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THE FLEXIBLE MASCULINITY OF LOKI

Loki the Disparate

Loki is one of the gods and yet not really one of them. Loki is also one of the giants, but his giant persona is usually so firmly externalised that it is no longer seen as part of him. He is human and yet the genes he transmits are serviceable to construct huge serpents, eight-legged horses and gigantic wolves. Loki is also a male but sometimes he is not. Furthermore, this transmutable superhuman power does not make him a proper deity but perhaps he is more powerful than all the gods and in his destructive way also has a flexible or ambivalent gender role¹.

Loki has a second name, Loptr, rarely used and its connotations are unclear². It could indicate a relationship with the air and the sky, as Old Norse *lopt* seems

¹ I will not attempt a review of the scholarly reception of Loki in this article but see e.g. J.C. Frakes, *Loki's Mythological Function in the Tripartite System*, "Journal of English and Germanic Philology" 86 (1987), pp. 473–486; Y.S. Bonnetain, *Der nordgermanische Gott Loki aus litteraturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, Göppingen 2006, esp. pp. 59–92.

² In the *Snorra-Edda*, Loki is only referred to as Loptr once, when he is first introduced (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen 1931, p. 34). This name is also used twice in the poem *Lokasenna* (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 27; *Norræn fornkvæði*, ed. by S. Bugge, Oslo 1867, p. 114 and 116), first where Loki uses it for himself and then Gefjun affectionally (or perhaps superciliously) calls him "Loptci" (Little Loptr). The name also appears in the *Hyndluljóð* (*Norræn fornkvæði*, p. 160). Skaldic poets seem to have used the name as a *heiti* in the 9th and 10th centuries. It appears in the poem *Haustlång* by Þjóðólfr of Hvinir (*Edda Snorra Stur-*

mainly to refer to altitude³. If such a relationship exists, Snorri Sturluson mentions the air on a couple of occasions⁴, he introduces him without mentioning any supernatural or religious functions, nothing about it in his *Snorra-Edda*, even though he depicts Loki flying in and claims that he is renowned mostly for his slyness and machinations (*slægð ok vélar*)⁵.

Even if Loki was to some, at some point in the history of paganism, a god of the sky, that would not seem to have much relevance to his narrative function in the extant Old Norse myths, mostly preserved in the *Snorra-Edda* more than two centuries after paganism had been discarded, at least officially. The only relevance to the question of his gender would then be that the ability to roam the sky is a popular and natural metaphor for freedom and Loki is indeed somewhat free from restrictions of species and gender.

According to scholars such as Ursula Dronke⁶, Loki also possessed a third name and is the Lóðurr who makes a single appearance in *Völuspá*, as one of the three creators of mankind⁷. The main argument for this is that both L-gods appear on one occasion in the company of Óðinn and the nebulous god Hœnir⁸. Lóðurr is an enigmatic figure who does not make an appearance outside of *Völuspá*, unless he (or Loki, or both if they are the same) is the mysterious Logaþore who

lusionar, p. 112) and in the *Dórsdrápa* of Eilífr Goðrúnarson (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 107), both of which are preserved in the *Edda* of Snorri. It also shows up in the Óðinn-kenning *Lopts vinr* in Einarr skálaglamm's *Vellekla* (*Heimskringla* I, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Reykjavík 1941, p. 219).

³ As in modern Icelandic, the mediaeval word *lopt* has two primary meanings, the air above the ground and an elevated floor in a building (Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog* II, Oslo 1891, pp. 559–592. Cf. Bonnetain, *Der nordgermanische Gott Loki*, pp. 63–65.

⁴ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 80 and 105. I refer to the author of the 13th century text known as the *Prose Edda* as Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) since the text is attributed to him in early 14th century sources, for example on the first page of the Uppsala manuscript (DG 11 4to). That does not mean that Snorri was necessarily the only person involved in the composition of the *Edda* or that he is an original author; DG 11 in fact refers to him as a compiler rather than an author.

⁵ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 34.

⁶ *The Poetic Edda II: Mythological Poems*, ed. by U. Dronke, Oxford 1997, p. 125.

⁷ *Norræn fornkvæði*, p. 14 (R) and 21 (H). In *Snorra-Edda*, Lóðurr does not appear in this narrative (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 16) nor indeed anywhere else.

