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Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature

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Seest thou, maiden, this keen, bright sword
That I hold here in my hand?
Thy head from thy neck shall I straightway hew,
If thou wilt not do my will. (23)

WITH THESE WORDS FROM THE EDDIC POEM "SKÍRNISMÁL" (THE Lay of Skirnir),¹ the man Skirnir addresses the giantess Gerd in order to persuade her to accept the god Frey as her lover. In its introduction, the poem describes how Frey sat one day in Odin's seat, from where he could look over all the worlds. He looked into "Jötunheim", the world of the giants, and saw there a fair maiden, as she walked from her father's house to her bower. From that moment he grows heartsick. He then keeps to himself, does not speak, and causes his parents to worry greatly. At last he confides in his friend Skirnir:

Since in days of yore we were young . . .
We two might each other trust. (5)

In the giant's world he has seen a maiden so dear, that her "arms glittered, / and from their gleam / shone all the sea and sky" (6). He has caught her in his gaze, and he must possess her. Skirnir offers to undertake the journey to "Jötunheim" and get the maiden for his friend. This he does on two conditions. He wants to take Frey's horse since it can ride through the flickering flames around the maiden's bower, and he wants to take Frey's sword "that fights of itself / against the giants' race" (8). With the sword Skirnir is going to conquer the maiden.

When Skirnir arrives in the land of the giants after a perilous journey through the wilderness, the maiden Gerd refuses to go with him. Skirnir tries to bribe her with golden apples, which represent eternal youth, and with jewelry, but it is no use:

I will not take at any man's wish
These eleven apples ever. (20)

Skirnir then resorts to threats and points at the sword he holds in his hands: "Seest thou, maiden, / this keen bright sword" (23). With the sword he will cut off her head, if she does not obey. She does not give in, and the poem relates the intense dispute between these two, one of many such disputes between the sexes represented in Old Norse literature. With a formulation similar to the words she has used before, she refuses to submit to men's power:

For no man's sake will I ever suffer
To be thus moved by might. (24)

The man pays no attention to her words and continues with the curses. Again he reminds her of the sword with which he not only will cut off her head, but the head of her father, the old giant, as well. In a speech twelve strophes long he threatens her with all kinds of physical as well as psychic violence. First he will whip her:

I strike thee, maid, with my magic staff
To tame thee to work my will. (26)

Calling her "most evil maid" (33) he threatens her with never-ending torments: exile, imprisonment, loneliness, hunger, humiliation, pain, weeping and various types of madness. She will suffer Odin's and Thor's wrath, Frey's hostility and the rage of all the gods,—that is the rage of societal and patriarchal power. She will live with a three-headed monster, or else be without a man, and never drink anything better than goat's piss. All this time he stands over her with a raised sword. When he begins to chant over her the three runes: "longing and madness and lust" (36), she has had enough and gives up. She promises to meet Frey in nine nights out in the woods, where she will grant him "delight" (42).

"The Lay of Skirnir" is a poem about sexual violence. Literary history, however, defines it either as a fertility myth or a love poem, and one of the most beautiful in Nordic literature. This identification with male desire, and blindness toward the perspective of the woman in the text, has a long history, which can be traced to Snorri Sturluson's paraphrase of the poem in his *Edda*.

I want to suggest that in "The Lay of Skirnir" the shrew is tamed. This happens while Frey is very young, and the victory over the giantess can be seen as his initiation into manhood, which is necessary if he is to be acknowledged by a male society. Furthermore the poem's structural pattern indicates a relation between the rise of patriarchy on the one hand and the subordination of women and the feminine on the other. In order to conquer women (and the feminine) men have to make alliances, and they need weapons. In the poem, then, the sword has a double and clearly phallic meaning as a metaphor for male power.

This structural pattern is striking in Old Norse literature, and this is all the more remarkable as this literature deals to a great extent with the appropriation of land, with settlement, and with the establishment of a society.

