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STUDIA I MATERIAŁY Z DZIEJÓW EUROPY ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIEJ

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"THE ÆSIR WILL CALL ME PERVERSE!" ÞÓRR AND HYPER-MASCULINITY IN ÞRYMSKVIÐA

Introduction

The humorous framework of the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða* has led many scholars to believe that it is a young and satirical poem because it ridicules the god. I do not agree; in my opinion, the poem is made up of several layers of text and that older contents can be found if we scratch the surface and consider the epic material of the poem carefully. I would argue that the older contents and epic material includes a sacred ritual related to Þórr's hammer and Þórr as a god of rain and protector of cosmos. The later can be seen as the famous motif, the "Theft of the Thunder Instrument", identified as tale-type Aarne-Thompson-Uther 1148B.[1] The narrative of the poem spread in different forms – most likely orally – in the Nordic countries and its colonies, up until the twentieth century[2]. The form and elements changed over time in the process of transition from orality to literacy.

[1] See Frog, *Germanic Traditions of the Theft of the Thunder-Instrument (ATU 1148b): An Approach to Þrymskviða and Þórr's Adventure with Geirrøðr in Circum-Baltic Perspective*, [in:] *New Focus on Retrospective Methods – Resuming Methodological Discussions: Case Studies from Northern Europe*, ed. by. E. Heide, K. Bek-Pedersen, FF Communications, 307, Helsinki 2014, pp. 120–162, and works cited there.

[2] For example, it was translated into an Icelandic rímur known as *Þrymlur*, probably composed around c. 1400. For more details, see S. Bugge, M. Moe, *Torsvisen i sin norske form. Udg. med en afhandling om dens oprindelse og forhold til de andre nordiske former, Festskrift til H. Maj. Kong Oscar II ved Regjerings-Jubilæet den 18de September 1897 fra Det kongelige Frederiks Universitet*, B. 2:5, 1897 or Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, Samf. til udgivelse af gl. nordisk litteratur, 35, København 1905–12, pp. 278–289.

The poem as we know it in writing is one version of the narrative that is related to a much larger body of myths and sacred narratives that once were primarily performed orally[3]. As an historian of religion, my perspective is not to consider the god Þórr as a literary character, but to view him as a deity. Even if the poem is regarded as late, e.g. composed in the thirteenth century, it is clear that it contains old epic motifs and mythological conceptions that had been passed on by word of mouth, before a narrative in the form we know of today took shape[4].

In the following article, I would like to, contrary to many previous interpretations of the poem, demonstrate that Þórr's role as "hyper-masculine" is never questioned, he is never considered to be effeminate and behaves in ways that actually fortify his manly character traits. The emotional elements in the conception of the god can be seen as a trait of anthropomorphism, which is a personal side of the god that makes him act as far as possible in the same way as a human. When the god's honour is injured, he makes sure to inflict punishment and consequently regains his status. An injury to someone's reputation and honour works in the same way for a man as for a god; it entails a loss that must be compensated for, if he is to recover his full honour. The divine wrath of Þórr mirrors retribution and bloodshed, caused by accusations and loss of honour, amongst men. My hypothesis is that Þórr's actions, his honour and bravery, including notions of his manliness, echo many of the traits cherished by warriors and rulers, groups that can be said to support and embrace these virtues[5].

The narrative

Þórr wakes up in anger when he finds out that his hammer is missing. He asks Loki to find out where it is. Loki borrows Freyja's feather-shirt and travels to the giant Þrymr. The giant says that he has hidden the hammer deep underneath the earth, and that he is only willing to give it up if he gets Freyja as a bride[6]. When Freyja heatedly refuses, the gods must find another solution. Heimdallr comes up with the idea that Þórr should disguise himself as Freyja, so that he can get close to his hammer. At first Þórr refuses, he is afraid that he will be called unmanly, but Loki reminds him of the consequences of not having his hammer and eventually

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[3] See W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, London 1982; J. Goody, *Myth, Ritual and the Oral*, Cambridge 2010.

[4] See M. Bertell, *Tor och den nordiska åskan. Föreställningar kring världsaxeln*, Stockholm 2003; H. Ljungberg, *Tor. Undersökningar i indoeuropeisk och nordisk religionshistoria*, Uppsala universitets årsskrift 9, Uppsala 1947.