⁸ The gods Óðinn, Hœnir and Loki occur as a trio in *Haustlǫng* (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 111–13) and the prose prologue to *Reginismál* in the Codex Regius (*Norræn fornkvæði*, p. 212); see also *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 78 and 126–27). The Odin-kenning *Lóðurs vinr* in Eyvindr's Háleygjatal (*Fagrskinna*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, Reykjavík 1985, p. 66; *Heimskringla* I, p. 108) and Haukr Valdísarson's Íslendingadrápa in the MS AM 748 (*Den Norsk-islandske Skjaldedigting* I, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen 1912, p. 556) furthermore appears to parallel the aforementioned kenning *Lopts vinr* in *Vellekla* (see no. 2), and Loki is similarly referred to as *Hænis vinr* in *Haustlǫng* (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 111–12).

is mentioned along with Óðinn (Wodan) and Þórr (Wigibonar) on the Bavarian Nordendorf fibula from the mid-6th century⁹.

If Loki is Lóðurr, it suggests his trickster role in legends from the 13th century and onwards might have been preceded by a much more dignified past, when Loki was possibly a part of a holy trinity along with Óðinn and Hœnir, whose roles as creators were later usurped by the sons of Borr (Óðinn, Vili and Vé), in the version handed down by Snorri in his Edda. In this interpretation, Loki is a disgraced god, a previously important deity who has been turned into an enemy of the gods, and a trickster¹⁰.

If Loki is indeed a god of many names, including Loptr and Lóðurr, he resembles the high god Óðinn in this aspect, the latter's own multiplicity of names reflecting a diversity of identities and disguises¹¹. Snorri seems to see this multiplicity of forms as an important attribute of Loki as well, and characterises him as *mioc fiolbreytiN at hattvm* (very disparate in his ways)¹². This might be an indication of his wickedness, a standpoint that has a Neoplatonic trait: whilst everything good comes from one source, evil is disparate. However, Snorri's censure of disparity only applies to Loki; Óðinn is allowed to have many names and guises. Is there an echo here of the angel who wished in his pride to imitate the master? Scholars have noted more similarities between Loki and Lucifer than just their similar-sounding names, though that does not necessarily mean that Loki was nothing more than the pagan version of the fallen angel¹³.

One might wish Snorri to have been clearer about whether Loki's disparity puts him on the same level as Óðinn with his many and varied identities. However, there is certainly no doubt that one of the features due to which Loki is said to resemble Óðinn is his ability to become theriomorphic. Both gods, the high one and the trickster, have a unique ability to become bestial at will. This also affects how scholars must think about his gender.

⁹ See *Runes, Magic and Religion: A Sourcebook*, Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia 10, ed. by J. McKinnell, Rudolf Simek and Klaus Düwel, Vienna 2004, pp. 48–49.

¹⁰ The trickster designation has been one of the most popular ways to describe Loki in scholarly terms for most of the last century (see e.g. J. de Vries, *The Problem of Loki*, FF Communications No. 110, Helsinki 1933, p. 274, and John McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays in Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, Rome 1994, pp. 30–38).

¹¹ Within *Snorra-Edda* itself, Óðinn frequently appears in disguise, most famously in the actual frame narrative (where he poses as the trinity Hárr, Jafnhárr and Þriði), and in the narrative of the theft of the mead of poetry, but also in the Eddic poems *Grímnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð* and in various legendary sagas, including the *Völsunga saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. He also has a variety of names, including Grímr, Gangleri, Gestumblindi, Hnikarr, Grímnir, Þundr, Herjan, Fjölfnir, Biflindi, Þólverkr, Sviðrir, Viðrir, (see e.g. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 27–28). These also serve as *heiti* in skaldic poems (pp. 88–92).

¹² *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 34.

¹³ The relationship between Loki and Lucifer has recently been discussed by Bonnetain (*Der nordgermanische Gott Loki*, pp. 156–162).

Loki the Beast

Although theriomorphism is not limited to Óðinn and Loki, they are without question the most prolific shape-shifters among the gods, and the ability to change into animal form is an important connecting factor between the two¹⁴.

The first example of such a metamorphosis of Loki in *Gylfaginning* is when the gods hire a masterbuilder, later revealed to be a giant, to build defensive walls around their city and promise to give him Freyja, the sun and the moon if he can finish this job at an appointed time with only his horse Svaðilfari to help him. Later they regret this bargain and decide that it must have been Loki who suggested it¹⁵. It must thus fall to him to solve the problem, which he does by transforming himself into a mare, using his feminine wiles to seduce Svaðilfari and eventually giving birth to Sleipnir¹⁶.

