

## **Skaði and Freyja: Females of Power amongst the Aesir**

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Norse mythology, especially the eddas and sagas written down in thirteenth-century Iceland after centuries of oral tradition, provide a view into a culture long supplanted by the standards of Christianity. Tales of gods and heroes capture the imagination and provide glimpses of the values, and even day-to-day lives, of the people who quite likely told those tales while sitting close around a roaring Yule fire. Yet there are numerous disparities in those tales; some themes are repeated multiple times, while others seem to be given a very short shrift.

Some of these lesser-quantity themes may be the result of the original storyteller, i.e. tales which were less likely to win the teller a bowl of soup and a slice of bread were best left forgotten. Ironically, I suspect that many others were simply left out of the conversion from oral to written tale for similar reasons; it seems likely that the authors did not wish to incur any unnecessary attention in writing down tales which too obviously flew in the face of church doctrine. Bad enough to be writing down tales of a pagan past to begin with, heaping glory on the wrong sorts of characters in those tales was skirting the edge of blasphemy.

It is for this reason that I suspect many of the tales of female characters in the mythology, whether considered goddesses, heroines or archetypes, were more heavily edited and trimmed out than those of the males. Masculine archetypes like the brave warrior or the wise leader might be incorporated into and melded with Christian ideas, i.e. wise leaders and strong warriors would always be needed to hold society together. Feminine archetypes in similar veins, e.g. women

who took up weapons and fought alongside their brothers, or independent women who led their people, did not fit into the new model of society and therefore needed to be downplayed.

Yet these archetypes were not fully eradicated. While the lore is rich with tales of brave jarls and kings, seamen and farmers equally capable of taking up arms, there remain a number of female characters who do not at all resemble the docile, subservient type seemingly epitomized by the Church. This paper will examine several of those archetypes, with a deeper look at two characters who exemplify them, the Jotun named Skaði and the Vanir named Freyja.

The warrior is somewhat of an uncommon feminine archetype. Often considered the most masculine of vocations, by the time in which most of the lore began to be written, battle and warfare were certainly not the anticipated domains of women. McLaughlin suggests that "the almost total exclusion of women from military functions in most societies has less to do with the supposed physical and mental incapacity of women than with the organization of such activities outside the home." (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 201). Female warriors appear to be less of a concern in early Medieval written history, where perhaps the defense of the community was everyone's responsibility. Later, "chroniclers and other writers began expressing astonishment at anomalous gender behavior from the eleventh century on." (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 200). Norman suggests that "a woman...who dressed like a man was mostly regarded as being headstrong or bold, a troublemaker." (Norman, 2000, p. 377). As an example of this viewpoint, Saxo Grammaticus specifically addresses women at arms:

"There were once women in Denmark who dressed themselves to look like men and spent almost every minute cultivating soldier's skills; they did not want the sinews of their valor to lose tautness and be infected by self-indulgence. Loathing a dainty style of living, they would harden body and mind with toil and endurance, rejecting the fickle pliancy of girls and

compelling their womanish spirits to act with a virile ruthlessness. They courted military celebrity so earnestly that you would have guessed they unsexed themselves. Those especially who had forceful personalities or were tall and elegant embarked on this way of life. As if they were forgetful of their true selves they put toughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm's embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill, and those they could have appeased with looks they attack with lances." (Grammaticus, 1979, p. 212).

Saxo's contempt for females taking on the traditionally male role of warfare is fairly obvious in his writings. If that attitude more closely represented the attitudes of the day, it is perhaps surprising that the character of Skaði appears so well-defined in the works of Snorri Sturluson, who was writing down his own version of the northern European lore during the same period of history as Saxo. Viewing the lore in the same light as literary fantasy, Clover suggests that it "has much to tell about the underlying tensions of the society that produced it" and that "when the subject is one such as woman, which the 'legitimate' sources treat only scantily, the literary fantasy takes on a special importance." (Clover, 1986, p. 36).