II

In fact, the whole of Norse mythology is geared to illustrate how the gods conquered nature, the untamed and wild, and established a society. First they set up a circle round the earth to demarcate the land from the ocean. Next they built another circle, the circle of Midgard with Asgard inside the first; these encircling fortifications protected them from giants and from the wild nature outside. They need to turn to the outside, however, to gain access to the knowledge stored there, and they win that knowledge by means of violence and deceit. Those elements outside society which they do not have power over but are seeking to win, are often defined as feminine, and in one way or another, related to the earth. Thus, the sibyl from whom Odin acquires wisdom in the poem "Völuspá" (The Sibyl's Prophecy) is a giantess, fostered beneath the surface of the earth. The woman Gunnlod who guards the mead of poetry is also a giantess, enclosed in a mountain, and when Odin bores himself into her, quite literally, with a drill, he sleeps with her and steals the mead. In the "Grottasöngur" (The Mill Song), two enslaved giantesses are set to work on an enormous millstone. They are rebellious, as giantesses most often are, and grind out death and destruction for their oppressors. These giantesses are also fostered in the earth. In "Hárbarðsljóð" (The Lay of the Grey One), Odin boasts about having seduced giantesses and slept with them, whereas Thor boasts about having beaten them:

Eastward I fared of the giants I felled
Their ill-working women
Who went to the mountain. (23)

In Eddic poetry Odin and Thor appear as allies, complimenting one another. Odin gains power over women through deceit and with sexual violence, Thor gains power with the hammer, the phallic symbol. Thor's ham-

mer is a kind of primal weapon. With it he holds the society of the gods together and keeps the giants away, as Loki says to Thor in "Prymskviða" (The Lay of Thrym), when the giant Thrym has stolen his hammer: "Else will the giants / in Asgard dwell / if thy hammer is brought not / home to thee" (17). Thor battles constantly with nature which he tries to conquer, though not always with good results. For instance, he does not get the better of time, which is personified—and feminized—in the old hag Age, with whom he wrestles in the uttermost wilderness of the place, on the other side of the ocean.

The Eddic poems are preoccupied with weapons. Thus Odin's spear in "The Sibyl's Prophecy" signals the first slaying in the world (24), and this is mystically related to the woman Gullveig whom the gods also kill with a spear (21). One of the most climactic events in the world of gods occurs when nature itself, in the figure of the plant mistletoe, turns into a deadly weapon:

From the branch which seemed so slender and fair
Came a harmful shaft. (33)

In Ragnarök, the doom of the gods, a similar metamorphosis occurs when nature itself turns into an array of weapons:

From the east there pour through poisoned vales
With swords and daggers the river Slith. (36)

Nature here turns into a society of warfare, a militant society, which in the end leads to the world's destruction.

III

In Old Norse literature, giantesses pose a great challenge to the heroes' masculinity. Metaphorically the female as giant reveals male fear of a female power that is bigger and stronger than the men themselves. In the giantesses, nature and woman come together, and the hero has to conquer both. The legendary romances ("fornaldarsögur") are very much about an appropriation of land, and in these sagas battles with giantesses are so frequent that they constitute a myth with a fixed narrative structure.

The narrative begins when the hero leaves society and sails on a ship, usually together with his ally, or a group of men, to northern and wild regions. After a hazardous journey at sea, they reach land, settle on shore in a tent or a shed, and fall asleep. But heroes may never sleep. They have always to be on guard, because while they sleep, giantesses seize their chance. The giantesses emerge, usually young and in a group of two or more. The confrontation between hero and giantess always takes place on the shore or at one or another border. The giantesses are described in sexualized terms, although as extraordinarily disgusting and bestial creatures. Often they also

are sexually aggressive. They live in the earth, in rocks, caves, canyons, and thus they merge with nature. The giantesses are curious, and show a special interest in the men's ships, which they seek to destroy. They shake the ships, and thereby often succeed in ruining—deconstructing—this societal and male construction. The narrative then depicts a dispute between the hero and the giantess, often in verse, in which the giantess either challenges the man sexually, or questions his virility. Often she humiliates him by reminding him of how small he is. In the battle that follows the man uses weapons, while the giantess fights with her bare body. The battle has erotic overtones, and the descriptions are preoccupied with the bodies of the giantesses and their dismemberment in detail. Usually the heroes begin by hewing off the hands of the giantesses. They see the hands as the giantesses' weapons, and by cutting them off, they "disarm" the giantesses.

