

# Painful Love and Desire in *Skírnismál*

## Origins and Contexts

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Eddic poem Skírnismál depicts erotically associated suffering in several instances. The god Freyr is filled with pain and grief when he first lays eyes on the beautiful jötunn maiden Gerðr. Later in the poem, Gerðr is threatened with horrible punishments if she refuses to give herself to Freyr, and one of these punishments consists in unfulfilled desire. The present study examines the sorts of emotions that are in play in these instances and attempts to determine the origins of the ways in which these emotions are depicted. The study also focuses on whether, and if so in what way, the two cases of erotically associated suffering are related to one another.*

**SAMMANDRAG:** *I eddadikten Skírnismál skildras erotiskt anknutet lidande vid flera tillfällen. Guden Freyr uppfylls av smärta och sorg vid första anblicken av den sköna jättinnan Gerðr. Senare i dikten hotas Gerðr med gruveliga straff om hon nekar att ge sig åt Freyr, och ett av straffen består i ouppfylld åtrå. Denna studie undersöker vilka slags känslor det handlar om i dessa fall och försöker fastställa ursprunget för traditionen för skildringarna av dessa känslor. Studien undersöker också om och i så fall hur de två fallen av erotiskt anknutet lidande i dikten är relaterade till varandra.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Emotions; love-sickness; grief and suffering; courtly literature; skaldic poetry; Eddic poetry; Freyr and Gerðr*

In the Eddic poem *Skírnismál*, with the god Freyr as one of the main characters, erotically connected suffering is depicted several times. The aim of this study is to investigate what kinds of emotions are depicted, as well as the poetic context and the origin of the tradition. Not least, the study will investigate how, or whether, the different cases of erotically connected suffering in the poem are related to each other.

The text of *Skírnismál* is preserved in two medieval manuscripts: Gks 2365 4to (Codex Regius, c. 1270), which calls the poem *För Skírnis*, and AM 748 I a 4to (c. 1300), which calls it *Skírnismál*.

*Skírnismál* tells the story of how Freyr, assisted by his servant Skírnir, wins the giantess Gerðr as his mistress or wife. In the beginning of the poem, Freyr's love awakens immediately on seeing a beautiful woman far away. Love is described as a torment for him. At the end of the poem, he complains of his yearning which makes the wait seem long. These feelings of Freyr's are fundamental to the poem: they direct the plot, and they open and conclude the poem.

In these parts, Freyr's erotically connected feelings towards Gerðr are in focus. But the main part of the poem is occupied by a scene where Skírnir uses various arguments and means to try to persuade Gerðr to give herself to Freyr. At first, Skírnir tries to convince Gerðr with precious gifts (st. 19 and 21), which she rejects, then with threats of killing her (st. 23) and her father (st. 25), and, most extensively, with a magic staff and a long curse that will strike her if she does not accept Freyr (st. 26-36). She will suffer many pains, among them an unbearable, unfulfilled desire (st. 29, 36). This persuasive rhetoric convinces Gerðr who now declares her willingness to give herself to Freyr (st. 37, 39).

Much previous research on *Skírnismál* has focused on or discussed its erotic motifs. In an article from 1909, Magnus Olsen claimed that *Skírnismál* was a religious poem from pre-Christian times, depicting the mythic origin of an agrarian fertility cult. The poem was seen as an allegory: Freyr represented the sun and Gerðr the earth, and the union between them resulted in the fruitfulness of the fields (Olsen 1909, 21-22). The threatening of Gerðr in the curse is a threat of infertility of the earth, a threat which is removed by her union with the god of the sky and sun. Olsen's article was influential, and for example Ursula Dronke saw the theme of a "hieros gamos, the sacred marriage of Sky and Earth" in the poem (Dronke 1966, 253). This interpretation became the standard view in scholarship and was the one presented in dictionaries and scholarly overviews for a long time.<sup>1</sup>

In a very different interpretation, completely lacking connections to genuine pre-Christian religion, Lars Lönnroth argued that *Skírnismál* instead depicted the problems within the family-based society of medieval Iceland. In Lönnroth's view, the poem exemplified the conflict between "släktens förnuft och den förälskade individens vanvett" (Lönnroth 1977, 166). While Freyr's love and his union with Gerðr are basically seen as the same thing by Olsen and his followers, with Freyr's feelings interpreted as a positive, constructive feature in the poem, Lönnroth makes a clear distinction and interprets Freyr's passion as a destructive force.

But Olsen's religious interpretation was also challenged with more literary arguments. For instance, Kaarle Krohn, Heinrich Hempel and Jan de Vries all argued

<sup>1</sup> E.g. *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid* (Holtmark 1970, 571-572), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (Harris 1988, 327), and *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon* (Gimmler 1992, 538).

that the depiction of Freyr's feelings had a character which indicated a high-medieval, rather courtly, poetic context.<sup>2</sup> In Paul Bibire's interpretation, *Skírnismál* shows "romance influence in its [...] presentation of Freyr as a lover" (Bibire 1986, 39). The high-medieval dating and context is even more pronounced in the comments on the poem in the recent *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, where the poem is ascribed fundamental influences from courtly literature, not least the "höfische Liebe" of Freyr (See et al. 1997, 61; cf. 60, 67). An "influence from courtly literature" was also claimed in the unconvincing conclusion of an article from 2004.<sup>3</sup> Anne Heinrichs' thorough study of the poem's depiction of Freyr's love argues in a similar way for continental influence and a high-medieval origin, but rather points to a learned background in pathological treatises and their treatment of *amor hereos*, love-sickness. In her view, the poem depicts an actual sickness and its cure (Heinrichs 1997, 3-36).

With the exception of Heinrichs, the scholars who have claimed high-medieval influences interpret Freyr's feelings as a fundamentally positive phenomenon, in accordance with the view of courtly poetry where passionate love is romanticized.

The scholars mentioned so far have all focused mainly on Freyr's feelings. But other scholars have paid greater attention to Skírnir's curse and, consequently, to the erotically related feelings of Gerðr.

In a recent article, Tommy Kuusela examines *Skírnismál* in the wider context of sexual magic. He claims that Skírnir's curse, whose purpose is to break down Gerðr's resistance to a sexual union with Freyr by using magic, is not only a mythological motif, but also has parallels in real, practiced magic. He points out parallels in both Old Norse literature and in later recorded charms which aim to overcome a person sexually. He also places the depiction of Freyr's desire in the light of magically caused passion in other Old Norse sources (Kuusela 2014, e.g. 43-44, 49-50, 54).

Carolyn Larrington focuses almost solely on Gerðr's feelings and on the curse. In her interpretation, the sexual desire with which Skírnir's curse threatens Gerðr constitutes, together with the other punishments in the curse, a "violent threat to the very core of her female identity", a threat which in the end defeats her and forces her to let her own desire and Freyr's concur (Larrington 1992, 3-16; especially 5, 7, 14).

