

WILLIAM SAYERS

Skírnismál, Byggvir, and John Barleycorn

In the scholarship devoted to the Eddic poem *Skírnismál* and to Skírnir's wooing of the reluctant giantess Gerðr on behalf of his master Freyr, considerable attention has been paid to the envoy's almost frenzied intimidation, its content and register, its congruity or incongruity in the context of a bridal quest story, and its possible role in, or connection to, an underlying myth. Why such a coercive effort in the interests of a love-sick Freyr, which culminates in the threat of a horrific, rune-driven curse that finally convinces the maiden to accede to the union? These questions will be approached through an initial consideration of another poem from the *Edda* collection, *Lokasenna*, in which key events of the story behind *Skírnismál* are recalled, albeit in a negative light.

Lokasenna does not have an underlying single myth, since the troubled relations between the Æsir and Loki inform the entire mythological corpus as it has been preserved, and taunts, quarrelling, and back-biting are pervasive. *Lokasenna* is set at a banquet at Ægir's, to which Loki seeks admittance and an honored place. Once admitted and with a drink of new-brewed ale in hand, Loki targets both the central functions of the various gods and goddesses with artful jibes, e.g., sexuality and family unions under the aegis of Freyja, and their supposed failings in these respects when measured in terms of conventional morality, for example in

Sayers, W., professor (adjunct), Medieval Studies, Cornell University. "*Skírnismál, Byggvir, and John Barleycorn*". *ANF* 131 (2016) pp. 21–46.

Abstract: In the Eddic poem *Skírnismál*, generally thought to reflect a myth of the wakening of arable land to the light and warmth of spring, the god Freyr's messenger Skírnir ('the radiant one') woos the giantess Gerðr on his master's behalf. From the offer of rich gifts to the reluctant maiden he turns to a series of vituperative threats that culminates in a menace of runic magic that will generate states of impatience, frenzy, and intolerable sexual desire. This seemingly chaotic litany of intimidation is here compared to Loki's sarcastic treatment of Byggvir ('Barley-boy'), another of the god's servants, in *Lokasenna* and to cultic agrarian practices centered in apotropaism, as illustrated in the British ballad of the murder of John Barleycorn. This perspective aids in understanding Skírnir's reference to the fate of the thistle at harvest-time and clarifies the rhetorical register and function of the poem's threats, which constitute a verbal grotesque, as Skírnir chivvies the dormant earth into responding to spring cultivation.

Keywords: *För Skírnis, Skírnismál, John Barleycorn*, bridal quest, agrarian practices, apotropaism.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63420/anf.v13i.27735>

the same Freyja's sexual promiscuity.¹ This two-edged rhetorical strategy is complemented by the poet's chosen formal structure, in which each divine figure accused by Loki rises in his or her own defense but is then also vindicated by a companion, who becomes Loki's next victim. The dialogue is organized as a concatenation, rather like Dante's *terza rima* but with a different kind of *contrapasso*. And within individual stanzas, the first verses often set out a topic that is expanded, developed, or complemented in the following lines.²

While Loki often chooses innuendo, his more direct charges also make allusion to other tales in Norse mythology and particularly to the consequences of these tales for the last, apocalyptic battle of Ragnarøk. Thus, *Lokasenna* functions as a literary catalogue but with many of the tales seen from a judgmental, often satirical and mocking perspective. Since the mythological record does not permit us to substantiate many of Loki's claims, he may be as much *auteur* as the individual composers of *Edda* poems. Although some of the failings of the gods have implications for the preservation of Ásgarðr from the giants and other malign forces, most concern morality, as seen from a human perspective, and signal the weakening of the social bond. It is the center that will not hold, not the border. In an important sense, Loki's social criticism is in support of the heroic ideal but this is not a heroic poem, rather an artful scolding with comic overtones.

Freyr's placement in the sequence of taunts in *Lokasenna* and Loki's reference to events preserved in another poem, more exactly *Skírnismál*, and to Freyr's proxy courting of the giantess Gerðr, reward careful attention. There is a double crescendo in the overall dialogic arc: from Loki's interaction with minor deities such as Bragi, Iðunn, and Gefun, on to the main gods, beginning with Óðinn and Frigg. Then, toward the end, he addresses other lesser figures (Heimdallr, Skaði, Sif, Beyla), before Þórr enters the scene to put an end to the catalogue of scorn. A central position in the sequence of criticisms is occupied by Njörðr and his two children, first Freyja, then Freyr, who draws two remarks. In response to Njörðr, Loki says that Freyr, the product of incest, is no worse than might be expected. The phrasing ('oc era þó óno verr') may, however, refer to the resulting *situation* being no worse than might be expected.³

¹ McKinnell (1987–88), Mizuno (2001).

² As noted by Marteinn H. Sigurðsson (2006); further discussion in Anderson (2002).

³ Neckel and Kuhn (1983: st. 36). For the first interpretation, see Larrington (2014: st. 36), for the second Orchard (2011: st. 36). Crawford (2015: st. 36) makes Njörðr the object of the judgment: 'I expect you've done even worse.'

In any case, Freyr is not tarred with the same brush as his father (nor his sister Freyja, who is accused of incest with him, tellingly with her in the superior position). Týr comes to Freyr's defense, although it seems less needed than in other cases, and states that Freyr is the best of the bold riders among the Æsir, that he does not makes girls or wives cry, and looses each person from bondage. Bonds are an understudied image in Old Norse mythology.⁴ Freyr's qualifications here are open to varied interpretation. One would be that the abstemious Freyr is no seducer or rapist, nor is he a violent widow-maker. The second statement may refer to Freyr as the promoter of peace and prosperity.⁵ When Loki then attacks Týr, it is Freyr's turn to speak. He does not exonerate Týr for the feckless loss of his sword-hand but rather predicts Loki's future binding, just like his son's, the wolf Fenrir's. Loki's retort is to condemn Freyr for buying Gerðr with gold and of having loaned out but not recovered his sword in the course of these marriage negotiations. How will he fight at Ragnarøk?⁶ Byggvir, a minor deity in the service of Freyr and whose name refers to barley, rises to Freyr's defense but only makes a general remark to the effect that Freyr occupies an honorable seat, whether in the hall or among the gods generally, and in this reiterates Týr's assessment.⁷ He makes a comically ludicrous threat against Loki. In serial accusations charging sexual lapses, one might have expected a fertility god to have given Loki a field day but Freyr escapes his mockery surprisingly lightly and the loss of the sword is the only fault found.

Loki's jibe recalls the single preserved myth in which Freyr figures as a principal, however remote he is from the real action of courting Gerðr, and the single least conventional action in it, the surrender of his self-activated sword to his envoy Skírnir. In Freyr's juxtaposition with Týr, we see the divine figures' readiness to give up both sword and sword-hand in enterprises whose long-term objective is the common good: containment of potentially chaotic violence in the divine community on the one hand and, less explicitly and less transparently, furtherance of its stability through marriage and family-building, at the cost of a symbol of virility on the other. To emphasize, neither god is criticized by Loki for

⁴ Now see Roy (2012).

⁵ This might seem to point to the institution of slavery and subsequent manumission but an association of slaves with the divine is unattested in Old Norse lore.

⁶ It may be that at Ragnarøk Surtr will employ Freyr's sword to kill Óðinn (*Völuspá*, 52–53).