The giantesses scream as they flee or are killed. In other words, they lose language—the mark of culture, that which separates human beings from animals. Thus the conquering of women very often has to do with language or, more precisely, with the silencing of women's language.

Parallel to this one there is another story, which often appears in the same narrative, and which tells about a love affair between a giantess and a male human hero. These two narrative structures reveal the ambivalent attitude toward women in these tales. In the second plot, even though he is small, the hero can arouse a giantess' desire. As opposed to the woman in society, the giantess is promiscuous. The rules of society do not apply to her. At the same time the sagas show a great interest in bringing this wild woman into society, under its rules, order and control. Thus they describe the various transformations by which an abnormal female is tamed. She takes on the woman's role and becomes a man's bride.

Giantesses play an important role in the series about the Norwegian chieftains in Hålogaland (a region far north in Norway). As other legendary romances do, these stories deal with the heroes' capture of land and conquest of nature. Among other things they discovered the sail, and thus they conquered two of nature's basic elements, the wind and the sea. A great part of their conquests consist of pursuing and killing giantesses. For this purpose they have secured themselves weapons: a big sword, the best of all swords, and three arrows. From these arrows the third link in the lineage has got his name: ArrowOdd ("odd" means a sharp point), and Odd is also one of the most industrious in eliminating giantesses and other abnormal women who cross his path.² It is conspicuous that these heroes are more or less giants themselves. An ancestor of ArrowOdd has the nickname "half-giant", a fact that could indicate that they have to suppress the gigantic and wild in themselves to be able to establish a society.

The short *Gríms saga loðinkinna*³ (The Saga of Grim with the furred cheek) offers a good illustration of what is happening in these sagas. It tells about the hero Grim who after great hardships at sea comes to a shore north

of Finnmark. He lands, places his ship and goes to the booth. One night he wakes up to hear someone laughing outside the booth. He springs up, catches his weapons—his reaction to laughter—and goes out. As always, he has with him the arrows which he has inherited from his father. He sees two giantesses down on the shore, shaking the ship, intending to break it apart by twisting it in two. He addresses them in verse and asks for the names of these disgusting creatures from the caves who are destroying his ship. They present themselves as from the far north, daughters of a giant high in the mountains, now visiting the shore. He calls them the worst of brides and threatens them with all evil. When they answer back, he shows them his weapons, and says that they now can get to know “what works better, the arrow or the fist”, that is, the man’s weapon or the woman’s body. He shoots one of his arrows at one of the giantesses, killing her on the spot, while he hews at the other with an axe. She screams and flees along the shore with the axe in her back, and the man follows. She runs up a mountain and into a big cave. With this, the axe falls out of her back, which is good, because the man, who is still ascending the mountain beneath her, has to use his weapon for climbing. Inside the cave are the parents of the giantesses, and the story describes them in bestial and grotesque terms. Before their daughter falls down dead, she informs them that her sister lies slain on the shore. Her father comments that it was not much of a deed to kill the giantesses, since the one was only six years old and the other only seven. At that moment Grim enters the cave, kills the father at once with the axe (there is no battle). The giant mother lunges at him, and they fight a long and hard battle “because she was the greatest of giants”. At last he succeeds “in cutting her head off, and lets her lie dead behind”. After that he goes to his shed. The scene is an emblematic one. We see the shore and wild nature, and the mountain which has to be conquered—with a weapon. The women come and surprise the man while he sleeps. The ship symbolizes purely male society. When the giantesses tear it apart, they literally deconstruct this male construction. The giantesses laugh while they are doing this. Laughter is a bodily language, which in Old Norse literature often accompanies women’s degradation of male heroes. The giantesses turn out to be children, thus they are potential women whose growth must be stopped. In this episode a whole family of giants is destroyed.