[5] This topic is explored in more detail in my doctoral dissertation that will be published in 2017.

[6] Giants usually desire and try to abduct goddesses, see further M. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse Myths in Medieval Society*, The Viking Collection 7, Odense 1994, pp. 111–115.

he agrees. Loki follows as his handmaiden. When they come to the giant's hall, Þórr's actions make the giant suspicious, but Loki finds quick answers for his odd behaviour. Eventually, the hammer is brought forward and when Þórr gets it in his hands, he massacres all of the giants in Þrymr's hall.

Earlier interpretations of *Þrymskviða*

The oldest known version of a myth in which Þórr is missing his hammer and has to retrieve it from a giant can be found in *Þrymskviða*, a poem composed in the *fornyrðislag* meter, framed by humour and usually dated to the mid-13th century. It only exists in one surviving manuscript, Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4to, ca. 1270), and the poem is not cited by Snorri, nor are its contents referred to in skaldic poetry. Its origin has been considered variously to be Swedish (Henrik Schück), Norwegian (Jan de Vries), Northern English (McKinnell), and most commonly, Icelandic[7]. Some have argued that the poem, with its burlesque character, cannot represent a myth, or that it is distorted, a view that very much depends on what someone means when they use the term "myth"[8]. Jan de Vries went as far as to consider the whole poem as a joke: "Jede Szene, fast jedes Wort ist als ein Spaß gemeint"[9]. Åke Ohlmarks went even further when he called it: "Worthless as a source, a late imitative pastiche of Snorri"[10]. Peter Hallberg also thought of *Þrymskviða* as amusing, and comments that in it "the poet's poetic vein lay bare and open for all to see"[11]. For Hallberg, the poem was a lampoon of Norse myths, written by a Christian author who he identified as Snorri Sturluson[12]. Others were of a diametrically different opinion. Finnur Jónsson, for example, considered the poem to be a masterpiece, composed in Norway in the 9th century, and pointed to the fact that its contents also could be found in Nordic medieval ballads[13].

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[7] For a survey of scholarship on the poem, see *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 2: Götterlieder (Skírnismál, Hárbarðslióð, Hymiskviða, Lokasenna, Þrymskviða)*, ed. by von See et al., Heidelberg 1997, pp. 509–26.

[8] See the contributions in G. Schrempp, W. Hansen, *Myth. A New Symposium*, Bloomington 2002, cf. L. Honko, *The Problem of Defining Myth*, [in:] *The Myth of the State*, ed. by H. Biezais, Stockholm 1972.

[9] J. de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, Grundriss der germanischen Philologie 16, Berlin 1942, p. 133.

[10] Å. Ohlmarks, *Asar, vaner och vidunder. Den fornnordiska gudavärlden: saga, tro och myt*, Stockholm, 1963, p. 11.

[11] P. Hallberg, *Den fornisländska poesin*, "Verdandis skriftserie" 20, Stockholm 2003, p. 50.

[12] This idea was briefly mentioned, six years earlier, by Åke Ohlmarks, *Eddans gudasånger*, Stockholm 1948, p. 285), but he never elaborated on it further.

[13] Finnur Jónsson*, Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* 1, København 1920, pp. 164–166. Cf. Bugge, Moe, *Torsvisen i sin norske form*…

Many dating principles are roughly based on aesthetic evaluations of contents, something that can partly explain the diverging opinions. The narrative in the poem is not known from any other source, but it does show phraseological parallels with other Eddic and Skaldic poems. This indicates a possible borrowing *from* the poem, an opinion that was popular earlier, when Þrymskviða was considered one of the oldest poems in *The Poetic Edda*. It can also indicate a loan *to* the poem, an opinion that is predominant today when the poem is considered one of the younger Eddic poems[14]. Certainly, it can also point to a borrowing from oral tradition known by the poets, both in style and wording.It is easy to think that the poet knew of a set of phrasings and formulas in advance, taken from a pool of verbal and semantic formulas, which were improvised and combined during the recitation. One example that supports this is the existence of the almost identical stanzas in *Þrymskviða* 13 and *Baldrs draumar* 1. Another example is the use of the wide-spread formula *iǫrð* "earth" and *upphiminn* "heaven above" in stanza 2. The formula is well-known in Germanic poetry, for instance it can be found in the Old High German poem *Wessobrunner gebet* from the 9th century, and on the Skarpåker rune stone in Sweden from the 11th century[15].