⁷ Useful summaries and scholarly bibliographies on all the minor figures discussed in this study in Lindow (2001) and Simek (1993).

the kind of moral lapses or socially deviant sexuality (the condemnation as *ragr*) of which other gods are allegedly guilty, at most only for questionable judgments that put them, despite short-term gain, at ultimate risk. Freyr is not an adulterer, does not exemplify unbridled sexuality. For lack of evidence to the contrary, Freyr may be judged glorious, beloved, the embodiment of well-being but also disengaged. In sum, Freyr, save for the consequences of the conjoined indiscretions of sitting in Óðinn's seat (noted only in the prose introduction to *Skírnismál* and in Snorri) and loaning out his sword, is aloof, static. He seems to embody a *Potenz*, a reservoir, not the realization, of sexual and procreative power.⁸

This essay will go on to examine *Skírnismál* and Skírnir's courting at greater length but attention for the moment stays with Byggvir, who is also mentioned, with his wife Beyla, in the prose introduction to the poem as having been present in Ægir's hall along with Freyr. As noted, this minor deity, whose name has been rendered *Barley-boy* (< *bygg*), makes only an innocuous remark in defense of Freyr, his master, but introduces imagery that Loki will seize on.

Byggvir:

‘Veiztu, ef ec øðli ættac sem Inguna-Fryr,
oc svá sællicet setr,
mergi smæra mylða ec þá meinkráco
oc lemða alla í liðo.’

Loki qvað:

‘Hvat er þat iþ litla, er ec þat löggra séc,
oc snapvíst snapir?
at eyrom Freys munðu æ vera
oc und qvernom klaca.’

Byggvir qvað:

‘Byggvir ec heiti, enn mic bráðan qveða
goð qll oc gumar;
því em ec hér hróðugr, at drecca Hroptz megir
allir ql saman.’

Loki qvað:

‘Þegi þú, Byggvir! þú kunnir aldregi
deila með mǫnnum mat;

⁸ This possibility is explored in a work in progress, ‘Faculties Relinquished and Enhanced: Óðinn, Týr—and Freyr?’ which addresses the incomplete Norse paradigm, two constituents of which are Dumézil's *le borgne* and *le manchot*, and their respective *mutations qualifiantes*. See McKinnell (2005), ch. 5, for a discussion of other divine representatives of procreative power.

oc þic í fletz strá finna né máttó,
þá er vágo verar.⁹

Byggvir said:

‘You know, if I had a lineage like Ingvi-Freyr and such a fortunate place, I’d grind down that harm-crow finer than marrow and break his every joint.’

Loki said:

‘What’s that little creature that I see fawning and snuffling snufflingly around? You’re always at Freyr’s ear and chattering under the grind-stone.’

Byggvir said:

‘Byggvir I’m named and all the gods and men say I’m sprightly; so I’m proud to be here, where the kinsmen of Óðinn are all drinking ale together.’

Loki said:

‘Be silent, Byggvir! You never know how to distribute food portions among men and, down in the straw of the hall benches, you can’t be found when it’s time for real men to venture out.’¹⁰

Speaking in character, Byggvir uses imagery associated with barley and the production of beer. He would like to grind Loki down but the target state is, curiously, that of bone meal, not ground malt. As a fertilizer, bone meal provides no nutrients to plants, affecting only soil chemistry, so that it would appear that the domestic image of cracking bones and breaking joints may have had a source in metrics and alliteration (‘mergi smæra mylða’). Loki, in turn, sees the servant as an officious acolyte of Freyr, readily found near the mill-stone.¹¹ What appear to be canine references (*loggri* ‘to wag one’s tail?’, *snapa* ‘to sniff, snuffle’) may suggest rat-catchers near the grain stores.¹² Byggvir’s characterization of himself as *bráðan* ‘quick, hasty, eager’ may be in reference to barley sprouting in the field or during the malting process, or to the alacrity with which beer is ideally served. Now the frame of reference has shifted from the grind-stone to the hall, where food and drink are served. Loki will not be put off and charges Byggvir with dereliction of duty in the hall. His failure in the distribution of food may be due to the effects of alcohol, which blurred, for both servers, and drinkers and diners, the protocol of distri-

⁹ Neckel and Kuhn (1983: st. 43–46).

¹⁰ My translation, which draws on both Larrington (2008) and Orchard (2011).

¹¹ On Norse mills, see ‘Waterwheels and Windmills’ in Denny (2007: 36–38). Note, too, the ominous potential of the hand-driven mill in *Gróttasngur*.

¹² An editorial reader of an earlier draft of this essay suggests a chicken scratching for grain under the quern.

bution in the hall, in which guests and retainers were to be served in order of rank and perhaps, as in early medieval Ireland, received cuts of meat corresponding to social status. Loki knows that Byggvir is no warrior and, when others prepare for battle, would withdraw to the straw under the benches on the platforms that ran down the sides of the hall. The straw reference also points back to the harvesting and threshing of grain but also to spilled beer. There may be other allusions in the exchange that are missed by the modern reader.

Byggvir's wife Beyla makes a brief appearance in the poem, stating that she hears the coming of Þórr who will silence Loki. Loki dismisses her as a filthy serving maid ('qll ertu, deigia, dritin', st. 56). If the name is associated with bees (and not with beans or cows) it would pair nicely with *Byggvir*, barley, and beer, and the reference to impurity may be to the cloudiness or other defects of mead.¹³ These are the only two appearances of these minor figures in Old Norse mythology and, whatever the importance of beer as a food and essential component of the life of the hall (in addition to the prestige of mead as a more aristocratic drink, offered guests by sovereignty figures and giantesses, and to the fundamental myth of Óðinn's theft of the mead of poetry), they would only invite unfounded speculation were it not for the quiet grove named by Gerðr in *Skírnismál* as the site where she will meet Freyr in nine nights and where their marriage will be celebrated. This is *Barri*, in which some scholars have seen a reference to barley and others to a grove of conifers (see further below). With this, the discussion shifts to this Eddic poem.

By way of preface, it should be recognized that many poems of the *Edda* elaborate what must have been well-known myths or stories but situate them in a select register, for instance, the sardonic and critical in the case of *Lokasenna*, the broadly comical in that of *Þrymskviða*. The evaluation of such (re-)orientations of the fundamental myth in modern critical readings then complement earlier choices as to the slant a poet will give a story.¹⁴ *Skírnismál* has enjoyed a wide range of interpretations, with little consensus. At one extreme, the poem has been seen as a nature myth, in which the god of fertility and growth sends the sun's rays (*Skírnir* 'the radiant'; cf. *skírr* 'radiant' as an epithet of Freyr) as his messenger to court the arable earth (*Gerðr* 'enclosed arable land'), to encourage, if need be, to force her into a *hieros gamos* that will generate the year's crops (Olsen 1909). At another extreme, Freyr's non-Nordic love-

¹³ Dumézil (1952) devotes a brief study to the couple, Byggvir and Beyla. Olsen (1960: ch. 2) sees a dairy association for the latter, hence the epithet *dritin*.

¹⁴ See the still valuable discussion in Bibire (1986).

sickness has been seen as a cultural import from the south of Europe, with a basis in courtly love and in classical and early medieval medical theory (Heinrichs 1997).¹⁵

In the following discussion, the poem is judged true to its mythic antecedents but seen, wryly, to make its protagonist—elsewhere no womanizer, sexual predator, or prolific *pater familias*—a lovesick swain. According to the possibly thirteenth-century prologue to the poem, Freyr first sees Gerðr from Óðinn's high seat, Hliðskjálf, and this is a lightly transgressive act (not made explicit in this poem but so identified in Snorri's more rationalizing account).¹⁶ This vantage point for the acquisition of knowledge is not by rights his nor, indeed, is the gathering of information from the wider cosmos his ambit.¹⁷ His attraction to the giantess is crystalized by the sight of her beautiful bare arms, as she crosses the courtyard, significantly to the storehouse, where grain would have been kept. This has an unsettling effect on the god and this motif of destabilization (established as early as st. 1 in Skaði's introductory remark about Freyr's unsettled mind) is maintained throughout the poem. At the same time, the epithet *fróði* 'fertile' is repeatedly used of Freyr, recalling his fundamental functional attribute. Although the Æsir do not normally engage in sexual relations with the giants, save Þórr in an expression of dominance through rape and always excepting Óðinn and Loki, unions between the Vanir and giants are tolerated.¹⁸ Freyr is himself the product of the union of the Vanr Njörðr and the giantess Skaði (but of Njörðr and his sister, in another strand of the tradition). Thus, on multiple counts Freyr is engaged on a path of questionable behavior and his mental state (*hugsótt* 'anxiety') indicates a more mortal than divine distress. This dissonance is made evident by Freyr's statement: 'þvíat álfróðull lýsir of alla daga ok þeygi at mínum munum' ('for the sun [elf-disk] shines through all the days and yet not on the object of my thoughts').¹⁹ With a god whose servant is 'the radiant one', there is clearly

