The Waning Sword
Conversion Imagery and Celestial Myth in *Beowulf*

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Further possible clues to the relevance of myths concerning the god Yngvi-Freyr and his circle may be found in Beowulf’s adventure in the mere. This episode displays a lengthy series of correspondences—to my knowledge, previously unrecognized—to an Old Norse story involving Freyr, his emissary Skírnir and a giantess called Gerðr. This myth is recounted principally in the Eddic poem For Skírnis ‘Skírín’s Journey’ (alias Skírnismál ‘Skírín’s Words’), briefly referred to in Lokasenna, and retold by Snorri in Gylfaginning. Despite many differences of detail, the correspondences between For Skírnis and Beowulf’s mere-episode may well indicate that they are related as independent variations, which employ similar story-patterns, on essentially the same mythic theme.

This theme, I propose, concerned a sun-controlling god who suffered anguish because of an encounter with a hostile lunar giantess whose body contained sunlight, and who is subsequently overcome by the sun-god’s armed emissary when he visits her in her water-enclosed home. It is of particular interest that the two weapons wielded by either hero may well correspond, as this could shed light on the nature of Hrunting and the giant sword.

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2 For a review of prior scholarship (including nature-mythological studies) and a detailed commentary on the Norse poem, see K. von See, B. La Farge, E. Picard, I. Priebe and K. Schulz, Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda, Bd. 2: Götterlieder (Heidelberg, 1997), 45–151. A significant edition of the poem is Dronke, Poetic Edda, II, 373–414.
In this chapter, therefore, I focus on the similarities between For Skírnis and Beowulf’s mere-episode,\(^3\) many of which are neither obvious nor compelling individually, but which may impress as a quite lengthy sequence. Additionally, I examine the evidence of Lokasenna, the further adventures of Hjálpér and Snarvendill in Hjálpés saga, and an episode from the medieval English Historia monasterii de Abingdon ‘History of the Monastery of Abingdon’.

**For Skírnis and Beowulf’s Mere-Episode**

*For Skírnis* records that Freyr looked into Jötunheimar ‘Giant Homes’, the land of giants, and suffered hugsóttir miklar ‘great mind/heart-sicknesses’ after seeing a fair maiden walk from her father’s halls to her bower. Freyr’s parents instructed his servant, Skírnir (whom scholars generally identify as a hypostasis of his master), to persuade him to talk.\(^4\)

Skírnir asked Freyr why he sat alone for days on end. In reply, Freyr asked why he should tell Skírnir of his mikinn móðtrega ‘great mood-grief’, before adding obscurely ‘þvíat álfr éðull lýsir um alla daga / ok þeygi at minum munum’ (4) ‘“because the elf-halo shines through all days, and yet not to my desires.”’ Skírnir pressed Freyr to explain, which he did:

‘Í Gymis gøðum ek sá ganga  
mér tíða mey;  
amrar lýstu,  
en af þaðan  
altopt ok lògr.

‘Mær er mér tíðari  
en manni hveim  
ungum í árdaga;  
Ása ok álfa  
þat vill engi maðr,  
at vit sàtt sém.’ (6–7)

‘In Gymir’s courts I saw walking a girl for whom I long; her arms gleamed, and from them all the sky and sea.

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\(^3\) See additionally Chapter 9.

\(^4\) In addition to his role as emissary in the following story, Skírnir was sent by Óðinn down to the world of black-elves to command some dwarves to make a fetter for the monstrous wolf Fenrir; see *SnEGylf*, 28; S. A. Mitchell, ‘Skírnir’s Other Journey: The Riddle of Gleipnir’, in S. Hansson and M. Malm (ed.), *Gudar på jorden: Festskrift till Lars Lönnroth* (Stockholm, 2000), 67–75. Later in this study I discuss events relating to Fenrir’s binding in connection with myths of the sun and moon.
‘The girl is lovelier to me than [any girl was?] to any young man in ancient days; of the Æsir and the elves no-one will wish it, that we should be united.’

It seems that this radiant girl has replaced in Freyr’s affections the sun, the ‘elf-halo’, of which he was normally in cheerful command. She is subsequently named as Gerðr ‘She of the Garðr/Gerði [i.e., (Inhabited) Enclosed Space]’ (probably), daughter of the giant Gymir. That her arms illuminated the sky and sea, but not (explicitly at least) the land, might be significant, as we shall find that Gymir, in whose garðar ‘enclosed spaces’ Gerðr lived, may well have been a sea-giant; this suggests that his giantess daughter lived in or by the sea—judging from her name, on sea-enclosed ground. We may compare Grendel’s mother, who, though not a maiden, was similarly a giantess who lived with a male giant (though her son, rather than her father) in a hall enclosed by water, and from whose body (albeit only when decapitated) may have come a sun-like radiance.

Having learnt the reason for Freyr’s suffering, Skírnir made a dramatic request of him:

‘Mar gefðu mér þá, þann er mik um myrkvan beri, visan vafrloga, ok þat sverð er sjálft vegiz við þjótna ætt!’ (8)

‘Then give me the horse, the one that can bear me through dark, discerning flicker-flame, and the sword that fights by itself against the family of giants!’

5 Álfrǫðul is the name of the personified sun in Vafþrúðnismál 47. With the luminous arms of Freyr’s love, compare the personified sun casting her right hand over the horizon (or a creature) in an image of the first dawn in Völuspá 5; also the rosy fingers and rosy or golden arms of Eos, goddess of dawn, in ancient Greek mythology.

6 For evidence for Freyr’s control of the sun and solar attributes, see Chapter 9.

7 Gerðr also appears among a catalogue of goddesses in a verse list in PTP, 763; cf. SnESkáld, I, 1. Given the meaning of her name, it is interesting to find that her alliterative partner in this list is Gefjon, a goddess who ploughed Zealand into existence, who married Skipldr (Beowulf’s Scyld, founder of the Scyldings) and who lived at Lejre, the likely historical site of Heorot; see Simek, Dictionary, 101–2. On Gefjon, see H. E. Davidson, ‘Gefjon, Goddess of the Northern Seas’, in P. Lysaght, S. Ó Catháin and D. Ó hÓgáin (ed.), Islanders and Water-Dwellers: Proceedings of the Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium held at University College Dublin 16–19 June 1996 (Blackrock, 1999), 51–9; also F. Battaglia, ‘The Germanic Earth Goddess in Beowulf’, Mankind Quarterly 31 (1991), 415–46, for a proposed link between Gefjon and Grendel’s mother.

8 Snorri, however, says that allir heimar birtusk af henni ‘all worlds were illuminated by her [i.e., Gerðr]’; SnEGylf, 31.

9 See further Chapter 15.
Skírnir, we gather, was willing to undertake a quest to win the giantess for his master.

Freyr agreed:

‘Mar ek þér þann gef, er þik um myrkvan berr
visan vafrloga,
ok þat sverð, er sjálft mun vegaz,
ef så er horskr, er hefir.’ (9)

‘I give you the horse that will bear you through dark, discerning flicker-flame, and the sword that will fight by itself, if he who has it is wise.’