These last two works do not feature the basically positive and constructive view of the erotic feelings, which both the Olsen school and the advocates of a courtly origin saw in the poem. Instead, *Skírnismál* is, according to Kuusela and Larrington, about destructive desire and sex associated with destructive magic.

The opinion that the depiction of Freyr's love is influenced by *courtly love* and *courtly literature* has been so important for several scholars that it constitutes their main dating criterion for the poem: since it is supposed to contain love-sickness and a sentimental or romantic depiction of feelings, it must be late (so e.g. Krohn 1911, 44;

<sup>2</sup> Krohn claimed that: "själva äventyret är alltför sentimentalt anlagt för att vara diktat utan påverkan av litterär kultur" (Krohn 1911, 544); Jan de Vries writes about a *moderner Geist* (de Vries 1967, 107); Hempel claims that Freyr is "voll Sehens und Trauerns wie ein Minnesänger des höfischen Zeitalters" (Hempel 1966, 55).

<sup>3</sup> Sävborg 2006, 339.

de Vries 1967, 107; Hempel 1966, 55; Bibire 1986, 39; Heinrichs 1997, 3, 33). This stresses the scholarly importance of the erotic motifs in the poem and the depiction of them, as well as the relevance of making a thorough investigation into them.

We will now take a closer look at the erotic motifs in *Skírnismál*. We start with the depiction of Freyr's feelings and behavior.

### Freyr's love

The poem opens with Freyr's mother being concerned about him, since she believes he is angry ("ofreiði"; st. 1) and wants to know the reason:

Rístu nú, Skírnir,   oc gacc at beiða  
occarn mála mǫg,  
oc þess at fregna,   hveim inn fróði sé  
ofreiði afi (st. 1)

[Get up now, Skírnir, and go and ask to speak  
with the young man  
and ask this: with whom the wise, fertile one  
is to terribly angry. (translation Carolyne Larrington)]

Freyr's servant Skírnir asks him:

Segðu þat, Freyr,   fólvaldi goða,  
oc ec vilia vita:  
hví þú einn sitr   ennlanga Sali,  
minn dróttinn, um daga? (st. 3)

[Tell me, Freyr, war-leader of the gods,  
for I would like to know,  
why do you sit alone in the long hall,  
my lord, day after day? (tr. Larrington)]

Freyr responds:

Hví um segiac þér,   seggr inn ungi,  
mikinn móðtrega?  
þvíat álfrǫðull   lýsir um alla daga,  
oc þeygi at mínom munom (st. 4)

[Why should I tell you, young man,  
about my great sorrow of heart,  
for the elf-ray shines day after day,  
but not on my longings. (tr. Larrington)]

The cause of the grief turns out to be his love for a woman, soon identified as the giantess Gerðr, whose beauty he has seen:

Í Gymis gǫrðom   ec sá ganga  
mér tíða mey;  
armar lýsto,   enn af þaðan  
alt lop toc lǫgr.

Mær er mér tíðari enn manni hveim,  
ungom, í árdaga;  
ása oc álfa þat vill engi maðr,  
at við sát t sém. (st. 6-7)

[In the courts of Gymir I saw walking  
a girl pleasing to me.  
Her arms shine and from there  
all the sea and air catch light.

More pleasing to me is the girl than any girl to any man  
young in bygone days;  
none of the gods and elves wishes that  
we should be together. (tr. Larrington)]

At the end of the poem, when Skírnir has informed Freyr about the successful outcome and the planned-for date with Gerðr nine days later, Freyr utters another stanza, which concludes the poem:

Long er nótt, langar ro tvær,  
hvé um þreiac þriár?  
opt mér mánaðr minni þótti  
enn síá hálf hýnótt. (st. 42)

[Long is one night, long are two,  
how shall I bear three?  
Often a month to me has seemed less  
than half one of these pre-marital nights. (tr. Larrington)]

What feelings are described in these stanzas? Tommy Kuusela has claimed that what fills Freyr in the beginning of the poem is “sexuellt begär”.<sup>4</sup> This, however, seems too crude a characterization. Freyr’s own talk of his *mikinn móðtregi*, ‘great sorrow of heart’ (st. 4), marks a strong emotional, rather than physical, reaction. The strength of the emotion is further stressed by the fact that it has ruled him for several days and resulted in the typical behavior of grieving people in Old Norse literature, withdrawing from the company of others and sinking down into passiveness: “[...] hví þú einn sitr [...] um daga” (st. 3; see below for other examples of this reaction in Old Norse literature). The emotional reaction is caused by Freyr’s sight of a beloved woman (*mér tíða mær*, st. 6), whose beauty he stresses in the poetic description of the shining of her arms, a radiance that gave light to all air and sea (“*armar lýsto, enn af þaðan / alt lop toc lög*”; st. 6). This sight deeply affected him, and he twice calls the woman ‘beloved / dear to me’ (*tíð*); she is even more dear to him than any woman is to any young man ever (“*Mær er mér tíðari enn manni hveim, / ungom, í árdaga*”; st. 7). All this is a description of more than just sexual arousal (“sexuellt begär”). It is primarily a strong emotional reaction caused by love for a woman, whose beauty is praised in poetic hyperboles.

<sup>4</sup> “Sexuellt begär uppfyller diktens Frej och det är med en sådan låga han till varje pris har för avsikt att erövra henne” (Kuusela 2014, 43-44).

But this love in the poem primarily causes Freyr grief: a *mikinn móðtregi* and the sorrowful behavior of extensive isolation and passiveness. In the prose introduction, which is certainly based on the poem, his feelings are described as “hugsóttir miclar”, ‘great sickness of heart’.

The stress on grief and pain has led some scholars to talk about Freyr’s love-sickness. Anne Heinrichs calls her analysis of the poem “Der liebeskranke Freyr”, and Carolyne Larrington similarly talks about Freyr’s “love-sickness” in the introduction to her translation of the poem (Larrington 1996, 61). The concept of love-sickness is, however, not entirely obvious and needs to be clarified and specified to be useful in analysis.

Love-sickness is, as an analytic notion, not simply pain caused by unrequited love or other external unhappy circumstances in connection with love. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century pathologist Bernardus Gordonius defined it as ‘a sickness which is a melancholic grief because of love to a woman’<sup>5</sup>, and the 12<sup>th</sup>-century love theorist Andreas Capellanus defined love as a ‘certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex.’<sup>6</sup> On the basis of such descriptions and definitions (other examples are found in works by e.g. Galenos, Paulos of Aigina, and Constantinus Africanus<sup>7</sup>), I have in a recent work defined love-sickness as *suffering caused by the emotional power of love itself* (Sävborg, forthcoming). The symptoms described in *Skírnismál*, explicit deep grief and the sorrowful behavior, caused by the awakened passion for a beautiful woman, are clear signs of love-sickness in this definition. There is, therefore, no doubt that Freyr’s feelings in *Skírnismál* should rightly be called love-sickness.