¹⁵ A concise summary of earlier interpretations is found in Larrington (2002) and, more dismissively, Liberman (1996); among the most significant are Berg (1998), Bibire (1986), Dronke (1969–2011), Guðrun Nordal (1992), Heinrichs (1997), Klingenberg (1996), Lönnroth (1997), McKinnell (1981, 2005: 64–67), Mitchell (1983, 2007), Motz (1981), Salberger (2002), Simek (2001), Steinsland (1990 and 1991), and the fundamental study of Olsen (1909), which continues to enjoy support (*faute de mieux?*). Treatment in von See et al. (1997) rejects speculation and does not usefully address the topics discussed in this essay.

¹⁶ Faulkes (2005: 37).

¹⁷ This information comes from the prose introduction to the poem and is then not integral to it, although repeated in Snorri (Faulkes 2005: 37).

¹⁸ Clunies Ross (1994: ch. 4) explores the idea of 'negative reciprocity'.

¹⁹ My translation.

some disconnect between spring sunlight on the one hand and the gloomy prospects of the hesitant lover on the other. In this poem Freyr is preoccupied with an instant love and acts out of divine character, bereft as he is of sunshine or of sunny prospects, instead of dispersing them. The lover (although the god is never designated by any such summary term) characterizes his feelings in indirect and elliptical fashion: 'Mær er mér tíðari enn manni hveim \ ungom í árdaga' ('The maid is dearer to me than [a maid] to any young man in days of old').²⁰ The focus here is on Gerðr's worth rather than on Freyr's feelings, which gives a curious impression of remoteness and passivity. It also suggests that Freyr has usurped an amatory stance more properly human than divine. Freyr himself recognizes that neither the Æsir nor the elves would favor his union. This statement is not transparent to the modern reader but may indicate that such an infatuation, with its threat of both exogamy and monogamy, was not congenial to the general conception of the god, or even that sexual activity on the god's part was excluded from this conception.²¹

Freyr states his plight but it is the servant who proposes to go and woo the giantess.²² Again, passivity on the part of Freyr. To facilitate and further this plan, he agrees to give the envoy both his horse and his sword, a weapon that fights on its own if wielded by a wise person. This act of willing surrender is formally similar to Týr's loss of a hand, which is clearly in a good cause, but may be more strongly characterized here as the abandon of an instrument which is otherwise a symbol of aggressive masculinity. In public, arms were always carried by well-born men.

Although the burial mound on which Skírnir finds a herdsman sitting on his arrival in the giants' domain has been recognized as having asso-

²⁰ Neckel and Kuhn (1983: st. 7); my translation. On the use, no fewer than eight times, of the Old Norse term *munr* 'desire' (as a mental state) in the poem, see Larrington (1992), Klingenberg (1996: 62), and North (1991: 30). Since Skírnir had earlier used the phrase 'í árdaga' in reference to Freyr and himself as young men, Freyr's comparison may be self-referential.

²¹ This may mean no more than that the idea of such a union was beyond the normal order for all manners of being, since the alliterative pairing of Æsir and elves is otherwise frequent. More specifically, it may recall that Freyr's residence, Alfheimr, was elf-built. However aloof Freyr may seem in the preserved mythological stories, popular belief as reflected in the sagas credits him with concrete interventions to defend fields dedicated to him; see North (2000). Egill Skallagrímsson even invokes Freyr in a curse to assist in driving Eiríkr *blóðox* and Gunnhildr from Norway (Sigurður Nordal, 1933: 57).

²² On the poem as a Norse realization of a bridal-quest-with-proxy narrative, see Klingenberg (1996). Skírnir is also sent to the dwarves to fetch the fetter that will bind Fenrir, one more juxtaposition of acts by Freyr and Týr. As a proxy suitor, Skírnir incorporates the further motif of being more skilled with words than his master, especially in ritualized situations; see Clark (2012: 52n16, 58).

ciations with fertility in Norse tradition (Orchard 2011, 286), the precise function and relevance of this scene has gone unexplained. In the early European tradition, mounds are also seats for the acquisition of knowledge and often for the inception of adventure—here, under this sign of fertility there is a hint of the transmission of cultural goods and the advancement of narrative. In another poem, *Prymr* is also met sitting on a grave mound. The encounter in *Skírnismál* is a miniature wisdom contest (see further below). Skírnir asks how he can get past the giant's guard dogs to talk to Gerðr. The herd's response (st. 12) presents textual difficulties and Skírnir's reply to it is only a fatalistic commonplace that one must do one's best in the face of fate's whims. Thus far in the poem, Skírnir's comments are of a relatively pedestrian nature, flat, expressive of only commonplace wisdom (st. 5, 13). This will abruptly change. At a minimum the herdsman's comments set the tone: 'Hvárt ertu feigr, eða ertu framgenginn? [...] þú scalt æ vera góðrar meylar Gymis' (st. 12) ('Are you doomed or are you dead? [...] you'll never have a chance to talk to Gymir's splendid girl', Orchard 2011, st. 12). This prepares the reader/listener for Skírnir's coercive efforts after his offer of gifts has been rejected.

Gerðr has a premonition that the visitor may cause the death of her brother, a figure otherwise unknown in Norse mythology (st. 16). Is this the giant Beli elsewhere stated as killed by Freyr (Faulkes 2005: 31)? The giantess's anxiety, however, seems to have Freyr himself and not the envoy at its focus, as if it were he himself who had come for the purposes of a mythically foreordained union. Yet Skírnir is hospitably received at the giant's dwelling place—until he introduces his errand.

Skírnir hopes that in return for gifts Gerðr will say that Freyr is the least hateful man alive ('at þú þér Frey qveðir \ óleiðastan lifa', st. 19), again indirectly and negatively understated phrasing that leaves the god as the object of judgment. In the ensuing exchange there is little concerning Freyr, and Gerðr makes no criticism of him. Several gifts are offered to Gerðr, apples (of youth?) and self-reproductive golden rings, but there is no promise of multiple children and secure family life in a union with the god of fertility. Instead, in the course of pleading Freyr's cause in ever more aggressive terms, Skírnir will first indirectly threaten Gerðr's father, Gymir, with Freyr's sword (although he will apparently leave it behind, possibly in payment of a bride-price).

Skírnir's escalating menaces conclude with his threat of recourse to magic. One of the fates that might await Gerðr lies within what might be the general ambit of Freyr's sister Freyja, since Skírnir threatens that she will suffer—in addition to loneliness and exile from her kin and kind—

insatiable lust and have ogreish partners at best. With this, Gerðr ceases to resist and she agrees to meet Freyr in nine nights, in the Norse fullness of time. The arithmetic here is curious: Gerðr stipulates nine nights (nicely alliterative). Freyr says one night is long, two longer; how could he wait for three? Each half-night seems like almost a month.²³

There is no prose coda that references the consummation of the marriage or that might offer an interpretation of the underlying myth. Marriages between the Vanir and the giants require accommodation (Skaði and Njǫrðr change domicile every nine nights) and the failure of the literate record to make any mention of the success or failure of the union of Freyr and Gerðr may be indirect evidence that it was never realized—at least not in the early understanding of the myth.²⁴ As noted, Freyr does not give Skírnir any instructions as to how to woo the giantess and, on the envoy's return, asks only as to the outcome of the voyage, not even naming its specific objective. Here and earlier, Freyr seems subject to a kind of functional paralysis. Skírnir, for his part, volunteers no information on how he pressed the god's suit. This results in further narrative disarticulation and raises the possibility that Skírnir's intimidations and their specific register may not be integral to a basic myth or story. The gaps in the narrative do, however, encourage our seeing the poem as suited to oral performance and we may imagine a one-act play with several short opening scenes, followed by the dramatic high point of the dialogue between Skírnir and Gerðr.²⁵ But there is no reference to the verbal content of Skírnir's suit in Snorri's (rationalizing?) telling. In fact, Skírnir's verbal maltreatment of Gerðr is at such odds with the characterizations of Freyr elsewhere in Norse tradition, e.g., 'he makes no girl weep' (*Lokasenna*), that the god might well have disowned the harangue.

