

KING HARALDUR FINEHAIR'S  
WOONG OF GYÐA EIRÍKSDÓTTIR

A summary

I

In my *Mythological Overlays*, published in 1977 (Sjöttu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni. Fyrri hluti, pp.273-292), I briefly discussed the context and possibly a significant affinity of the Haraldur - Gyða story in Haralds saga hárfagra in Heimskringla and the Freyr - Gerður episode in Skirnismál. As has been duly noted in motif indexes, the two share the motif of *Woong by emissary* which occurs quite frequently in Old Icelandic literature. In addition to this, I drew, in the article just mentioned, attention to other features as, for example, the following: Throughout Ynglinga saga we have a number of short and highly mythical accounts of a long line of kings whose progenitor is said to have been Freyr (Yngvifreyr), a euhemerized or divine king whose wife is Gerður Gymisdóttir. Accordingly, Haraldur Finehair was almost thirty generations removed from this couple.

Ynglinga saga does not explain under which circumstances Freyr originally came to meet his wife Gerður. Apparently, and unlike some of his descendants, he contented himself with only one wife who bore him their only son, Fjölfnir. In the saga, Freyr's fecundity powers reveal themselves in general prosperity, peace and high yields from farmlands and livestock throughout his domain. Yet Freyr and Gerður are the progenitors of the long line of the Yngling dynasty. Despite their divine or semi-divine attributes all these individuals are mortals, and in the end Freyr dies in his home territory of Sweden from natural causes, and even though his subjects try to keep his death a secret for three winters, his son, Fjölfnir, finally succeeds him.

The Freyr episode in Ynglinga saga does not lend it itself to a meaningful comparison with Haralds Saga. Yet a few points must be considered. As Snorri Sturluson himself has stated in his Heimskringla Prologue, of the two, the Saga, despite all its folklore and mythical features, has firmer historical grounds. Both Yngvifreyr and Haraldur have epoch-making roles in Heimskringla, the former as an illustrious progenitor, the latter as an enterprising ruler who managed to extend his sway to all of Norway. To a long line of descendants and sovereigns his accomplishments would remain an inspiration and a source of pride. Of the pre-Christian kings in Heimskringla, Yngvifreyr (Freyr) and Haraldur may therefore be said to have figured more prominently than any other members of the Yngling family and were presented by medieval writers as the makers of history. After death, impressive burial mounds were made in their honour. Quite a few other Yngling kings were accorded a similar distinction.

We notice that in Heimskringla the sequence of some thirty reigns separating Freyr and King Haraldur is studded with fecundity cult motifs. To give only one example, Haraldur's father, King Hálfðan the Black, the first king to become the subject of a separate Saga, is said to have lain down in a pig-sty where he dreamt a prophetic dream. Pigs were associated with the fertility god Freyr, so in this particular instance, the sanctity of the pig-sty appears to have been King Hálfðan's assurance of an important revelation.

In my paper, I shall document more fully the common occurrence in the Kings' Sagas and other related genres 'the woong by emissary motif' which is a distinctive element in the

Haraldur-Gyða episode. Suffice it to mention here that in *Ynglinga Saga* the story about King Guðröður Hálfðanarson's wooing of Ása Haraldsdóttir, who were Haraldur Finehair's grandparents, has the same motif and forms in essential ways a neat parallel with it. From the point of view of both literature and family history, the latter could be appropriately labelled as an anticipatory element.

Our discussion of a folktale motif suggests of course a literary analysis. With this in mind we may sound a note of caution by calling attention to the very thin and often blurred dividing line between fact and fancy. Indeed the very perceptive *Heimskringla* commentator Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson once wrote that "there is no indication that the story about King Haraldur's vow is not true," (*Heimskringla* I:LXIII). As is well known and further mentioned below, the vow is a highly significant part of this story.

Before we extend our discussion beyond the context of *Heimskringla*, it is necessary to point out that according to his *Saga* King Haraldur Finehair had six wives on whom he begat 20 offspring (scholars have tried to reduce that number by approximately half) and had to defeat several petty kings and conquer a handful of provinces (their number is uncertain) before achieving sovereignty over all of Norway. On the mythological plane of the Freyr-Gerður episode in *Skírnismál*, the conquest of lady and territory is represented in a different way as an indivisible concept.- a feature I deal with at some length in my paper.

## II

Even though we must maintain a reasonably neutral attitude towards the proportion of historicity and literary creativity in *Heimskringla*, we nevertheless have recourse to Northrop Frye's well-known classification of fictions based on the hero's power to act. The main features of the first three categories in his hierarchy may be described as follows: 1) the hero is superior in kind to other men and to the environment of other men (myth, the laws of nature suspended); 2) the hero is superior in degree to other men and to his environment (the laws of nature are partly enforced); 3) superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment (the laws of nature are fully enforced). King Haraldur himself and his ancestors seem to straddle the second and the third category. Their lives and careers are often affected by supernatural happenings; yet they are subject to the same fate as the heroes of *Sæmundar-Edda* in that they fail to escape mortality.

## III

Having briefly considered the Haraldur-Gyða story in its narrower context of *Heimskringla*, I have, in this part of my paper, examined to what extent it differs from the Freyr-Gerður myth of the Eddic poem *Skírnismál* and used Northrop Frye's classification outlined above to distinguish between the levels of mythical and mortal figures in the two stories. Having looked beyond their sharing of theme or motif, I discuss other features of a possible correspondence between them. In making this comparison, I shall, inasmuch as possible, fall back upon, or at least make reference to, a few pertinent analyses of the composition or structure of the Freyr-Gerður myth, the Æsir-Vanir exchange, and of some medieval accounts of social conflicts in Norway. Finally, I intend to ask a few questions one of which will raise the possibility of King Haraldur's wooing of Gyða being an example of the transformation of myth into folktale and another one asking, in a converse manner, if the Freyr-Gerður myth represents an instance in which a folktale (the Haraldur-Gyða story?) having been elevated to the level of myth. According to the opinion of some medieval

authors, the famous vow in the Haraldur-Gyða story not only led to the unification of Norway but resulted in the settlement of Iceland, too. With this in mind it is tempting to speculate if the Freyr-Geirur myth in Skírnismál could also have some bearing on these two historically related events. Unfortunately, the nature of the source materials at hand and indeed the speculative nature of mythological studies in general precludes that these and other related questions be answered with any degree of certainty. Conjecture, nevertheless, often leads to an interesting discussion even though it always acknowledges its lack of evidence.

The full version of my paper will have a select list of references.