Loki later changes into a salmon when trying to escape from the gods, albeit not successfully.¹⁷ In *Skáldskaparmál*, as well as in *Þrymskviða*, he can use wings of Freyja or Frigg to take flight. In doing this, he is assuming bird-shape, cross-dressing if not actually changing species.¹⁸ He changes into a seal in a little-known fight with his arch-enemy Heimdallr mentioned briefly in *Skáldskaparmál*¹⁹, while in *Lokasenna*, Óðinn claims that Loki once transformed into a milking cow²⁰. He is, moreover, a flea and a fly in *Sörla þáttur* when he spies on Freyja and steals her Brísingamen²¹, as well as in *Skáldskaparmál*, when he irritates one of the crafty dwarfs, Brokkr, by buzzing around as a fly²².

If we take a closer look at these examples, what is most striking is a practical side to Loki's transgressions. He becomes an insect to spy, steal or irri-

¹⁴ P. Orton, *Theriomorphism: Jacob Grimm, Old Norse Mythology, German Fairy Tales, and English Folklore*, [in:] *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. by T. Shippey, Tempe, Arizona, 2005, pp. 299–334 (see in particular pp. 307–308).

¹⁵ In the *Snorra-Edda* narrative, Loki is not seen suggesting this (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 46), so there is at least the possibility of regarding Loki as a scapegoat. There is a further link between Loki and the goat in the Skaði narrative of *Skáldskaparmál*, where he ties his genitals to the beard of a goat in order to amuse the wronged Skaði who is now being taken into the family of the gods (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 81). On Loki as a scapegoat, see e.g. Y. Bonnetain, *Potentialities of Loki*, [in:] *Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives: Origins, changes, and interactions*, ed. by A. Andrén, K. Jennbert, C. Raudvere, Lund 2006, pp. 326–330 (p. 327).

¹⁶ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 46–47.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 80 and 105; *Norræn fornkvæði*, pp. 124–125. The bird costumes that the two goddesses possess are referred to as *hamr* and thus when using them, Loki has, at least to a degree, undergone *hamskipti* (metamorphosis).

¹⁹ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 99.

²⁰ *Norræn fornkvæði*, p. 117.

²¹ *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda I*, ed. C.C. Rafn, Copenhagen 1829, pp. 393–394.

²² *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 122–23.

tate. He takes salmon shape to hide and escape, becomes a bird to travel, and changes into a mare to accomplish a mission. We are not told the reasons behind his fight in seal shape or his outing as a milking cow but it might be inferred that there is also a practical reason for those. However, there is no clear pattern to the bestial shapes in his repertoire. Flies, fleas, birds, salmon, seals, mares and cows belong to various genera of the animal kingdom and there is no common characteristic that might be said to attract Loki to these particular animal forms.

While usually pragmatic²³, shape-shifting is never innocent. Loki's willingness to transgress the boundaries between a man and a beast is in itself irreverent and subversive. The transformation may also have a sexual aspect to it. As the encounter of Loki the mare with Svaðilfari demonstrates, changing into a beast will lead to bestiality, and this might apply to any such metamorphosis, even one that does not result in a child. Copulation with animals is as transgressive as anything a human can do, since it undermines the idea that humans are distinct from, and superior to, brutish beasts.

The clear link between shape-shifting and bestiality can thus also be discerned in the existence of Loki's transgressive apocalyptic children. As *Gylfaginning* has it, even Váli, one of his human children with Sigyn, can be turned into a wolf in order to commit fratricide.²⁴ His other children are Hel the goddess of death, the Midgard serpent, and Fenrir the wolf. How somebody who is usually in human form can father wolves and serpents by a giantess is never explained²⁵. However, it is clearly a possibility, even though an unmentioned one, that Loki sired these children while in serpent or wolf shape, as indeed he was a horse when he gave birth to Sleipnir²⁶. Loki is constantly on the boundaries between human and animal and perhaps it is this very bestiality which makes him a frightening adversary of the gods. Humans and animals need to be clearly separated, just as gods should be clearly discernible from giants, but all these demarcations become blurred in the figure of Loki.