As Skírnir effectively serves as the executive of the distressed Freyr by undertaking to win Gerðr on his own, so Beowulf undertakes to conquer Grendel’s mother on behalf of the distressed frea of the Ing-friends, who declared that help relied on him alone (Beowulf 1376–9). Additionally, rather as Skírnir received Freyr’s remarkable sword, so Beowulf received from Unferð, ðyle Hroðgares ‘Hroðgar’s spokesman’ (1456), an outstanding ancestral sword, Hrunting, which had never failed its wielder. Neither sword would prove up to the challenge this time, however. It also catches the eye that both sword-donors—Freyr and Unferð—are identifiable as brother-slayers, albeit in different respects. In For Skírnis, Gerðr, on sensing Skírnir’s arrival, suspects that her bróðurbani ‘brother’s slayer’ is outside (16); Freyr is recorded as having killed the giant Beli after he had given his sword to Skírnir, so here Gerðr might be referring to a future slaying that she has foreseen or heard prophesied, or to a prior event; more likely, though, she simply refers to the giant-killing sword of Freyr in Skírnir’s hand. In Beowulf, the hero had earlier reminded Unferð that ðu pinum broðrum to banan wurde ‘you became slayer of your brothers’ (Beowulf 587). The elements bróður- and -bani in ON bróðurbani are cognate with Beowulf’s broðrum and banan, respectively.11

Having received Freyr’s sword, Skírnir set out for giantland in darkness on Freyr’s (presumably solar) horse.12 Skírnir declares to the

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10 SnEGylf, 31.
12 Cf. MIFL, motif A732.2 ‘Horse of the sun’.
horse: ‘Myrkt er úti, mál kveð ek okr fara úrig fjöll yfir!’ ‘It’s dark outside—time, I say, for us two to journey over moist mountains!’ (For Skírnis 10). The darkness (i.e., absence of sunlight) is noteworthy, whether it indicates day or night. Although Beowulf marched, rather than rode, to Grendel’s mere (unlike Hroðgar), and did not set out in the dark, he also passed through darkness, as the land through which he strode was shrouded in genipu ‘darknesses, mists’ (Beowulf 1360) and from the mere itself a won ‘dark’ surge of water ascended to the clouds (1373–4). Additionally, with the moist mountains of For Skírnis we may compare Beowulf’s fyrgenstream ‘mountain-stream’ (1359), which the hero would similarly have passed.

Skírnir’s horse apparently crossed without incident the ‘dark, discerning [literally ‘wise’] flicker-flame’ (For Skírnis 8–9) guarding the giants’ abode. This flame is also described as an eikinn fúr ‘oaken fire’ (17–8), by which, given oak’s properties as excellent firewood, is presumably meant a very strong and enduring fire. Whether or not the mythological Old Norse river Eikin is pertinent, this remarkable fire finds parallel in the eerie fire on, or in, the waters of Grendel’s turbulent mere (Beowulf 1365–6),15 which occurred only by night and similarly failed to hinder Beowulf’s (daytime) dive into the mere. That, in both cases, the mysterious fire plays no part in the story after its initial mention may be significant.

Skírnir then found his progress temporarily blocked by ferocious hounds (For Skírnis 11). These may find parallel in the wolves that haunted the slopes around Grendel’s mere, though Beowulf would have encountered them before any fire on the flood.16 They doubtless

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13 For thoughts on the nature of this flame, see Chapter 14.
14 Perhaps the fire was originally the *Eikin-fúr ‘Eikin-fire’, which is to say a fire on the Eikin, a river identified in Grímnismál 27 as one of those that fall near men and descend from there to Hell—like that which passes beneath the earth at Grendel’s mere (Beowulf 1359–61). For alternative explanations of this river-name, which lacks the diphthong in most of the younger manuscripts that mention it, see C. S. Hale, ‘The River Names in Grímnismál 27–29’, in R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (ed.), Edda: A Collection of Essays (Manitoba, 1983), 165–86 at 168–9; PTP, 838, 40.
15 Note also, in another Eddic poem discussed in Chapters 8 and 15, the flame surrounding a hall called Lýr. If I am correct in identifying this hall as, originally at least, a ‘Pike’ (fish), this suggests that the fire was in or on water.
16 Since Gerðr’s home, like Grendel’s, seems equated with the world of the dead, compare also the hellhound that threatens Óðinn in the Eddic poem Baldr’s dreams (2–3) and the Greek Cerberus.
deterred many visitors, though they did not directly hinder Beowulf. Comparison might also be made with the minor mere-beasts that vainly attacked Beowulf in the water, though no canine or lupine nature is indicated for those—unlike Grendel’s mother.

Next Skírnir encountered a herdsman who was sitting on a burial mound and watching all ways. Skírnir asked him how he might pass the dogs in order to speak with Gerðr. The herdsman replied bluffly by asking whether the visitor was doomed or already dead (12). This watchful herdsman finds surprising parallel, I think, in Grendel’s mother (who, we shall see, is also and more importantly equivalent to Gerðr), although she does not sit on a mound or speak to her visitor. The masculine pronoun se ‘he’ (Beowulf 1497) denotes Grendel’s mother as she beheld ‘beheld’ (1498) the waters; and Beowulf later identifies her, again in grammatically masculine terms, as grimme gryrelincne grundhyrde ‘the grim, terrible sea-bed/depths/ground-herdsman’ (2136).17 Beowulf, it therefore appears, was similarly met by a vigilant herdsman associated with aggressive canids. And their meeting similarly occurred at a place, likened to Hell, to which there normally came only the doomed or the dead.

Gerðr then heard a resounding noise and felt the ground shaking (For Skírnis 14). Her maidservant explained that a man had arrived outside and dismounted. Somewhat similarly, Grendel’s mother onfunde ‘perceived’ (Beowulf 1497) her visitor’s arrival, presumably from vibrations as he and the mere’s creatures disturbed the water.

Gerðr invited Skírnir into her sal ‘hall’ for a drink, past the guard-dogs (For Skírnis 16). Similarly, Grendel’s mother’s brought (albeit violently) Beowulf, as her gist ‘guest’ (Beowulf 1522), into her nidsele ‘hostile/abyssal/dark-moon(?) hall’ (1513), her hrofsele ‘roofed hall’ (1515)—ON sal and OE sele are cognate nouns—out of the sea-beasts’ clutches.

When asked to identify himself, Skírnir declared that he was not one of the elves, the Æsir or the Vanir (For Skírnis 17–8), which, unless he

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17 DOE s.v. hyrde ‘herdsman; keeper, guardian’. DOE defines grund-hyrde as ‘guardian of the depths (an epithet for Grendel’s mother)’; KB, 388 interprets this unique compound as ‘guardian of the deep’. Admittedly, OE hyrde is used quite frequently in Beowulf; for example, Grendel is the hyrde of crimes (750), God is the hyrde of glory (931), Grendel and his mother are hyrdas of their submarine house (1666), and the dragon is a hyrde of treasure (3133).
is lying, may make him a giant, a dwarf or a (super)man. Beowulf faces no such challenge, but he was a superman of giant-like strength, whose father’s name, *Ecgþeo(w)* ‘Edge-Servant’, is cognate with ON *Eggþér*, the name of a giantess’s herdsman in *Voluspá* 42.

Skírnir began wooing Gerðr by offering her golden apples and a marvellous ring, all of which she refused because, she declared, she had more than enough gold in Gymir’s home (*Fór Skírnis* 19–22). Beowulf offered Grendel’s mother no treasures, but he did see many *madmaehta* ‘treasures’ (*Beowulf* 1613) in her lair, many of which were doubtless golden.

Next Skírnir threatened Gerðr with decapitation by his (Freyr’s) sword, a threat by which she was unmoved (*Fór Skírnis* 23–4). Skírnir’s unsuccessful threat, uttered in an attempt to acquire Gerðr, may find parallel in the *grædig guðleoð* ‘greedy battle-song’ (*Beowulf* 1522) sung by Hrunting against the head of Grendel’s mother. As Skírnir’s threat with a sword was rebuffed by Gerðr’s words, so Hrunting’s singing blow was resisted by Grendel’s mother’s head.

Gerðr, therefore, initially had the upper hand in the contest. But Skírnir did not relent. He added that Gymir—a *jotunn … feigr* ‘giant … doomed’, rather as Grendel was earlier an *oten* ‘giant’ (*Beowulf* 761) *fége* ‘doomed’ (846) (the pairs of words are cognate)—*hnígr* ‘sinks’ or ‘will sink’ by the edges of his sword (*Fór Skírnis* 25). Similarly, in *Beowulf*, the giantess initially had the advantage, but Beowulf did not give up. Having earlier *gehnaege* ‘laid low’ Grendel (*Beowulf* 1274; this verb is related to ON *hnígr*)) by tearing off his arm, he later beheaded him with a sword, albeit a different sword, the giant sword, not Hrunting.