Masculinity and hyper-masculinity

To define masculinity and manhood is not an easy task, and there is not a single monolithic conception that covers all possible aspects. If we consult *The Oxford English Dictionary* it is not very helpful, it gives the following explanation for manliness: "The state or quality of being manly; the possession of manly vigour, or of those virtues characteristic of a man". We have to turn to the definition for masculine before we learn what these virtues are (besides pertaining to the male sex): "Having the appropriate excellences of the male sex; manly, virile, vigorous, powerful. Rarely of persons; usually of attributes, actions and productions"[16].

There are many ways to construct and understand masculinity. In brief, there are different constructions of gender to consider. What it means to be a man or perform masculinity can also vary in different contexts. One of the most well-known theories of masculinity is by R.W. Connell and is aimed at contemporary

[14] Theories of borrowing between known sources are problematic. See the discussion in B.Ø. Thorvaldsen, *Om Þrymskviða, tekstlån og tradisjon*, "Maal og Minne" 2 (2008), pp. 142–166.

[15] See J. de Vries, *Over de dateering der Þrymskviða*, "Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taalen Letterkunde" 47 (1928), pp. 251–322; L. Lönnroth, *Iǫrð fannz æva né upphiminn: A formula analysis*, [in:] *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. by U. Dronke et al., Odense 1981, pp. 310–327.

[16] *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by J.A. Murray, Vol. 6, 1933, pp. 127 and 198.

Western society. Connell's theories are usually used in the field of sociology; the most famous aspect is something referred to as "hegemonic masculinity"; a culturally idealized and dominant form of masculinity, and a form of a pattern of practice that allows men's social dominance over women to continue[17]. When I speak of masculinity below, it is the main form of being a man in Old Norse society as drawn out of the texts I have been studying (laws, sagas, and poetry). These can be seen as examples of hegemonic masculinity[18].

Another study that I have found helpful is an article by Scott Rubarth, who discusses three different competing concepts of masculinities in Ancient Greece: masculinity and courage, masculinity and patriarchy, and masculinity and political participation[19]. The first category proposed by Rubarth, who mainly discusses differences between Athenian and Spartan men, can be useful in analysing Þórr's masculinity in *Þrymskviða*. Even though the Greek and Old Norse societies are separated by time and place, they place similar values on masculine courage, in particular how Spartans praise bravery on the battlefield may be compared here.

Donald L. Mosher and Mark Sirkin established something they referred to as a hyper-masculinity inventory to measure a macho personality. Essentially, it consists of three main components: (a) calloused sex attitudes toward women, (b) violence as manly, and (c) danger as exciting.

These components reflect the macho man's desire to appear powerful and to be dominant in interactions with other men, women, and the environment. Mosher and Sirkin describe them accordingly:

> "Violence as Manly refers to the attitude among some men that violent aggression, either verbal or physical, is an acceptable, even preferable, masculine expression of power and dominance toward other men […] Danger as Exciting reflects the attitude that survival in dangerous situations, including "tempting fate", is a manly display of masculine power over the dangerous environment"[20].

In the following, I will use a simplified version of their concept of hyper-masculinity. Hyper-masculinity will be used as an intensified form of masculinity in Old Norse society, where Þórr, as one of the most popular gods, mirrors notions of manhood and serves as an ideal amongst men.

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[17] See R.W. Connell, J.W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity. Rethinking the Concept*, "Gender & Society" 19:6 (2005), pp. 829–859 for a discussion of the term and its history.

[18] As I mentioned earlier, I am aware that it is problematic to speak of one form of masculinity as hegemonic. It is a complex concept; therefore, I consider it better to focus on the aspects of violence against other men (not women), stoicism, and courage for this study.

[19] S. Rubarth, *Competing Constructions of Masculinity in Ancient Greece*, "Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts" 1 (2014), pp. 21–32.