According to Snorri, the powerful figure of Skaði, born of Jotun (giant) stock, arrives at Asgard apparently well-armed and ready for battle: *Skáldskaparmál* 1 states that "...Skaði, daughter of the giant Thjazi, put on her helmet and coat of mail and, taking all her weapons of war, proceeded to Ásgard to avenge her father." (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 2005, p. 82). According to the tale, her father Thjazi had just died at the hands of the gods. They seem to understand and respect her purpose for being there, the very next line in the story tells us that they "...offered to reconcile and proposed compensation."

Jochens asserts that "seen from the perspective of the gods, giant women fall into two categories, the young and beautiful who often attracted the gods, and the old and ugly for whom the gods-and the giants-felt revulsion. Some young giantesses succumbed to the seductive efforts of the gods, deserted their own kind, and placed their reproductive capacities at the service of the gods." (Jochens, 1996, pp. 53-54). While Skaði may fall into the category of the young and beautiful, she certainly does not fit the role described by Jochens, but instead exemplifies the female warrior. While the Northern peoples would have considered a man taking up arms and going to avenge his father's death as well within his right, Skaði demonstrates that it is also within the daughter's right to do the same.

Even in the reparations offered by the gods, there remains some degree of gender role reversal. Skaði takes on a quest similar to that of the armed knight coming into court and being offered a bride in an effort to prevent further battle; certainly there are few if any similar tales in which a formidable woman is given her choice of mates. The fact that she must choose based only on the appearance of their feet is not necessarily an allusion to the superficiality of women, but more likely just good storytelling. I'm left wondering how many other body parts might have been utilized over the years that this story was told before Snorri got it down on paper, especially given the ribald nature of Loki's role later in the tale as referenced below.

Skaði does not come away with the mate she anticipates, but a mate is also not sufficient weregild to avenge her father's death. For her second reparation, she insists that the gods must make her laugh, and here it is Loki who does just that – in this case by tying one end of a rope to a goat, the other to his own testicles. In this part of the story, she is again cast as the strong, formidable warrior who must be appeased, and it is the male who denigrates himself for her amusement. She does not expect to laugh easily, else why make the demand in the first place? In

the end "...Loki fell into Skaði's lap, and she laughed." (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 2005, p. 83). His denigration is complete and he has apparently conceded to her power over him.

Finally, Odin casts her father's eyes into the heavens as stars, and the weregild is considered to be paid. Skaði has marched into the gods' stronghold of Asgard, been allowed to choose a mate from all those assembled, given the freedom to denigrate the man whom she blames most for her father's death, and forced the chief of the assembled gods to honor her dead father. Later, she is given a place amongst the gods and allowed to stay there as an apparent equal. Through all of this, perhaps weregild is not even an appropriate measure – her father was not, after all, killed without justification but in fact while he was attacking the very hall in which she's now being welcomed. What power did this female wield over the gods?

Another formidable female denizen of Asgard, and arguably one of the most well-known in the Norse myths, is the goddess Freyja. Like Skaði, she comes from a different tribe and a different cultural background, but is nonetheless accepted in the society of the Aesir as an apparent equal. She is also tied to the warrior culture, but in very different ways than the well-armed Skaði.

In *Gylfaginning* 24, Freyja is said to receive half of all the battle-slain warriors, with Odin taking the others (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 2005, p. 35). That implies an immediate connection with the battlefield, and perhaps even one of those mythological choosers of the battle dead, the valkyries. *Gylfaginning* specifically references how she "...rides into battle..." but unlike descriptions of male warriors, her battle exploits do not include those whom she kills but those already dead whom she chooses.

While some modern interpretations might cast Freyja in the warrior role, there is little in the lore to support a view of her actually taking a stance on the battlefield. Even though there is

no mention of her taking up arms, there are several places in which she bears responsibility for the battle. In *Sörla þátttr*, at Odin's order, she starts an endless war in order to retrieve her stolen necklace. (Thordson, 1921, p. 46). This theme of inciting war is also told regarding the start of what's known as the first great war, that between Aesir and Vanir, as some scholars (Turville-Petre, 1964, pp. 158-159) believe it is likely Freyja who appears under the name Gullveig in *Völuspá* 21-22. (Larrington, 2008, pp. 6-7).