Skírnir then seems to have given up on the sword that Freyr had given him—at least we do not hear of it again. He turned instead to what seems, ostensibly at least, to be a different weapon. Comparably,

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18 For other accounts of swords with voices, see SASE5-7, 419.
19 The etymology of *Gymir* is uncertain. The name might relate to ON *gyma*, a poetic term for ‘earth’, or to *geyma* ‘to keep, watch’ or *gumi* ‘man’; in this last case, compare Grendel as a *guma* ‘man’ in *Beowulf* (973, 1682). A. M. Sturtevant, ‘Three Old Norse Words: Gamban, Ratatoskr, and Gymir’, SS 28 (1956), 109–14 at 112–4 argues that *Gymir* derives from *Ymir* (specifically *Ga-ymir*) and originally meant ‘The Roarer’. For Dronke and Dronke, *Growth of Literature*, 36 n. 78, however, *Gymir* derives from ‘the same stem as gömr, “gums”’ … *Gymir* is, as it were, a variant of Ægir’s “jaws”, which swallow ships’; Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, II, 356. See also PTP, 707–9.
20 An instance of the ‘useless weapon’ motif not mentioned in Jorgensen, ‘Gift’.
Beowulf discarded Hrunting, the loan from Unferð, and resorted to the giant sword.

Skírnir declared ‘Tamsvendi ek þik drep’ ‘With a taming wand I strike [or ‘will strike’] you’ (For Skírnis 26). He accompanied the use or threat of this wand, or sword,\(^2\) with declarations that Gerðr would be condemned to a sorrowful life of sexual frustration with giants, deprived the love of men, fyr nágrindr neðan … á viðar rótum ‘below corpse-gates … at the roots of the tree [i.e., Yggdrasill]’, which is to say in Hel (26–31, 33–5).\(^2\)

Amid this curse, Skírnir abruptly revealed that:

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‘Til holts ek gekk ok til hrás viðar,
gambantein at geta,
gambantein ek gat.’ (32)
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‘I went to a/the wood and to a/the sappy tree/wood, a/the gambanteinn to get, a/the gambanteinn I got.’

When he went to this wood is unclear, as is the wood’s location, because no such wood or trip has been mentioned before, though ultimately Gerðr agrees to meet Freyr at a grove (on an island?) called Barri (41). It seems to me likely, however, that the reference is to a wood in or bordering giantland (see Chapter 16). Also previously unmentioned is the object of this trip, the gambanteinn (-teinn means ‘twig’), a weapon quite likely identifiable as the ‘taming wand’. It may be significant that the reference to the gambanteinn comes long after Skírnir’s receipt of Freyr’s sword—a weapon from which it does not, however, appear wholly distinct. Similarly, Beowulf’s surprise discovery of the giant sword, which will come to appear comparable to the gambanteinn, occurs during a somewhat sexually suggestive encounter with a giantess after his receipt of Hrunting—and we shall see later that these two weapons are probably not wholly distinct either. Beowulf, did not, however, acquire the giant sword from a wood but from the wall of the giants’ cave.

\(^2\) For \(vǫndr\) ‘wand’ as a poetic term for ‘sword’, see \(LP\) s.v. The sword Snarvendill/Hrotti is termed a \(sara\ \text{uendi}\) (nominative \(vǫndr\)) ‘wand of wounds’ in \(Hjálmphés\ \text{rimar}\).

\(^2\) Cf. C. Tolkien, The Saga of Heidrek the Wise (London, 1960), 14–6, in which the radiant sword Tyrfingr (about which more later) is recovered from a grave-mound \(undir\ \text{viðar}\ \text{rótum}\ ‘under the roots of the tree’, below \(helgrind\) ‘Hel-gate’).

\(^2\) The abruptness raises the possibility of textual disruption or interpolation, but this cannot be assumed.
ON *gambanteinn*—a full interpretation of which I reserve for Chapter 16—appears only once elsewhere in Old Norse literature. In *Hárbarðsljóð* ‘Hárbarðr’s Song’, which is the next poem in the Codex Regius manuscript of Eddic poems and the preceding poem in the AM 748 manuscript of Eddic poems, *Hárbarðr* ‘Hoary-Beard’ (Óðinn incognito) declares:

‘Miklar manvélar ek hafða við myrkriður,
þá er ek vélta þær frá verum!
Harðan jötun ek hugða Hlébarð vera;
gaf hann mér gambantein,
en ek vélta hann ór viti!’ (20)

‘Great girl-tricks I had against gloom-riders, when I tricked them away from men! A hard giant I thought Hlébarðr ‘Lee/Shelter-Beard’ to be; he gave me a/the *gambanteinn*, and I wangled him out of his wits!’

Here it may be that this *gambanteinn*—which could also be involved in the implicit seduction by trickery of the *myrkriður* (probably troll-women)—came from the giant’s presumably bushy *barðr* ‘beard’, if it were likened, as is that of another giant called Hymir, to a wood. At any rate, this obscure stanza raises the possibility that Skírnir also acquired his *gambanteinn* from a giant. If, as seems a reasonable inference, Óðinn scrambled Hlébarðr’s wits by striking him with the *gambanteinn*, perhaps this weapon was some sort of magic wand (like Skírnir’s ‘taming wand’?). More specifically, I suspect, it was a marvellous ‘twig-sword’ (which may also be a *vǫndr* ‘wand’), as the noun *teinn* ‘twig’ occurs elsewhere in poetic terms for ‘sword’.

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24 *Myrkriða* ‘Murk-Rider’ appears among a list of names of troll-women in *PTP*, 729–30.
25 Two other meanings of ON *barðr*, though, are ‘edge of a hill’ and ‘prow of a ship’.
26 The Eddic *Hymiskviða* ‘Lay of Hymir’ (10) describes Hymir’s frozen beard, from which *joklar* ‘icicles’ hung, as a *kinnskógr* ‘chin-forest’. Cf. also the twig-weapon called *Lævateinn* (discussed in Chapter 8), which, in another Eddic poem, appears implicitly likened to a hair plucked from a gleaming branch of the world-tree *Mimameiðr* ‘Mimi’s Tree’, Mimi (or Mími) possibly being a giant. According to *Grímnismál* 40, the world’s trees were formed from the hair of the giant Ymir. Another giant, *Þistilbarði*, presumably had a beard of thistles; *PTP*, 707–9.
27 See further Chapter 16.
28 *LP* s.v. *teinn*; again, see the discussion of *Lævateinn* in Chapter 8. With Óðinn’s use of his *gambanteinn*, and Skírnir’s use of a rune-inscribed *gambanteinn* to overcome Gerðr’s resistance, compare also the striking by Othinus (Óðinn) of a Russian...
It appears significant that Skírnir’s gambanteinn, which seems likely to be the tamsvøndr, came specifically from a sappy tree. Sappy wood may have been favoured as a relatively soft surface on which to carve temporary runic inscriptions, as Skírnir soon does here.29 This detail also encourages association of Skírnir’s gambanteinn with the mythical sword called Mistilteinn ‘Mistletoe’ in Old Norse sagas (examined later in this study),30 since the parasitic mistletoe ‘prefers [as its host] trees with a soft sappy bark’.31 Two further points favour this association:

(a) A description in Gylfaginning of the mistletoe-shaft that killed Baldr as both a viðarteinungr, literally a ‘wood’s/tree’s twig’, and a vǫndr.32

(b) Skírnir’s prior offer to Gerðr of the ring that had been burnt on Baldr’s pyre (Før Skírnis 21), which shows that Skírnir had another object closely associated with Baldr’s death.