[20] D.L. Mosher, M. Sirkin, *Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation*, "Journal of Research in Personality" 18:2 (1984), pp. 151–152.

The concept of unmanliness in Old Norse society

Masculine virtues in the Old Norse society, as described in the Icelandic sagas, Eddic and Skaldic poetry, Snorri Sturluson, and other sources, are closely integrated with notions of honour and social status. Prominent scholars such as Preben Meulengracht-Sørensen, Erik Noreen, Folke Ström, Bo Almqvist, and others, have, from different perspectives, explored and elucidated how sexual defamation worked in early Northern society[21]. Fundamental studies on how *níð* operates in verse, and to a lesser degree in prose, already exists, but no one has seriously analysed *Þrymskviða* and Þórr's role in the whole poem beside the idea that it is late and burlesque in style.

One of the worst insults for a man was to be accused of being effeminate, and therefore unmanly. The crucial word in *Þrymskviða* occurs in the scene in which Þórr is afraid that if he puts on the bridal garb, the other gods will consider him *ragr*. What does this expression actually mean, and why does this defamation distress Þórr? The adjective *ragr*, with its metathesized form *argr*, and the nouns *ergi* and *regi*, are invectives that mean 'sexually perverse, unmanly, effeminate, and cowardly'. The implication and undertone of sexually perverse is that a man has been sexually used by another man, that is, he is accused of being willing or inclined to play the female part[22]. For a female, the counterpart would be a nymphomaniac, and this is a notion that Freyja intensely opposes earlier in the same Þrymskviða (stanza 13). Notions of *ergi* are also connected with the practice of *seiðr* (but this will not be considered here, as it is not relevant for Þórr)[23]. As Meulengracht Sørensen, speaking of the Valkyrie-figure as emphasising the masculine and military ideal, says

> "the dominating masculine ethic which made the presentation of women in a male role into a favourite literary motive, at the same time rendered impossible the converse breach of sexual roles. The mere suggestion of a man in a female role was enough to symbolize unmanliness"[24].

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[21] E. Noreen, *Om niddiktning*, [in:] *Studier i fornvästnordisk diktning II, Filologi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskaper*, 4, Uppsala 1922; F. Ström, *Nid, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*, London 1974; Bo Almqvist, *Norrön niddikting: traditionshistoriska studier i versmagi, 1. Nid mot furstar. Dissertation*, Nordiska texter och undersökningar 21, Stockholm 1965; *Norrön niddikting: traditionshistoriska studier i versmagi, II. Nid mot präster*, Nordiska texter och undersökningar 23, Stockholm 1974; P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, transl. by J. Turville-Petre, The Viking Collection 1, Odense 1983.

[22] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man…*, p. 18. Modern terms with similar connotations would be to call someone a "fairy", "bender", "fudge", "homo", or "poof, poofter".

[23] See for example D. Strömbäck, *Sejd: Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria*, (Nordiska texter och undersökningar 5), Stockholm 1935; N. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Uppsala 2002; C. Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic, I-II*, FF Communications 296, Copenhagen 2009.

[24] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man…*, p. 23.

When Þórr actually puts on female clothes and acts in a female role, it is more than enough to make him vulnerable to accusations of unmanliness. The poem is not the only source that explores the borders of manliness. Accusations of unmanliness or cowardice directed against Þórr also come up in other sources, for instance in *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð*. In the former, Þórr is mocked by Loki, in the latter by Óðinn. The form is expressed in the following formula: You have done *x* (with the insinuation that it is unfitting and therefore unmanly behaviour), while I have done *y* (with the implication that it is proper and hence manly behaviour). The sources, both sagas and the mythological texts, usually mention this form of verbal duelling during drinking sessions in which, if the worst came to the worst, it could result in blood being spilt[25]. In *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð*, Þórr, finally, when the insults have gone too far, threatens his opponent with physical violence. This kind of behaviour is representative for what Mosh and Sirkin labels hyper-masculinity.

Negative attitudes for cross-dressing

Þrymskviða is not the only Old Norse source that mentions cross-dressing. Below, I will give some further samples from other sources where this occurs and where a negative judgement is recognisable.

