *Skírnismál* are meaningful primarily as representations of human behaviour. The normative world in this poem, against which deviations are contrasted, is the human, gendered world, not the divine one, as both Dronke (1962, 258) and Lönnroth (1977, 171) have indicated.

We also have material evidence suggesting that some of the contemporary audience of the poem would have believed that runic curses could be effectively deployed in the real world to affect women’s sexual response. Among the runic inscriptions from Bryggen, Aslak Liestøl has published one thirteenth-century text which bears a striking resemblance to the curse of *Skírnismál*. Liestøl believes that the inscription represents a genuine spell, intended to operate on a real woman (Mundal and Steinsland 1989, 112, from Liestøl 1964, 41–42). Thirteenth-century Norwegians then may well have believed that cursing an uncooperative woman “inni skæðu skag-valkyrju” [the harmful “skag”-valkyrie] with the “ergi” [sexual perversity] of the she-wolf,² and wishing “úþoli” [unbearable desire] upon her would bring about a satisfactory result. Skírnir’s strategies, it seems, were imitated in the human world at the time that *Skírnismál* was being written into the Codex Regius.

2. The she-wolf is traditionally believed to choose the lowliest male in the pack to mate with. See Chaucer’s “Manciple’s Tale” 1988, sec. 9, lines 183–86, and Bächtold-Stäubli 1942, 727–28.

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.³ Snorri suppresses the threats and curse entirely and regularizes the relationship with marriage (*Gylfaginning*; Faulkes 1988, chap. 37) and a child (*Ynglinga saga*; Aðalbjarnarson 1941, chap. 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 den för övrigt olagliga kärleksmagin för at vinna henne. Hon besegras så att säga med sin egen medecin*” (1977, 169; italics in original).⁴ I shall return to the significance of Freyr’s gaze below. Mitchell’s Lévi-Straussian identification of woman with gift (Mitchell 1983, 116–17) overlooks the fundamental difference between gift-objects and women, noticed by Norse poets and illustrated, with comic irritation, by *Hávamál* 90. Women have minds of their own:

Svá er friðr kvenna,	[So is the love of women,
þeira er flátt hyggja,	those who think falsely,
sem aki íó óbryddom	like driving a horse with unspiked hooves
á ísi hálom,	on slippery ice,
teitom, tvévetrom,	a frisky two-year-old,
ok sé tamr illa,	and badly broken-in,
eða í byr óðom	or in a raging wind,
beiti stiórnlauso,	steering a rudderless boat,
eða skyli haltr henda	or having to catch when lame
rein í þáfalli. ⁵	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.⁶

Although by the displacement of the dirty work onto Skírnir, Freyr’s status as “romantic” hero is uncompromised, so that in *Lokasenna* Týr can claim of Freyr: “mey hann né grætir / né mannz kono” [he makes no girl weep nor any man’s wife] (37.4–5), 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

3. The idea is, of course, a commonplace both of much pornographic writing and of a number of medieval texts, e.g., the Latin *Pamphilus* and the fourteenth-century lyric of Peter of Blois, collected in the Arundel lyrics. See the analysis of these texts, and references ad locum in Mann 1991, 96–99.

4. Lönnroth (personal communication, 1991) maintains that here he is tracing Skírnir’s rationale for choosing magic as a wooing method, that Lönnroth himself as author does not necessarily approve the strategy used. But that is precisely my point: the reasoning of Skírnir and the commenting voice of the male critic become indistinguishable in Lönnroth’s article, nor would a reader adopting a “normal,” i.e., male reading position need to make such a distinction.

5. All quotations from the Poetic Edda are from Helgason 1955 and 1956. Translations are my own.

6. Compare, as does Dronke 1962, 250–51, Rinda in Saxo Grammaticus 1979, 76–78 and “Billings mær” in *Hávamál* 96–102.

violent male bullying, or can we “make speak” the curse to recover further meaning which in some way resists those 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” [a man’s desire for a woman’s love], but also “hvad der tjener til at gjøre en Ting, et Forhold bedre” [that which serves to make a thing or a circumstance better] (Fritzner 1886–96, 2:751). *Munr* is repeated eight times during the course of the poem, more frequently than any other semantically charged term,⁷ and its referents are 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. When Skírnir returns, Freyr asks him whether he has achieved “þíns eða míns munar” [your desire and/or mine]: recognition that the two munir are not necessarily identical—for Skírnir’s interest is in gaining Gerðr’s submission—but that they are complementary. Gerðr’s own munr is invoked only to be thwarted by Skírnir’s (35.7–10), 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?