Skírnir's threats—sardonic, almost frenzied, paratactically ordered and in varying poetic meters—are at a far remove from Freyr's standoffish lovesickness as depicted in the poem.²⁶ Scholarly studies of the poem have identified the numerous references to the figures and places of

²³ Efforts to untangle these numbers in Liberman (1996) and Klingenberg (1996). Barley sprouts in three days and might be thought to ripen in 70+ days in northern climes but the giantess's conditions cannot be made to fit the growing season.

²⁴ The marriage is mentioned in *Hyndluljóð* (Neckel and Kuhn 1983: st. 30), along with the names of both of Gerðr's parents, but this poem is otherwise an effort to gather and systematize mythological lore.

²⁵ On the performance potential of the passage and the poem as a whole, see Gunnell (1995: 247–255).

²⁶ On variation and possible irregularities of meter, see Salberger (2002).

Norse mythology in these stanzas and the mention of the crushed thistle has drawn focused scrutiny (Harris 1975 and 2002). The intimidating conclusion to the surrogate wooer's harangue, which covers 13 of the 15 stanzas of Skírnir's suit, while only two are devoted to the prior offer of gifts, has been closely studied in *Edda* scholarship but is not central to any hypothesis that explains the myth or poem.²⁷ A more detailed examination of the coercive litany of future sufferings will be followed by its juxtaposition with an analogue text from a cognate popular tradition.

A perhaps overly analytical assessment of the threatening stanzas might establish the categories of 1) coercive instruments to be deployed by Skírnir, 2) Gerðr's projected physical or mental state, and, often conjoined with the foregoing, 3) her future physical and social environments. Yet the content of the verses is rather resistant to efforts at taxonomy, as a sample stanza will illustrate.

‘Tópi oc ópi, tíðsull oc ópoli,
vaxi þér tár með trega!
Seztu niðr, enn ec mun segia þér
sváran súsbreca
oc tvennan trega.’ (st. 29)

‘Howling and growling, teasing, impatience:
may your tears increase with your troubles;
sit down, and I'll say to you
a sorry end to joy
and a twin trouble too.’ (Orchard 2011)

Of these three tentative categories, the instrumental is the clearest. Against Gerðr, Skírnir threatens to use Freyr's sword, a taming wand and a wand of power (most likely the same), and lastly a stick cut with runes, where the message trumps the medium. Or this may simply be a sword and a rune-stick. Evocation of these objects are fairly evenly spread over the 13 stanzas (st. 23, 25, 26, 32, 36). Most other stanzas, however, combine references to both future emotional and physical states, and the social milieu in which they will be experienced. These are changes rung on themes of exile and perhaps servitude in cold, dark, and abject circumstances (recurrence of *hrím*; location below fortress ramparts, under tree roots, all ground-oriented), social debasement and rejection. Also threatened are anxiety, melancholy and grief, anorexia, sexual hunger unsatis-

²⁷ Klingenberg (1996) probes the rhetoric of the curses but does not address their discordant register and purpose. He does note that Old Norse literature offers ‘no direct model for the curse passage’ (1996: 60); see also Simek 2001.

fied by monstrous partners. In a symbolic interpretation, the ground will remain dark and frozen. The more distant background is the enmity and disgust of the gods and even of Gerðr's fellow-giants. An important aspect of the threats is the chaotic nature of the litany ('no escalation of horror', Liberman 1996: 116–117), which becomes a kind of grotesque verbal artifact in itself (on which notion see further below). Simple decapitation with Freyr's sword seems the least of these threats. Stanza 34 marks a formal *crescendo* in the menaces, when the envoy apostrophizes the giants and ogres in a malediction denying Gerðr human pleasure. Gerðr makes no response to this mixed bag of menaces. It is only the prospect of runic magic that prompts the giantess to speak again after a silence of 12 stanzas. The key couplet in Skírnir's voice reads as follows:

'Þurs ríst ec þér oc þríá stafi,
ergi oc æði oc óþola.' (st. 36)

In the first verse ("Ogre" I carve for you, and three other runes'; Orchard 2011: st. 36), commentators have generally seen *þurs* 'giant' as distinct from the three misfortunes to be visited on the victim. It is unlikely to be a vocative and is perhaps the name of the curse itself or is the name of a fourth rune.²⁸ As for the three states represented by the runes to be carved, Larrington translates *ergi*, *æði*, and *óþoli* as 'lewdness and frenzy and unbearable desire', Orchard as 'cock-craving and frenzy and impatience'.²⁹ Identifications and English renderings are naturally guided by the foregoing stanzas. Here, several observations are called for. Although the designations for the three negative states alliterate, they are not formally similar, in that the third, a typical Old Norse-Icelandic compound, consists of a positive term prefaced by a negative particle *ó-*, which puts the exact semantic valence at a further remove, since *þoli* must first be defined in order for its negation to be understood. Unlike the other two states, *óþoli* is earlier mentioned in the poem proper (st. 29, above). Perhaps the most telling observation to be made about the triad is that the reference to Freyr's anger is at odds with his love-sickness and that *ergi* is not otherwise used of women, since it refers only to a disgraceful fall from the male standard of behavior. No comparable term is used, for example, by Loki of the sexual appetites and indiscretions of Freyja and

²⁸ So interpreted by Page (1998); in the *Rune-Poem* in this edition the opening line applied to the rune þ is 'þurs er kvenna kvöl' – 'þurs is the torture of women'.

²⁹ See Orchard's discussion of *ergi* and *ragr* in the headnote to *Lokasenna* (2011: 298–299); for Óðinn's own non-normative sexual status, see Ármann Jakobsson (2011); on negative charms, Mitchell (1998).

the other *ásynjur* in *Lokasenna*, nor, in *Skírnismál*, of the fate which threatens Gerðr before the runes are invoked. Paul Bibire recalls that some of these rune names are so late that either the poem must be dated to about 1200 or the curse seen as an interpolation from about that date in an earlier mythological poem.³⁰ The inapplicability of the curse to a woman is further evidence of the passage not being part of an earlier iteration of the poem or of a conscious introduction with intentional or unintentional inconsistencies. The whole assembly of threats may have drawn on various traditional curses, thus contributing to its rag-bag effect.

The fullness of Skírnir's imprecations has no ready model in early Old Norse literature, although the curse in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* may be mentioned. Skírnir's curses are not true performative utterances because they are not immediately realized and validated.³¹ The delay in effectuation seems to encourage an augmentation in volume but this is difficult to achieve, since speech is transient, ephemeral. The emotional crescendo of the threats that culminate in the curse anticipates the frenzied fate promised Gerðr in the event of non-compliance. *Ljóðaháttir* 'song meter' gives way to *galdralag* 'spell meter', characterized by Orchard (2011: 285–286) as 'more ragged', in keeping with the heightened emotionality of Skírnir's speech, which also seems to include novel lexical coinages. The envoy also turns to repetition, variation, encyclopedic listings, covering all possible outcomes (cf. medieval *loricae* that protect against multiple ills). The rhetoric, while often disjointed, has some resemblance to the flying in its effort at all-inclusiveness, although the latter looks to past and present and not to the future. Yet the spoken curse, however staged with other ritualized action, can, like all speech acts, not last past the moment. The rune stick, on the other hand, is durable and thus, perhaps, can be economically succinct: even in malign magic, literacy wins out over orality.

