

AMBIGUITY IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HEROES AND GIANTS.

As this paper is about the problematic and often ambiguous relationship between heroes and giants, it will not be necessary to take up the many issues that have been the concern of recent scholarship.¹ Nevertheless, it will be useful to start with defining the nature of giants and the relationship between them and other creatures in Scandinavian mythology.

Let us first repeat a statement, that has been made by many scholars - though not by all² - in one form or another, one by the way that does not refer to the Scandinavian giants alone: Giants belong to the outside, that is the place where people do not live, the wilderness, the untamed and untamable nature; they are beings of chaos. As such they are the implacable antagonists of the gods, the creators and guardians of cosmos. Yet, as this visible world was created from chaos, so the gods were born from the giants and there is a basic relationship between them. The battle between cosmos and chaos is by no means the same as that between good and evil, and we had better detach ourselves from the values that belong to this antagonism in our Christian world in this ancient conflict.

To protect Midgardr, their frail creation, the gods put up barriers between it and the wild untamed outside, Útgardr.³ The conflict between the gods and giants cannot come to an end, before the world is at an end, and then both gods and giants are at an end, too. Men cannot stay neutral in this conflict. Most of them will take sides with the gods, because it is the only relatively safe choice for them, creating the conditions in which they can live and look for the means of sustaining life. Therefore they will prefer to stay on the inside of the barriers.

Yet, there are people, to whom the lure of this wild

world and the dangers of destruction will prove irresistible, the adventurers. In this society they are particularly found in bands of Vikings and those of other warriors. By choosing the Viking way of life, they opted for life on the outside, outside settled rural life, outside the community. They were under the spell of wilderness, despite its dangers and deprivations.

Wild animals, bears, wolves, wild boars also belonged to wilderness. The warrior still had to fight and to kill them, not only because he wanted to preserve his life but also because he himself had become a part of the destructive forces. Yet, he envied these animals of their strength and ferocious courage. He dined on their meat and dressed himself in their skins, and he used a personal name, in which "wolf" or "bear" was an element. Thus he identified himself with them, and tried to absorb their enviable qualities by magical means. The opposite forces of attraction and repulsion installed an ambivalent relationship.

The same applies to giants. In some tales a giant is just a monster and a danger for mankind. He can take the place a dragon takes in other stories, some of them very famous. In that case the hero, like a dragon-slayer, just has to fight and kill the giant, in order to save his fellow man. The gods have ordained the hero to be the defender and guardian of cosmos, like they themselves are. In other stories he comes to an agreement with a giant, to stay for some time with him, although most certainly not for ever. Maybe, by so doing the warrior can get some profit of the giant.

Most creatures are either male or female. (The dwarfs are the notable exception.) And so there are male and female giants⁴ who live in families, the same as with gods and men. The place the giantesses take in universe, and their relationship with their male companions, and also with humankind (and the gods, with which this paper does not con-

cern itself) is very difficult to define.

The relationship of male and female monsters in general has been studied by Joseph Fontenrose in his "Python" (1959). He is especially occupied with Greek and Eastern mythology, but in one of the appendices he draws attention to Beowulf and Siegfried/Sigurdr. And we will certainly find that the most important themes in Fontenrose's list can also be found in Scandinavian mythology, although we will have to speak of other themes, too. We will not adopt his theory, that these themes originated in Asia Minor, and from there spread out over the world, the European continent included. We rather are inclined to think that owing to the basic structural relatedness of human beings, related images could express the same basic problems of life.

1) In many myths of the combat theme type the god or hero meets both male and female monster. The female is either mother, daughter or wife of the male. Usually he first meets the male, against whom he fights and whom he slays. Afterwards, the same thing happens to the female. The reverse order is not impossible.

2) There are also some myths, in which the god/ hero is seduced by the female monster. Fontenrose calls this the Venusberg theme (a term taken from the well-known Tannhäuser story, but it occurs in Classic mythology, too).

Fontenrose repeatedly says that the outward form of the monster is of no vital importance. While the dragon is the most well-known type in the Classical world, all other kinds of monsters can also be found. To the Scandinavian (and other) Teutonic peoples the dragon is not entirely unknown (Beowulf, Siegfried/ Sigurdr). But the type the most frequently met with is the giant.

