Oedipal Conflict

The aforementioned feud between the two aged witches in Eyrbyggja saga cannot be considered only a class conflict, but must also be regarded as a family affair; indeed, how often are the two not intertwined? The conflict begins and ends in desire. The sorceresses’ apprentice is at the heart of the conflict between the two mature ladies, Geirríðr and Katla, and yet he acts out a strangely passive role. The attractive and vulnerable youngster Gunnlaugr is a mere object that the two wise women desire, as becomes evident in the exchange when he stops over at Katla’s place on his way to Geirríðr’s. She asks whether he is going to Mávahlíð to “klappa um kerlingarnárrann” (stroke the biddy’s groin), revealing that whether or not Gunnlaugr is actually providing Geirríðr with sexual favours in exchange for her teachings, Katla attributes Geirríðr’s interest in him to lust, revealing also that she is herself similarly inclined. He retorts that Katla is no younger than Geirríðr; this is indeed a conflict of age and gender as well, where the old women possess knowledge and power and the young man is the object of desire, not merely as a desirable male youth but also as an eager student of magic.

The carnal aspect of the master and student relationship is a well-known trope even in our age, usually with an older man and a younger woman filling these roles, respectively. In Eyrbyggja saga, the situation is, however, reversed. It is here the women who possess the desired knowledge and the young man his youth and sex appeal. But he is reluctant to accommodate the women, not only repeatedly
refusing to spend the night in Katla’s home, but his undoing is his subsequent refusal, possibly provoked by an unease originating in Katla’s insinuations, to spend the night at Mávahlíð when Geirríðr invites him to stay there.

When attacked and “ridden,” Gunnlaugr is no longer merely an object but has become prey; he is victimized and thus exemplifies the vulnerability of youth. Somewhat paradoxically, as the desired male, he also retains all of the power, including the power to refuse both women his nightly favours and to choose his own instructor in the occult. Also, somewhat in the typical fashion of teenagers, both Old Norse and modern, he demonstrates no fear of either woman, perhaps unwisely and to his own peril.223

Gunnlaugr is more than just a conquest, though, being also a potential heir to both women. Both desire him as a pupil, as a surrogate son to the two older women who, incidentally, are each introduced along with their own biological sons in ch. 15 of Eyrbyggja saga. If we were to regard this symbolic episode as a “family drama,” it concerns maternal as well as prurient longings, although Gunnlaugr’s biological mother does not appear in this episode even though she, Þuríðr at Fróðá who is later indirectly responsible for the Fróðá wonders and thus paved the way for Snorri goði to act as an exorcist, is one of the central figures of the subsequent narrative.224

Considering the reputation that seems to follow those who practice seiðr, which will be returned to below,225 and the close connection shared between magic and the female gender, Gunnlaugr’s interest in the occult, in queer practices, may seem slightly subversive. The eponymous Bósi of Bósa saga indeed rejected magical instruction from his nanny Busla stating that he would rather progress in the world through his “karlmennska” (manliness),226 which would have apparently been undermined by his studying magic. Why, then, would a young man from a good family wish to learn witchcraft? Gunnlaugr may not necessarily long for a career in sorcery, though he does demonstrate a
This dramatisation of the witch as mother highlights the witch’s uncanny nature: something “familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it.” On the one hand, as mother, she represents the pinnacle of familiarity, as what could possibly be more familiar than the source from which we all emerged? On the other, as witch, she epitomizes the improper and the occult. The word “forneskja,” already encountered above, encapsulates a similar uncanny binary: the past should be familiar, more so than the future, since it has already happened and is known, whereas the future always remains unknown (hence our eagerness to know it). And yet, the past remains uncanny, as it is in the very passing of the past that the doom of the future lay, that same judgment which makes dead people frightening, especially the ghosts of those we thought we knew, of whom we have several examples in Eyþyrninga saga—Geirríðr’s zombie father being but one. Death is uncanny but so are fathers and mothers in that they symbolize the past and birth, and at the same time they symbolize progress and eventually death.

The two wise women appearing in this episode represent the uncanny face of the mother, her intimate alterity, the mother as a representative of ancient lore, of danger, of death. And yet Geirríðr and Katla present two vastly different faces of death. Geirríðr’s name suggests a Valkyrie, a noble creature who serves the gods and brings dead men to Valhöll. And still, even noble death on the battle-field is frightening in its unfamiliarity to the living—skaldic poetry about death in battle on the whole being less preoccupied with the joyous afterlife in Valhöll than carcasses, corpses, and, especially, the scavengers that feast on the lifeless bodies left behind on the battlefield. Katla is less ambivalent and more frightening. She represents the mother as a forbidden figure of lust, she who invites the youngster to her bed, but whose flirtations mask a grave desire for theurgic knowledge. His motives are left unexplained, his eagerness to learn unexplored.
danger, as what she really wishes to do is to ride him until death is upon him. This siren is also a vampire, a mare.

It is difficult to ignore the idea that the ambiguity of the witch mother in the sagas echoes the giant mothers found in *Snorra-Edda*. The giant is generally also an uncanny figure, both antagonist and ancestor to the gods. Even counted amongst the Æsir are several giant women, such as Skaði and Gerðr. According to *Snorra-Edda*, the high god Óðinn’s mother was indeed a giant, Bestla Bólforns dóttir.²³¹ He is not said to have studied magic with her, but may have had a surrogate mother as a teacher of ancient knowledge in the sibyl (perhaps also a giantess) who is the narrator of *Völuspá*.²³² There are Odinic echoes in Gunnlaugr’s quest for sorcerous knowledge, gained from something like a giant mother in the neighbourhood, and it may be his undoing that there happen to be two such figures in the vicinity, one good and one bad. Together they form something of a unit not unlike the figure of the Old Norse giant, compelling in its contradictions: old, powerful, helpful, dangerous, wise, wild, ambiguous, and ultimately uncanny.

When the giant mother is divided into two representatives in the flesh, one is good and the other bad. But if Geirrífóðr and Katla are two faces of the same figure, is the symbolic figure that they each represent, the witch mother, is she good or bad? Perhaps not so easily understood, she is uncanny, and it is notoriously difficult to state anything about the uncanny, otherwise it would not be so. If Gunnlaugr had not failed, had not been ridden, his story might have become one to be imitated: how to succeed in witchcraft without nearly dying. It is indeed possible that with Gunnlaugr’s downfall, *Eyrbyggja saga*’s shadow protagonist Snorri goði lost a significant competitor, one whose studies in the occult could have made him a powerful adversary.