It is remarkable how the other gods do not seem to be willing or able to turn into beasts, with the exception of Loki's blood brother Óðinn who also transforms on occasion into a snake and an eagle²⁷. We might interpret that as another Lucifer-like aspect of Loki: again the high god has certain unique powers that Loki and his family also usurp for themselves. Or does the transgression say something

²³ See e.g. P. Orton, *Theriomorphism...*, p. 308.

²⁴ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 69.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 84–85. See P. Orton, *Theriomorphism...*, p. 308. Óðinn also changes into a falcon (*i valsliki*) to escape from King Heiðrekr at the end of the riddle section of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (*The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. by Ch. Tolkien, London 1960, p. 44).

about Óðinn? Is the high god really so different from the vile Loki? Is he not also a sorcerer and a giant²⁸?

It is noteworthy that theriomorphism seems more common among the giants, with both Suttungr and Þjazi assuming the shape of an eagle for practical purposes²⁹. There are also cases of Gefjun and her unnamed giant husband who have oxen offspring, and the Ironwood giantess who gives birth to wolves³⁰. Loki's gigantic alter ego Útgarða-Loki is also skilled in sorcery, among whose accomplishments are transforming the Midgard serpent into a cat and adopting the guise of the giant Skrímir³¹.

While Snorri presents Útgarða-Loki and Loki as two separate persons, even including Loki in Þórr's retinue as they journey to Útgarðr³², Saxo Grammaticus appears to suggest they are one and the same individual, depicting an "Ugarthilocus" tied in a cave and guarded by poisonous serpents³³. There are further reasons for believing Loki and Útgarða-Loki are two representations of the same power. Firstly, the name is uncommon and only used for these two figures. Secondly, Loki is definitely one of the giants. His father is a giant, his mistress is a giant, he fights on the giant's side in the twilight of the gods, and he is even referred to as "jötunn" in st. 44 of *Völuspá*³⁴. It seems somewhat overly convoluted to postulate that the giant who escapes in that stanza is a different creature than the gigantic captive portrayed in Book 8 (15,8) of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*. Moreover, in *Lokasenna*, Loki gloats over Útgarða-Loki's tricks when insulting Þórr³⁵.

If Loki is Útgarða-Loki, this means that he is a giant. One can indeed see some of his giant characteristics in mythological narratives involving him: he is uncontrolled in various ways, he loses his temper several times, eats without tem-

²⁸ As noted by Else Mundal (*Forholdet mellom gudar og jotnar i norrøn mytologi i lys av det mytologiske namnematerialet*, "Studia Anthroponymica Scandinavica" 8 (1990), pp. 5–18) and Marianne Ciklamini (Óðinn and the giants, "Neophilologus" 46 (1962), pp. 145–158), Óðinn's relationship with the giants is quite close, and his theriomorphism and sorcery may be interpreted in that light.

²⁹ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 79–80 and 85. See also P. Orton, *Theriomorphism...*, pp. 308–309.

³⁰ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 8 and 18. P. Orton (*Theriomorphism...*, pp. 308–309) does not assume that actual mating with animals takes place every time a giant sires or gives birth to a beast. It must also be mentioned that the verb *fæðir* used in the depiction of the Ironwood giantess is ambiguous (can both mean "give birth to" and "nurture").

³¹ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 50–60.

³² See e.g. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 54. Snorri's reasons for keeping the two Lokis apart are hard to discern and it does not seem unlikely that he may be influenced by diverging traditions.

³³ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* I, ed. by K. Friis-Jensen, P. Zeeberg, Copenhagen 2005, pp. 576–577.

³⁴ *Norræn fornkvæði*, pp. 17 and 23. Margaret Clunies Ross (*Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, Vol. 1: *The Myths*, Odense 1994, pp. 101 and 265) has argued that the inversion of the proper male-female relationship between the gods and the giants (the gods taking giant wives) makes Loki subversive.

³⁵ *Norræn fornkvæði*, p. 122.

perance (much and swiftly), and he seems to have an uncontrolled sexual appetite and thus ends up fathering monsters³⁶. Even more significantly, Loki seems to be chaotic – male and female, man and beast, god and giant. Thus he represents that same wildness and that same chaos that the giants would seem to represent³⁷.