Joseph Harris has suggested that “the elements of the curse proper are negative transformations of the hoped-for world of the maiden” (1975, 31). Feminist analysis can make precise the notion of the “hoped-for world,” while, at the same time, warning against an over-simplistic identification of this with “female pleasure.” 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?

My analysis then has two phases: first to show how patriarchal strategies work to bring about Gerðr’s co-operation; second to illuminate what Gerðr’s own silenced munr might be, and how it can, albeit within the constraints of patriarchy, be achieved.

What Women Don’t Want

The main elements of the curse threaten Gerðr with:

- a. Being invisible (26.4–6); being a public spectacle (28)
- b. Unbearable sexual frustration (29; 34.5–8; 36.3–4)
- c. A physically repulsive husband (31.1–3)
- d. Low social status and loss of autonomy (30; 35.4–10)
- e. Male, authoritarian disapproval (33)

7. Noted by Dronke 1962, 256.

The threat that Gerðr will become a public spectacle, stared at by everything: “á þik hotvetna stari; / víðkunnari þú verðir / en vqrðr með goðom” [may everything stare at you; may you become more widely known than the watchman among the gods] (28.4–6) may be connected with recent theories of the gaze, primarily utilised in feminist fine art and film theory (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 Gerðr, is conflated with Hrímgrímnir, who will possess her sexually: “Hrímgrímnir heitir þurs / er þik hafa skal” [Hrímgrímnir is the name of the ogre who will have you] (35.1–2). Thus for Gerðr, to be stared at makes explicit her loss of autonomy; she will be unable to occupy a subject position or to control how she is looked at. She herself will only look outwards, away from the human world which she is predicated as desiring; she will “snugga heliar til” [hanker towards hell] and gape through a barred gate.

The threat that “gumna synir” [the sons of men] will never see Gerðr 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, 46–47)

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” [may everything stare at you], but by a human being, a son of men, since, as we have seen, the normative world against which the curse defines itself is a human one.

Excursus: The Gaze

The act of gazing has also been significant in the first movement of the poem, the scene in which Freyr reveals the object of his desire to Skírnir. Sitting in Hliðskjálf, perhaps illicitly, as Snorri thinks, Freyr has seen a woman walking:

armar lýsto	[her arms gleamed
en af þaðan	and from them
alt lopt ok lqgr	all the air and sea.]
(6.4–6)	

What we “view” here is not the sight which Freyr actually saw, but his image of it, which he mediates to us and to Skírnir through his words. Freyr possesses the image of Gerðr; he has

power and control over the image, which he can show to whomever he likes. He chooses to show it to Skírnir and us, but not, as the poem's first verse indicates, to Njörðr and Skaði, his anxious parents.⁸

Freyr, Skírnir, and we the audience make a fundamental error at this point, an error which arouses generic expectations, subsequently to be thwarted. For we, and Freyr and Skírnir, confuse our power over the image with power over the object it represents. Although we share the forebodings about the journey, which Skírnir confides to his horse, especially since among the set of expectations which we bring to bear on the poem is the belief that journeys to the Other World are fraught with obstacles, I suggest that we have no expectation that Gerðr will do anything other than welcome Skírnir joyfully, as Menglǫð welcomes Svipdagr in *Fjolsvinnsmál*. At last the romantic hero has come for her. These expectations are formed both by our understanding of the wooing-journey genre and by the treatment of the image in strophe six. But Gerðr will have none of it. There is a clash between subject, object, and image; Freyr's image of Gerðr as object of desire is not Gerðr's own image of herself, for she sees herself as autonomous subject and intends to continue as such. In effect, Gerðr is a kind of Menglǫð who has been reading "maiden-king romances."⁹

The second element of the curse is excessive and frustrated sexual desire: "Tópi ok ópi / tiǫsull ok ópoli" [Madness and howling, tearing affliction and unbearable desire] (29.1–2); "ergi ok æði / ok ópoli" [lewdness and frenzy and unbearable desire] (36.3–4), language strikingly paralleled in the Bryggen curse ("ylgjar ergi ok úpola"). 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. Gerðr, though unmetamorphosed, will be prevented from achieving satisfaction or fulfilment by the absence of a suitable lover. Instead of caresses, she will suffer the oppression of fiends, "Tramar gneypa þik" (30.1–2); Skírnir makes her deprivation explicit:

þú skalt hverian dag	[every day you shall
kranga kosta laus,	creep without a choice,
kranga kosta von;	creep without hope of choice.]
(30.5–7)	

The multiplicity of meanings for *kostr* 'choice, opportunity, sexual partner, condition' (Fritzner 1886–96, 2:336–38) emphasizes the constraints to which Gerðr will be subjected: unable even to stand upright, she will neither have a lover nor any choice or hope of one. Again her previous autonomy, the sexual choice which

8. Although Skaði is unlikely to be Freyr's biological mother, since *Lokasenna* 36 suggests that he is the product of a brother/sister liason, she is shown in the maternal role here, conceivably to counterpoint Gerðr's initial unwillingness to be integrated into the Vanir tribe.

9. Kalinke (1990, 207) suggests that the authors of the popular maiden-king genre might "conceivably have recalled the giantess Gerðr," although she feels that the motivation for refusal, which she defines as inequality of power, is only laid bare in the maiden-king sagas.

she used to have, and was able to exercise in her refusal of Freyr, 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 þríhöfðuðom" [three-headed ogre]. 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 already seen, 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 characterized by lowliness and marginalization: at the edge of the world, on the eagles' tussock (27.1–3), she will sit below all other beings, at the roots of the tree, "fyr nágrindr neðan" [down below the corpse-gates] (35.3). That potent signifier of a gracious life in hall, the mead which Gerðr first offers Skírnir (16.1–3), is transformed into goats' urine, the antitype of the divine mead which the goat Heiðrún provides for the gods (Harris 1975, 31–32). Just as Gerðr will lose her autonomy as sexual being, her *kostr*, so she will lose her social status as mead-providing lady in hall.¹⁰ 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.]
(35.7–10)	

Finally, 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 sexualized and desexualized; a familiar range of strategies for keeping women in their place.

What Women Want: Gerðr's *munr*

When Jacques 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 phallographic power: he cannot bear that someone else speaks anything but *his truth* as he describes it. And it is up to him to describe what is the pleasure of the woman, not a woman! (Irigaray [1977] 1990, 91)

10. Compare the portrayal of Gunnlǫð in *Hávamál* 105.

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.¹¹ But from the terms of the curse, from its “gaps and absences” we are perhaps able to learn what it is that women *do* 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—not simply the absence, but the converse of the elements of the curse. As Chaucer’s Wife of Bath tells us, both explicitly and through the subtext of 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 have to be mediated through patriarchal structures is unavoidable; to use Shirley and Edwin Ardener’s terminology,¹² a “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, 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 mimesis (Frank 1973; Jochens 1980, 1986a, 1986b, 1990; Clover [1988] 1990), and in other texts. Some examples are briefly delineated below.

Njáls saga furnishes several women whose behaviour shows awareness of the desires suggested above, epitomized in Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” Þórhildr skáldkona immediately recognizes the significance of the male gaze when she catches her husband, Þráinn Sigfússon, staring “starsýnn” at Þorgerðr, Hallgerðr’s daughter, at Hallgerðr’s wedding-feast; her *kviðling* (ditty), though obscure in meaning, focuses explicitly on the stare as signifier of sexual desire “gægr er þér í augum” [there is lust in your eyes] (Sveinsson 1954, chap. 34). Þráinn’s gazing brings him almost instant gratification; he divorces Þórhildr on the spot and marries Þorgerðr. Þórhildr correctly interprets the meaning of her husband’s gaze, but she disapproves of its object—had the lascivious look been directed at her, she would not have complained.

Outside *Njáls saga*, female hostility to the unwanted male gaze is exemplified by Pryð in *Beowulf* of whom we are told:

11. Compare Moi’s important article (1986) for a lucid analysis of male and female roles and discourses in Andreas Capellanus.

12. Set out most clearly in Ardener 1975.

nænig þæt dorste deor geneðan,
 swæsra gesiða, nefne sinfrea,
 þæt hire an dægæs eagum starede.
 (Klaeber 1950, lines 1933–35)

[No warrior of the dear retinue dared venture that thing, except her great lord, that he would gaze at her by day with his eyes.]

Pryð's antipathy to being gazed at results in death for the man who transgresses. Like Gerðr, Pryð gets her way while she lives in her father's house, but when she crosses the sea and marries Offa, she abandons—or is forced to abandon—this practice.

