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Stefanie von Schnurbein

THE FUNCTION OF LOKI IN SNORRI STURLUSON'S *Edda*

> That one too is numbered among the Æsir whom some call the slanderer of the Æsir and originator of deceptions and a stain of the Æsir and humans. His name is Loki or Lopt, son of the giant Farbauti. Laufey or Nál is his mother and his brothers are Byleistr and Helblindi. Loki is fair and handsome in appearance, bad of mind, very changeable in his ways. He had that form of wisdom beyond other men, which is called cunning, and he uses tricks in everything. He constantly brought the Æsir into great difficulty, and often rescued them with deceits.[1]

Loki, the outsider in the Northern Germanic pantheon, confounds not only his fellow deities and chronicler Snorri Sturluson but has occasioned as much quarrel among his interpreters. Hardly a monograph, article, or encyclopedic entry does not begin with the reference to Loki as a staggeringly complex, confusing, and ambivalent figure who has been the catalyst for countless unresolved scholarly controversies and has elicited more problems than solutions.

In this article, I would not so much as presume to propose a solution to any one of these myriad problems. I will not even attempt a detailed

Translation by Lilian Friedberg.

[1] Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, chap. 33: Sá er enn talðr með Ásum er sumir kalla rógbera Ásanna ok frumkveða flærðanna ok vǫmm allra goða ok manna. Sá er nefndr Loki eða Loptr, sonr Fárbauta jǫtuns. Móðir hans er Laufey eða Nál. Brœðr hans eru þeir Býleistr ok Helblindi. Loki er fríðr ok fagr sýnum, illr í skaplyndi, mjǫk fjǫlbreytinn at háttum. Hann hafði þá speki um fram aðra manna er slœgð heitir, ok vælar til allra hluta. Hann kom Ásum jafnan i fullt vandræði ok opt leysti hann þá með vælrœðum. Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning/Snorri Sturluson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 26–27; translations by author unless otherwise indicated.

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account of sources in which Loki myths are delivered. Far more, I hope to provide a new reading and reconfiguration of scholarly opinions on Loki in particular and, more generally, on old Icelandic mythological and heroic poetry, with special attention given to the way these function in medieval Scandinavian society. My aim is to discover a new angle of insight into Loki's role and function in the one text that portrays a whole series of Loki myths together in context: Snorri Sturluson's *Edda.*

To this end, I will first provide a brief overview of the most significant Old Norse written sources in which Loki plays a role and comment briefly on the source value of Snorri's *Edda.* Subsequently, I will summarize some of the more pertinent scholarly positions taken on Loki in general before discussing in greater detail the figure of Loki in the *Snorra Edda.* The focus of this discussion will center on Loki's enigmatic positioning between disparate categories—giants and gods, men and women, man and beast.

I. SOURCES

In the extant written sources, Loki appears neither as a functional deity nor was there any cult surrounding the figure. Proof of the latter point is evidenced by the absence of place names that can be traced to Loki in Scandinavia. At the same time, Loki myths are present in each of the three most significant genres of medieval Scandinavian literature. The earliest record of a literary treatment of Loki myths is contained in the skaldic poem *Haustlǫng* by Þjóðolfr or Hvíni from the ninth century A.D. Two additional skaldic poems, *Húsdrápa* by Úlfr Uggason from the tenth century and *Þórsdrápa* by Eilífr Goðrúnarson from the turn of the tenth to the eleventh century, also refer to Loki myths. These sources, however, hardly demonstrate any coherence in and of themselves, as skaldic verse is itself a highly complex literary genre characterized by multicoded metaphor.

The so-called *Elder* or *Poetic Edda,* a collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic lays written down in the thirteenth century, contains several songs in which Loki plays a prominent role. While the dating of the individual lays is a matter of contention, several of them are presumed to have been created as early as the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the content of the narratives antedates even that in some instances. But neither skaldic nor eddic verse can offer much insight into the contextual relationship between the individual Loki myths. It is impossible to derive from these works any certainty regarding the function of this enigmatic deity.