In this saga we also have the other pattern—the love story. On the same trip when Grim kills the giant family, he meets an extraordinarily monstrous giantess. The narrative describes her as black and ugly, with snot hanging from her nose. The skin frock she wears reaches only down to her buttocks. Grim gazes at her and thinks that she is rather “unkissable”. However, she talks him into sleeping with her, and then she is transformed into a beautiful woman. It turns out that she is Grim’s bride who had disappeared a week before their wedding and whom he was in fact seeking. He takes her back with him to society and marries her.

IV

These fellows from the legendary romances are just petty kings on adventurous expeditions. But the same structural pattern is to be seen in narratives of mightier kings. Before Saint Olaf can become a king over all of Norway, he has to conquer a sea giantess, who swims in the waves around his ship. This narrative is to be found in *Flateyjarbók*,⁴ a manuscript with kings' sagas from about 1290, that also contains an illustration of the event. It is said that this sea giantess sings so beautifully that whole crews fall asleep. When she has checked that all are asleep, she turns the ships over so that the men on board drown. At times she screams so loudly that many fall backward off the ships and into the sea solely because of fear. This sea giantess tries to practice her skill with Saint Olaf and his crew. Everybody aboard sleeps, except for the king who sits and reads a book, probably the Bible, given that he is a Christian and a civilized man. Suddenly the king sees the sea giantess emerge from the sea. Her body is described in detail and through the king's eyes. She has a head like a horse, with raised ears and wide nostrils. She has huge green eyes, and a terrifically large jaw. She has the shoulders of a horse, which in the front form her hands. Her back is in the form of a snake with a big curving tail and a broad tail fin. She is furry like a seal and grey in color.

The sea giantess succeeds in placing her hands on the rail, but in the same moment that she flings her tail upwards, the king jumps at her. He seizes his sword, and "chops her hands off". She screams loudly and rudely, in a way that the king has never heard before. Then she throws herself backward into the sea, with open jaws and intense screams.

The episode is the first in a long series about Saint Olaf's heroic deeds. As with the heroes in the legendary romances, King Olaf has to conquer the feminine and threatening elements in the ocean and throughout wild nature. This he does with his large and forceful sword, while the sea giantess has only her body. In the illumination in the manuscript she is depicted as quite feminine, with naked breasts and long hair, as she prays to the king for mercy. The sword, the hero's phallic attribute, dominates the picture.

V

The Icelandic family sagas, especially those which come closest to the fantasy of the romances, represent many battles between heroes and giantesses. In contrast to the romances in which the giantesses dwell far away from society and are pursued by the heroes on their expeditions, the giantesses in the family sagas live at the border of society, which they try to invade. Thus *Grettis saga*⁵ (The Saga of Grettir the Strong) tells about a giantess who eats men and breaks down houses. The hero Grettir fights with her during an entire night on a canyon rim, and the giantess tries to pull him down with her into the deep. At the end of a long battle, again with erotic overtones—he holds her, "the woman", tightly,—he succeeds in cutting off her head with

his weapon. She tumbles down into the canyon she came from and disappears into a cave under a waterfall. There her son (or husband) awaits her. Grettir later also kills him in the cave. This male giant does not move out into society, but sends a woman (his wife, mother) as his representative. Thus the giantess is situated on the border between two worlds: that of nature and society. Once she is killed, the saga comments that Grettir has with this feat performed a great clearing of the land. One version of the saga says that Grettir did not throw her into the deep, but that she was petrified into stone when the sun came up, and "still stands in a woman's image on the cliff".

VI

This structural pattern in the narrative of the giantesses can easily be transferred to the more realistic Icelandic Family Sagas in their narratives of ordinary women who refuse to be oppressed by male power.