Lafayllve suggests that Freyja's association with battle is further defined in the Lay of *Hyndla*, "the subtle hint of Freyja as a battle goddess comes mainly in the form she gives Ottar – the boar *Hildsvini*. *Hildsvini*... translates to 'battle-swine'. That this boar is Freyja's mount is clear from the text..." (Lafayllve, 2006, p. 61).

A second, perhaps more readily accepted female archetype is that of the wife/lover – but in this role, neither *Skaði* nor Freyja follow any expected norms. If the tale of *Skaði* can be seen in any way as defining the rights of a wife, those rights are certainly not those of a subservient. In *Gylfaginning* 23 (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 2005, pp. 33-34), we learn that her marriage to *Njord*, part of the weregild accepted from the Aesir, is not a good one. She cannot bear living in his seaside home, and he cannot abide by her mountainous one, and so they separate. This is also referenced in *Ynglinga Saga* 8 (Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the kings of Norway*, 1964, p. 11).

This is an excellent example of her status; she is not stuck in a marriage as a subservient mate, but an equal who, through mutual decision with *Njord*, accomplishes an amicable split. It is most certainly not the typical happily ever after sort of fairy tale, but both of them lay claim to an ancestral home which, in the end, is more important than the bonds formed by marriage. Jochens makes the comment that "...it is one of the few cases in the entire Old Norse corpus of

female initiative both in the woman's own marital fate and in larger issues." (Jochens, 1996, p. 62)

Under normal circumstances, especially given the era, there would be two likely options. Either the male would leave his ancestral home because the woman's home was more powerful politically (and thus he was rising in status as a result of the marriage) or she would leave her home to join him in his. There are few cases indeed in which both partners are both so attached to their houses that they split. This breaks entirely with Norman's suggestion that "however beautiful and bold the maiden kings and the woman warriors are said to be, they fight as men for a while but when the hero comes along and captures their hearts, they leave their roles as woman warriors." (Norman, 2000, p. 371). Furthermore, this speaks to how the Aesir considered Skaði's position; were she not at least an equal in their eyes, the lore would likely contain records of their grumbling about the split, and she would perhaps not even be welcomed back to Asgard once her connection to Njord was severed.

At first glance, Freyja might seem to better play the role of the virtuous wife. In *Gylfaginning* 35, we learn that "Freyja...married the man called Od" and that "Od went travelling on distant paths while Freyja remained behind crying tears of red gold. Freyja has many names, because she gave herself different names as she traveled among unknown peoples searching for Od" (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 2005, pp. 42-43).

Yet Freyja does not seem to be without companionship while awaiting the return of her wandering husband. Freyja's strong sexuality is a recurring theme throughout the lore. In *Sörla þátr*, she desires the necklace *Brisingamen*, and to earn it she willingly spends a night with each of the four dwarves who crafted it (*Dvalinn*, *Alfrik*, *Berling*, and *Grer*) after they turn down her earlier offers of silver and gold. (Thordson, 1921, p. 44).

Perhaps because of her different background, different cultural rules apply. The tribe of gods from which Freyja arrives at Asgard, the Vanir, seem at the very least to have a comparatively looser set of sexual mores. One undeniable example of this occurs when she is accused of incest with her brother in Lokasenna 32, and their father rises to her defense in verse 33 - not to deny the charge, but instead to deny that any harm has come of it. (Larrington, 2008, p. 90).

There is a clash of morals, at least in the most obviously Christianized versions of the tales. In the version of the Brisingamen tale related in *Sörla þátr*, Odin orders Loki to steal Freyja's necklace, then refuses to return it to her because of the way she has earned it. As referenced previously, in order to retrieve it she is charged to lay a curse, to start an endless war between two kings – a war that is only ended when Christians step into the fray and put an end to the pagan curse. . (Thordson, 1921, p. 46) The message here seems to be that while war and bloodshed are an acceptable price, female sexual expression is not.