The essay now addresses the purpose of the rhetorical strategy adopted by the divine envoy and by the Norse poet. How might it relate to Olsen's identification of *Skírnismál* as reflective of a nature myth, the wakening of the dormant earth to fertilization and organic growth? Here

³⁰ Comparable content on a fourteenth-century runic charm from Bergen (McKinnell 2005: 65); see, too, the curse called *Buslubæn* in *Bósa saga*.

³¹ St. 36 suggests that Skírnir has already cut the runes but has not yet 'activated' them, either by rubbing blood into them or by speaking a magic word. This means they can still be scraped off without taking effect (as Skírnir offers to do in st. 36.4–6); see McKinnell, Simek, and Düwel (2004:163–165, 144). My thanks to an anonymous reader.

it will be useful to turn first to the well-studied onomastics, in order to elucidate the degree to which names in *Skírnismál* and related references to the story may resonate with interpretations of Skírnir's threats to Gerðr. *Freyr* is 'the Lord', *Skírnir* 'the radiant one'.³² The name *Gerðr* is generally interpreted as 'enclosed area of land' (cf. *garðr* 'fence') and it seems justified in regarding this in the context of the poem as having connotations of arable land, although the signification 'protectress' has also been proposed. The element *gerðr* is found in names for giantesses and also figures in woman-kennings 'usually compounded with elements of female dress', where it may refer to some kind of girdle.³³ Previously unnoted in this respect is that *gerðr* has a near-homonym—what we might call the makings of word-play—in *gerð* 'fermentation'.³⁴ Here may be recalled the descriptor *fróði* 'fertile', used of Freyr, is yet another allusion to transformative power. In what may be an expression of antiquarian systematization and/or an effort to fill out the picture so as to create a denser genealogical background against which to view the Ynglings, the Swedish royal dynasty that traced its descent from the union of Freyr and Gerðr, Snorri names both Gerðr's parents, Gymir and Aurboða.³⁵ *Gymir* is also used as name for Ægir in the prose introduction to *Lokasenna* and thus has a connection with the sea, and even with beer and barley, while *Aurboða* may be explained as 'profferer of gravel or sand'. She is identified by Snorri as a mountain-giantess. These identifications raise the possibility of Gerðr being the product of water and earth: arable land. If *Gerðr* is read as 'enclosed (or girdled) field', Skírnir's threats foresee her negatively qualified enclosure in a miserable, infertile world beyond that of culture and cultivation, in a grotesque perversion of her basic attribute.

It is problematic to associate the grove *Barri* of the Codex Regius recension of *Skírnismál* only with Old Norse *barr* 'barley', since the latter also signifies 'pine needle'. Furthermore, Gerðr's reference to 'lundr lognfara', conventionally interpreted as a quiet grove, points away from cultivated fields. Perhaps a generalized notion of a sacred site is intended, although nothing in the lore associated with Freyr points in this direction. Other texts have the image of Freyr being taken to the fields rather than the farmers coming to a shrine or dedicated site (save the central

³² On the name *Freyr* and derivatives, see Elmevik (2003); for other names in the poem, Radzin (1985).

³³ McKinnell (2005: 66) for this detail and a wider discussion.

³⁴ Cleasby, Guðbrandur Vigfússon, and Craigie (1957: s.v. *gerð*).

³⁵ Faulkes (2005: 37); *Hyndluljóð*, st. 30.

temple in Uppsala reported by Adam of Bremen).³⁶ Snorri names the site for the consummation of the marriage as *Barey*,³⁷ which has prompted modern associations with the Hebridean island of *Barra*. Nonetheless, word-play on the idea of barley is certainly *disponible* in *Skírnismál*. In addition to the punning potential of the pair *Gerðr/gerð*, a few other lexical choices in the poem could be said to echo the multi-stage harvesting of barley and processing of malt and wort. The *tamsvǫndr* ‘taming rod’ could be seen to pun on *vǫndull* ‘bundle of hay’. On balance, *Skírnismál* offers, despite the mention of Barri, a less explicit tie with crops of grain than does the figure of Byggvir and, in *Lokasenna*, his characterization by Loki.

This consideration of names in *Skírnismál* will serve to introduce what might be called a synchronic display, words for barley and beer in languages of the early Norse environment, as distinct from the diachronic ordering of successive names such as seed, malt, wort, and beer. As concerns barley as a crop and as food in the form of beer, its relative prominence in yet a third *Edda* poem, *Alvíssmál*, is noteworthy. After *Alvíss* (‘the all-knowing’) has given the names of such elements of the cosmos as earth, heaven, moon, and sun, Óðinn, his interrogator, turns to what must be seen, perhaps a bit wryly or humorously and with a quantum shift in scale, as fundamental elements of human life on earth: grain and ale. The first of these pairs of stanzas is as follows:

‘hvé þat sáð heitir, er sá alda synir
heimi hveriom í.
‘Bygg heitir með mǫnnum, enn barr með goðom,
kalla vaxt vanir,
æti iǫtnar, álfar lagastaf,
kalla í helio hnipinn.’³⁸

‘what the seed is called, that the sons of men sow,
in every world there is.’
“Barley” it’s called by men, but “grain” by the gods,
the Vanir call it “waxing-growth”,
“scoff” the giants, elves “brew stuff”,
they call it “crestfallen” in Hel.’³⁹

Just as sitting and drinking over long in the hall can lead to risky conduct (*Hávamál*), so the talk of grain and beer keeps *Alvíss* up past a dwarf’s

³⁶ Klingenberg (1996) and Liberman (1996) argue that ‘lugnfara’ should be seen as an epithet of the god Freyr (‘calm traveler?’), perhaps a reference to his ship.

³⁷ Summary of the scholarly discussion in Lindow (2001: 71); see also Sahlgren (1962).

³⁸ Neckel and Kuhn (1983: st. 31–32).

³⁹ Orchard (2011: 309).

bedtime (note the prolepsis in the antagonists' earlier discussion of the terms for night and day). The sun's first light turns him to stone (another tie to *skírr* 'radiant'), now having the opposite effect of the spring sun's rays on a cultivated field. As in the other flyting and wisdom contests in *Edda*, there is a clear winner. Barley figures in no fewer than three Eddic poems, while beer is even more often mentioned.

In his discussion of the vocabularies of different orders of being as listed by the dwarf *Alvíss*, Orchard raises the possibility that some of these may represent *noa* language, the in-group vocabulary used only by certain speakers under certain circumstances, such as sailors at sea in reference to ship's parts, the sea, etc.⁴⁰ This is part of the larger issue of apotropaism, speech and other ritual acts intended to protect something valued, a child, a home, against evil supernatural forces. Many cultures avoid making complimentary remarks about children lest this attract envy and malevolence. Another technique seen in taboo language is to refrain from naming something, e.g., the bear or wolf, by its right name but only to allude to the animal through the mention of an attribute. Another tactic is to frighten the malevolent spirits, for example, those loosed by an evil eye, with grotesque images, in an ambiguous technique where the horror of the one prevents the horrors of the other. Yet a third technique, not dissimilar to calling a beloved child by a critical or debasing name, is to maltreat, symbolically, the thing to be defended in order to forestall injury from the exterior. Such harshness then shows the spirits that no further harm is warranted, since the work of depreciation is already accomplished.