The fact that this agent of chaos is placed among the Æsir (although never really one of them) is an indication of the confusing relationship between good and evil in the mythology of *Snorra-Edda*³⁸. The gods and giants are not clearly separate at all: the giants are the ancestors of the gods³⁹, the two tribes intermarry and make uneasy alliances, and Loki is at the centre of this confusion⁴⁰. Furthermore, since Útgarda-Loki is a well-known illusionist and sorcerer, Loki, too, must be regarded as a great sorcerer. And both Loki's gigantism and his sorcery lead us to a different kind of transgression, present in the Sleipnir narrative. Not only is Loki theriomorphic but also an androgynous or gender-bending figure.

Loki the Lady

When Loki needs to seduce Svaðilfari, he has not only changed his species but also his physical sex. Both transgressions could be seen as abominable, but perhaps doubly so when put together. It may well be argued that not only the crossing of gender boundaries may be characterised as *ergi* in Old Norse legal vocabulary, but shape-shifting as well⁴¹. As noted above, shape-shifting may certainly lead to bestiality, which tends to be grouped with homosexuality in the law codes⁴². Thus the transgression of Loki in the masterbuilder narrative and

³⁶ See Ármann Jakobsson, *Loki og jötnarnir*, [in:] *Greppaminni: Rit til heiðurs Vesteini Ólasyni sjötugum*, ed. by Margrét Eggertsdóttir et al., Reykjavík 2009, pp. 31–41. In that article, I discuss the arguments for Loki being regarded as a giant at more length. On monsters and genre, see e.g. B. Bandlien, *Man or Monster: Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society*, Oslo 2005, pp. 43–44.

³⁷ See e.g. M. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, pp. 144–186.

³⁸ Loki's androgynous state expresses the chaos of the giants, according to E. Mundal, *Androgyny as an image of chaos in Old Norse mythology*, "Maal og mine" 1 (1998), pp. 1–9.

³⁹ Óðinn indeed refers to his gigantic grandfather Bøljörn as one of his greatest rune teachers in *Hávamál* (*Norræn fornkvæði*, p. 61).

⁴⁰ On the complicated and ambivalent relationship between gods and giants, see e.g. Ármann Jakobsson, *A contest of cosmic fathers: God and giant in Vafþrúðnismál*, "Neophilologus" 92 (2008), pp. 263–277, and references there to the works of Ciklamini, Clunies Ross, Mundal and Steinsland.

⁴¹ See Ármann Jakobsson, *The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímur the Witch: The Meanings of Troll and Ergi in Medieval Iceland*, "Saga-Book" 32 (2008), pp. 55–63. There are unfortunately no clear instances where shape-shifting or bestiality is referred to as *ergi*, even though the word appears in a wide variety of meanings.

⁴² See e.g. P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Norrønt nid: Forestillingen om den umandige mand ide islandske sagaer*, Odense 1980, K.E. Gade, *Homosexuality and the Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature*, "Scandinavian Studies" 58 (1986), pp. 126–131.

presumably in the nebulous incident mentioned by Óðinn in *Lokasenna* is double: Loki not only changes species but also biological sex, becoming a cow and a mare rather than a bull and a stallion⁴³.

Sorcery may be regarded as feminine and abominable in itself, most famously expressed in *Ynglinga saga*'s comment about the sorcery of Óðinn's *seiðr* and the *ergi* it entails⁴⁴. Clearly sorcery and *ergi* go hand in hand, and it is equally clear that a lack of masculinity constitutes the *ergi* of sorcery, which is also present in other depictions of it. It is hard to establish firmly the meaning of the words *argr* and *ergi*. One of the meanings of *argr* is "angry, enraged, trembling with rage" which may lead one to become "volatile". And its metathetical cousin *ragr* means "cowardly, trembling with fear", thus also "moveable". Both words are also used to talk about volatility of gender, and about sorcery⁴⁵.

Every definition of *argr* and *ragr* seems to fit Loki; he is volatile in every sense of the word, changing both species and genders, which leads him to become Sleipnir's mother. The seduction of Svaðilfari is not the only occasion which requires Loki to change his gender. He accompanies Þórr as a maidservant on their journey to Jötunheimr in the poem *Þrymskviða*, and unlike Þórr he does not protest against the female disguise. In fact, he eagerly volunteers for the part, and seems to be quite in his element dressed up as a servant girl⁴⁶. He also adopts the guise of a woman when he tricks Frigg into revealing Baldr's weakness⁴⁷, and he is again in female form, this time a giantess, when he is the only creature in the world who refuses to cry for Baldr and save him from Hel⁴⁸.