Freyja is certainly not wanton in her desires; in fact her role is often one of controlling her own sexuality. In a variety of tales, she is the object of a Jotun's demands; when in *Thrymskvida* 12-13 the gods appear to seriously consider actually allowing her to be a Jotun bride, she explodes with anger, shattering her necklace. She complains that her reputation will be forever sullied if a marriage to a Jotun is allowed, and this in itself is very telling. The price they ask of her is not one of chastity, because when she decides to take on a lover, that is entirely her choice, but the gods are pushing her to use her sexuality for their own ends, namely the retrieval of Thor's stolen hammer. (Larrington, 2008, p. 98). In the former case, she retains the power, in the latter, she would be relinquishing it.

Perhaps it is this level of control which the Christian church found most disturbing about her - during the conversion of Scandinavia, Freyja's association with sexuality was repressed, and the veneration she had once been given was shifted toward Mary, the nearly asexual virgin who represented that church. (Nasstrom, 2003, p. 21)

In spite of those attempts to expunge the name of the very sexual Freyja from the community, it appears throughout Norway and Sweden in numerous place-names (Turville-Petre, 1964, pp. 178-179). This is often assumed to coincide with a great deal of honor being bestowed upon the deity in question. It would be unlikely for a people to name their town after a deity whom they did not honor, if not venerate!

Note that Skaði is also not above accusations of sexual misconduct. In *Lokesenna* 52, Loki accuses her of willingly having him as her lover, when it is he that was most responsible for the death of her father (Larrington, 2008, p. 93). Skaði does not answer the charge directly, nor does she apparently forget - when Loki is eventually bound at the end of the poem, it is she who adds the finishing touch to his torture. (Larrington, 2008, p. 95). Of course, across the length of the poem, Loki accuses nearly every female present of some sexual misconduct, and Jochens asserts that "gender differences in sexual matters can best be studied from *Lokasenna*..." (Jochens, 1996, p. 59); specifically, "Odinn and the other male gods could be polygynous with impunity, but sexual interest, not to speak of nymphomania, was forbidden even to Freyja, the goddess of love." (Jochens, 1996, pp. 61-62).

For both Freyja and Skaði, the progression assumed by so many other warrior women in the lore that it seems almost standard does not seem to apply. Norman conjectures that, for the warrior women, "after discovering and experiencing their own sexuality they return to their given place within society, the domestic sphere. They now act as wives and mothers, but it does

not always work out for the best and the ending of the saga can be anything but happy." (Norman, 2000, p. 384). In both cases, these strong females seem fully secure in roles that embody not only sexual maturity, but also a continuation of their roles in the "masculine" matter of warfare. The lore implies that both bear children, yet unlike tales of other females, that role does not appear to supersede their other characteristics.

Skaði's non-traditional role as a female is further defined toward the end of *Gylfaginning* 23. After splitting with Njord, she "went up to the mountains, and lived in Thrymheim. She travels much on skis, carries a bow, and shoots wild animals; she is called the ski god or the ski lady." (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 2005, p. 34). In this regard, she has taken on yet another traditional masculine role, that of the hunter.

Skaði also assumes a role of state. While she continues to be welcomed in Asgard, the references to her residence in her deceased father's home, Thrymheim imply that she is actually ruling over that Jotunheim-based estate. This is an example in which a female character is treated as independent and at least an equal to her male counterparts. From the time of her initial arrival at Asgard, and the reparations made by the Aesir, they obviously consider her to be a formidable foe, one whom they bend over backwards to appease. Going forward, she is seen as a guest in the actions of those same gods, appearing in tales of feasts and joining them in the pursuit of Loki prior to the onset of Ragnarok. As mentioned previously, in the version of that tale included in *Lokasenna*, she takes an additional role of judgeship, adding to his already extreme punishment with the addition of the serpent who will forever drip painful venom into his face. (Larrington, 2008, p. 95).

Both Freyja and, to a lesser extent Skaði, also represented another archetype considered, at the very least dangerous, and most likely blasphemous, by the Christian church – that of the sorceress or witch.