To situate *Skírnir*, *Gerðr*, and Norse crops in this frame of reference, it will be illustrative to see how barley fares in a personification in another culture. In a version first recorded during the reign of James I, *The Song of John Barleycorn* begins as follows (orthography modernized):

There was three men came out of the West,
Their fortunes for to try,
And these three men made a solemn vow,
John Barleycorn should die.
They ploughed, they sowed, they harrowed him in,
Threwed clods upon his head,
And these three men made a solemn vow,
John Barleycorn was dead.⁴¹

⁴⁰ On Shetlandic seafaring terms, which are Scots on land but Norn-derived at sea, see Rendboe (1987).

⁴¹ Vaughan Williams and Lloyd (1959), which provides information on other early versions of the song.

John lies for a long time as it rains, then springs up. He is allowed to stand, 'pale and wan', until midsummer, by which time he has grown a long beard. Here may be recalled the name for barley in Norse Hel, *hnipinn* 'drooping', consonant with the dismal locale but also suggestive of both the ripe ears weighing on the stalk and the bowed victim awaiting the reaping hook.

They hired men with the scythes so sharp
 To cut him off at the knee,
 They rolled him and tied him by the waist,
 And served him most barbarously.
 They hired men with the sharp pitchforks
 Who pricked him to the heart,
 And the loader he served him worse than that,
 For he bound him to the cart.
 They wheeled him around and around the field
 Till they came unto a barn,
 And there they made a solemn mow
 Of poor John Barleycorn.
 They hired men with the crab-tree sticks
 To cut him skin from bone,
 And the miller he has served him worse than that,
 For he ground him between two stones.

Another version of the ballad continues the violent conceit into the malting and brewing processes.

They hyred two men with holly clubs,
 to beat on him at once,
 They thwacked so on Barly-corne,
 that flesh fell from the bones.
 And then they tooke him up againe,
 to fulfill womens minde
 They dusted and they sifted him,
 till he was almost blind.⁴²

John is then knit in a sack, steeped in a vat, laid to dry, raked, and fire-dried in a kiln. 'Then they brought him to the mill, /an there they burst his bones' (cf. Byggvir's wish to grind Loki's marrow). The malt is ground and 'hot scalding liquor' poured over it in a fresh vat.

⁴² English Broadside Ballad Archive, EBBA 20199, Magdalene College, Pepys 1.426, *A pleasant new Ballad to sing both Euen and Morne, / Of the bloody Murther of Sir John Barley-corne*, 1624.

But not content with this God wot.
that did him mickle harme,
With threatning words they promised
to beat him into barme.

Lastly the remains of John Barleycorn are transferred from the vat to the barrel.

But (to return to the first-cited recension), little Sir John in the nut-brown bowl ‘proved the stronger man at last’, for neither can the huntsman hunt the fox nor the tinker mend the pot ‘without a little of barley-corn’.

In contrast to this mock violence directed at the crop of grain, charms to hold off evil spirits could be given a positive realization in a catalogue of harvest blessings, wished-for or already received. These figure typically in accounts of successful reigns, as for example, the now legendary Yngvi-Freyr’s as king of the Swedes and founder of the line of Ynglings.⁴³

It is proposed that Skírnir’s dialogue with Gerðr is at home in a greater European tradition of feigned violence as apotropaic depreciation. The arable field is being urged toward cultivation, fertility, and bounteous crops by mock threats. It is not possible to say how consciously the poet of *Skírnismál* may have had such popular belief in mind when crafting the teleologically articulated menaces so similar to the exhaustive treatment of John Barleycorn.

It is in this context that Skírnir’s reference to the thistle in stanza 31 must be judged; it concludes:

‘ver þú sem þistill, sá er var þrunginn
í qnn ofanverða.’

‘Be like the thistle, the one that was crushed at the harvest’s end.’

Olsen (1909) cites an Estonian harvest custom, in which a thistle is placed in each window opening and weighted down with a stone in order to prevent malignant spirits from stealing the grain from the threshing.⁴⁴ The thistle may be deceptively intended to signal the absence of grain in the barn or it may simply be a kind of spiky grotesque to ward off the spirits. This does not offer much of a parallel with the incident in *Skírnismál* as conventionally interpreted but is consonant with the basic antagonistic and apotropaic situation being proposed here. In the Eddic stanza in

⁴³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (1941–51: I. 11).

⁴⁴ Further studied in Harris (2002), Heizmann (1996), and Salberger (2002).

question, *þrunginn* has occasioned considerable scholarly ink and it has been argued that the verb signifies forcible rejection of the weed from the agrarian community. The thistle and other plants that infest the grain field occupy, for present purposes, a middle ground between John Barleycorn and Gerðr. Like the English barley crop, the thistle is cut down with iron's sharp edge. It is not made the object of further productive treatment but is ritually destroyed, in a negative simulacrum of threshing and grinding. Ritually cast out, the thistle is the scapegoat, bearing with it all the ills that could affect the fields or the future quality of the cereal harvest.

The ripened thistle is both the antithesis of the cereal crop and its field companion. In the fall, its swollen flowerhead mocks the fullness of the spikes and ears of the grain but the ample content is deceptive and ephemeral from the human perspective, of no nutritive value. The thistle is purposefully crushed at harvest's end so that its flowerhead does not scatter naturally and send the thistledown flying to infest future crops.⁴⁵ With this, the forces of want have been overcome by the successful harvest of grain; its enemy in the field, first competing for space and then possibly corrupting the threshed grain and even future crops, has been rejected and removed. Yet, in the kind of dualism seen elsewhere the early medieval conceptual world, also reflective of a prudent economy in which little should be allowed to go to waste, the crushed thistle is turned to practical use as its thorns are displayed to ward off other ills such as the visit of demons.⁴⁶ Gerðr, on other hand, is discursively placed by Skírnir at the start of the agrarian sequence. Unless she, the land, yields to its Lord, she is semi-ritually sentenced to the fate of the thistle at season's end, rejected and scorned, condemned to darkness and cold. Like the sheela-na-gigs best known from Irish tradition, with their genital exhibitionism, and like the scorned thistle put to guard, Gerðr, too, is turned into a hypersexualized grotesque, posted to the ramparts of the community fortress, to suffer in misery but also to keep malevolent spirits at bay. In the 'thistle stanza', *Skírnismál* thus offers a succinct but sophisticated reference to apotropaic practice.

In structuralist terms, the spiny, lacerating thistle has a formal and

⁴⁵ Dronke (1962: 256) implies that the thistle was crushed in the threshing process but, for practical reasons, this is a misguided conclusion. Early farmers would also have noted the attractiveness of the thistle to bees so that the cause of mead can be seen to be advanced at the cost of barley and beer.

⁴⁶ Heizmann studies an Icelandic magical formula in which the thistle is invoked to deter unwelcome guests (1996: 98–99).

functional similarity to the stick to be cut with runes. Ritual magic is at work in both cases as a deterrent, since the runes will lead to states of ostracism like the thistle borne away from the field. The threatened violence in *Skírnismál* has its larger correspondence in such folklore traditions as the battle between summer and winter kings (McKinnell 2005). To judge from Gerðr's reaction, it would seem that by the early thirteenth century the pagan belief world had lost a great deal of its relevance but runic magic was still a power to be reckoned with.

Just as the young giantess, a symbol of the arable field, may be intimidated, another order of being related to the northern lands could be manipulated, either placated or pressured. The favor of the *landvættir* 'earth spirits' determined the success of crops and the general well-being of the homestead. While it was advisable to avoid giving offense, certain lines might need to be drawn. Thus, torches were carried around the prospective boundaries of a new farm to claim it for human use. This expropriation of a portion of the natural world is without overt violence, is a simple act of demarcation, a signal to both the supernatural tutelary spirits and to other humans.⁴⁷

Richly cross-referential, the mythological poems of the *Edda* are also formally interrelated, largely as dialogues (or multi-voiced monologues), prompting some scholars to speculate on dramatic performances (making an oral presentation of *Skírnismál* appropriate to the spring).⁴⁸ The dialogue, often concatenating in that not only topics and details but actual phrasing is repeated between speakers or within a single speech, is unfailingly confrontational (or masks a deeper antagonism). The vantage points for discourse are also generally asymmetrical, even though one party may not recognize his (rarely her) disadvantage. Whether an admonitory monologue (*Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Grímnismál*), flyting (*Lokasenna*), wisdom contest (*Vafþrúðnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Alvíssmál*), dialogue-driven confidence trick (*Þrymskviða*), or, in broader terms, a myth of a risk-filled exchange or of sacrifice and gain (Óðinn in *Hávamál*, Týr and Fenrir, the latter story only mentioned in the *Poetic Edda*), these works are structured by the fundamental 'antagonistic dualism' (McKinnell 2005: 4) that is everywhere apparent in Old Norse culture, with its winners and losers, or, in the mind of an individual, two choices (often both bad).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Lid (1958).

