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ETYMOLOGY, MYTH AND INTERPRETATION. ON SOME PROBLEMS OF THE USE OF

EDDIC MATERIALS IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION. (SUMMARY)

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how divergent etymologies may affect the interpretation of definite texts and how the resulting new exegetic comments on the myth may modify the perception of the nature and functions of the deities involved. As an example, the Skírnismál is investigated in this context. The story is well-known: While surveying the worlds from Odin's high seat Freyr sees a beautiful young maiden in Giantland and falls desperately in love with her. Promptly his servant Skírnir is dispatched to Jötunheimr to woo the girl for the yearning god, and after a perilous journey he reaches her home. There, Skírnir offers the young lady, Gerðr, the daughter of the giant Gymir, various gifts, but though these are valuable in Ásgarðr, she does not show the slightest interest for them. Then, Skírnir resorts to threats and is about to use a magic spell to doom the reluctant girl to a miserable fate of rejection and lovelessness when Gerðr finally yields. She promises to meet Freyr after nine nights, and Skírnir rides back home to report the success of his mission. Though happy, Freyr does not know how he will be able to live through the long nine days of waiting time!

The usual interpretation of the Skírnismál is based on the views expressed by Magnus Olsen in 1909 in his article in Maal og Minne (pp. 17-36) under the title: Fra gammelnorske myte og kultus. In his

opinion, the text reflects the hierogamy between the god of sunshine and fertility, Freyr, and the deity of the wheatfield, Gerðr, released from the grip of the frost-giants, symbolizing winter. Their trysting place, Barri, represents a plowed field sown with barley (ON barr) and the whole poem is pervaded with ritualistic elements. Besides, as E.O.G. Turville-Petre indicates in his Myth and Religion of the North--The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia (London, 1964, p.175), Old English poetic diction appears to have influenced this lay, e.g. in the use of terms like vafrogi 'flickering flame' (st. 9), corresponding to OE wafran lices. On the other hand, this interpretation does not account for a number of facts like the offering of Iðunn's apples to Gerðr: suggesting Celtic affinities with reference to this episode is a rather makeshift solution, as is the assumption of Celtic influence to explain the presence of a horse able to penetrate a ring of magical fire! All in all, considering the Skírnismál as a "drama representing the marriage between the god of sunshine [whose servant, Skírnir, i.e. 'shining brightly', is nothing but a hypostasis of the deity] and his earthly bride fails to provide a satisfactory explanation for the hazardous journey of Skírnir; it does not take into consideration his meeting with the shepherd on the mound and the vicious hounds guarding the approaches to the residence of Gerðr; it does not examine the motivation for the choice of the gifts offered by Skírnir and the threats made by him, and it fails to consider the reasons why Gerðr acts the way she does when offered presents and being pressed with threats and curses.

Can a better solution be proposed? To answer this question it is necessary to deal with three problems:

- (a) what does the etymology of the name of the protagonists of this

little drama tell us about their nature and function?

(b) what is the meaning of Skírnir's trip and encounters before reaching Gerðr's residence?

(c) what is the significance of the gifts offered to Gerðr and of the threats uttered by Skírnir, and why does Gerðr respond the way she does? Let us examine these points one by one:

ETYMOLOGIES: Referring to Jan de Vries, Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Leyden, 1961), the following remarks can be made:

(a) Gerðr, whom Olsen considers as symbolizing the "fenced field", has been interpreted by J. Sahlgren as hypocoristic for a feminine name in -gerdr --related to gardr 'protectress' (de Vries, 1961:164). This meaning correlates with Sahlgren's interpretation of the name of her father, Gymir, which he connects with ON geyma in Eddica & Scaldica II (1928:241) 'pay attention to, care for', assuming a meaning 'protector' which, as de Vries (1961:197) points out, hardly fits his personality.

(b) Gymir has been considered as a chthonian being and his name connected with ON gumi 'man', as earthling (cf. Lat. homo < humus); de Vries (1961:196-197) prefers to equate Gymir [the giant] with ON gymir 'ocean', also used as a name for Ægir, the original meaning being 'throat, gullet', related with ON gómr 'palate, jaws' and further with gr. khágos 'gullet, gorge, chasm'--he would be the 'devourer'! A further possibility would be to consider him as the 'wintry' one and link his name with ON gemla 'one-year old sheep', like gr. khámaros from Indo-European *ghem-/#ghyem- 'winter (weather)', e.g. Skt. hima 'cold, frost', Lat. hiems 'winter (weather), storm'--an interpretation that would fit the classical pattern of the wintergod reluctant to release the earth to the god of sunshine and fertility in Spring--but it is not

Gymir that keeps Gerðr in his clutches: SHE does not want to go!