Snorri Sturluson, who cites most of the above-mentioned verse, was the first to have established a specific—albeit at times ambiguous—*contextual* relationship between the individual myths about Loki. One of his major works, originally titled *Edda,* which is today commonly re-

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ferred to as the *Snorra Edda* or *Prose Edda* in order to distinguish it from the *Poetic Edda,* originated around A.D. 1220. The Icelandic scholar, author, and politician Snorri Sturluson wrote the work as a textbook on the art of skaldic verse. His explicit motivation was to preserve a genre derived from an oral, pre-Christian period in a written literary form in the era of Christianization. Since the poetic circumlocutions of skaldic verse, the so-called kennings and heiti, can only be understood in the context of the mythological backgrounds surrounding them, Snorri delivers, in the first part of the *Edda,* the *Gylfaginning* (the delusion of Gylfi), a portrait of pagan mythology from the creation of the world to its final demise—Ragnarǫk (fate of the gods). The second part, the *Skáldskaparmál* (poetic diction), elucidates the meaning of numerous kennings and makes reference to additional myths essential to the understanding of the kennings. Finally, the third part, the *Háttatál* (the sayings of the High), comprises a sort of skaldic morphology. Whether or not authorship of the prologue introducing these three components of the *Snorra Edda* manuscript can also be attributed to Snorri remains to this day a contested issue.[2] But, this brief erudite, euhemeristic exegesis on the pagan belief system as a "natural religion" plays a rather insubstantial role with regard to the question of Loki's function.

Even without adducing the intricacies of this debate, the value of the *Snorra Edda* as a source for pagan mythology remains controversial. For one thing, no definitive conclusion has been reached concerning the impact of Christian influences so undeniably present in the narrative. This applies in much the same degree to the greater part of Old Norse literature and is thus also relevant for Snorri's sources. Writing itself was a tradition first introduced to Iceland after the onset of the Christianization process in the year 1000 and became the precondition for the literary production that began to flourish after the twelfth century. Furthermore, Snorri's role as author is open to question—can he be considered a faithful chronicler or is he perhaps, as Eugen Mogk (1932) or Walter Baetke (1952)[3] maintained, a creative author of poetic mythological novellas?

Georges Dumézil's monograph, *Loki* (1959),[4] marks a significant shift in the assessment of the *Snorra Edda.* Dumézil believed he had proved the age and authenticity of the myths Snorri had written down by comparing

[2] Recent debates have been spawned by Klaus von See's controversial book, *Mythos und Theologie im skandinavischen Hochmittelalter* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1988).

[3] Eugen Mogk, *Zur Bewertung der Snorra-Edda als religionsgeschichtliche und mythologische Quelle des nordgermanischen Heidentums* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1932); Walter Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra Edda* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1952).

[4] Georges Dumézil, *Loki* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1959). The German edition is a revised and extended translation from French of Dumézil's *Loki* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve, 1948).

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them with other Indo-Germanic mythic tales.[5] Philological research in the 1970s and 1980s, however, took as its basic assumption a substantial influence of theological dogmas on Snorri's work.[6] In 1988, Klaus von See challenged this position in his stimulating and provocative book, *Mythos und Theologie.* According to this account, Snorri's interest, and indeed the essential impulse underlying the whole corpus of Old Norse literature, was motivated precisely *not* by theological historical interpretations but rather by an attempt to preserve the pagan cultural tradition of the North by embedding it in the high medieval worldview, integrating it into the Christian understanding of history, and thereby molding a genuine Scandinavian cultural consciousness. In this context, then, von See advocates a conceptualization of Old Norse literature as a literature of the High Middle Ages and calls for a consideration of the putative function of the texts in their extant state.

II. SCHOLARLY OPINIONS

This approach will serve as the point of departure for the following examination of the function assumed by the figure of Loki in the *Snorra Edda.* It renders irrelevant the one question that has been foregrounded by nearly all earlier commentators on the subject, namely, the question of determining the *original* character of Loki, based on the fragmentary and younger sources. Thus, I will briefly mention these theories here for the sake of providing a comprehensive overview.

The first theory regarding Loki was advanced by Jacob Grimm, who assigned Loki the attributes of the god of fire[7] based on an onomastic analogy drawn from the German "Lohe." Even though the etymology proved untenable, this image has persisted tenaciously in the public imagination—partially due to Richard Wagner's portrayal of "Loge" in *Der Ring des Nibelungen.* Sophus Bugge (1889), in his efforts to trace Norse gods and myths to Christian prototypes, saw in Loki a variant of the Christian figure of Lucifer.[8]

Scholarly discourse in the postwar period centered primarily on four theories. In 1956, the similarities between Loki and Oðin prompted Folke

[5] Dumézil has been criticized for his methodological approach and especially for the political implications of his postulate of a tripartite organizational structure of Indo-Germanic society. The most pertinent critical positions have been summarized by Bruce Lincoln in "Rewriting the German War God: Georges Dumézil, Politics and Scholarship in the Late 1930s," *History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (1998): 187–208, discussion at 190, nn. 8 and 9. See also the detailed, two-part research report by Bernfried Schlerath, "Georges Dumézil und die Rekonstruktion der indogermanischen Kultur," *Kratylos* 40 (1995): 1–48; 41 (1996): 1–67.