What origin, then, does the motif and description of Freyr’s love-sickness have?

In high-medieval courtly poetry, love-sickness is common. A typical example is found in Chrétien de Troyes’ courtly romance *Cligès* (c. 1175), where the awakening love of a woman is depicted:

Tote nuit est an si grant painne,  
Qu’ele ne dort ne ne repose.  
Amors li a el cors anclose  
Une tançon et une rage,  
Qui mout li troble son corage  
Et qui si l’angoisse et destraint,  
Que tote nuit plore et se plaint  
Et se degete et si tressaut,  
A po que li cuers ne li faut.  
Et quant ele a tant travaillé

5 “Morbus qui hereos dicitur est sollicitudo melancolica propter mulieris amorem” (after Lowes 1913-13, 499).

6 “Amor est passio quaedam innata procedens ex visione et immoderata cogitatione formae alterius sexus”. The English translation in the main text is by John Jay Parry.

7 See Kaiser 1998, 250, for Galenos and Paulos; for Constantinus, see Constantinus Africanus, 187.

Et sangloti et baillié  
 Et tressailli et sospiré,  
 Lors a an son cuer remiré,  
 Qui cil estoit et de queus mors,  
 Por cui la destreignoit Amors. (v. 876-890)

[All night long she was in such great torment that she could neither rest nor sleep. Love had locked up within her body a conflict and frenzy that troubled her heart so that it nearly failed her, and that so tormented and obsessed her that she wept all the night through – lamenting, tossing, and trembling. After she had struggled, sobbed, gasped, trembled, and sighed, she gazed into her heart to see who it was and what manner of man it was for whom Love was causing her such suffering. (transl. William W. Kibler)]

This kind of description of love, usually the awakening of love, as primarily a suffering which causes the loving person deep pain, sorrow, crying, sobbing, trembling and sleeplessness, not because of unhappy conditions for the love, but because of the emotional power of the passion itself, is common in courtly romances and lyrical poetry from the period.

But love-sickness was not invented by the high medieval authors. It has a long history as a poetic motif in Western literature. It is depicted by e.g. Sappho (fragm. 31), Euripides (*Hippolytos*; see Karnein 1983, 63) and Ovid (see e.g. Wack 1990, 51 and Baldwin 1994, 18, 114). Love-sickness was not only a motif in poetry, but also a part of the learned view of love. Hippocrates (c. 400 BC) and Galenos of Pergamon (2<sup>nd</sup> century) as well as several early medieval pathologists describe it (see e.g. Wack 1990: 7-9; Kaiser 1998: 245, 250; Baldwin 1994: 12). Constantinus Africanus' *Viaticum* (11<sup>th</sup> century) explicitly calls it a *morbus*, 'disease' (Wack 1990, 38). Gerardus of Berry, in his *Glosses on the Viaticum* (c. 1180-1200), developed Constantinus' description further (Wack 1990, 39, 53, 60, 66). In Gerardus' work, Constantinus' term *eros* for love-sickness has become *heros* (Wack 1990, 60), and from now on terms such as *amor hereos* were frequently used for love-sickness (see e.g. Lowes 1913-14: 492, 498, 524 etc.). In Bernardus Gordonius' medical tractate *Lilium medicinae* (late 13<sup>th</sup> century), love-sickness is extensively described regarding causes, symptoms, prognostics and cure.<sup>8</sup> The symptoms and expressions of love-sickness are always connected with pain and suffering, such as sleeplessness, depressed thoughts, loss of appetite, neglect of one's duties, and, if the sickness is not correctly treated, madness and death.<sup>9</sup> The same or similar symptoms are found also in the poetic treatment of the phenomenon in high-medieval literature (cf. the quote from *Cligès* above).

It is clear that love-sickness has a strong position in high-medieval literature from the European continent, especially in the courtly literature, where it has a key role in the love-depiction in general.

The love-sickness in the courtly poetry did also evidently find its way into the Old Norse literature. It is found relatively unchanged in many Norse translations of

<sup>8</sup> For Bernardus Gordonius and his work, see Lowes 1913-14, 498-502; Crohns 1905, 76-86; Heinrichs 1997, 7-10.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Constantinus Africanus, 189; Gerardus of Berry, 201; Bernardus Gordonius, 499-501; see also Heinrichs 1997, 8-10.

European courtly works, such as *Pamphilus* (e.g. p. 96, 98, 103), *Strengleikar* (e.g. p. 24, 68-70), and *Tristrams saga* (e.g. p. 8-11). Keeping this in mind, it is hardly surprising that several scholars have interpreted the motif of love-sickness in *Skírnismál* as a high-medieval feature, an influence from courtly poetry (See et al. 1997, Bibire 1986, Heinrichs 1997 etc; see above). Both grief and isolation from the company of other people, which we meet as signs of love-sickness in *Skírnismál*, can be found also in high-medieval works.

But it should be remembered that similarities do not necessarily prove a direct influence. There are similar descriptions of love-sickness in e.g. Melanesian and ancient Egyptian traditions (see e.g. Giddens 1992, 37), which indicates that love-sickness might be a polygenetic rather than a time- and culture-bound phenomenon. We must, therefore, not forget to consider the possibility of a native tradition of love-sickness in Scandinavia.

Love is generally a more common motif in Old Norse poetry than many scholars are aware of. Carolyne Larrington has, for instance, claimed that only the courtly translations from French “taught Icelandic saga-writers how to deal with emotional expression” (Larrington 2015, 91), that “native tradition is reticent about open discussion of feelings” (Larrington 2011, 84), and that a depiction of “male interiority” was “alien to Norse literature” until the translations of courtly romances (Larrington 2011, 83, 84). However, more than 100 stanzas from skaldic poetry from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century describe, mention, or indicate love<sup>10</sup> – in the vast majority of these cases, the love felt by the male skald himself. There, as well as in Eddic and runic poetry, we find some recurring motifs and formulas for the depiction of love which seem to be specific to Old Norse poetic tradition.