Words such as androgyny or bisexuality appear to be misplaced when speaking of Loki. It seems more helpful to describe him, as Bandlien does, as having a liminal gender identity⁴⁹. Still, in each of those cases, deception is an important factor in his transformations. Every metamorphosis of Loki serves a practical purpose: If Þórr is to play Freyja, he has to have a maid. Svaðilfari presumably can only be seduced by a mare, and it also seems logical that Frigg should trust a strange woman rather than a man⁵⁰. But why does it have to be a giantess rather

⁴³ According to Hyndluljóð (*Flateyjarbok* I, ed. by C.R. Unger, Kristiania 1860, p. 15), perhaps Loki can also be a human mother (*vard Loptr kuidugr / af konu illri*), although the stanza is somewhat opaque.

⁴⁴ *Heimskringla* I, p. 19.

⁴⁵ This is discussed in more detail in Ármann Jakobsson, *The Trollish Acts...*

⁴⁶ *Norræn fornkvæði*, pp. 126–27.

⁴⁷ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 64.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 67–68.

⁴⁹ See esp. B. Bandlien, *Man or Monster...*, pp. 69–72.

⁵⁰ Although Frigg's trust of the strange woman is in fact a curious flaw in the narrative, badly needing a "willing suspension of disbelief". Obviously the omission of the *mistilteinn* from the oath of immunity would have been a dangerous secret and far too important to be blurted out to a strange woman.

than a male giant who refuses to cry for Baldr? Are the gods more easily taken in by a female guise? Are they less likely to kill a giantess than a giant in a fit of rage⁵¹? Or does Loki enjoy crossing gender boundaries? Is it part of his subversive nature to switch genders?

When *ergi* begins to mean “cowardice”, it is clearly not regarded as a strength, since a coward cannot be seen as strong. On the other hand, though Loki is volatile, he is not really cowardly. In fact, Loki’s flexible gender identity has its advantages. He is indubitably the leading trouble-shooter of the gods and his volatility is an advantage in this role. It is precisely because Loki can be a flea, a fly, a mare or a bird that he is useful to the gods. In addition, his most successful acts of vandalism are performed in female guise.

Loki may be liminal, but this does not necessarily entail that he is weak, or, that he is less masculine than the other gods. *Lokasenna* reveals that he has had much heterosexual sex; in fact he claims to have cuckolded most of the other gods⁵². He certainly does not come across as weak in this poem; the other gods fear him and plead in vain for a cessation of hostilities. It is only Þórr who can tame this uncontrollable and wild force that Loki has become. But why should the gods fear Loki? What is the danger posed to them by his liminal status?

Transcendental Loki

When the gods have killed the giant Þjazi and made peace with his daughter Skaði, there is a small coda relating how Loki made the final peace offering by putting on an act for Skaði. His genitals are tied to those of a goat and when they are pulled in separate directions, each gives a great yelp which makes Skaði laugh⁵³. Again Loki seems to be emasculated and humiliated in this anecdote, act-

⁵¹ In the narrative of Baldr’s funeral, the giantess Hyrrokin is asked to aid the gods to push the funeral ship afoot and whilst Þórr is visibly enraged at this, the gods plead with him not to kill the giantess (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 65). This may not be due to her gender only as she has been invited to the funeral and thus presumably granted sanctuary. This mercy is not granted to everyone; in his anger Þórr instead kicks the dwarf Littr on to the funeral pyre (p. 66).

⁵² Loki claims to have fathered a son by Týr’s wife and not paid him any compensation for the slight. He also claims to have been invited to Skaði’s bed and he claims to have cuckolded Þórr (*Norræn fornkvæði*, pp. 119 and 121). As seen in the prose epilogue to the poem in *Codex Regius*, these boastful claims have no effect on his own wife Sigyn’s loyalty to him.