The collection of laws known as Grágás (*Konungsbók*) condemns cross-dressing and specifies outlawry as punishment:

> *Ef kona klæðist karlklæðom eða sker sér skör eða fer með vopn fyrir breytni sakir, þat varðar fjörbaugsgarð. Það er stefnusök, ok skal kveðja til búa fimm á þingi. Sá á sök er vill. Slíkt er mælt um karla af þeir klæðast kvenna klæðnaði*[26].
>
> "If in order to be different a woman dresses in men's clothes or cuts her hair short… or carries weapons, the penalty for that is lesser outlawry… The same is prescribed for men if they dress in woman's clothing"[27].

The sentence seems harsh and indicates that cross-dressing was something that was regarded as a crime. It was considered appalling by society, at least at the time when the laws were written down. It seems that the same negative connotations for cross-dressing can be found in other sources, in both prose and poetry. The texts usually mention that a man has to escape his enemies and as a last resort he puts on a woman's clothing as a disguise.

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[25] C. Clover, *The Germanic Context of the Unferð Episode*, "Speculum" 55 (1980), pp. 447–448.

[26] *Grágás. Lagasafn íslenska þjóðveldisins*, ed. by Gunnar Karlsson et al., Reykjavík 2001, p. 125, §27.

[27] *Laws of Early Iceland: The Codex Regius of Grágás*, Vol. II, transl. by A. Dennis, P. Foote, R. Perkins, Winnipeg 2000, p. 219.

In the second heroic lay *Helgakviða Hundingsbana*, the hero Helgi has to put on a serving-woman's clothes when he spies on his enemy, King Hunding, but his piercing eyes almost give him away. In stanza 2, the poet says: *Hvǫss ero augo í Hagals þýio* ("Piercing are the eyes of Hagal's maidservant")[28].

Cross-dressing is also something that is considered unmanly in some of the Icelandic sagas[29]. In the most famous of the sagas, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Helgi Njálsson, puts on a woman's clothing to escape his enemies and the flames around their household. At first he refuses, but is persuaded to do so. *Gakk þú út með mér og mun eg kasta yfir þig kvenskikkju og falda þig með höfuðdúki* ("Come out with me – I'll put a woman's cloak on you and wrap a scarf around your head")[30]. His enemies notice that one of the women leaving the house is too big and discover that it is Helgi who reveals himself and slays one of his enemies with a sword, before his adversaries decapitate him.

The head-dress, something that usually designated a married woman, is used in a disguise by Brandr in *Hallfreðar saga* to avoid capture by his enemy Þorkell[31].

In *Laxdœla saga*, a woman is advised by her lover to make a shirt for her husband that is so low cut that it reveals his nipples, which is considered grounds for divorce: *Gerðu honum skyrtu ok brautgangs hǫfuðsmátt ok seg skilit við hann fyrir þessar sakar*[32].

The Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, in *Gesta Danorum*, written in the early 13th century, tells us of another instance when a manly man dresses like a woman. Hagbarth puts on women's clothing to get close to his beloved, Signe[33]. In book three, Saxo says that Othinus (Óðinn) puts on women's clothes and disguises himself as a woman under the name Vecha to get close to the princess Rinda[34].

Above, I mentioned some examples of cross-dressing in the Icelandic sagas, and it is clear from these examples that this was considered unmanly by society. In many cases, the man who dons woman's clothing usually has to escape enemies and is frequently referred to as a manly and a heroic character that has no other choice. This is an old motif found elsewhere, for example in the Bible or in the Greco-Roman world.

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[28] *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by H. Kuhn, G. Neckel, 3rd edition, Heidelberg 1962, p. 151; *The Poetic Edda*, transl. by C. Larrington, revised edition, Oxford 2014, p. 128.

[29] See K. Wolf, *Klæðskiptingar í Íslendingasögunum*, "Skírnir" 171 (1997), pp. 381–400.

[30] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Forrit XII, Reykjavík 1954, pp. 329–330.

[31] *Hallfreðar saga*, ed. by. Einarr Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII, Reykjavík 1939, p. 190.

[32] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Forrit VIII, Reykjavík 1934, p. 94.

[33] Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes Books I-IX*, ed. by H.R. Davidson, translated by P. Fisher, Woodbridge 1996, p. 214.