Of vital importance for the understanding of *Skírnismál* is a motif in Old Norse poetry which can be called *the woman causes the man grief*, where this statement functions as a poetic expression for ‘the man loves the woman’. It is typical of the formula type that it is love itself which is described as grief; it is not about any unhappy conditions in connection with the love in question. Characteristic, too, is that love is not mentioned explicitly in the context; the grief is thus not described as an expression of a love which is mentioned or depicted, but the entire love ‘description’ or love mention lies precisely and solely in this grief. The grief does in this formula type function as a synonym for love.<sup>11</sup>

In skaldic poetry, this motif is primarily realized in a limited group of formulas<sup>12</sup>, which is attested in several different variants in some sub-types, but always in

<sup>10</sup> For an overview and analysis of love in skaldic poetry, see Sävborg 2007, 276-288; for love and emotions in Old Norse literature in general, in all its genres, see Sävborg 2007 *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> The characteristics of this formula type are more thoroughly discussed in a separate article (Sävborg forthcoming b) and plays a role also in Sävborg 2007, 310-324.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the concept of formula, see Sävborg 2018, 51-56. Note also Alison Wray’s definition of formulaic sequence: “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is sorted and retrieved whole from



recognizable form. One common subtype is *the woman deprives the man of his joy*, e.g. “fold **nemr flaum** af skaldi flóðhyrs” (Gunnlaugr ormstunga, *Gunnlaugs saga*, 90).<sup>13</sup> A related subtype is *the woman stands in the way of the man’s joy*, e.g. “Hvít **stendr** heiðar jótra Hlín **fyr gamni** mínu” (Illugi Bryndælaskáld; SKALD III 1, 266).<sup>14</sup> Another subtype expresses in various ways more directly the idea that *the woman causes the man grief*, attested in both skaldic poems and in runic inscriptions from Bergen, e.g. “Vár kennir [mér] víra vitr **úgláðan** sitja” (Bryggen inscription B 255) or “margr elr **sorg** of svinna” (Ármóðr, lv 3; SKALD II 2, 622).<sup>15</sup> A closely related subtype is *the woman is born to cause the man grief*, e.g. “**alin** erumk björk **at þolvi** bands” (Óláfr Helgi, lv 2; SKALD I 2, 518).<sup>16</sup> The subtypes *the woman causes the man grief* and *the woman deprives the man of his joy* might also be varied so that the words for grief and joy respectively are synecdochically replaced by well-known symptoms of grief (sleeplessness and silence) and harmony (good sleep and talkativeness) respectively, e.g. “Sá **kennir** mér svanni [---] hvítjarpr **sofa lítit**” (Magnús berfœttr, lv 3; SKALD II 1, 387).<sup>17</sup> Less formulaic, but still belonging to the same motif, is *thinking about the woman causes me grief*, which also functions as a poetic expression for ‘I love the woman’, e.g. “né ek leynda, [---] hyrjar því **striði**, bands mank beiða Rindi” (Kormákr; *Kormáks saga*, 210).<sup>18</sup>

The motif that love causes grief must be described as a kind of love-sickness. Since in all the instances above it is love itself, the emotional power of the passion, which causes the suffering, it is love-sickness in precisely the definition used here, and this love-sickness is of essentially the same kind as in courtly poetry and learned European pathology.

We should note that a large group of the instances – in fact the majority of them – are found in skaldic poems from the Viking Age (by Kormákr, Egill, Gunnlaugr ormstunga, Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, Óláfr helgi, Magnús inn góði, and Illugi Bryndælaskáld) or at least from the time before the genesis of courtly poetry (Magnús

memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar” (Wray 2002, 9 [after Wray 2009, 29]).

<sup>13</sup> Other instances of this type are found in Magnús berfœttr (SKALD II 1, 387); *Víglundar saga*, 110; Bjarni Kolbeinsson, *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 6 (SKALD I 2, 963); Grípisspá 29; Óláfr helgi, lv 10 (SKALD I 2, 528); Anon Lauf 3 (SKALD III 1, 639); Bjarni Kolbeinsson, *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 15 (SKALD I 2, 971); *Víglundar saga*, 109; *Stríðkeravísur* (SKALD III 1, 628).

<sup>14</sup> Other instances of this type are found in Kormákr (*Kormáks saga*, 271); Anon SnE 2 (SKALD III 1, 514); Anon Lauf 1 (SKALD III 1, 637).

<sup>15</sup> Other instances of this type are found in Björn Breiðvíkingakappi (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 78); Bjarni Kolbeinsson, *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 2 (SKALD I 2, 959); *Víglundar saga*, 108; Kormákr (*Kormáks saga*, 287); Bjarni Kolbeinsson; *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 15 (SKALD I 2, 971); Anon Lauf 3 (SKALD III 1, 639); Kormákr; *Kormáks saga*, 213).

<sup>16</sup> Another instance of this type is found in Magnús inn góði, lv 2 (SKALD II 1, 6).

<sup>17</sup> Other instances of this type are found in Magnús inn góði, lv 2 (SKALD II 1, 6); Bryggen inscription B 255; Kormákr (*Kormáks saga*, 270); Óláfr helgi, lv 5 (SKALD I 2, 523); Gunnlaugr ormstunga (*Gunnlaugs saga*, 92); Hallar-Steinn, fragm 2 (SKALD III 1, 202).

<sup>18</sup> Other instances of this type are found in Kormákr (*Kormáks saga*, 268); Egill Skallagrímsson (*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, 148).

berfœttr). Given the fact that the motif, with all its sub-types and variants, is found already among Viking Age skalds, it seems plausible to assume that this particular kind of love-sickness constitutes a native Norse tradition which is present in its rather fixed form already in Norse poetry of the Viking Age and then lives on during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>19</sup> No influence from European courtly love-sickness is therefore likely.

Despite the similarity on a general level – as love-sickness in the definition used here – we should note that this Old Norse motif and its various variants do not have any clear parallels in high medieval European literature. We should remind ourselves of one of the distinctive features of all the instances listed above: love is not mentioned; instead, *the woman causes the man grief* and other manifestations of this motif is used synonymously with ‘the man loves the woman’ – the information about love is thus given only through the mention of grief. In contrast, the motif of causing grief, or depriving of joy, as a direct synonym for love is not something we meet in the European literature. There, on the contrary, love is normally mentioned explicitly, and if grief is mentioned in the context, it is one of several *consequences* of this love – grief itself does not constitute the mention of it. As in the Norse cases, suffering or grief is frequently connected with love by the poets, but this suffering or grief is described in the poem as a phenomenon *connected with* love – it is not grief itself which constitutes the poet’s way of mentioning love. It is also clear that, when grief – or an expression of grief – is depicted as a consequence of love itself in the high-medieval European poetry, it is usually only one symptom of suffering among many others, such as trembling, sweating, gasping, rage, or actual illness with fever and physical pain. Grief is hardly ever the only element of the love-sickness, as in the standard Norse motif, and it is, if it occurs at all, clearly subordinated other, mostly physical, expressions of suffering.