The recognition that women are themselves capable of sexual desire is made explicit in *Njáls saga* chap. 7 when Unnr's marriage to Hrútr founders on the possibility of his satisfying her sexually: "Hann má ekki hjúskaparfar eiga við mik, svá at ek mega njóta hans" [He cannot have marital intercourse with me, so that I can get pleasure from him], 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. Mundal and Steinsland also note terms in Christian law books which suggest that being incapable of sexual desire—both male impotence and female frigidity—can be grounds for preventing a previously contracted marriage. Women's sexual response is highly valued (Mundal and Steinsland 1989, 115–17).

Although women often reject wooers on grounds of insufficient birth or reputation, in at least one case the physical attractions of the bridegroom are emphasized. Skaði comes to Ásgarðr in full war-gear, seeking revenge for the death of her father. The gods agree to compensate her with a husband. She hopes to gain Baldr, but when she chooses on the basis of radiantly beautiful feet: "þenna kýs ek, fátt mun líótt á Baldri" [I choose this one, there can be little ugly about Baldr] (Jónsson 1931, 81), she finds she has chosen Njörðr 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* chap. 35 and the quarrel between Guðrún and Hrefna, symbolized by the contentious headdress, in *Laxdœla saga* chap. 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 the concept of "honour" does to a man.

Laxdœla saga also furnishes us with an example of a woman pressed by male authority into a marriage which she is reluctant to undertake, in the circumstances surrounding Guðrún's marriage to Bolli:

Ok er Ósvífr tók þetta mál svá þvert, þá fyrirtók Guðrún eigi fyrir sína hönd, ok var þó hin tregasta í öllu. Synir Ósvífrs fýsa þessa mjök, þykkir sér mikil slægja til mægða við Bolla. (Sveinsson 1934, chap. 43)

[And since Ósvífr was so firm in this matter, Guðrún did not refuse her hand, and yet she was completely miserable about it. The sons of Ósvífr urged it very much, they thought there was a great advantage for them in kinship-by-marriage with Bolli.]

Male figures of authority, father and brothers, like the combined forces of Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr himself in *Skírnismál* 33, combine to persuade Guðrún into a marriage which she does not want to undertake. Similarly in *Völsunga saga* chap. 31, Brynhildr's father bullies her into marrying by threatening to withdraw his approval of her:

Váru þá tveir kostir fyrir hendi, at ek munda þeim verða at giptask sem hann vildi, eða vera án alls fjár ok hans vináttu; kvað þó sína vináttu mér mundu betr gegna en reiði. (Finch 1965, 53)

[There were two choices before me, that I would have to marry one of them (the sons of Gjúki), as he wanted, or else be deprived of all my wealth and his good-will; he said that his good-will would be of more benefit to me than his anger.]

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

Has a definitive answer to Lacan's question at last been found? No, for the fundamental choice which the text articulates, the choice between Freyr or Hrímgrímnir as lover, does not permit Gerðr a third option allowing her to retain her autonomy and subject position. She cannot choose not to choose. The constituents of desire revealed by “the precipitate of the unsaid”¹³ in the curse are inevitably predicated within the patriarchal order itself. The contemporary texts against which I have tested my reading are, of necessity, male-authored; the Wife of Bath, for all her apparent femininity, is a male voice mimicking the feminine. *Skírnismál* cannot give access to what Elaine Showalter ([1981] 1982) calls the “wild zone,” that inexpressible area outside male-constituted discourse, where women's pleasure exists for and in itself.¹⁴

13. I owe this useful phrase to Dr. Sarah Kay of Girton College, Cambridge.

14. It is arguable (see Jesch 1991, 139) that when Skaði leaves Njörðr and retreats to her father's sanctuaries in the mountains (*Gylfaginning*; Faulkes 1988, chap. 23) she locates herself in the wild zone where she finds her pleasure in autonomy. Yet that autonomy is assured only by her inheritance from her father.

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 16.1–3 and 37.1–3, 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. Gymir's absence is significant: perhaps it has nurtured Gerðr's delusions of autonomy, an autonomy which is signified by the act of mead-pouring denoting Gerðr's status as an independent lady in her hall. Now that both the fundamental premises of patriarchy and the exact latitude allowed to women's munr within that system have been laid bare, Gerðr finally pours out the mead for Skírnir, but she does so to seal the subordination of her munr to Freyr's munr and his.

Paradoxically, the curse which has forced Gerðr into submission recognizes 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 can be achieved, but 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, by the fact that she is enculturated to need male approval.

Writing about Penelope, a woman who does successfully resist 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 only answer Freyr's embassy by saying "the female word *yes*" (Joyce 1975, 285).

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