⁴⁸ Discussed in Gunnell (2005), Harris (2000), and Lönnroth (2009).

⁴⁹ The mythological poems of the *Edda* foreground open verbal contention, while the heroic poems are largely concerned with interiorized ethical problems.

There is consensus that at one level *Skírnismál* in its present form is ‘about’ the spring wakening of a dormant field, symbolized by the giantess Gerðr, to cultivation and sowing.⁵⁰ Unlike his relatively restrained incarnation of sexual potency as illustrated elsewhere in the Norse mythological corpus, Freyr’s behavior in the poem is out of character, infatuated (to borrow from the imagery of Skírnir’s threats) as he is with a single female of another order of being, an aberrancy perhaps stemming from his transgressive occupancy of Óðinn’s chair Hliðskálf, from which he sees the maiden. Under these circumstances Skírnir’s proxy wooing may also be judged unconventional, as he quickly abandons gift-offerings and any promise of happy conjugal life for threats of exile and sexual misery. The harangue and intimidation of the story, which themselves form a verbal grotesque, have correspondences in what are posited as popular agrarian practices, in which the weeds infesting the field may be scorned or the grain crop itself maligned and symbolically maltreated in order to divert the attention of evil forces and thus successfully bring in a plentiful crop.⁵¹ As noted, references to the prime product of barley, beer, are found through the *Poetic Edda*. It is noteworthy that in *Lokasenna* Loki’s sardonic humor should treat the innocuous and somewhat officious Byggvir in just the same disparaging and deprecatory way (albeit to no apotropaic end) as the English pretended to treat John Barleycorn in his mock sacrifice, as the Estonians and others did the thistle, and as Skírnir, at an earlier stage of the agricultural cycle, does Gerðr.

In *Skírnismál* the verbal confrontation that structures many Eddaic poems is almost entirely one-sided, with little parity between interlocutors and with a coerced rather than cleverly won end. Yet fleshing out all these dualistic structures are narratives situated in different registers and assigned differing purposes. Whatever the myth in the background of the poem, the extant poem is, in Bibire’s terms, primarily an individualized story, although one still bearing detail from an age of active popular pre-Christian belief. We may figure *Skírnismál* as standing equidistant from both myth and popular agrarian lore, offering an artistic interpretation and adaptation of both. Just as each species of being in the mythological cosmos has its own vocabulary for barley and beer, so each retelling of myth, including those in poetic form, can represent its own momentary world view. The poem’s audience would bring its collective cultural

⁵⁰ *Hávamál* (st. 88) warns against sowing a field too early, for weather creates crops.

⁵¹ The field cult of Freyr as reflected in a narrative medium is exemplified in the well-known story of Gunnarr, a man on the run, and of a priestess of Freyr, *Qgmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars helmings* (Jónas Kristjánsson 1956); studied in Harris (2008).

knowledge to each hearing of the story and would have been familiar with notions of fundamental theme and individual performance variation. Over time the mythic story evolves, like the miniature iron sickles, from fraught amulet to simple piece of traditional jewellery. These remarks apply no less to Snorri's streamlined account in *Gylfaginning*.

The argument of this essay does not invalidate other readings of *Skírnismál*, however close to or far from those of a putative early thirteenth-century Norse audience they may be. Its primary objective has been to analyze and understand the psychological and rhetorical strategy that Skírnir adopts toward Gerðr in wooing her on behalf of Freyr—a strategy that seems inconsistent with the figure of Freyr as found elsewhere and one that does not even raise his curiosity. In this section of *Skírnismál* and in Skírnir's threats of violence, there is a touch of the carnivalesque, the world turned upside down.⁵² The envoy can be imagined as wearing one of the grotesque masks that feature in such celebrations, here of the cherished home field being chivvied into its spring awakening. Coerced, the giantess eventually promises that Njǫrðr's son (=Freyr) will have his pleasure of Gerðr (= her) in nine nights ('Niarðar syni Gerðr unna gamans'). Skírnir's entire courting speech may well be put under the rubric of *gaman* 'game, sport, pleasure, amusement', when viewed from the perspective of apotropism.

To conclude, the prose preface to *Lokasenna* states that Ægir ('who is called by another name Gymir') prepared an ale-feast for the gods after his acquisition of a great cauldron, from which the ale served itself, like Freyr's self-activated sword. Yet at the end of the poem, when Loki has been driven from his taunts and from the hall by the arrival of Þórr and his hammer, the scold makes an ominous prediction.

‘ǫl gǫrðir þú, Ægir, enn þú aldri munt
síðan sumbl um gora;
eiga þín ǫll, er hér inni er,
leiki yfir logi,
ok brenni þér á baki! (st. 65)

‘Ale you made, Ægir, but never again
will you hold a feast after this;
as for all your possessions which are here inside:
may flame play over it,
and burn you behind!’

⁵² There may also be some echo of the imprecation tradition in Irish to which Norse raiders, traders, and settlers were exposed.

The sexual taunt aside, beer is here tapped into the imagistic world of Ragnarøk. Just as the field may not be fertile, the barley infested with thistles or poorly harvested and threshed, or the beer spoiled in the brewing, so, on a grander scale, the world of the gods is under permanent threat and in need of defense, although its fate lies beyond both armed might and apotropaic magic.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Philip N., 2002: 'Form and Content in *Lokasenna*: A Re-Evaluation', *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, New York: Routledge: 139–57.
- Ármann Jakobsson, 2011: 'Óðinn as Mother: The Old Norse Deviant Patriarch', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 126: 5–16.
- Berg, Mai Elisabeth, 1998: 'Skírnismál—kjærlighetspoesi eller hierogamimyte?' *Edda* 3: 226–244.
- Bibire, Paul, 1986: 'Freyr and Gerdr: The Story and its Myth', *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 65th Birthday, 26 May, 1986*, ed. Rudolf Simek et al., Hermann Vienna: Böhlhaus Nachf.: 19–40.
- Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.), 1941–51: *Ynglinga saga, Heimskringla*, 3 vols, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Clark, David, 2012: *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cleasby, Richard, Guðmundur Vigfússon, and William A. Craigie, 1957: *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret, 1994: *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, Odense: Odense University Press.
- Crawford, Jackson, (trans.), 2015: *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Denny, Mark, 2007: *Ingenium: Five Machines That Changed the World*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dronke, Ursula, 1962: 'Art and Tradition in *Skírnismál*', *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Norman Davies and C. L. Wrenn, London: Allen and Unwin: 250–268.
- (ed. and trans.), 1969–2011: *The Poetic Edda*, 3 vols., Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press.
- Dumézil, Georges, 1952: *Deux petits dieux scandinaves: Byggvir et Beyla*, Bruxelles: La Nouvelle Clío.
- Elmevik, Lennart, 2003: 'Freyr, Freyja och Freyfaxi', *Studia Anthroponymica Scandinavica* 21: 5–13.
- English Broadside Ballad Archive, <[http://http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/](http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/)>
- Faulkes, Anthony, (ed.), 2005: Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, London: Viking Society for Northern Research.