Next Skírnir carved on the tamsvøndr/gambanteinn hostile stafi ‘rune-staves’ (Før Skírnis 36), including þurs ‘giant’, ergi ... ok óþola ‘sexual perversion ... and unendurable lust’.33 Judging from other Old Norse evidence, the first of these may well have threatened to inflict the pain and bloody flux of menstruation upon Gerðr.34

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29 It is uncertain whether another Eddic poem refers to the inscription of a wounding runic spell on the roots of a sappy tree or of a strong tree; see D. A. H. Evans (ed.), Hávamál (London, 1986), 71, 138–9 (on stanza 151).
30 Falk, Altnordische Waffenkunde, 56.
32 SnE Gylf, 45–6.
33 The alliterating phrase ergi ... ok óþola recurs in a similar, presumably related context in a late fourteenth-century runic curse carved on a stick from Bergen, Norway: ylgjar ergi ok óþola ‘she-wolf’s sexual perversion ... and unendurable lust’; J. McKinnell, R. Simek and K. Düwel, Runes, Magic and Religion: A Sourcebook (Vienna, 2004), 131–2; M. MacLeod and B. Mees, Runic Amulets and Magic Objects (Woodbridge, 2006), 34–9. This parallel may reinforce the lupine aspect of certain giants, such as Grendel’s brimwylf ‘sea-she-wolf’ mother, which is argued for in this study and bolstered by the twin meanings ‘giant’ and ‘wolf’ of tuss and tusse, modern descendants of ON þurs ‘giant’ in some Swedish dialects; ibid., 119. Also, in Chapter 9 I examine a Norse runic inscription that appears to identify a disease-spirit as both a ‘giant’ and a ‘wolf’. Finally, note the giant-name Hundalf ‘Hound-Elf’ in PTP, 722–3.
34 See Chapter 9.
At that, Gerðr gave in and cemented the marriage proposal with the offer of a drink (37). She agreed to meet Freyr in nine nights in a lundr lognfara—perhaps a ‘becalmed grove’ or a ‘grove of the fair-weather traveller [i.e., Freyr]’—on Barri, a name probably based on ON barr ‘pine needle’ or ‘barley’ and interpretable as ‘Pine Needle/Barley Isle’ (39). Skírnir then returned home to report the good news to Freyr, who promptly declared that he could not wait three nights, one month often having seemed shorter to him than just sjá hálf hýnott ‘this half-nuptial night’ (42).

For Skírnis does not record whether Skírnir returned Freyr’s sword (Lokasenna strongly suggests and Gylfaginning clearly says that Freyr did not recover it), whereas Beowulf certainly returned Hrunting to Unferð. Otherwise, this series of events appears broadly comparable to those in Beowulf. Thus, Beowulf overcame Grendel’s mother with a remarkable sword discovered in Grendel’s lair, a weapon inscribed (albeit not by him) with runes describing an event that led to the overcoming of transgressing giants in a flood. He then returned, through thawing, becalmed waters to Ing’s representative, Hroðgar. Furthermore, in both texts the hero’s overcoming of the giantess has potentially phallic connotations. Skírnir’s threats against Gerðr with a sword (a potentially phallic symbol) and the tamsvöndr/gambanteinn are tantamount to sexual assault. The physical nature of Beowulf’s attack on Grendel’s mother with Hrunting and the giant sword is explicit; its acquisitive, sexual aspect is implicit. After a failed ‘greedy’ sword-blow, and a bout of wrestling in which Grendel’s mother threw and

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35 *Gylfaginning* has the more transparent Bar(r)ey; SnEGylf, 31 (on 164 identified as probably Barra in the Scottish Hebrides).

36 The precise meaning of this passage is debated. I suggest that Gerðr scheduled her meeting with Freyr for nine nights (something of a ‘perfect’ number in Germanic tradition) after acceding to Skírnir’s demand because she knew how long it would take him and Freyr to travel the distances involved. If, as seems a not unreasonable guess, it took Skírnir six nights to ride home the challenging way he had come—past flickering flame, across wet mountains and over land—this would leave Freyr three nights to reach Barri. The ‘half nuptial night’ would be the first of those three nights, it being ‘half’, which suggests incompleteness, because his wife (his ‘other half’, if you will) was elsewhere. Perhaps Gerðr also appreciated that Freyr’s three-night wait, which began once he learnt of his marriage, would correspond to the normal period of marital chastity after a wedding (Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, II, 193 n. 44, 414).

37 Although there is no physical killing of the giantess in *For Skírnis*, Gerðr is nevertheless conquered and her hostility overcome. Cf. Hjálmpert’s conquest of Vargeisa without killing her, and Sörlí’s defeat of Mána without killing her (both discussed earlier).
ofsæt ‘pressed down upon’ Beowulf, and in which he grabbed her by the shoulder (or hair) and neck, he penetrated her with a stroke of his sword, whereupon his blade melted. Given the erotic, phallic aspect of Anglo-Saxon ‘sword’-riddles, and the sexual aspect to the analogous encounter of Hjálmþér and Vargeisa (and her likely double Ýma, whom we shall meet shortly), it may be that the giant sword’s ‘waning’ not only denotes the diminution of an iron blade imagined as a burning candle but also suggests the aftermath of coitus for the male party.

As mentioned earlier, there are unquestionably many differences between For Skírnis and the mere-adventure of Beowulf. Most obvious is the fact that Gerðr is the object of Freyr’s ardent desire, whereas Grendel’s mother is a creature which Beowulf wishes only to kill and which is the object of Hroðgar’s fear and loathing. Perhaps, though, this apparently stark contrast may be explained by recognizing both cases as manifestations of the suffering attendant upon a form of solar darkening. As I hope to persuade readers by the end of this study, Gerðr is a likely lunar giantess who gleams with light stolen from the sun. Here her stolen lustre takes away some of the brightness of the sun and its appeal for Freyr, whose emissary then travels through darkness. Comparably, Grendel’s mother brings the shadow of death back to the sun-like hall of Hroðgar, whose emissary then travels to her home through partial darkness. If this is the case, no fewer than twenty sequential correspondences emerge between the Norse and Anglo-Saxon poems, which I summarize as follows:

(a) A hostile, radiant, lunar giantess (Gerðr/Grendel’s mother) brings anguish (albeit of different types) and a form of solar darkening to a Freyr-figure (Freyr/Hroðgar).

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39 Cf. Lyle, ‘Hero’, 7, 10. On scenes of the decapitation of giants as rites of passage linked to the hero’s ‘political, sexual, social coming of age’ (my emphasis), see J. J. Cohen, Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages (Minneapolis, 1999), 66. On arguments about whether certain swords may serve as phallic symbols, see Brunning, ‘“Living” Sword’, I, 33–4; also SASE5-7, 403–4. See also my analysis of the Langeid sword in Chapter 4.
40 For Heorot as a solar hall, see Chapter 10.
41 In neither poem does the giantess have an obviously lunar aspect, but for evidence pointing to the identification (originally at least) of these giantesses with the moon, which shines with light taken from the sun, see Chapters 14 to 16.
(b) The giantess inhabits an enclosed environment, one quite possibly marine or semi-marine in both cases (certainly so in *Beowulf*).\(^{42}\)

(c) She lives there with a formidable, hostile male giant (Gymir/Grendel).

(d) A young, purifying emissary of the Freyr-figure (Skírnir/Beowulf) undertakes to win or defeat the giantess.\(^{43}\)

(e) The emissary receives the renowned sword of the Freyr-figure or his representative (Unferð), who is a ‘brother-slayer’.

(f) The emissary sets out alone through darkness.

(g) He crosses wet mountains.

(h) He crosses the site of a marvellous boundary fire (possibly *ignis fatuus*),\(^{44}\) associated in both cases with darkness, without apparent incident.

(i) He passes hostile canids. (Elements (h) and (i) are possibly inverted in *Beowulf*.)