[6] Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987).

[7] Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie,* compiled by Elard Hugo Meyer, 4th ed. (1835; reprint, Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1875–78), pp. 199 ff.

[8] Sophus Bugge, *Studier over de nordiske gude—og heltesagns oprindelse* (Christiania: Forlag af Alb. Cammermeyer, 1881–89), pp. 10 and 70–79.

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Ström to conclude that Loki was merely a hypostatization of this chief god.[9] Shortly thereafter, Jan de Vries (1959) brought into circulation one of the most influential and plausible theories that had thus far been advanced: the notion that Loki was a typical "trickster" figure, like those most commonly associated with the myths of North American Indians.[10] Anna Birgitta Rooth, in her comprehensive 1961 monograph, sought to uncover the original character of Loki by excluding all mythological parallels from non-Scandinavian sources and concluded that he had originally been a spider.[11] A distinction must be drawn between the above-listed efforts and the aforementioned attempt on the part of Georges Dumézil to ascribe a psychological function to this contradictory god. He considers Loki a product of the mythological imagination attempting to create an incarnation of "impulsive intelligence." In 1962 Anne Holtsmark dismissed every previous attempt at determining the character of an original Loki.[12] She argues that the oldest known form of the Loki figure originates from the literature of the Middle Ages, which supplies an unchecked fluctuation of motifs. In her view, not even the etymology of the Loki name has been clarified. While she does lend some credence to Dumézil's history of religions approach to Loki's function as a psychological phenomenon, she nonetheless concludes that "the literary analysis of extant texts must ultimately contain proof of the figure's significance within the economy of each individual narrative. We cannot progress much beyond that."[13]

III. LOKI EPISODES IN THE *Snorra Edda*

Taking this call for scholarly modesty at its word, then, the following examination of the function of Loki will focus primarily on his role in Snorri's *Edda,* the only source in which individual Loki myths are not only narrated or mentioned but situated within a greater narrative context.

In his enumeration of the individual Æsir in the beginning of the *Gylfaginning,* Snorri outlines the general character of Loki cited here as an introduction to this article. This functions, among other things, to steer the reader's sympathy or antipathy for the episodes that follow. In conjunction with the question of the origin of Oðin's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, Snorri proceeds to report on the construction of a protective wall around Midgard. In order to prevent the wall's architect, a giant (*jǫtunn*), from receiving the sun, the moon, and the goddess Freya as

[9] Folke Ström, *Loki: Ein mythologisches Problem,* Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, vol. 62 (Göteborg, 1956).

[10] Jan de Vries, "Loki . . . und kein Ende," in *Festschrift für Franz Rolf Schröder zu seinem 65. Geburtstage September 1958,* ed. Wolfdietrich Rasch (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsverlag, 1959), pp. 1–10.

[11] Anna Birgitta Rooth, *Loki in Scandinavian Mythology* (Lund: Gleerup, 1961).

[12] Anne Holtsmark, "Loki: En omstridt skikkelse i nordisk mytologi," *Maal og Minne* 62 (1962): 81–89.

[13] Ibid., p. 89.

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compensation, Loki transforms himself into a mare. In this guise, he lures the architect's stallion away for three nights and thus prohibits the completion of the wall. Following this redemptory act, he gives birth to the stallion Sleipnir. The next mention of Loki occurs in conjunction with his role as Þór's companion on his journey to the giant Útgarðaloki, but, in this episode, he neither assumes a significant role in the action nor is he portrayed as any sort of villain.

While he had thus far been an ambivalent figure, Loki's function shifts in the very next episode to one of utter villainy. Here, he is indirectly responsible for the death of the god Baldr because he advises the blind god Hǫðr to shoot Baldr with a mistletoe. Mistletoe is the only entity not under oath to refrain from harming Baldr. The goddess of death, Hel, agrees to release Baldr from the underworld on the condition that all the other creatures weep over his death. In response, Loki transforms himself into an old woman, refuses to mourn Baldr's death, and is thus responsible for the fact that Baldr remains in the underworld. Loki then flees Asgard and transforms himself into a fish. But, he gets caught in the Æsir's net—a net he himself devised. As punishment, he is bound to a jagged cliff by his own son's entrails—and there he remains until the end of the world, the Ragnarǫk. In the tremendous battle between the gods and the creatures of the underworld that transpires in the Ragnarǫk, as reported in the final passages of the *Gylfaginning,* Loki and his progeny are unequivocally situated on the side of the gods' opponents.