The realms of death also belong to chaos. Death is a destructive force which disrupts cosmos and its inhabitants and turns them into chaos again. Generally a female monster

can rather often be looked upon as a representation of death. She is a death-goddess, or rather the earth-goddess in her destructive, negative aspect.⁵ In Scandinavia we know some giantesses who are death-goddesses by name: Hel and Rán. Most people go after their death to Niflheimr, the misty place, ruled by Hel. Only the sailors and other people who drown at sea, will be the slaves of Rán, wife to the sea-giant Ægir. There are also some nameless women, who are most likely to be interpreted as death-goddesses, and who are probably also giantesses.⁶

Perhaps this will come somewhat unexpected to some people, but a meeting with the goddess of death is not unfrequently spoken about in erotic terms.⁷ She is not only a fiend to be hated and shunned, she can also be a seductress. Here we enter upon the second theme. To die can be to start an erotic relationship with the goddess of death. Of course, this detracts nothing of her ambiguity.

In some stories the giantess fights side by side with her male relation, in other cases she wants to avenge his death, but there are also cases in which she betrays him in a most ignominious way to start a relationship with the hero.

Male giants must most often be fought against by the hero, as the gods did before him. Sometimes people beg him to deliver them from an evil creature that harries their country and threatens their lives (Beowulf, Bødvar-Bjarki, Grettir). Sometimes he feels that it is his duty to save an unhappy damsel in distress. But the Scandinavian heroes have more often than not lost something of the primeval earnestness of mythology, and the only aim of the hero is that of enhancing his own glory and gaining great treasures. Sometimes he fights monsters just for the fun of it.

Then it may happen, that he meets a second monster afterwards, as for instance Beowulf, who met Grendel's mo-

ther who wanted to take revenge for the death of her son. Beowulf was able to kill her, too, but this second feat is not possible for every hero.

The same scenario can be found twice in Saxo's Hadingus story:⁸ The first time, the hero kills a sea-monster on the coast of Hålsingland; then he is accosted by a woman who threatens him with terrible consequences unless he pays compensation by sacrificing a great number of black cattle to Freyr. The second time he slays a giant, the unwelcome betrothed of the Norwegian princess Regnilda. This act has more terrible consequences: a mysterious woman brings him to the nether regions of the dead. (From which he must have been rescued in a part of the story, that has been lost, probably by his blood-brother Liserus.) It is not told what connection the women had to the monsters, but the best explanation seems to be that they were relatives.

In the Edda Lay of Helgi Hjörvardsson it is told that Helgi slays the giant Hati. Afterwards the giant's daughter Hrimgerdr wants to have Helgi as a bed-fellow as compensation, but the hero's jarl manages to put her off until the first rays of the rising sun turn her into stone. But then during the dark demonic time at Yule, Hedin, Helgi's brother, meets a giantess who is probably identical with Hrimgerdr, and who asks for his companionship; when he denies her this, she is angry and swears to take revenge. The outcome of this is that Helgi is slain soon afterwards.⁹

These women must take blood-revenge on the hero (or a relative) for his slaying of their relatives. As they were goddesses of death themselves, they could also ask to be married to the hero, which amounts to the same in this case. In this way the balance was restored again.¹⁰

After the giant Djazi had been killed by the gods, his daughter Skadi came to Ásgardr to exact vengeance.¹¹ In analogy to the preceding story one could therefore very well

argue that she is a death-goddess too. She got Njördr, but the person she really wanted to have was Baldr.

Now, as we know from another story that Baldr had to go to the land of the dead, we could ask ourselves, whether this is not the contamination between a story about Njördr and Skadi, and the story how the death-goddess came to fetch off Baldr to the underworld.¹²

Many more things could and must be said about the subject, of course, but in the confines of this paper we must necessarily restrict ourselves. We will therefore proceed with another theme, that of the erotic female.

In the Baldrs Draumar (Edda, pp. 277-'79) Ódinn raises a dead volva from her grave at the entrance of the land of the dead. This female is probably the goddess of death herself (Hel?). She informs Ódinn, that a great drinking-party is being prepared for the reception of Baldr, maybe the wedding-feast of Baldr and herself. In the Fóstbrœdra Saga the hero Dorgeirr informs one of his enemies, that Hel will fold her arms about him that evening (ÍF VI, p. 138). But in many cases the implications of a meeting with the giantess are not that serious. The motif of the friendly giantess, who gives to the hero indispensable help, and thereby betrays her male relatives, is frequently used in the older and even more in the younger heroic stories of the North. Because of lack of space we must confine ourselves to a few examples.