(j) He approaches the giantess’s hall.

(k) He encounters a hostile, watchful herdsman (in *Fyr Skírnis*, a figure separate from the giantess; in *Beowulf*, the giantess herself).

(l) The giantess senses his arrival.

(m) The giantess brings him into her hall, normally the destination of the doomed and the dead.

(n) He (or his sword) addresses her acquisitively and with the threat of decapitation.

(o) She resists him (verbally or physically)—the sword gifted by the Freyr-figure fails to overcome her.

(p) The emissary proposes to kill the male giant with his sword (or, in *Beowulf*, shortly afterwards beheads the male giant with a different sword).

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42 See further below.
43 For Skírnir and Beowulf as purifiers, see Chapter 9.
44 See Chapter 14.
(q) The emissary turns to a second, more remarkable weapon, one inscribed (or potentially inscribed) with a runic inscription that has a bearing on the overcoming of a giant or giants, in both cases possibly in a form of flood. This weapon is a sword (or at least potentially so in Fôr Skîrnis), possibly a radiant weapon which the emissary seized within the giants’ land (arguably in the case of Fôr Skîrnis).

(r) The giantess’s resistance is overcome, with implications of sexual penetration (future or current).

(s) There is reference to good weather/sunshine and/or becalming.

(t) The emissary returns to the Freyr-figure and reports his success.

**Lokasenna, Gylfaginning and the Gifted Sword**

A brief reference to the myth of Freyr and Gerôr appears in *Lokasenna*. Loki declares to Freyr that:

‘Gulli keypta léztu Gymis dóttur
ok seldir þitt svá sverð;
en er Muspellz synir riða Myrkvið yfir,
veizta þú þá, vesall, hvé þú vegr.’ (42)

‘With gold you had Gymir’s daughter bought, and thus gave your sword; but when Muspell’s sons ride over Myrkviðr, then, wretch, you won’t know how you’ll fight.’

We have seen that in *Fôr Skîrnis* (19–22), Skîrnir—who is not named in *Lokasenna* but who might be the understood means by which Freyr had Gerôr bought—offers Gerôr golden apples and an implicitly golden and gold-dripping ring, which she refuses. In that poem her resistance is overcome by Skîrnir’s runic threat, not his offers of golden treasure, although she may still have received that treasure later, after accepting Freyr. We also saw that Freyr had to give his sword to Skîrnir, who used it to threaten Gerôr, in which capacity it was found wanting and apparently abandoned (literally or not). In *Lokasenna*, it is unclear to whom Freyr gave his sword. It is sometimes supposed that he gave it to the giants via Gerôr or her father, in which case *Lokasenna* seems likely to refer to a somewhat
different version of the story from that told in Før Skírnis. But in Lokasenna it may rather be that, as in Før Skírnis, Freyr simply gave his sword to his agent (Skírnir), so that he would agree to pursue the purchase. This would bring the two accounts into closer agreement.\footnote{However, for a different view, which sees Loki’s account as a travesty of the myth, see Dronke, Poetic Edda, II, 366.}

In Gylfaginning Snorri records that Freyr gave his sword to Skírnir. He adds that this was why Freyr was weaponless when he fought Beli.\footnote{SnE Gylf, 31.}

We have seen that, by contrast, Beowulf, despite initially casting away Hrunting in the giants’ lair, recovered it and returned it to Unferð.

**Gymir and Gerðr as Sea-Giants**

The giant Gymir and his daughter Gerðr may well be inhabitants of a land enclosed by water in some way. If so, they appear comparable in this respect to Grendel and his mother, a giant and giantess who inhabited the strangely water-free bottom of a sea-like mere. Marine or semi-marine aspects to the homes of Gymir and Gerðr are not readily apparent from Før Skírnis; nor is there explicit reference to Skírnir’s gambanteinn being located underwater (which would greatly strengthen its likeness to Beowulf’s giant sword). Nonetheless, in this section I adduce evidence that suggests both of the above.\footnote{I am not the first to associate these giants with the sea. For F. G. Bergmann, Le Message de Skirnir et les Dits de Grimnir (Strasbourg, 1871), 38, Gerðr personifies the winter sea. See also Dronke and Dronke, Growth of Literature, 36 for an identification of Gerðr as the earth and as the daughter of the sea, which is personified by her father Gymir; Dronke, Poetic Edda, II, 356, 387, 390 (‘Gymir, the ocean of death’), 396–7.}

More than one Old Norse source indicates that a figure called Gymir was identified with the sea. Most striking is the prose introduction to Lokasenna, the third poem after Før Skírnis in the Codex Regius, which identifies Gymir as an alias of the sea-giant/god Ægir ‘Ocean’: Ægir, er qôru nafni hét Gymir ‘Ægir, who by another name was called Gymir’.\footnote{The same prose introduction adds that in Ægir/Gymir’s hall, which was doubtless in or by the sea, var lýsigull haft fyrir eldzljós ‘shining gold was used instead of firelight’, a point picked up in SnESkáld, I, 40–1. Comparably, Grendel’s submarine lair}

On the basis of this statement (which is perhaps a thirteenth-century addition), at least some readers of the Codex Regius would presumably interpret this Gymir as Gerðr’s father and identify him with Ægir.

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\footnotetext[45]{However, for a different view, which sees Loki’s account as a travesty of the myth, see Dronke, Poetic Edda, II, 366.}

\footnotetext[46]{SnE Gylf, 31.}

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An association between a certain Gymir and Ægir may well have been part of pagan Norse tradition. In Skáldskaparmál, Snorri records a stanza by an eleventh-century Icelandic skald called Refr (Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson), who was probably a heathen:

Fœrir björn, þar er bára
brestr, undinna festa
opt í Ægis kjöpta
úrsvøl Gymis völva.\(^{49}\)

The spray-cold seeress of Gymir [RÁN <Ægir’s wife>] often brings the bear of twisted-fastenings [SHIP] into Ægir’s jaws where the wave breaks.\(^{50}\)

Here one could, admittedly, read ægis ‘the ocean’s’, rather than Ægis ‘Ægir’s’.\(^{51}\) But for Snorri: Hér er sagt at alt er eitt, Ægir ok Hlér ok Gymir ‘Here it is said that all are one: Ægir and Hlér and Gymir’.\(^{52}\)

Whether the Gymir of these passages was originally the same as the giant of For Skírnis is doubtful.\(^{53}\) For one thing, whereas Gerðr’s father was married to a mountain-giantess called Aurboða ‘Mud(dy)/Gravel(ly)-Offerer/Summoner’,\(^{54}\) Ægir’s wife was Rán ‘Theft/Robbery’, a personification of the sea as illicit taker of ships and their crews.\(^{55}\)

For another, Gerðr is nowhere named as one of Ægir’s nine daughters,

\(^{49}\) SnESkáld, I, 37; the stanza is quoted again in SnESkáld, I, 93.

\(^{50}\) Since waves break on the shore, I interpret ‘Ægir’s jaws’ as jagged, ship-destroying coastal rocks.


\(^{52}\) Sturtevant, ‘Three Old Norse Words’, 113 states that ‘No one, of course, assumes that the giant Gymir is the same person as Aeger [Ægir]’ and adds (114) that ‘[t]he sea and the earth are two entirely different mythological conceptions’. This is no longer the case: see Dronke and Dronke, Growth of Literature, 36; Dronke, Poetic Edda, II, 356. Furthermore, the distinction between sea/water and earth is blurred when dealing with shores, floods, mud, tidal islands and, as in Beowulf, marshland and the submerged but dry and firelit home of amphibious giants.

\(^{53}\) SnEGylf, 30–1; also stanza 30 of the Eddic poem Hyndluljóð ‘Hyndla’s Poem’.