⁵³ Most scholars see this a symbolic or even an actual castration of Loki, perhaps even the cause of his ambiguous sexuality (R. North, *Loki’s Gender: Or Why Skaði Laughed*, [in:] *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, ed. by K.E. Olsen, L.A.J.R. Houven, Leuven 2001, pp. 141–151). John Lindow (“Loki and Skaði”, *Snorrastefna 25.–27. júlí 1990*, ed. by Úlfar Bragason, Reykjavík 1992, pp. 130–142) has pointed out that Loki’s encounter with the god symbolises his sexual ambiguity since the she-goat (with its beard) is a creature of ambivalent sexuality and he furthermore explores the possibility that Loki enacts another mock-feminine ritual such as

ing as a clown to make a big joke out of a potentially explosive situation. But is he really just a harmless jester or the butt of the laughter of the other gods? Another possible interpretation is that he is yet again showing the power of a transgressive being, who is hampered neither by gender nor species. He is willing and able to submit himself to an ordeal that others would fear.

Loki seems unconstrained by all boundaries. This would seem to be a strength rather than a weakness and Loki is certainly able to exploit it. If he is an air god, he constitutes a metaphor for freedom from restrictions and boundaries. He also seems to be able to allow himself many guises and identities, much like the high god Óðinn himself. He imitates Óðinn in his ability to theriomorph, as well as in his sorcerous powers. And, finally, Loki alone is not afraid to be a woman when it suits him. In the relationship between gender and this particular subversive individual, he is certainly the master.

The power and attraction of all magic lies in the ability to transcend one's limitations, as Óðinn does in *Ynglinga saga* when he is able to be in two places at the same time through sorcery⁵⁴. As a mythological figure, this might be what Loki is all about. There are no boundaries to his existence. He is a god of many species and genders. Thus one might discern in him a wish to transcend one's limitations, and his frequent gender mutations might indicate that gender is one of those categories that people secretly wish to transcend.

Loki the Evasive

Another and a more negative way to regard Loki is to see him as a cipher. As a figure of many guises, Loki is everything and nothing. When he is female, he is not really female. He can be a horse and yet not quite a horse. Loki that one might see swimming upstream in the river is not a salmon but a *faux* salmon. Just as Útgarða-Loki is primarily an illusionist who cannot create an incredible heavy cat, but only disguise Miðgarðsormr so that he resembles one, Loki may not really be able to transcend anything, may just act out various female and bestial parts. He begets only monsters. As a faker, Loki is not androgynous nor bisexual. He rather has no gender but can adopt any gender that he needs to. Thus Loki is not really tangible: in the end his meaning eludes us.

It could be argued that Snorri Sturluson leans towards the latter view of Loki. He may be fascinated by Loki but he certainly does not approve of him. Did

giving birth. Clunies Ross sees the sexual humiliation Loki acts out as a joke on Skaði who did not get the god she wanted but ends up getting won over by an androgynous/bisexual and marginal member of the god's household (M. Clunies Ross, *Why Skaði laughed: Comic Seriousness in an Old Norse Mythic Narrative*, "Maal og minne" (1989), pp. 1–14.

⁵⁴ *Heimskringla* I, p. 18.

he have to contend with an ancient cult of Loki which saw his transformational powers as something to aspire to? If so, its traces are few and unclear⁵⁵. However, even if Loki was ever a deity, he may have been nothing like the Loki that Snorri committed to parchment in the 13th century. In the end, you may turn to face the faker but you never catch a glimpse.

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⁵⁵ Cf. e.g. U. Drobin, *Myth and Epical Motifs in the Loki-Research*, “Temenos” 3 (1968), p. 19–39.

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Streszczenie

Niniejsze studium dotyczy sposobu, w jaki płęć jest wyrażana i rozgraniczana w przedstawieniach Lokiego w głównych średniowiecznych źródłach, które określiły, jak późniejsze pokolenia postrzegają mitologię staronordycką, w szczególności *Eddę* Snorriego Sturlusona. Nacisk kładziony jest na mity prawdopodobnie obecne w całej Skandynawii w okresie średniowiecza, a nie na wcześniejsze pogańskie życie Lokiego jako kultowej postaci w całej germańskiej Europie. Analiza mitologicznych portretów zapewnia ważny wgląd w średniowieczny sposób myślenia, w tym przypadku – w jaki sposób zmienna płęć i gatunek Lokiego może uczynić go bardziej transcendentalnym, co przyczynia się do wyjaśnienia jego atrakcyjności jako kultowej postaci. Pamiętać należy jednocześnie, że Loki jest zbyt niematerialny, ponieważ jego przedstawienia dostarczają jedynie ulotnych wskazówek na temat jego średniowiecznego znaczenia.