In the Hjálmþés Saga ok Qlvis (FAN IV, pp. 175-244, p. 194-5) Hjalþér has to slay a giant in order to escape a curse put on him by his stepmother. Skinnhúfa, the giant's daughter goes as far as to procure him the giant's own sword, the only weapon with which he can be killed. In the Egils Saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana (FAN III, pp. 323-66, pp. 354-61) the giantess Arinnejfa does not only restore Egill's lost hand to him, but also assists him and his foster-brother Ásmundr to save two human sisters from

her male relatives.

From here it is but a small step to a motif that is of particular importance in the heroic stories: very many heroes stay for some time in the dwelling-places of the giants.¹³ This is even told of the historic hero Haraldr fagrhar, who stayed for some time with the Dofri giant as a boy (Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar. Flateyjarbók I, pp. 565-66).

This was at the beginning of Haraldr's glorious career. In a way, he received his early education at the hands of the wise giant. One could therefore say, that this dwelling in the wilderness was a kind of limen experience, preceding the initiation, to be compared with the life of Sigmundr and Sinfjotli, who turned into wolves, straying through the woods for a time.

Hadingus' career started in the same way (Saxo, pp. 19-24; F/ED pp. 21-25). His guardian brought him to a giant, to be educated there. But after his return to the human world, he had also to be educated by Ódinn, in order to become a warrior-king. The case of Hadingus was complicated by the fact that the giant's daughter, who had suckled him in the beginning, became his lover afterwards. This is another case of the giantess as a seductress. This giantess tried to make their relation a lasting one by accompanying him in the human world, but she had to pay for this with her life.

A certain episode in the life of Orvar-Oddr has often been compared with it (FAN II, pp. 271-'80). Also he stays with a family of giants for some time; in the beginning a giant-girls uses him as her toy and afterwards he becomes her lover. It is quaint that this is in the middle of Oddr's career and after his becoming a Christian (!) - but as he is afterwards received by Ódinn with whom he strikes a pact, it could also be seen as a kind of initiation. (This episode was a later insertion into some versions of the saga.)

The famous Starkadr was even partially of giant des-

cent, but before he could enter the human world and become a warrior, he had to adapt himself to human society by having his superfluous limbs cut off by the god Dórr (Saxo, p. 151; F/Ed p. 170), or, according to another version (Gautreks Saga, FAN IV, 13-14) he had to receive an education at the hands of nobody less than Ódinn.

Naturally, one remembers the scene of Dórisdalr in the Grettis Saga (ÍF VII, p. 200-'01) at this point. But this episode serves another function. It is a kind of sabbatical leave during the tormented period of Grettir's life as an outlaw. The community exiled him to the outside, but now there proved to be in the middle of the chaos, which had threatened his life for such a long time, another kind of ordered life, a small new cosmos, so to say. Giants supplied to Grettir, this exceptional creature, the help that ordered community could not or would not give to him. But it proved to be only a temporary relief.

The heroic story is written to enhance the glory of the hero. Whether he goes out to kill the giants or to explore their world for some time, he will always profit during his endeavours. Although the modern readers can feel some sympathy for the giants and even think of them as poor, persecuted beings, the feelings of the original audience always went into the direction of the hero, a glorious adventurer who dared to go to the outside of ordered life.

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³It will be noticed that this explanation holds good for the old horizontal model of the world, that was afterwards superseded upon by the Christian vertical model. See Aaron Gurevich (1969) and Kirsten Hastrup (1990).

⁴As a matter of fact, there are male and female monsters of all kind. Something of this idea survives in expressions like "the devil and his old dam".

⁵In her positive aspect she is the fertile Earth-mother, of course. The kind of relationship she then enters into with some human beings (the kings) have been analyzed by Gro Steinsland (1991).

⁶Such as the woman who brought Hadingus to the underworld (Saxo, p. 31, F/ED, pp. 31-32) through the underworld and the woman consulted by Ódinn in Baldurs Draumar (Edda, pp. 277-'79).

⁷See Riti Kroesen (1984) and Gro Steinsland (1992).

⁸Riti Kroesen (1987).

⁹See Heino Gehrts (1967) and Riti Kroesen (1984).

¹⁰Cp. the Laxdæla Saga (ÍF V, p. 84), in which after the slaughtering of the miraculous bull Harri, a gigantic woman appears to Óláfr pái, announcing to him that Óláfr's son Kjartan will have to pay for this ignominious deed with his life.

¹¹Gylfaginning, Snorra Edda (1900), pp. 68-70.

¹²Riti Kroesen (1987).

¹³H.R. Ellis (1941).

TEXTS.

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