\(^{54}\) However, if Aurboða means ‘Mud(dy)/Gravel(ly)-Summoner’, this meaning appears potentially relatable to the concept of the sea as an acquirer of ships and their crews, which is encapsulated by Rán. In the next chapter we shall find Aurboða at the foot of mountain that may well be in the sea.
personifications of waves.\(^{56}\) But even if Gerðr’s father and Ægir were originally separate figures, their sharing of the name Gymir raises the distinct possibility of conflation.

Old Norse texts also attest a common noun gymir meaning ‘sea’, which is not always distinguishable from the proper noun.\(^{57}\) For example, the compound sargymir ‘wound-sea/Gymir’, a poetic term for ‘blood’, appears in Hákonarmál ‘Hákon’s Lay’, a poem by the Norwegian Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson (c. 915–90):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Brunnu benjeldar} & \quad \text{i blóðgum undum;} \\
\text{lutu langbarðar} & \quad \text{at lýða fjǫrvi.} \\
\text{Svarraði sárgymir} & \quad \text{á sverða nesi;} \\
\text{fell flóð fleina} & \quad \text{i fjǫru Storðar.}\text{\(^{58}\)}
\end{align*}
\]


Here the concept of blood as a roaring ‘wound-sea/Gymir’ probably alludes to the myth of the slaying of a primordial giant with a similar-sounding name, Ymir,\(^{59}\) from whose wounds blood flowed to form the seas.\(^{60}\)

ON gymir/Gymir also appears in the unique term hvergymir ‘cauldron/hot-spring sea/Gymir’ in a skaldic poem from the late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century tale Stjörnu-Odda draumr ‘Star-Oddi’s Dream’.\(^{61}\) It forms part of the ‘woman’-kenning Hörn hvergymis stjörnu ‘Hörn [a

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56 See below, however, for her partial namesake Margerðr ‘Sea-Gerðr’ (probably), one of nine ship-destroying, ship-robbing troll-women who may be identified as hrannar ‘waves’.
57 See LP s.v. gymir 1; PTP, 392–3, 835.
58 Whaley, *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas* I, 182.
60 This stanza flirts with an image of swords burning in a bloody, turbulent sea of giant-blood. We might compare how Beowulf’s giant sword forbarn ‘burnt up’ (1616, 1667) in giant-blood in the waters of Grendel’s mere, whose turbulent waves were themselves stained with such blood and similarly crashed against naessas ‘headlands’ (1358).
Freyja-alias, here denoting ‘goddess’] of the star of the cauldron-sea/Gymir [GOLD]. It is presumably not coincidental that the woman is described in the immediately preceding stanza as the ægis geisla ... Gerðr ‘Gerðr of the rays of the sea/Ægir [GOLD]’. The woman in question is a violent, trollish, wolf-headed, sea-faring female called Hlégunnr ‘Lee-Battle’. It is interesting to observe that, like Hlégunnr, Grendel’s mother was violent, trollish and lupine; that she was similarly beheaded by a sword; and that she too was associated with a golden, sun-like radiance within water (compare hvergymis stjörnu ‘star of the cauldron-sea’).

Hjálmþér, Ýma and Margerðr

If Gerðr’s father was closely associated with the sea, both Gerðr’s bower—which was within walking distance of his halls—and, ultimately at least, the gambanteinn were presumably also in the sea, or more specifically (it seems likely) in an island or other space enclosed or encroached upon by water. Such a location offers further encouragement for the association of the gambanteinn with the giant sword, as the latter was found beneath the waters of a Danish bog, as have many swords in historical reality.

Further reason to think that Gerðr lived in proximity to the sea, and was sometimes immersed in water, is provided by Hjálmþés saga. Shortly after Hjálmþér’s encounter with Vargeisa, the saga refers to an encounter between the hero and his companions (chiefly Ölvir and the ‘slave’ Hörðr, who is eventually revealed as King Hringr, brother of Vargeisa/Ál(f)sól) on the one hand, and a radiant troll-woman and

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62 Hymiskviða and the prose introduction to Lokasenna attest to the possession by Ægir (= Gymir in Lokasenna) of a huge hverr/ketill ‘cauldron’.

63 Andréén, ‘Is it Possible?’, 181–3 identifies Hlégunnr with the historical Queen Margarete of Denmark.

64 Cf., in Chapter 13 of this study, the swords on Sigarshólmr ‘Sigarr’s Island’.

65 See F. Battaglia, ‘Not Christianity versus Paganism, but Hall versus Bog: The Great Shift in Early Scandinavian Religion and its Implications for Beowulf’, in Kilpiö et al., Anglo-Saxons and the North, 47–67 at 53; F. Herschend, The Early Iron Age in South Scandinavia: Social Order in Settlement and Landscape (Uppsala, 2009), 350. Among these swords are one from Nydam bearing what looks like a representation of a horned crescent moon; see SASE, 42; 53; C. Engelhardt, Denmark in the Early Iron Age (London, 1866), VII Nydam (fig. 22). In myth, recall also Excalibur, the marvellous sword—according to some accounts a flaming weapon—which King Arthur obtained from another supernatural aquatic female, the Lady of the Lake (whom some commentators connect with Diana, a Roman underworld goddess of the moon).
her sister Margerðr on the other. The name Margerðr, interpretable most obviously as ‘Sea-Gerðr’ (ON marr ‘sea’), catches the eye, and the relevant episode merits examination here.

Chapter 11 of the saga records that Hjálmþér re-encountered his stepmother, Lúða, whom he had earlier rejected and punched. Now hideous, she cursed him. He would have no peace of mind, she declared, except when aboard ship or in his tent, until he saw a princess called Hervör Hundingsdóttir. Lúða presumably thought this an impossible task, but Hjálmþér took the challenge lightly. Before setting off, he said Lúða would lay no more spells on him, because kjaftr þinn skal opinn standa ‘your mouth shall stand open’ while she straddled two crags by a harbour, above a fire kindled by slaves, and sustained only by what ravens brought her (presumably nothing), until he returned. These details resemble Skírnir’s threatened curse upon Gerðr in Fröð Skírnis (27–8): if Gerðr does not accede to his wishes, she will reside as a spectacle on a hill of eagles, where she will find food loathsome (and therefore go hungry)—‘Gapiðu grindum frá!’ ‘Gape from the gates’, Skírnir commands.

Hjálmþér and his companions set off on their quest to find Hervör, in which they eventually succeeded. Chapter 12 records how, along the way, they came one autumn to a big country with a large fjord and great mountains. Hjálmþér walked along the seashore. He saw a tröllkonu stórskorna ‘large-boned troll-woman’ standing amid a threateningly high mountain above a spring on the shore. She had a gullofinn dúk ‘gold-woven towel’ on her knees (the implication being that she was otherwise naked) and was combing her ljósa lokka ‘light/radiant locks’, which she had just washed, gullkambi ‘with a golden comb’. He addressed her in verse as a bákn ‘beacon’, a term that suggests a highly visible fiery radiance, while at the same time declaring her the most hideous female on Earth. She, in turn, expressed disapproval at his speech and said he

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66 On this name, see PTP, 730. Possible alternative or additional meanings are ‘Sword-Gerðr’ (marr being a term for ‘sword’ in ibid., 794), ‘Horse-Gerðr’ (ON marr ‘horse’) and ‘(Night)mare-Gerðr’ (ON mara ‘(night)mare (monster)’. Cf. aspects of Vargeisa.

67 For the text, see FSN, IV, 203–13.

68 Cf. also the forced opening of the wolf Fenrir’s jaws (discussed in Chapter 10 of this study), the fate of the giantess Hrímrgerðr at a harbour (Chapter 13), and the yawning of the troll-woman Skjaldvör (Chapter 14).