The *Skáldskaparmál* contains three additional Loki myths: the saga of the theft and rescue of the goddess Iðunn, without whom the gods are bereft of their eternal youth; the second episode relates the story of how Loki entices Þórr into the snare of the giant Geirrǫðr without his hammer; and in the third episode, Loki cuts Þór's wife, Sif's, hair. This event must precede the others chronologically since this is the one of Loki's misdeeds that first leads to the Æsir's acquisition of Þór's hammer and other valuable treasures.

The last episode in which Loki plays a leading role is situated at the intersection of mythological and heroic poetry. It concerns the origin of the gold that would later become the treasure of the Nibelungen, a subject reported on in greater detail in another source, the *Vǫlsunga Saga.* Here again, Loki's rash course of action is the catalyst for events. He kills an otter who turns out to be the son of the man who is host to Oðin, Hǫnir, and Loki. Loki subsequently steals a treasure from the dwarf Andvari as compensation for the killing. This treasure would later become the cursed Nibelungen gold.

IV. THE FUNCTION OF LOKI IN THE *Snorra Edda*

It is not easy to draw any conclusions concerning the character of the Loki figure from the highly contradictory tales told within just this one work.

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Most conspicuous perhaps is the attribute ascribed to the god by Snorri himself in one of his introductory statements: Loki brings misfortune upon himself and the other Æsir with his clumsiness, haplessness, or malevolence, he always redeems himself by dint of his cunning, his magical capacities, or his eloquence. He figures as companion or servant to the other gods and is most often associated with Óðin or Þórr. What merits explication in the context of the *Snorra Edda* is above all the fact that there are two clearly opposing sides to his character. On the one hand, he is the fiendish mischief maker and, at the same time, he is the amply artful rescuer of the gods—that is, a sort of benevolent scoundrel or trickster. On the other hand, he appears in conjunction with the story of Baldr's death and subsequently, at the downfall of Asgard and Midgard, as an absolute adversary of the gods. This state of affairs has led numerous authors to see the Loki figure in the *Snorra Edda* as the composite of several older figures, whether this was Snorri's intent or not. Others, Jens Peter Schjødt,[14] for example, whose study is not restricted to the *Snorra Edda* but includes a consideration of all the Old Norse Loki sources, have attempted to render this transformation plausible within the context of the economy of narrative.

A. SCHJØDT'S CONSTRUCTION OF A MYTHICAL HISTORY

Invoking Mircea Eliade, Schjødt assumes that the Germanic peoples, like countless others, subscribed to a cyclical understanding of time characterized by the eternal return of the stages of the golden age, the creation of the world, its subsequent demise, and the emergence of a new golden age.[15] He considers the contradictory elements in Loki to be steps in the progression of a mythical chronology since Loki's development from a helpful assistant to the gods to one of their primary adversaries is parallel to the demise of the world. For Schjødt, Loki thus becomes an exponent of the increasing malevolence and moral disintegration of the world that ultimately leads to its downfall. The Loki myth explains the introduction of evil to the world and why the present reality is so much worse than the ideal primordial period. What is important for our purposes is the foundation upon which Loki's negativity rests in Schjødt's analysis. Loki's magical capacities, especially his shape- and gender-shifting abilities, consign him to a liminal position between fundamental opposites. These attributes make Loki into the "intermediary par excellence"—a function that renders him indispensable to the gods, but at the same time leads to their demise. Loki thus becomes the exponent of qualitative deterioration that is the fate of the world. The canon of myths surrounding him attempts to explain and justify this deterioration. This occurs in part as

[14] Jens Peter Schjødt, "Om Loke endnu engang," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 96 (1981): 49–86.

[15] Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper, 1959).

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a result of the fact that he is equipped with the ability within himself to reconcile contradictions that are absolutely irreconcilable inasmuch as they represent, in many ways, natural oppositions. Their fusion is in turn unnatural and thus constitutes in itself one end of the polarity that Schjødt describes as "the Natural-the Unnatural." From Schjødt's perspective, then, Loki becomes, by virtue of his intermediary function, the quintessential symbol of "the Unnatural."