To summarize, there is an old tradition of depicting love-sickness in Old Norse poetry, independent of the European high-medieval and classical tradition. This Old Norse tradition has distinctive traits not found in the continental European depiction of love-sickness.

<sup>19</sup> Against this conclusion could, however, be argued that the Viking Age cases might be non-authentic; these stanzas would, then, also be high medieval creations influenced by high medieval European literature. For example, Kormákr’s stanzas, which contain several of the instances for the formula type, have by Bjarni Einarsson been regarded as non-authentic, high medieval poems composed under the influence of troubadour poetry (Bjarni Einarsson 1961 and 1971). But the rejection of them as late forgeries is based precisely on their love depiction and not least their love-sickness, which according to Bjarni resembles European troubadour poetry – the view that love-sickness is not a native Norse phenomenon is therefore a presumption for him. We should also remember that there are not just a few single occurrences which contrast with a general tendency in Viking Age skaldic poetry – if that had been the case, there would clearly be more reason to assume that we have to do with later forgeries. But instead, it is remarkable that there are so many instances and that they are found in the poetry of so many different Viking Age skalds – there are simply too many stanzas which have to be rejected as forgeries if the forgery hypothesis is to work.

To which of these traditions, then, does the depiction of Freyr's love-sickness in *Skírnismál* belong? The native Norse one or the continental European one?

Most scholars who have advocated courtly influences have mustered only vague support for this, pointing to the mere presence of love-sickness and tender emotions (so e.g. Paul Bibire; See et al; Jan de Vries; Heinrich Hempel). In light of the evidence above for a native Norse tradition of love-sickness, this argument is hardly strong.

Anne Heinrichs is, however, more concrete in her parallels to *Skírnismál*'s love-sickness in high-medieval European medical treatises. For the depiction of Freyr's love-sickness, she notes the description of his isolation from other people (st. 3) and points to one mention of this in a medieval Latin treatise on love-sickness (Heinrichs 1997, 9). This mention, in Bona Fortuna's *Tractatus super Viaticum*<sup>20</sup> is, however, only from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and its mention of search for isolation as an expression of love-sickness seems to be an exception in the continental European description of love-sickness; even Heinrichs notes in this particular context that "Dieses Symptom [Isolierung] wird seltener bei der Liebeskrankheit erwähnt" (Heinrichs 1997, 9). In contrast, the isolation from the company of other people is mentioned many times in native Old Norse texts in connection with love-sickness of the native Norse tradition or other types of love-sorrows.<sup>21</sup> This expression or sign of love-sickness thus seems to be much more typical of the native Norse tradition of love-sickness than of the continental European and rather points to a native Norse context and background.

But even more important is the fact that Freyr refers to his own feeling as 'grief', *móðtregi*, and never mentions love, although his love is clear from the context. This makes grief in this poem a kind of synonym for 'love', which is precisely what characterizes the native poetic formula type discussed above. This means that, in *Skírnismál*, we seem to have a clear anchorage in the native poetic tradition of love-sickness, while, on the other hand, there do not seem to be any clear cases of a medieval European connection.

There are also some scholars who have previously pointed to a native context to the depiction of Freyr's passion, although they have not discussed it under the notion of love-sickness or pointed to a poetic context.

Tommy Kuusela points to alleged parallels in two episodes in *Heimskringla* (Kuusela 2014, 53-54). In *Ynglinga saga*, the Swedish king Vanlandi breaks his promise to his wife in Finland to return to her within three years. She therefore asks the sorceress Huld to use magic ("síða") to make him return or else kill him. The magic

<sup>20</sup> Heinrichs incorrectly calls him Bona Ventura (Heinrichs 1997, 9).

<sup>21</sup> E.g. in *Völsunga saga*, where Sigurðr in his love-sickness "vill enga skemmtan við menn eiga" (166), Egill in his love-sickness for Ágerðr in *Egils saga* (148), and in cases of love-sorrow in *Laxdæla saga* (136-137), *Morkinskinna* (354), the *Legendary saga of Saint Olaf* (102), *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (89), *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (123), *Hávamál* (st. 113), *Guðrúnarkviða III* (st. 1), as well as several cases of other types of grief in e.g. *Egils saga* (244), *Fagrskinna* (104), and Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek* (st. 18).

works and Vanlandi suddenly wishes to travel to Finland (“Þá gerði hann fúsan at fara til Finnlands”), but his advisors stop him, understanding that this wish is caused by black Finnish magic (“sögðu, at vera myndi fjölkynngi Finna í fýsi hans”). The following night, Vanlandi is killed by the *mara* (*Heimskringla* I, 29). In *Haralds saga hárfagra*, king Haraldr is bewitched by a Saami sorcerer and his witch daughter Snæfríðr. As soon as he has received a cup of mead from her hand, he is filled with desire. He marries her and loves her madly (“unni svá með ærslum”) so that he neglects his kingdom and all his royal duties (“ríki sitt ok allt þat, er honum byrjaði, þá fyrir lét hann”). After Snæfríðr’s death, he sits passively for three years over her corpse, which remains unchanged, and his people grieve over his madness (“landslýðr allr syrgði hann villtan”) (*Heimskringla* I, 126). Then she is burned and turns out to be full of snakes, toads, lizards, and frogs. After she has become ashes, the king is released from his madness, regains his senses (“konungrinn steig til vizku ok hugði af heimsku”) and takes up his rule again, full of anger over the ‘fraud of the Saami woman’ (“svik Finnunar”) (*Heimskringla* I, 127).

One remarkable difference between these two *Heimskringla* episodes on one hand and Freyr’s love-sickness in *Skírnismál* on the other is that both the *Heimskringla* episodes are about *magic* and magically caused wishes – magic is actually the core of both these episodes – while no magic is mentioned or indicated in connection with Freyr’s emotions in *Skírnismál*. This is an essential difference. Freyr’s passion and wishes lack the supernatural origin which constitutes the main point in the *Heimskringla* episodes. Freyr’s emotional state is, as we have seen, instead very similar to the ‘natural’ love-sickness described in skaldic poetry and native sagas. In the Vanlandi episode, we do not necessarily have to do with passion for a woman at all – the saga only states that the magic causes in him a wish to travel to Finland (“gerði hann fúsan at fara til Finnlands”). No sign of love-sickness – no grief, no longing for a woman, no thought of her beauty etc. of the kind we meet in *Skírnismál* – is even indicated here.