A refusal like that is the theme of *Svarfdæla saga*⁶ (The Saga of the People of Svarfardal Valley), in the story of Yngvild fair-cheek. This beautiful woman is the concubine of the most powerful chieftain in the valley, a certain Ljotolf. He marries her to a man who is beneath her in class, and together with him she begets three sons. A conflict arises between the chieftains in the valley. At a meeting Yngvild ruins a possible reconciliation between the chieftains, interrupting their discussion and egging her husband on to revenge an old wound he received. When she has spoken, all men turn against her, blaming her for what is to come. Her husband says: "So you speak, the worst and most wretched of women". Another man comments in a phrase which figures as a topos in the saga literature: "Often much evil comes from a woman's speech". As a consequence of Yngvild's egging him on, her husband kills one of the chieftains. His son, who has the striking name of Karl, does not, however, turn vengeance against the killer, but against his wife, Yngvild, the woman.

The events that follow show how both weapons and men's alliances are used against women. When Karl is old enough, he sets out to get revenge; he is the same age as Frey in the poem "Skírnismál". Early one foggy morning (fog is a recurring metaphor in scenes like this, wiping out boundaries), the young man arrives with his men at Yngvild's farm. Her husband and sons have gone out, working in the fields while she is still in bed. Karl captures the husband and the sons, and leads them home into the courtyard. Then he goes inside the house to Yngvild's bed and orders her to get up. She tries to put some clothes on, but he drives her out, bare, except for her shift. It is said that she was without a head scarf, and that her hair was thick, long and beautiful. Karl draws his sword and orders her to say certain words which signify her defeat. He orders her three times, and three times she refuses. At each of her refusals he hews off the head of one of her sons, one at a time. All the same,

she does not give in. Karl sets her husband free, but takes Yngvild as his concubine. The saga says that his sword was always drawn. And with that sword drawn, he repeatedly orders her to utter the words of defeat, and she refuses. He sails with her to Denmark where he sells her as a slave to two thugs, described as criminals. When they drag her away, she pulls back. One of these evil men leads her by pulling her hair, while the other whips her. Some years later they return her to Karl as defective goods. "We could never beat her enough, so that she would work for us," they say. Karl takes her to Iceland again, where he goes on with the threats, but as before, it is no use, and the saga comments: "Her temper was still the same".

Again he takes her abroad with him, and now he sells her as a slave to an evil and ugly man in Sweden. This man, too, returns her after several years, and the text describes how he drags her from the mountains to the ship on the shore—quite naked and covered with blood over her whole body. Now she has had enough. She lays her hands around Karl's neck and cries. Once again, he draws his sword, and she surrenders, saying the words he requires.

At this point the former enemies Karl and Yngvild's husband have made an alliance with one another, traveling together on conquests in foreign lands. When Karl gives his new friend his wife back, he says he does not want to see her before his eyes, and neither Karl nor Ljotolf, whose concubine she was, want to see her anymore. These three men become companions and make various alliances. They banish the women with mocking words, saying that now she can be married to anybody, because "now she cannot imagine that she is too good for any man". The saga gives two versions of her fate: people could not tell whether she was married or not, but some people say that she took her own life out of despair.

VII

With the sword men keep women in check. With it they tame the shrew. Yngvild's hair hangs loose and unbound when Karl comes and decapitates her sons in front of her. The giantesses often have their hair loose, and are frequently depicted combing it. Loose hair is a symbol of freedom, in contrast to the tamed hair of a braid or the hair confined under the head scarf. Loose hair is a threat to the men, if not directly dangerous for them. Thus Hallgerd's hair in *Njal's saga*⁷ (The Saga of Njal) will become fatal for Gunnar, when she refuses to give him a lock of it for a string in his bow. *Landnámabók*⁸ (The Book of Settlement) relates an account in which the hair, the sword and the elimination of a disobedient woman come together.

This short account tells about the marriage of Hallbjorn and Hallgerd, in which there was little love. The first winter they stay with her father at his farm, and the event takes place when Hallbjorn moves with his wife to his own land where he is setting up his own farm. Her father does not want to be

at home when this happens, because he knows his daughter and suspects that she will not go with her husband. Therefore, he goes away to look after his sheep:

When Hallbjorn had made the horses ready, he went into the bower. Hallgerd sat on the bench and combed her hair. The hair fell all around her body and down to the ground. She had the most beautiful hair of all the women in Iceland. Hallbjorn asks her to stand up and go with him. She sits and keeps silent. Then he grasps her, but she does not stir. Three times it went like that.