(c) Skírnir could also be related to ON skýrr 'clear, bright' (cf. OHG scāri 'shrewd' < IE *skeyros- --a meaning that would fit Skírnir's personality very neatly!).

(d) Barri--the meeting place of the lovers--is strangely enough homonymous with a personal name that actually means 'ram', but also applies to an oak or bumpkin; as a place-name it can designate a pine-grove as well as a barley- or wheatfield (ON barr actually reflects two Germanic terms: (1) bariza- 'barley' (also applying to wheat in Old Norse); (2) barza- 'conifer' (hence, any tree or foliage in Old Norse).

SKÍRNIR'S JOURNEY AND ENCOUNTERS: The mythical geography of the Scandinavian world places Jotunheimr beyond the mountains in the east, but the realm of the giants extends also northwards, where the hrimpursar (frost-giants) dwell: there Giantland borders on the land of the dead, since it is the location of the Nástrandir 'the shores of death' and the way to the Other World leads in this direction: helveg liagr niðr ok norðr. Like the dwarfs whose abode is in the Niðavellir ('dark fields'), a number of giants have subterraneous dwellings such as the mountain chamber in which Suttungr kept the mead of poetry. Sigurðr Nordal has shown in his comment on the Völuspá (German edition, Darmstadt, 1980, p.101) that Surtr is a powerful giant residing in the nether world, where he controls the fire, being responsible for volcanic eruptions in Iceland. A giant in eagle-shape sits at heaven's end, beating his wings to produce the stormwind from the north: his name is Hræsvelgr 'devourer of corpses', as the wise Vafþrúðnir tells us (Vafþrúðnismál, st. 37). These associations of the giants with the Other World make it plausible to assume that Gymir also belongs to this group:

this would be in keeping with the chthonian interpretation of his name and especially with the etymology favored by de Vries, which makes him a 'devourer'--an epithet often given to the rulers of the nether world because they gulp up the living into their land of no return! Such an interpretation would make the whole episode of Skírnir's journey and arrival much more understandable: he needs a magic sword to overcome the powers of darkness--the trolls who, like Grendel (see J. Haudry's recent article in Revue des Études Indo-européennes, Lyon, 1984), strike at nightfall; only Freyr's horse can, like Sleipnir, jump over the fence surrounding the Other World. Actually, there is more than one parallel between Skírnir's mission and Hermóðr's journey to Hel: when Hermóðr reaches the shores of Hel, Móðguðr is surprised to see him alive and points out that he made more noise coming there than "five troops of dead men"; similarly, the shepherd whom Skírnir meets on a mound near the entrance of Gerðr's residence wonders whether he is "doomed or dead already", and when he arrives, Gerðr asks what all that "outcry and uproar" is in the courtyard: "the earth and all my father Gýmí's high halls shake!" Both also state their errand to the first being they encounter in the Other World. Typical of the latter are also the two "grim hounds of Gýmí" which block the access to the "bower" of Gerðr. Like Móðguðr, Gerðr welcomes the unexpected visitor and asks who he is, wondering how he has reached her abode. One problem remains unsolved here: why does she say that he may be "her brother's baneman" when she offers him mead? Lee M. Hollander suggested in his translation of the Poetic Edda (Austin, 1962, p.68,fn.12) that Skírnir might have killed the shepherd, who acts like a gatekeeper, "watching all ways" (st. 11), whom Hugo Gering in his Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda. I. Götterlieder (Halle, 1927, p. 55) compares him with Egðer, gvgjar

hirðir 'the giantess' herdsman', in Vpluspá, st. 42; it is however most improbable that Skírnir would have jeopardized his mission before it even began by murdering the brother of Gerð. Since Skírnir appears to be a mere hypostasis of Freyr, Hollander also considers the possibility that the passage refers to the slaying of the giant Beli by the god (cf. Snorri Sturluson, Gylfaginning, chap. 37), but as Gering (ibidem, p. 224) points out, this event took place after the wooing of Gerðr! Whatever the case may be, it is obvious that Skírnir's mission has taken him to the Other World; this is further confirmed by the third element in our discussion:

THE GIFTS AND THE THREATS OF SKÍRNIR AND GERÐR'S RESPONSE: Freyr, and his messenger Skírnir, represent the Vanic world--this is illustrated, for example, by Skírnir's perfect knowledge of his future (st. 13) and by his extensive resort to magic--but as one of the hostages sent to Ásgarðr, Freyr has acquired some of the features and abilities of the Æsir: Freyr also participates in combat, and his servant Skírnir is not afraid to face the giants sword in hand: Gerðr even calls him "fearless warrior"; he enjoys the protection of Odin, who apparently gave his blessing to the mission (cf. st. 33), and makes use of the runes to cast spells on Gerðr (st. 36)--actually, the threat of this all-powerful magic is what makes Gerðr waver in her decision not to respond to Freyr's request!

If we consider the gifts that were offered to Gerðr, we notice that in a Dumézilian pattern, they would belong to the third and second functions: the apples of youth and the ring Draupnir--symbol of inexhaustible wealth--are clearly elements of the third functional level

which encompasses health, wealth, fertility and all the material things of life though one might claim that the apples maintaining the gods in their youthful vigor (i.e. preventing aging) have direct second function connotations since they condition the maintenance of physical strength. Obviously, the magic sword belong, with all wonderful arms, to the warrior function (= second level). Such gifts would be those one expects from a third function god (= Freyr, presiding over fertility and prosperity) with minor warrior connotations—but why does Gerðr refuse them? Again the interpretation of her place of residence as the Other World provides the clues: there is no need for the rejuvenating medicine of the gods there where people never age; a new source of wealth is insignificant in the nether world where there is no lack of treasures of precious metal (cf. st. 22: "there is no lack of gold to share out every day in the halls of Gymlr"); the ruler of the world of the dead has no need for weapons...

Explaining the threats is somewhat more complex, but the torments she will be afflicted with if she does not surrender consist essentially in physical and spiritual deprivation; she will be refused the essential attributes man was initially endowed with by the gods: beautiful presence (the gifts of the Vanic deity Lóðurr in Völuspá, st. 18) and intelligence (coming from the Æsir, as I showed in my comments on the relevant stanzas of the Prophecy of the Seeress in the Symposium volume Old Norse Literature and Mythology [ed. E.C. Polomé, Austin, 1969:265-290]). This explains why, after saying he will make her disappear "on a cliff where eagles nest", Skírnir tells her she will lose all beauty and physical appetite, and drivel and dote stupidly through life! When this does not work, he switches to other

torments--mostly physical: she will be plagued by demonic beings, submitted to the whims of a tricephalic giant, burning of unsatisfied desire, paralyzed by a magic charm (= a thistle weighed by a thorn; cf. Sering, loc.cit., p. 231). Then come the curses in which Odin and Freyr are invoked and all the beings in the universe called upon to deprive her of the sexual enjoyment she will lust for--a curse which again relates typically to the third Dumézilian function! The culminating point is reached when he condemns her to a life of seclusion with a repulsive frost-giant at the "Gates of Death" (st. 33: fyr gágrindr neþan) where she will be fed tree-roots and given goat's urine to drink (receiving the same treatment as Njörðr had from the giant Hymir's handmaids, according to Lokasenna, st. 34). To fulfil this curse, Skirnir starts scratching the 'thunr' rune, which is supposed to strike women with illness, and calls upon its magic to make her lecherous, loathing and lustful... The fear for this awful predicament brings about a total change in attitude on the part of Gerðr and she accepts Freyr's courtship.

Where does this take us as regards the final interpretation of the Eddic lay? Obviously, Gerðr is not the deity of the "fenced field", but is she the "protectress"? This interpretation does not fit the context too well either: if her name is connected with the root that means 'enclose, protect', one would rather expect a past participial form, since she is secluded in the Other World, behind a ring of flames (like a valkyrie), guarded by the terrifying hounds of Hel. Mythologically, the union between Freyr and Gerðr--confirmed by the Ynglingasaga, chap. 10--is one of the several between giantesses and gods, but the wooing of a young lady from the Other World by Freyr may

be indicative of the affinities of the fertility god with the chthonian powers. The romantic love episode focusing on the yearning of Freyr in the initial and final stanzas has partly obscured the original meaning of the text and makes its conclusive interpretation rather difficult.

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