In the story of Haraldr and Snæfríðr, passion for a woman is, indeed, part of the story. Haraldr’s feelings are explicitly mentioned: he loved (“unni”) her and grieved (“syrgði”) after her death. But these feelings are clearly subordinated the magic madness and caused directly by that; they also disappear the moment the magic is broken. Magic and insanity caused by such magic is in focus here, the (insane) passion is only a subordinated part of that, clearly second to his abandonment of his rulership and other kingly duties. Kuusela is certainly right when he claims that this episode and the opening episode in *Skírnismál* “förenas [...] i motivet med den oväntade och sjukliga åtrå som drabbar individerna”. But he is wrong when, in the following sentence, he claims that they also share the magic element: “Den sjukliga passionen är ett resultat av trolldom, sådan vars syfte var att övervinna en tilltänkt älskogspartner” (Kuusela 2014, 54). This is true only for the *Heimskringla* episode, and the purpose of the magic seems, in fact, to be to cause the man to abandon his royal duties; in *Skírnismál*’s depiction of Freyr’s love, there are, as mentioned, no hints of magic.

None of the episodes mentioned by Kuusela seem to shed more light on *Skírnismál*'s depiction of Freyr's love than the cases of native love-sickness in the Norse poetry and sagas discussed above.

Another scholar who has placed Freyr's passion in *Skírnismál* within a native context is Lars Lönnroth. In his interpretation, *Skírnismál* is a poem about the actual norms of marriage in the medieval Icelandic society. It is only in this context he comments upon Freyr's feelings in the beginning of the poem: "I överensstämmelse med det isländska släktsamhällets generella fördömelse av sådana irrationella passioner, som går på tvärs av släktens önsknings och intressen, skildras den som en sjukdom, 'hugsot'" (Lönnroth 1977, 166). Lönnroth, too, seems to see this passion as caused by magic, since he describes it as a punishment for Freyr's breaking of the norms of society: "När Frej sätter sig i Hliðskjálf [det symboliska uttrycket för Odens patriarkaliska auktoritet] bryter han alltså mot en av släktsamhällets lagar, och det är då logiskt, att han bestraffas genom att drabbas av ett begär som han inte kan bemästra" (166).<sup>22</sup>

Kuusela's and Lönnroth's interpretations of Freyr's passion are both based on the idea that his feelings are negatively charged and destructive. Lönnroth describes those feelings as an 'irrational passion' of a kind that is *condemned* by society, and he claims that it is a divine *punishment* for a crime against the norms. Kuusela stresses even more the magical origin of the passion. In his alleged parallels, we have not only to do with magic, but with black, destructive magic, *maleficium*. Vanlandi is subjected to "fjölkyngi", a negatively charged word for magic, a magic that soon kills him in a painful way. Haraldr hárfagri's passion is strongly connected with *madness* caused by destructive magic; unambiguous words such as *ærsl* and *heimska* are used. The woman at whom his passion is directed is a witch, who turns out to be full of – in the contemporary view – evil animals such as snakes and toads. The magic passion is described as a *fraud*, "svik", on the part of the witch. It is *evil* in its very core. If Freyr's feelings are interpreted in the light of these alleged parallels, they are certainly negative and destructive in their core.

Is it, then, correct to interpret Freyr's love as negative? We have already noted that it is not caused by magic, and it can therefore not be interpreted as a punishment, a revenge, or an intended evil attack, as in the alleged parallel cases. It certainly causes him grief, which can of course be called a negative feeling in itself. But this aspect, the suffering, is something that it shares with all other cases of love-sickness – the suffering is a key part of the definition of this phenomenon. To establish how Freyr's love-sickness was charged or evaluated, it is therefore necessary to put it into the context of love-sickness in general.

<sup>22</sup> His support for this does not come from *Skírnismál*, but from passage in *Snorra Edda* (see below).

In continental courtly poetry, love-sickness was a central part of an almost religious cult of love<sup>23</sup>; even unhappy love is ascribed a high emotional value by the troubadours (see e.g. Finlay 1995, 127 or Bandlien 2001, 74). Love-sickness was, in medieval Europe, seen as a prestigious phenomenon and a sign of a noble, more sensible inner life. “The sufferer was typically thought to be a nobleman”, Mary F. Wack stresses (Wack 1990, xi), and Anne Heinrichs also notes that the idea that love-sickness primarily affected kings and princes was standard during the Middle Ages (Heinrichs 1997, 4). Gerardus of Berry made this view clear in the following words: “amor qui heros. heroes dicuntur uiri nobiles qui propter diuicias et mollietatem uite tali potius laborant passione” [Love that [is called] heros: Heroes are said to be noble men who, on account of riches and the softness of their lives, are more likely to suffer this disease (transl. Wack)].<sup>24</sup>

A similar view does, in fact, seem to exist in Old Norse poetry. Warrior skalds, such as Egill, Björn, Kormákr and Gunnlaugr, and warrior kings such as Óláfr helgi and Magnús berfœttr, all express their grief-bringing love-sickness in their stanzas, which otherwise express their pride over their martial deeds. It is not likely that such persons would describe themselves in a way that was seen as evil, destructive, and dishonorable. What they expressed in their stanzas was what they were proud of. Both the theme of love for a woman and the theme of martial deeds were prestigious for the poets in Old Norse tradition when they talked about themselves. Kings, skalds and warriors *boast* about their love-sickness in Old Norse poetry; the fact that the high god of fertility himself is deeply struck by it is therefore not inconsequent. Love-sickness is as prestigious in Old Norse tradition as in the courtly culture of Europe. The emotional pain which is present in the formula type is, as mentioned, partly used differently – concerning the verbal expression – in Old Norse poetry and courtly poetry, but the difference mainly concerns poetic technique. The basic view of love as a phenomenon that brings both suffering and happiness is fundamentally similar.

The grief mentioned or depicted in the native Norse tradition of love-sickness is an expression of the emotional force of the passion itself. Skalds who ascribe themselves grief because of their love of a woman often also describe how this love brings them happiness (e.g. Kormákr and Björn Breiðvíkingakappi). Suffering and joy are two sides of the same coin in both native Norse and continental courtly depictions of love.

Love-sickness is thus prestigious, we might say romanticized, in the native Norse poetry, too, and it is in this context we should interpret *Skírnismál*. Freyr’s love should not be seen as a negative or destructive phenomenon. The grief is a prestigious sign of his nobility. The earlier scholars in the tradition of Magnus Olsen who saw Freyr’s love in the poem as a positive, constructive phenomenon seem, at least regarding this evaluation, to have made the correct analysis.

<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis has argued that a core component of the distinctive love depiction by the medieval troubadours was “the Religion of Love” (Lewis 1936, 2).

<sup>24</sup> Gerardus of Berry, 202-203. Cf. the similar description by Bernardus Gordonius (499).