Hallbjorn places himself in front of his wife and recites a verse about her disobedience and the humiliation she causes him. While he does this, he wraps her hair around his hand and tries to pull her up from the bench, but she sits firmly. Then "he raises his sword and cuts off her head. After that he goes out and rides off".

"Thy head from thy neck shall I straightway hew," Skirnir says to the disobedient maiden Gerd in "The Lay of Skirnir". This threat of physical violence hangs over women who do not do men's will. In this settlement story, this threat is realized quite literally. The husband cuts off the head of his wife because she does not want to move with him, to be with him at a new settlement. He does this while her father turns his back. Thus the men are allied against a woman, even though she is their daughter or wife.

VIII

Weapons are not to be used by women, they are to be used against them. Old Norse literature is extremely interested in swords, how one gets them, and how one can keep them. To have a good sword is the same as to have power. The men, however, can never be sure that the women will not take the swords from them, thus eliminating male power, or even taking it for themselves.

Thus, Hervor, in the legendary romance, *Hervarar saga*⁹ (The Saga of Hervor), goes into the tomb of her father in order to get his sword. To be able to do this she has to disguise her gender, and she thus masks herself as a man. She can, however, not fool her father who will not give the sword away. A dispute in verse between father and daughter follows, in which he repeatedly reminds her of her gender and addresses her with gender-based words, calling her daughter, maiden, and woman. She, for her part, mocks him as dead, saying that it does not suit ghosts to bear precious weapons. With this taunt, she deconstructs his maleness. He gives her the sword, and she finds that sword better than if she had gotten the whole of Norway. In this saga the sword symbolizes the phallic power which Hervor seeks and gets. But it lasts only a while: she marries and loses the sword.

The Icelandic Family Sagas offer several examples of women who try to get a sword and even to use it. They do, however, always fail. Their attempts are always in some way or another associated with gender. In *Laxdæla*

*saga*¹⁰ (The Saga of the People of Laxardal) Thurid exchanges her baby daughter for her husband's sword. He intends to abandon them and sail away, without leaving them any money. She puts her baby girl in the skin sleeping bag where the man sleeps, takes his sword from the wall above him and goes away. With this she not only castrates him, but also feminizes him, making him into a mother with a baby in his arms. Thereby he loses his power and gets lost off the shores of Norway, together with his ship and child.

In *Gísla saga*¹¹ (The Saga of Gisli Sursson), the woman Thordis succeeds in seizing a sword from her brother's slayer when she brings him a meal. This happens just when the slayer and her husband are becoming reconciled, and she is not pleased with this. It is interesting that women so often try to ruin men's reconciliations, their potential alliances. Thordis drops spoons on the floor and bends down. The slayer has placed his sword, which Gisli had originally owned, between his legs. Thordis seizes it and aims at the middle of the man's body. However, she does not know how to handle a sword and hits him lower than she intends—in the thigh. Her husband seizes Thordis and takes the sword from her. After this she declares herself divorced from him and says that she will never share a bed with him again. Symbolically she also leaves society and moves to a farm of her own, situated at the shore, the farm of Thordis.

IX

Old Norse literature is a unique source in that it shows a connection between the oppression of women and Norse patriarchy during the phase of its establishment. The methods the men use to control women are first and foremost weapons and alliances, but also violence and deceit. Women's possibilities in the society are limited to subordination, exile or death.

Literary history contains many statements concerning the strong women of Old Norse literature, where strength is equated with freedom. The strong women this literature depicts are not free. But they are strong, and their strength consists in resisting oppression—they refuse to be oppressed. They do not succeed, but their protest is everywhere in the text. That is what Old Norse literature is primarily about. Thus, men's battles against strong women, the oppression of women, and the suppression of the feminine, within society and within the men themselves, is the conflict this literature springs from. It is a literature in which the power of the text punctures male power.

NOTES

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10. *Laxdæla Saga*. Translated with an introduction by Magnus Magnus-
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