69 Translated ‘monster’ in Clunies Ross, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, 504, but see the note thereto.
would be the first on her cooking fire. He retorted that the towel had an evil fate to be rubbing her hair and approaching her glyrnum ‘gleaming/cat’s eyes’. In a verse he also threatened snerta ‘to touch’ her with his sword Snarvendill, as a result of which she would handar … missa ‘miss her hand’ and cry out loudly. He added that she was skauð it aumasta ‘the most touchy/miserable sheath/cunt’. Hjálmþér’s threat to ‘touch’ her is laden with sexual innuendo, which she answered by declaring an interest in missa minn meydóm ‘losing my virginity’ and having him handtéra mik um mittit ‘hand-stretch me around the middle’, because ‘it may well be that the grey beast I have between my legs is starting to yawn now and wants to be fondled’. As she dipped her hand in the spring, Hjálmþér drew Snarvendill and severed it í úlfliðnum ‘in the wolf-joint [i.e., at the wrist]’. She screamed, gazed at the stump, and declared that ‘Víst gleðr mik eitt … jöfurr inn ógndjarfi’ ‘“one thing certainly gladdens me … O fearless boar”’—her sisters were busy making corpses of his men back on the ships.

Hjálmþér then saw that nine large troll-women had broken the men’s ships to pieces,† killed the crew and brought all their goods ashore.‡ These monsters had heard everything that he and the radiant troll-woman, Ýma (Íma) ‘Embers’,§ had said. The nine were called Hergunnr ‘War-Battle’, Hremsa ‘Paw/Claw’ (or ‘Clutch’ or ‘Shaft’), Nál ‘Needle’, Neffa ‘Nose’, Rúna ‘Intimate Friend’ (or Raun ‘Trial’), Trana ‘Snout’, Greip ‘Grip’, Glyrna ‘Glowing/Cat’s Eye’ and Margerðr.

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70 O’Connor, Icelandic Histories, 81. I lack the Norse wording for this passage, which perhaps fell victim to censorship in most manuscripts of the saga.

71 As with Vargeisa earlier, compare the ship-destroying vargynjur of Hárbarðsljóð 37–9. Cf. also the nine daughters of Ægir, personifications of waves.

72 Note that they are robbers.

73 The rímur have lma. Given her radiance, I favour the translation ‘Embers’ (from im ‘dust, ashes, embers’; see CV s.v. ima, im, Ýma) over ‘Dark/Dusky One’ (for which see Gade and Marold, Treatises from Poetics, 728), although since I believe she is, or was originally, a lunar giantess, it would be fitting if she also had a dark aspect. Another list of names of troll-women includes Íma beside lmð (and Járnsaxa ‘Iron Knife’); see SnESkáld, I, 112; Gade and Marold, Treatises from Poetics, 727. Similar-looking names appear elsewhere, at least sometimes denoting giants. A certain lmðr(r) appears in stanza 43 of the Eddic Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fjöru ‘First Poem of Helgi, Slayer of Hundingr’; one of the god Heimdallr’s nine giant-mothers (quite possibly personified waves) bears the same name in Hyndluljóð 37 (another is Járnsaxa). Vaþrúnismál 5 mentions a male giant called lm. An obscure late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century runic inscription from Bergen, Norway twice refers to a certain lmí; McKinnell, Simek and Düwel, Runes, Magic and Religion, 133; MacLeod and Mees, Runic Amulets, 129; M. P. Barnes, Runes: A Handbook (Woodbridge, 2012), 111.
All nine were scantily clad, their jaws gaped (göptu kjöftunum), and they shook their heads. Margérðr evidently stood out, though, as she walked in front and is individually described. She was a hunchback with a single eye in the middle of her forehead—a significant combination suggestive, in my view, of a gibbous moon. She also had a nose and claws of iron, two overhanging teeth and a lower lip that hung down to her chest. Hjálmþér suspected she could give a powerful kiss!

He turned back to the men’s tent, which the nine troll-women then made for with the intention of cooking the men. Verses were spoken, in which Hjálmþér identified the foes as Hrauðungs meyjar ‘Hrauðungr’s girls’ and possibly as hrannar ‘waves’. Ölvir also referred to them obliquely in the phrase hverja hýsnoppu ‘every downy-snouted girl’. Hergunnr then threatened Hjálmþér, whom she too called a jöfurr ‘boar’, by showing him her claws with their uncut nails and insinuating sexual violence. He replied by urging her to advance and:

‘Ettu fram járnhrómmum, ef þú afli treystir, 
dróð in dulrífa, en ek mun dvergasmiði.’

‘Stretch forth your iron claws, if you trust your strength, wilful(?) girl [or ‘girl of concealed ripping(?)’], and I will (unleash) dwarves’ work [i.e., Snarvendill]!’

Hörðr fought and killed seven of the troll-women. Hjálmþér fought a long battle with Hergunnr, who defended herself with a vænt sax ‘beautiful short-sword’, until she tired and called for help from Margérðr, mar in öflgasta ‘the most powerful maiden’. She and Margérðr fled, but Horðr gave chase. He beheaded Hergunnr and then cut Margérðr in half at the waist. He had then killed all nine sisters.
Subsequently we re-encounter Ýma, who has not been killed, in the company of a pitchfork-bearing giant. Hörðr killed him as well, but spared Ýma. He put her in charge of the giant’s cave, which was full of gold and other treasure, some of which he took. Ýma told him to call her name if he ever needed help. I return to Ýma and her male companion in Chapter 14, but here we should note the similarities between these events and those of For Skírnis and Hjálmþér’s encounter with Vargeisa.

The likelihood that the Eddic poem’s Gerðr is a giantess associated with the sea is increased by the presence in the saga of Margerðr ‘Sea-Gerðr’, whose potentially lunar aspect encourages attribution of the same to Gerðr. And although Gerðr’s radiant beauty is not reflected in Margerðr’s hideous deformity, the saga-episode displays further significant similarities to For Skírnis, if we allow for some distortion, duplication and displacement. For Gerðr finds a clearer parallel, except by name, in Ýma, Margerðr’s sister and likely original double, whom Hjálmþér encountered on the shore.

Gerðr is characterized by an alluring radiance, which, as we shall later find further evidence to suspect, is probably lunar, although as a forthright frost-giant she is also off-putting and decidedly hostile. Similarly, Ýma is in one respect a golden, latently lustrous beacon, but at the same time hideous and potentially deadly. As such, she too evinces the double aspect of the common medieval concept of the ‘loathly lady’, which we have also seen in Vargeisa/Ál(f)sól.

Hjálmþér, for his part, corresponds broadly to Skírnir, who, we have seen, parallels Beowulf. The son of Ingi, Hjálmþér is figuratively the supreme ‘boar’, a boar being one of Freyr’s close animal associates. And rather as Skírnir is impelled to seek Gerðr for Freyr by the implicit ‘cursing’ of his master by love at first sight, so Hjálmþér is cursed to seek Hervör, whom Hörðr/Hringr will eventually marry. Furthermore, Hjálmþér’s encounter with Ýma finds broad parallel in Skírnir’s

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79 Ellis, ‘Fostering by Giants’, 73 observes: ‘The incident with her [i.e., Ýma] is ... completely irrelevant and quite unnecessary to the plot; and therefore on the face of it more likely to be earlier, half-remembered material’.
80 Note the appearance of Ímgerðr and Margerðr in the same stanza of a verse catalogue of the names of troll-women in SnESkáld, I, 112.
encounter with Gerðr. In both cases, the male sees a radiant giantess or troll-woman (effectively the same thing). As a visitor to her land he addresses her with hostile verses and threatens her with a marvellous sword, whereupon she agrees to sex (though the saga-episode makes no reference to runes). In the saga, Hjálmtýr’s severing of Ýma’s wrist and her crying out are probably euphemisms for sexual penetration and orgasm.