[34] Saxo Grammaticus, Book 3, pp. 77–78.

In *Deuteronomy* 22:5 (NIV) it is explicitly said that: "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this"[35].

If we turn to Ancient Greece, or more precisely, to the poem the *Illiad*, Achilles is said to have been concealed by his mother Thetis amongst the daughters of King Lycomedes to prevent him from taking part in the Trojan wars. As we all know, he still enters the war together with the Myrmidons and is filled with godlike wrath (similar to the berserker's rage) when his beloved companion, Patroclus, is killed by Hector. In *the Bacchae* by Euripides, King Pentheus dresses up like a woman in order to spy on the boisterous Maenads who worship the Greek god Dionysus, but he is eventually discovered and ripped to pieces[36].

Is mockery of Þórr evidence of a poem being young?

In a recent and admirable study, Frog argues that "the lack of early evidence suggests that the Þórr bride narrative was either not in circulation or not interesting in Iceland in the first half of the thirteenth century"[37]. His opinion might be correct, at least for Iceland, but a lack of earlier evidence is not enough to rule out the possibility that this motif was indeed in circulation. As shown above, cross-dressing of a masculine character is not isolated to *Þrymskviða* as it can be found in other sources, as well as from comparable mythological narratives from other cultures. Frog goes on to say that:

> "*Þrymskviða* was composed as a mythological burlesque centrally developed from an ATU 1148B tradition with an orientation away from vernacular mythology and belief traditions, most probably in poetic form in thirteenth century Iceland, very likely near the time of its earliest documentation, and most probably intended for 'Christian' audiences in the context of discourses surrounding tensions and conflicts between Christian and vernacular beliefs"[38].

Is this poem composed to be a deliberate mockery of Þórr?[39] Is Þórr being ridiculed, and if so, does this mean that the poem cannot be considered old? Many have these arguments as a criterion for asserting the young age of the poem, since they believe that absurdity and comedy has no place in a genuine belief system. In

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[35] *New International Version Bible*, https://www.biblica.com/bible/ (accessed 2015-10-10).

[36] Compare with Tale Type 1545A* "It's a Man", in A. Antti, *The Types of the Folktale. A Classification and Bibliography*, transl. and enl. by S. Thompson, Second Revision, FF Communications 184, Helsinki 1987, p. 447.

[37] Frog, *Germanic Traditions*…, p. 152.

[38] Ibidem, p. 153. He points out, in a footnote, that the "gods must not necessarily be treated seriously and with reverence where mythology is vital" (Ibidem, footnote 51).

[39] Ibidem, p. 145.

fact, this is a very strange way of looking at religious narratives and traditions, and is based on an understanding of Christianity as a case in point. It can be argued that the seriousness that often characterizes Christianity is not a good comparison when it comes to other religious traditions; it is actually an awkward criterion, as comedy, even mockery of the holy, also exists in Christian traditions[40]. Narratives of comical and disrespectful behaviour among the gods are found in several Eddic poems that are generally considered to be old.

Theodore Andersson has pointed out, mainly with examples from *Egil's saga*, that caricature and exaggerations are undeniably distinctive features of the Icelandic sagas[41]. Egill is considered a very masculine character, and some of his actions and words are sometimes exaggerated to the point that the audience listening to the saga certainly laughed out loudly. Ironic humour and parodic episodes can be seen as key elements and a distinctive trait of the Icelandic sagas. "Comic sagas" is even a recent term for some of the sagas (even though most of them are considered to be late)[42]. Is comedy a young innovation, characteristic for some of the sagas? No, I do not believe so, as it can be found in abundance in earlier sources from other cultures, most notably in ancient Greek Comedy where mythological burlesque is common, as well as in other sources of *The Poetic Edda*[43].

Gurevich has stated that the amusing and satirical qualities of the Eddic poems should not be interpreted as constituting a critique of heathenism. His main focus is *Lokasenna*, but he also comments on burlesque episodes in all the poems of *The Poetic Edda*. Gurevich believes that comedy is an integral part of the sacral, and proposes that a freedom from taboos and other restrictions on men reaffirms the sanctity of the gods[44].