## Gerðr and the unfulfilled desire

In Skírnir's curse in the second part of the poem, he threatens Gerðr with many kinds of punishment if she does not give herself to Freyr. She will have a generally miserable life, but a remarkable part of the curse has a clearly erotic content; for example:

Tópi oc ópi, tíqsull oc óþoli,  
vaxi þér tár með trega!  
Seztu niðr, enn mun ec segia þér  
sváran súsbreca  
oc tvennan trega. (st. 29)

[Madness and howling, tearing affliction and unbearable desire,  
may tears grow for you with grief!  
Sit down, for I shall tell you  
a heavy torment  
and a double grief (tr. Larrington)]

Several of the words are hapax legomena and others are ambiguous, but both *óþoli* and *súsbreki* are generally supposed to refer to (sexual) desire<sup>25</sup>, and various kinds of torment and grief are mentioned in connection with this desire. Later in the curse Skírnir denies her all pleasure in men:

ec fyrirbanna  
manna glaum mani,  
manna nyt mani (st. 34)

[I deny  
pleasure in men to the girl,  
benefit from men to the girl (tr. Larrington)].

In the last stanza of the curse, he returns to the painful desire which the curse will cause her:

Þurs rist ec þér oc þriá stafi,  
ergi oc æði oc óþola" (st. 36)

['Giant' I carve on you and three runes:  
lewdness and frenzy  
and unbearable desire (tr. Larrington)].

Again, the point is that the unfulfilled desire should cause her torment, and madness (*æði*) is explicitly mentioned in the same context.

Since many of the torments in the curse, grief, madness etc., are mentioned in connection with – and possibly as consequences of – strong erotic desire, this case comes close to love-sickness as we have seen it in both continental European and native Norse sources, and as it is defined in this study. A connection to love-sickness

<sup>25</sup> Some examples: Anne Heinrichs translates *súsbreki* as “quälende Begier” and *óþoli* as “unerträgliche Pein” (Heinrichs 1997, 19). Carolyne Larrington translates *óþoli* and *súsbreki* as “desire” and “torment” (Larrington 1996, 65). In *Lexicon Poeticum*, Finnur Jónsson translates *óþoli* as “uudholdelig (erotisk) pine” (*Lexicon Poeticum* 1931, 450; *súsbreki* he believes is a scribal error; p. 547).

has, in fact, been made by scholars. Anne Heinrichs directly connects the torment, and especially the madness, of Gerðr in the curse with love-sickness. She claims that Gerðr has to suffer “den Wahnwitz unheilbarer Liebeskrankheit“ (Heinrichs 1997, 21). Heinrichs further calls Skírnir’s curse ‘love-magic’ (“Liebeszauber“) and claims that *Skírnismál* “folgt einer langen Tradition, ebenfalls schon von der Antike her, *amor hereos* mit Liebeszauber zu verbinden“ (1997, 17). There are, however, also fundamental differences from love-sickness as we have met it so far in this study.

There is no love mentioned or indicated as causes of this suffering, but the suffering itself is the central element here, and this suffering has been created in a destructive manner with the help of magic. We have to do with suffering because of *maleficium*, harm-bringing magic.

Instead of describing love, Skírnir’s curse describes an absence of love – Gerðr will never have any pleasure in men. It is precisely because she does *not* love Freyr that Skírnir utters the curse and threatens to punish her with lovelessness, a life without joy or pleasure with men but with a grotesquely increased desire, whose only purpose is to cause suffering. The desire which Skírnir evokes is not an emotional longing for a certain man. It is, in fact, not even a desire for a specific man: there is no *object* of the desire. It is only a painful torment in itself – a ‘general’ horniness without the possibility of being satisfied. This distinguishes this case from the love-sickness we have met in European medieval literature as well as in native skaldic poetry.

One of the short runic inscriptions found on wooden pieces at Bryggen, Bergen, includes a magic spell, of which some parts are legible:

ek sendi þér,  
ek síða þér  
ylgjar ergi ok óþola,  
Á þér renni óþoli  
ok ‘ioluns’ móð.  
Sittu aldri,  
sof þú aldri... ant mér sem sjálfri þér (after Heinrichs 1997, 18, footnote 18)

[I send you, I bewitch you, she-wolf perversity and unbearable desire! May unbearable desire strike you and *ioluns*-misery! You shall never sit, you shall never sleep... Love me as yourself!]

This appears to be the same phenomenon as in *Skírnismál*. In both cases, we have to do with a curse where a man uses (conditional) *maleficium* against a woman: if she does not give the man her love, she will be tormented by eternal sleeplessness, unrest and desire; it is worth noting that the rare word *óþoli* occurs in both texts. It seems reasonable to follow Anne Heinrichs in seeing this as a curse of the same kind as the one in *Skírnismál*, where the woman is also threatened with eternal unfulfilled desire (Heinrichs 1997, 18; similarly in Larrington 1992, 9). Here, again, we note one of the remarkable differences from love-sickness in both European and native Norse tradition: the suffering is caused by evil magic and strikes the woman precisely if she does *not* love the man – if she will love him, she will escape the suffering. In genuine love-sickness, the opposite is the case.



The inscription on the Bryggen rune stick is important for the interpretation of the erotic motifs in *Skírnismál*. The inscription proves that ‘unfulfilled desire as a punishment’ was an established and distinct phenomenon even outside of *Skírnismál*, in both cases directly linked to a man’s threat against a woman if she rejects his proposal. We do not seem to have to do with literary loans, or with a motif in narrative discourse at all, but rather with a native tradition of magic in real life.<sup>26</sup>

However, we should nevertheless remember that *Skírnismál* opens with a description of Freyr’s – genuine – love-sickness. The fact that we have two instances of erotically related suffering in the poem makes it natural to ask whether there is a connection between them, despite the different character of Gerðr’s impending torment noted above. Some scholars have, indeed, argued that there is a connection and that the two instances mirror each other.

Anne Heinrichs claims that the torment described in Skírnir’s curse – “Steigerung der Begierde bis zum Wahnsinn” – mirrors the torment of Freyr in his love-sickness: Gerðr must experience what Freyr will experience if his love-sickness develops according to the learned medical treatises (Heinrichs 1997, 18). In her view, the curse is a *cura*, aiming to heal the love-sick Freyr: “Sein Ziel ist, Gerðr zur Liebe zu zwingen und damit die Heilung des liebeskranken Freyr zu erreichen; seine ärztliche Methode besteht darin, die Patientin das Schicksal erleben zu lassen, das ihrem Liebhaber gemäss medizinischer Prognose zustossen würde, nämlich Steigerung der Begierde bis zum Wahnsinn” (Heinrichs 1997, 18). Since the *cura* according to the medieval medical treatises can only come from the person who caused the sickness, it is necessary that Gerðr has to suffer “den Wahnwitz unheilbarer Liebeskrankheit stellvertretend für Freyr” (21).

Lars Lönnroth’s view of Gerðr’s unfulfilled desire in Skírnir’s curse is similar: “Den olycka som i värsta fall kommer att drabba henne utgör en exakt parallell till Frejs egen plåga i diktens början” (Lönnroth 1977, 173-174).