Significant, too, are parallels between Ýma and Vargeisa, who also appear to be essentially doubles. Both are large-mouthed ‘ember’-monstrosities whom Hjálmtýr encounters in the autumn by the shore. Both are daughters of Hrauðungr. Both are initially dangerous but ultimately won over. Both are also wolfish, temporary custodians of Snarvendill (assuming Hjálmtýr’s sword penetrates Ýma sexually), and concomitantly lustful for the same hero. As a counterpart to Vargeisa’s wolfish aspect, the ‘grey beast’ between Ýma’s legs strongly suggests not just her ‘pussy’ but a wolf, in this case a sexually ravenous one; it is surely no coincidence that a list of Old Norse poetic terms for ylgr ‘she-wolf’ includes, beside vargynja, íma (= ýma). And rather as Ýma’s ‘sheath’, effectively her lower mouth, implicitly stretched like a scabbard to receive Snarvendill, so Vargeisa played vigorously with Snarvendill using her hands and ‘mouth’ — a description that now looks even more like masturbatory euphemism.

These parallels bring into focus neglected aspects of Grendel’s mother. Like both Vargeisa and Ýma, Grendel’s mother was a lupine giantess, probably latently hot and (ultimately) radiant, who dwelt in a space in proximity to water. She too was greedy for a sword. She too was probably a thief or at least a receiver of stolen or arrogated goods. A clawing maneater, she too was hungry for a ‘boar’-warrior, the son of an Ing-character — in her case the boar-helmeted Beowulf (1448–54), the

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82 As noted earlier, imleitr ‘ember/ash-coloured’ describes a wolf.
83 See PTP, 905.
84 See Chapter 3. The implicit stretching of Ýma’s wolfish vagina (‘sheath, scabbard’) by a sword might be informed by the myth of the propping open of Fenrir’s jaws by a sword — which, I later suggest, he subsequently swallowed — after he had bitten off the hand of the god Týr (see Chapter 10). Hjálmtýr’s severing of Ýma’s hand at the ‘wolf-joint’ might allude to this myth, though here it is the ‘wolf’ who is dismembered. As Ýma’s lupine vagina dentata implicitly threatens to sever the blade of Snarvendill, we might, as with Vargeisa’s sword-swallowing, compare the possible sexual connotations of the melting of the giant sword’s blade after beheading Grendel’s mother.
surrogate champion of the ‘Ing-friends’ who would become Hroðgar’s adopted son. She too had temporary possession of a radiant sword, the giant sword, which, after a tussle, the same boar-warrior departed with. And finally, as we shall see later in this study, she, like Margerðr and Gerðr, may well have had a lunar aspect.

The Burning Candle and the Barley Isle

Distantly related to the union of Freyr and Gerðr on Barri in Fpr Skírnis (Barey in Gylfaginning), and to the intimated image of the giant sword as a burning candle in Beowulf, might be a ritual described by a late twelfth- or thirteenth-century reviser of the twelfth-century Historia monasterii de Abingdon (also known as the Historia ecclesiae Abbendonensis ‘History of the Church of Abingdon’). This text records the miraculous way in which, during the reign of King Edmund (941–6), the monks of Abingdon monastery settled a dispute with the locals of Oxford over the ownership of quodam prato nomine Beri ‘a certain meadow by the name of Beri’:

Quod dum servi Dei propensius actitarent, inspiratum est eis salubre consilium, et (ut pium est credere,) divinitus provisum. Die etenim statuto mane surgentes monachi sumpserunt scutum rotundum, cui imponebant manipulum frumenti, et super manipulum cereum circumspectae quantitatis et grossitudinis. Quo accenso, scutum cum manipulo et cereo, fluvio ecclesiam praetercurrenti committunt, paucis in navicula fratibus subsequentibus. Præcedebat itaque eos scutum et quasi digito demonstrans possessiones domui Abbendoniæ de jure adjacentes, nunc huc, nunc illus divertens; nunc in dextra, nunc in sinistra parte fiducialiter eos præebat, usquedum veniret ad rivum prope pratum quod Beri vocatur, in quo cereus medium cursum Tamisiae miraculose deserens se declinavit et circumdedit pratum inter Tamisiam et Gifteleia, quod hieme et multociens æstate ex redundatione Tamisiae in modum insulae aqua circumdatur. Quo viso miraculo ab astantibus, et concurrentibus tam Berrocensis pagi quam Oxenfordensis nonnullis comprovincialibus, insimil et monachis cereum sequentibus, memoratum pratum domui Abbendoniæ est redditus, populo acclamante, ‘Jus Abbendoniæ, jus Abbendoniæ!’ Ex hoc etiam miraculo omnes qui illud audierant tantus stupor invaserat, ut ab illo tempore usque ad præsens tempus non esset inventus quispiam rex, vel dux, vel princeps,
vel aliquis alius præpotens, qui de eodem prato contra domum Abbendonieæ causam movere aliquatenus auderet.\textsuperscript{85}

While the servants of God were most eagerly pleading this [i.e., that God would show the justness of their case], they were inspired by a wholesome plan, and (it is pious to believe) a divinely provided one. Indeed, on the appointed day, the monks arose in the morning and took a round shield, on which they placed a bundle of grain/crops, and upon the bundle a wax candle of well-considered/distinguished size and thickness. Having lit it, they committed the shield with the bundle and candle to the river flowing past the church, with a few brothers following in a small boat. Thus the shield preceded them and, like a finger, pointed out the adjacent possessions of the house of Abingdon by legal right, turning now here, now there; now to the right, now to the left side it faithfully preceded them, until it came to a stream by a meadow which is called Beri, at which point the candle, miraculously deserting the middle course of the Thames, turned aside and passed around the meadow between the Thames and Iffley, which in winter and many times in summer is surrounded by the overflowing of the Thames with water in the manner of an island. When this miracle had been seen by those standing there and by those running alongside, both of the district of Berkshire and some of the natives of Oxford, and likewise by the monks following the candle, the said meadow was given back to the house of Abingdon, with the people crying ‘Abingdon’s (legal) right, Abingdon’s right!’ Furthermore, all who have heard of this miracle have been struck with such astonishment that, from that time until the present time, no king or duke or prince or other very powerful person has been found who would to any extent dare bring a case against the house of Abingdon concerning the same meadow.

Various scholars have discussed parallels between this episode and the description of the arrival and departure of \textit{Scyld Scefing} ‘Shield (son) of (the) Sheaf’ at the start of \textit{Beowulf}.\textsuperscript{86} It seems likely that these accounts, and others, derive from an early Germanic fertility myth concerning a barley-spirit. One scholar also points out a possible parallel between the water-meadow called \textit{Beri}, interpreted as ‘Barley Isle’, in the chronicle


and the Barri/Barey of Norse tradition. Additionally, I tentatively suggest that the giant sword—which, we have seen, could well be akin to Skirnr’s gambanteinn and implicitly imagined as a large, burning candle—shares a degree of kinship, albeit indistinctly, with the chronicle’s ‘wax candle of well-considered/distinguished size and thickness’. It is, at least, curious that rather like the monks’ candle, the giant sword passed through waters in close association with a representative of both barley and shield: Beowulf, whose name is interpretable as Beowulf ‘Barley-Wolf’, and who fought as the effective champion of the Scyldingas ‘Shieldings’. Also, rather as the monks’ candle, by serving as God’s finger and overcoming the neighbours’ claim, returned to Abingdon monastery land enclosed by water, so the giant sword, by serving as an extension of Beowulf’s arm and overcoming the Danes’ unjust neighbours, effectively returned to Heorot the mere, its contents and environs, according to divine right.

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88 The candle’s placement on a likely sheaf of barley is also suggestive of a sexual symbolism in keeping with the union of the grain-god Freyr with Gerðr. For its part, the round shield of the chronicle might represent the sun. In Chapter 14 of this study, though, we shall meet a family of lunar ‘shield’-giants comparable with Gerðr and Grendel’s mother. Anlezark, Water and Fire, 289 n. 96 compares the monks’ candle to the golden standard in Scyld’s funeral ship, which, in Chapter 4, I likened to the giant sword as candle.