- Faulkes, Anthony, (trans.), 1987: Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, London: Dent.
- Guðrun Nordal, 1992: 'Freyr fifldur', *Skírnir* 166: 271–294.
- Gunnell, Terry, 1995: *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer.
- 2005: 'Eddic Poetry', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Malden, MA: Blackwell: 82–100.
- Harris, Joseph, 2000: 'The Performance of Old Norse Eddic Poetry: A Retrospective', *The Oral Epic: Performance and Music*, ed. Karl Reichl, Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung: 225–232.
- 2002: 'Cursing with the Thistle: *Skírnismál* 31, 6–8, and OE Metrical Charm 9, 16–17', *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, New York: Routledge: 79–93, originally published in 1975 as 'Cursing with the Thistle', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76: 26–33.
- 2008: 'Ogmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars helmings: Unity and Literary Relations', 'Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing': *Old Norse Studies by Joseph Harris*, ed. Thomas D. Hill and Susan E. Deskis, Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 221–49.
- Heinrichs, Anne, 1997: 'Der liebeskranke Freyr: euhemeristisch entmythisiert', *Alvissmál* 7: 3–36.
- Heizmann, Wilhelm, 1996: 'Der Fluch mit der Distel: Zu *För Skírnis* 31.6–8', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 46: 91–104.
- Jakob Benediktsson (ed.), 1986: *Landnámabók*, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Isaksson, A.-M., 1992: 'Miniaturskärorna från yngre järnålder i Mälardalen: föremål med magisk kraft?' Arkeologiska institutionen, Stockholms Universitet.
- Jónas Kristjánsson (ed.), 1956: *Ogmundar þáttur dytts, Eyfirðinga sögur*, Íslensk fornrit 9, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag: 99–115.
- Klingenberg, Heinz, 1996: 'För *Skírnis*: Brautwerbungsfahrt eines Werbungshelfers', *Alvissmál* 6: 21–62.
- Larrington, Carolyne, 1992: "What Does Woman Want?" *Mær* and *Munr* in *Skírnismál*, *Alvissmál* 1: 3–16.
- 2002: 'Skírnismál or *För Skírnis*', Introduction to Joseph Harris, 'Cursing with the Thistle: *Skírnismál* 31, 6–8, and OE Metrical Charm 9, 16–17', *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, New York: Routledge: 79–81.
- (trans.), 2014: *The Poetic Edda*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lieberman, Anatoly, 1996: review of Klaus von See et al., 'Skírnismál': *Modell eines Edda-Kommentars*, *Alvissmál* 6: 114–118.
- Lid, Nils, 1958: 'Eldviging', *Kulturhistoriskt Lexikon för Nordisk Medeltid*, vol. 3, Malmö: Allheims: 579–581.
- Lindow, John, 2001: *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lönnroth, Lars, 1977: 'Skírnismál och den fornisländska äktenskapsnormen', *Opuscula Septentrionalia: Festskrift til Ole Widding 10.10.1977*, ed. Bent Chr. Jacobsen et al., København: Reitzel: 154–178.
- 2009: 'Old Norse Texts as Performance', *Scripta Islandica* 60: 49–60.

- Marteinn H. Sigurðsson, 2006: 'bera tilt með tveim: On Lokasenna 38 and the One-Handed Týr', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 121: 139–159.
- McKinnell, John, 1981: 'Freyr and Gerðr: A New Interpretation of the Myth of Skírnir', *Maal og Minne*: 121–136.
- 1987–88: 'Motivation in Lokasenna', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 22: 234–262.
- 2005: *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer.
- McKinnell, John, Rudolf Simek, and Klaus Düwel (eds), 2004: *Runes, Magic and Religion: A Sourcebook*, Wien: Fassbaender.
- Mitchell, Stephen A., 1983: 'För Skírnis as Mythological Model: Frið at kaupá', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98: 108–122.
- 1998: 'Anaphrodisiac Charms in the Nordic Middle Ages: Impotence, Infertility and Magic', *Norveg* 41: 19–42.
- 2007: 'Skírnismál and Nordic Charm Magic', *Reflections on Old Norse Myths*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt, Rasmus Trandum Kristensen, Turnhout: Brepols: 79–94.
- Mizuno, Tomoaki, 2001: 'Loki's Buffoonery: The Dialects of Sagacity and Folly', *Iris* 21:105–122.
- Motz, Lotte, 1981: 'Gerðr: A New Interpretation of the Lay of Skírnir', *Maal og Minne* 3–4: 121–136.
- Neckel, Gustav, and Hans Kuhn (ed.), 1983: *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius*, 5th ed., Heidelberg: Winter.
- North, Richard, 1991: *Pagan Words and Christian Meanings*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- 2000: 'Óðinn gegen Freyr: Elemente heidnischer Religion in der Viga-Glúms saga', *International Scandinavian and Mediaeval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, ed. Michael Dallapiazza, Olaf Hansen, and Preben Meulengracht-Sorensen, Trieste: Parnaso: 347–365.
- Olsen, Magnus, 1909: 'Fra gammelnorsk myte og kultus', *Maal og Minne*: 17–32.
- 1960: *Edda- og skaldekvad: forarbeider til kommentar (II)*, Oslo: i Kommissjon hos H. Aschehoug.
- Orchard, Andy, (trans.), 2011: *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*, London: Penguin.
- Page, R. I., (ed.), 1998: *The Icelandic Rune-Poem*, London: The Viking Society for Northern Research.
- Radzin, Hilda, 1985: 'Names in the Mythological Lay Skírnismál', *Literary Onomastics Studies* 12: 209–212.
- Rendboe, Laurits, 1987: *Det gamle shetlandske sprog: George Low's ordliste fra 1774*, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag.
- Roy, Carrie A., 2012: *Norse Binding Motifs and Techniques in Material Culture and Narrative Tradition*, Dissertations Abstracts International 73 (3).
- Sahlgren, Jöran, 1962: 'Lunden Barre i Skírnismál', *Namn och bygd* 50: 193–203.
- Salberger, Evert, 2002: 'Andra Helmingen i Skírnismál 31', *Gardar: Årsbok för Samfundet Sverige-Island i Lund-Malmö* 33: 13–19.
- Schjødt, Jens Peter, 2012: 'Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr: Functions and Relations', *News from Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Cul-*

- ture, ed. Merrill Kaplan and Timothy R. Tangherlini, Berkeley: North Pinehurst: 61–91.
- Schmeidler, Bernhard, (ed.), 1917: Adam of Bremen, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte* [= *Gesta hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*], 3rd ed., Hannover and Leipzig: Hahnsche Buchhandlung.
- Schorn, Brittany, 2013: ‘Divine Semantics: Terminology for the Human and the Divine in Old Norse Poetry’, *Scripta Islandica* 64: 67–97.
- von See, Klaus, et al., 1997: *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda, Band 2: Götterlieder: Skírnismál, Hárbarðsljóð, Hymiskviða, Lokasenna, Þrymskviða*, Heidelberg: Winter.
- Sigurður Nordal (ed.), 1933: *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Simek, Rudolf, 1993: *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, Angela Hall (trans.), Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- 2001: ‘Lust, Sex, Domination, *Skírnismál* and the Foundation of the Norwegian Kingdom’, *Sagnaheimur: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*, eds. Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek, Wien: Fassbaender: 229–246.
- Solheim, Svante, 1965: ‘Landvette’, *Kulturhistoriskt Lexikon för Nordisk Medeltid*, vol. 10, Malmö: Allheims: 300–302.
- Steinsland, Gro, 1990: ‘Pagan Myth in Confrontation with Christianity: *Skírnismál* and Genesis’, *Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-names*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck, Åbo: Donner Institute for Research in Religion and Cultural History: 316–328.
- 1991: *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: En analyse av hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð*, Oslo: Solum.
- Vaughan Williams, Ralph, and A. L. Lloyd, 1959: *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs: from the Journal of the Folk Song Society and the Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, and Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books.