Þórr as hyper-masculine in *Þrymskviða*

One way of portraying Þórr would be to refer to his aspects of violence, strength, short temper, and sexual aggression, as well as his lust for adventure. He

[40] See O. Ferm, *Abboten, bonden och hölasset. Skratt och humor under medeltiden*, Runica et mediævalia, Scripta minora 7, Stockholm 2002, and references cited there. Scatological humour is also something that can be considered old, see V. Allen, *On Farting. Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages*, The New Middle Ages, New York 2007.

[41] Th.M., Andersson *Character and Caricature in the Family Sagas*, [in:] *Studien zur Isländersaga. Festschrift für Rolf Heller*, ed. by H. Beck, E. Ebel, Berlin 2000, 1ff.

[42] Many "comic sagas" have been gathered and edited in a recent collection, *Comic Sagas and Tales from Iceland*, ed. by Robert Kellogg, with an introduction on the subject by Viðar Hreinsson, Penguin Books 2012.

[43] See the articles in *Broken Laughter: Select Fragments of Greek Comedy*, ed. by D. Olsson, Oxford 2007.

[44] See A. Ya, Gurevich, *On the Nature of the Comic in the Elder Edda: A Comment on an Article by Professor Höfler*, "Mediaeval Scandinavia" 9 (1976), pp. 127–137.

was expected to be the ultimate fighter and was a renowned slayer of giants and giantesses. The sources tell us that Þórr has fiery eyes and a great red beard. His realm is Þrúðheimr ("The mighty abode") or Þrúðvangr ("The mighty fields"), and his hall is called Bilskírnir ("Flashing of Light"). He is armed with Mjǫllnir, a hammer that he wields whilst wearing iron gloves, and a belt that enhances his strength. He travels the skies in a chariot drawn by two billy-goats, Tanngrísnir ("teeth-barer") and Tanngnjóstr ("teeth-grinder"). He has two sons, Magni ("The angry one") and Móði ("Strong one"), and a daughter, Þrúðr ("Mighty woman"). These mythological features are intimately associated with power and strength, as are most myths about the god. These attributes are well known, and there is no reason to elaborate on them any further.

My arguments for proposing that Þórr is described as hyper-masculine in the poem follow below. In my opinion, the conception of the god Þórr in the poem, is serious and serves as a model for humankind. Depictions of the god function – like most myths about Þórr – as a reminder of the gods' superiority and divine power. Þórr, like a heroic warrior, is greater than other men. Even when he is faced with a degrading act, such as cross-dressing, he displays a model of the masculine ideals of courage and stoicism, and he quickly recovers his honour by slaying all of his offenders. Interesting also are the epic motifs that can be found in the poem that fit the other accounts of a Pre-Christian mythological system.

Not much attention has been given to descriptions of the god's emotive characteristics, besides his short temper. The poem clearly states that he is anxious that the gods will call him *ragr* if he puts on female clothes. Obviously, he is afraid of being considered unmanly, a degradation of his masculinity. Eventually, he agrees because he needs to retrieve his hammer which is a crucial tool for keeping the gods as supreme rulers of the cosmos. In other words – the end justifies the means. The description of how Þórr dresses like Freyja is comical and might be a late theme, added to an older mythical narrativ2ear a bridal gown. He is expected to lash out violently and brutally. The giants are killed without hesitation and the cosmic balance is back to normal, with the gods in command as guarantors of order.

Conclusion

In the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*, the poet describes Þórr's forceful reaction to the suggestion of letting him dress up in a bridal gown and act Freyja's part in a marriage ceremony with a giant. He declares that the gods will call him *argr* if he dresses like a woman; a breach of sexual roles that was shameful and more than enough to symbolize unmanliness. Eventually, Þórr agrees and puts on the bridal outfit and travels to Þrymr's hall together with Loki, a mythological personage who can easily transgress gender boundaries. While impersonating Freyja, Þórr shows considerate emotional self-control, but is on the verge of exploding with

rage as his identity as a man is severely tested. Only Loki's witty responses to the giant save Þórr from revealing himself. In the end, Þórr wins back his weapon and regains his manly status, slaying everyone in his path, including male and female, old and young.