Since we have in the same poem two instances of erotic suffering associated with Gerðr – firstly as the object of the desire, secondly as the subject – it is of course tempting to see such a connection. If that connection exists, it would also establish a direct and perhaps old link between genuine love-sickness of native Old Norse origin and magically caused desire as punishment.

But there are arguments against this connection between the poem’s two instances of erotic suffering. There is not the slightest verbal similarity which could indicate a connection between the two cases, nor any similarities regarding motifs. The expressions of love-sickness/desire are different. Freyr’s love-sickness is expressed by his passiveness and withdrawal from the company of other people; Gerðr’s unfulfilled desire is described without any expressions, and the other types of suffering mentioned in the context are, beside grief, madness, howling, and general torment. But

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Kuusela 2014, 50 and Larrington 1992, 9, who also claim a background in ‘real magic’ in *Skírnismál* on the basis of the Bryggen inscription.

even more important is the fact that the alleged expressions of love-sickness in the case of Gerðr's suffering, madness and grief, are not clearly described as consequences of the desire, but as parallel torments: unfulfilled desire seems, if we read the text as it stands, to be only one of several kinds of (mutually independent) torments which are listed in the curse, and madness and howling etc. belong to the other kinds. And if madness is not an expression of the desire in the curse, but a separate torment in itself within the punishment, then Heinrichs' basis for a connection with European learned love-sickness – and with genuine love-sickness in general – is gone.

This interpretation is further supported by the fact that we have other Icelandic curses whose purpose is to persuade an unwilling woman to love a man, where the descriptions of torments are close to the ones listed in *Skírnismál*, but where unfulfilled desire is lacking (Lindqvist 1921, 56-59). This indicates that the torments described in Skírnir's curse are not expressions of the desire, but the desire itself is rather one of the torments, independent of the others.

There are further indications that the unfulfilled desire in the curse in *Skírnismál* is not likely to be connected with Freyr's love-sickness at the beginning of the poem. Carolyne Larrington has analyzed the threats against Gerðr in the curse and convincingly argued that “[b]y showing what women [...] do not want, the curse allows us to construct an understanding of what *is* wanted” (Larrington 1992, 11). She lists the main threats against Gerðr as: being invisible (st. 26), being a public spectacle (st. 28), unbearable sexual frustration (st. 29, 34, 36), a physically repulsive husband (st. 31), low social status and loss of autonomy (st. 30, 35), male authoritarian disapproval (st. 33) (Larrington 1992, 7).

This perspective provides a better understanding of Gerðr's unfulfilled desire than Anne Heinrichs' view of it as a kind of love-sickness. Larrington's perspective gives us a clue to the art of the threats as a totality. The unfulfilled desire is only one of several threats which should be basically seen and evaluated in the same way. It seems clear that the poem depicts this unfulfilled desire as only the intended total *opposite* to the wished-for – fulfilled – desire of Gerðr, in the same way as the violent, ugly, and low-status husband in the same curse is, of course, the intended opposite to the wished-for husband: gentle, handsome, and of high status. This means that Gerðr's unfulfilled desire is depicted solely as something disgusting and humiliating. It belongs to the same class as being forced to drink goat piss, which is another of her punishments in the same curse (st. 35). At this point, the unfulfilled desire can be strongly contrasted to love-sickness, which despite its pain-bringing character is always prestigious and romanticized. As we have seen above, it is something connected with only particularly high-status and sensible persons, such as kings, aristocrats, and poets; this is true for both the native Norse tradition of love-sickness and the continental European one. By this, it is the opposite to the humiliating, disgusting and low-status character of the unfulfilled desire in the threat in *Skírnismál*.

It is, in short, highly unlikely that the poem *Skírnismál* has intended any connection between the motif of Gerðr's unfulfilled desire in the curse and the motif of Freyr's

love-sickness. Unfulfilled desire as a punishment is an essentially different phenomenon from love-sickness, in both its native Norse and its continental European form. In its pure form, we meet the phenomenon in the Bryggen inscription: as solely harmful magic, *maleficium*, without any connection to the romanticized love-sickness in the poetry.

However, although these two phenomena are distinct and are likely to have different origins, they are certainly similar in their basic focus on the torment of desire. How close the motif of desire as magic punishment can be to love-sickness is demonstrated by Snorri Sturluson's retelling of the story of *Skírnismál* in his *Edda*.

In the introductory prose to the poem in Codex Regius it is said that Freyr sees Gerðr when he is sitting in Hliðskjálf; in the poem itself, nothing is said about this. In *Snorra Edda's* retelling of the story, this piece of information becomes essential. Hliðskjálf is earlier in *Snorra Edda* presented as Óðinn's high-seat, and Snorri now describes Freyr's suffering – the love-sickness of the poem – as a *punishment* for the crime of having entered this holy seat: “Ok svá hefndi honom þat mikla mikillæti er hann hafði sezk í þat helga sæti at hann gekk í braut fullr af harmi”; ed. Anthony Faulkes, p. 31 [And his punishment for his great presumption in having sat in the holy seat was that he went away full of grief (tr. Faulkes)]. By this remark, with no counterpart in either *Skírnismál* or its introductory prose, Freyr's suffering in his longing for Gerðr has become a magically caused phenomenon – rather than a spontaneous emotional reaction – where the purpose is to punish by the pain of unfulfilled desire or passion. This might be described as Snorri's re-interpretation of the genuine love-sickness in the poem as a magical punishment consisting of unfulfilled desire.<sup>27</sup> Since Snorri, however, retains the story's character of a love story, and even elaborates this aspect further (for an analysis of this, see Bibire 1986, 35-36, 39), it might be equally possible to see his version as a fusion of the two originally distinct types of erotically connected suffering.

## Summing up

This study has analyzed two kinds of erotically loaded torment. Both are of native origin, but they are essentially different regarding their art and genesis. One belongs to the view of emotions, the other to the practice of witchcraft. One is connected to nobility and sensibility, the other to disgust, humiliation and low status. But both are native Norse phenomena. Regarding the erotic motifs, there is nothing in *Skírnismál* which does not seem to belong to a native Norse tradition.

<sup>27</sup> In Lars Lönnroth's interpretation, the motif of Freyr's punishment for having entered Hliðskjálf belongs to the myth itself and is a key element for understanding *Skírnismál* and its description of Freyr's suffering (Lönnroth 1977, 166). Most scholars seem, however, to see the Hliðskjálf motif as an addition by the author of the prose introduction (to explain how Freyr could have seen a woman far away) and the motif of punishment as an addition by Snorri (see e.g. See *et al.* 1997, 63-64, 66).

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