Skaði shows some inkling of this in Lokasenna 49, when she foretells to Loki exactly what will happen to him: "You're light-hearted, Loki, you won't for long play with your tail wagging free, for on a sharp rock, with your ice-cold son's guts, the gods shall bind you." (Larrington, 2008, p. 93).

A short verse later (Lokasenna 51), Skaði takes things one step farther. After Loki goads her by telling her that he was primarily responsible for her father's death, she replies: "You know, if first and foremost you were at the killing when you attacked Thiazi, from my sanctuaries and plains shall always come baneful advice to you." (Larrington, 2008, p. 93). In this, she has taken the sorceress' role from one of prognostication to that of actually leveling a curse against him. Skaði claims a degree of control over the natural spaces, and thus tells Loki he will find no respite or haven anywhere in nature.

Freyja's connection to sorcery is more pronounced. She is described as driving a chariot pulled by two cats, and anyone who has ever tried to coerce cats to do much of anything can attest that this is a feat which implies some supernatural mastery over the animal kingdom.

Freyja is strongly associated with seiðr, a form of magic/sorcery practiced in the Northern European world. In Ynglingasaga 4, Snorri states "It was she who first taught the Æsir magic such as was practiced among the Vanir." (Sturluson, Heimskringla: History of the kings of Norway, 1964, p. 7). The practice of seiðr, described in various sources as comprising both divination (allowing communication to come from the spirit world) and magical manipulation

(communicating outward to the spirit world to effect change), would have been seen, at the very least, as directly competitive with the Christian church.

Note that these are the very practices also attributed above to Skaði. There are two possibilities here: either Freyja, who brought seiðr to the Aesir, also taught it to Skaði, or that Skaði already knew how to work that magic because she had learned it within her own Jotun tribe. Either way, with the exception of Odin (whom Loki mocks for it in Lokasenna 24), seiðr remains within the purview of female practitioners, even amongst the gods.. "As an accoutrement of a female profession and a specifically female activity, seiðr brought shame to men even if they employed it for other magical activities." (Jochens, 1996, p. 75).

Returning to Freyja, the apparent master teacher of seiðr, another hint to her abilities lies in her ownership of a cloak which allows the wearer to turn into a falcon, as attested in Skáldskaparmál 1 (Larrington, 2008, p. 82). This of course implies her abilities toward shape-shifting, a capability which she apparently shares only with Loki, who is not Aesir-born, and Odin, whom Snorri implies she taught in Ynglinga Saga 4 (Sturluson, Heimskringla: History of the kings of Norway, 1964, p. 7). Shape-shifting was one of the specific accusations brought against victims of witch trials, up to and including the Salem era. Thus Freyja, throughout the lore, gains the reputation of a witch or sorceress – but without any condemnation for such acts.

Yet another form of sorcery is presented via the previously mentioned item from Grímnismál 24 of her receiving half of all the battle-slain warriors. This concept serves to establish her character as a psychopomp, a bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead. The journey to the underworld often integrated into this role is further explored by Lafayllve, who asserts that in the Lay of Hyndla, "seeing Hyndla as a giantess and volva that Freyja compels gives us the implication that Freyja is a powerful seidhkona...if, on the other hand,

Hyndla is dead...then Freyja is both a seidhkona and one who has command over the dead."  
(Lafayllve, 2006, p. 62).

In the case of both characters, Skaði and Freyja, the images presented by the surviving stories are those of strong females, acting in their own best interests independent of father and/or husband. These females, fulfilling archetypal roles of powerful warrior and witch, while downplaying the more traditional roles of wife and mother, are by no means presented in the lore as negative role models for the young women of human society.

While the argument may be made that accepted practices among the gods and giants are not necessarily indicative of accepted practices among the tribe of humans, the lore suggests that the Aesir at least seem to mesh more closely with humans in terms of ethics and morals, and while neither Skaði nor Freyja are born into that tribe, they are both accepted there as full members. These tales are therefore apparently little adulterated by the social norms of the era in which much of the lore was transcribed. Perhaps to do so would have been to attempt to dramatically alter stories which, in their oral form, were already well ingrained in the cultural consciousness.

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