If we go back to the inventory defining hyper-masculinity by Mosher & Sirkin, their first category is an unsympathetic attitude towards women. The sexual part is seldom a topic in myths about Þórr, but he has fathered children with giantesses while he lives in a marital relationship with the goddess Sif[45]. In *Þrymskviða* there is one example of this violent attitude towards women when Þórr gets his hammer back and goes to massacre every giant in the hall. In the last stanza (32), the poet clearly reflects on this as a crude joke: *Drap hann ina ǫldno iǫtna systor, / hin er brúðfiár of beðit hafði; / hon scell um hlaut fyr scillinga, enn hǫgg hamars fyr hringa fiǫlð* ("He killed the old sister of the giants, she who'd asked for the gift from the bride; striking she got instead of shillings, and hammer-blows instead of heaps of rings")[46].

The next category of Mosher & Sirkin is violence as hyper-masculine, a masculine expression of power and dominance toward other men, an aspect that Þórr can be said to embody. Every myth about the god includes a reference to his skills as a slayer of giants or to his great strength. He is the protector of cosmos and mankind; therefore, it is natural to associate him with great battle prowess. In this, he is indeed hyper-masculine.

The last category in their inventory is "danger as exciting", reflecting an attitude that survival in dangerous situations, including "tempting fate", is a manly display of power over the dangerous environment; for example, by crossdressing and visiting a hostile giant without a weapon. In *Þrymskviða*, the poet describes how cross-dressing makes Þórr worried about defamation, an action that symbolically might reduce him to an unmanly man. The poet goes on to describe Þórr's emotional self-control as a sign of toughness and how he, in the end, wins back his honour by acting in a violent manner. His manly traits cannot be hidden under a bridal gown and his behaviour is indeed very masculine, even though he has to resist and control his violent temper.

One motif, found in several poems, is to slander Þórr by accusing him of being unmanly[47]. The poem includes many traditional stock motifs, well-known

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[45] It can, however, be used to explain Óðinn's masculinity that is often centred on his treacherous methods and conquest of women. Cf. T. Kuusela, *»Med trehövdad turs skall du leva«: sexuellt betvingande trolldom i nordisk mytologi och religion*, "Chaos. Skandinavisk tidsskrift for religionshistoriske studier" 62 (2015), pp. 41–74. Þórr is the eldest son of Óðinn and their rivalry is obvious in mythological narratives and might have been evident in their cults as well.

[46] *Edda. Die Lieder*…, p. 115; *The Poetic Edda*, p. 97.

[47] See above. *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð* give good examples of this. Another example is when the giant Hrungnir says that it would be without honour if Þórr attacks him when he is not carrying his weapon. See T.T. Kuusela, *Tors strid mot Hrungner. Tvekamp, brynstenssymbolik och*

from other sources, and I would like to add Þorr's hyper-masculinity to this list; he is never considered unmanly and the section in which he dresses in a bridal gown might be considered amusing just because he is too masculine to be considered effeminate. It is precisely Þórr's hyper-masculinity that makes the poem work as comedy.

The narrative described in *Þrymskviða* is not an isolated case where cross-dressing occurs; rather it expresses a traditional motif that works well – even in a hilarious manner – when applied to somebody that embodies masculine attributes. The poem considers the same topics as many other sources – the complexity of masculinity and the thin line between fame and defamation.

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„AS BĘDZIE NAZYWAŁ MNIE PRZEWROTNYM!" ÞÓRR I HIPERMĘSKOŚĆ WÞRYMSKVIÐA

Streszczenie

W *Þrymskviða*, wierszu *Eddy Poetyckiej*, bóg Þórr przebiera się w suknię ślubną i bierze udział jako Freyja w ceremonii zaślubin z gigantem. Zanim się godzi, obawia się, że bogowie będą go nazywać *argr*, jeśli ubierze się jak kobieta – naruszenie ról seksualnych było haniebne i więcej niż wystarczające, by symbolizować niemęskość. Używając teorii hipermęskości płci, Kuusela twierdzi, w przeciwieństwie do wielu wcześniejszych interpretacji wiersza, że męski charakter Þórra nigdy nie jest kwestionowany; przeciwnie – bóg zachowuje się w sposób, który faktycznie wzmacnia jego cechy charakteru macho.