Several aspects of this interpretation are problematic. For one, Eliade's construction of a cyclical, mythical concept of time can itself be viewed as the expression of a nostalgic retrospective projection. Furthermore, the opposition between "Natural" and "Unnatural" that Schjødt presents as his point of departure is not by any means self-evident but rather in need of further explication. Finally, what is paramount for our concerns is that, while Schjødt does not extrapolate from his sources an original Loki—an endeavor he explicitly rejects—making recourse to Eliade, he attempts instead to construct a sort of originary pagan worldview. Thus, even Schjødt does not consider the function of the individual narrative and its putative intentions in its time. However, his references to Loki's fundamental duality, to Loki's shape- and gender-shifting abilities and his function as intermediary between various dimensions, seems to me crucial, and I will return to these themes again below.

B. LOKI AS EPIC FIGURE

Whereas Schjødt is intent on reconstructing a mythical history, Ulf Drobin[16] undertakes the attempt to disaggregate the mythical and epic elements in the Loki sources. He posits the thesis that Loki's primary function is an epical one. His actions establish specific patterns that make possible various series of intrigues prerequisite to the expression of religious ideas and concepts in epic narrative. Even though Drobin is in pursuit of a religious function—not the function of a *literary* figure in a *literary* text—this insight is valuable to our concerns here. In the course of his argument, Drobin reminds us that, in his narration of Loki's role in the emergence of the Nibelungen treasure and the curse associated with it, Snorri incorporates a story from the epic tradition of heroic poetry. In this same context, Drobin mentions Birgitta Rooth's thesis of the epic technique as a constitutive element of Snorri's Baldr myth, which places it in the context of a written literary tradition.[17]

C. THE DEATHS OF BALDR AND SIGURÐR

It seems that the entire myth surrounding Baldr's death as narrated by Snorri not only adheres to the general patterns of heroic epic but dem-

[16] Ulf Drobin, "Myth and Epical Motifs in the Loki-Research," *Temenos: Studies in Comparative Religion* 3 (1968): 19–39.
[17] Rooth.

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onstrates astonishing parallels found in renderings of Sigurð's/Siegfried's death, which are related in the Old Norse *Vǫlsungasaga* as well as in several eddic lays and in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied.* By now it should be clear that my intent is not to construct *mythical* parallels from this coincidence of Baldr and Sigurðr but rather to point to the parallelism inherent in the literary structures, which can only be touched on in a brief sketch here.

Sigurðr/Siegfried is a heroic figure radiating an innocence quite similar to that of Baldr. Both are veritably invulnerable. Each of their deaths is caused by an object, or in Sigurð's case, by a person who is not bound to the hero by any oath of allegiance; in Baldr's case, by the mistletoe; in Sigurð's, by his brother-in-law. In both the Baldr and the Sigurðr stories, there is an ambivalent figure whose advice costs the hero his life. For Sigurðr, this figure is Hǫgni/Hagen; for Baldr, of course, it is Loki.

And yet, how tenable are these parallels, and, more importantly, what can be gleaned from them for our interpretation of the Loki figure in the *Snorra Edda?* The primary cause of Sigurð's death in the story of the Nibelungen can be located first and foremost among the complex and highly precarious alliances of marriage and kinship structures together with the attendant exchange of material goods (the Nibelungen treasure). While there is some deviation between the Old Norse and the Middle High German renderings, the structural similarities remain clearly discernable. One need only recall Sigurð's commitment to Brynhild, his marriage to another woman, his uncharacteristic lingering in his wife's family's court, his betrayal of Brynhild, whom he wins for his brother-in-law, the dispute over the treasure that ensues after Sigurð's death, and so on. These intrigues are typical of the heroic epic, but they are absent from the Baldr myth as reported by Snorri. However, a consideration of the other stories told about Loki in the *Snorra Edda* reveals that Loki indeed does play a central role not only in the exchange of goods but also in the marital politics and the kinship systems of the gods. Thus, he assumes functions that are salient features of the heroic epic.

D. LOKI AS INTERMEDIARY IN THE EXCHANGE OF GOODS AND OF WOMEN

Margaret Clunies Ross has undertaken the study of kinship structures in the Old Norse pantheon.[18] In her view, contact between the gods and giants in the medieval Scandinavian renderings exists primarily because each is in possession of objects coveted by the other. We are concerned

[18] Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994). In my opinion, Ross goes too far in her attempt to provide a unified socio-cultural interpretation of both myth and saga. However, some of her renderings prove helpful for an understanding of the structures of the *Snorra Edda.* See also Margaret Clunies Ross, "Why Skaði Laughed: Comic Seriousness in Old Norse Mythic Narrative," *Maal og minne* (1989): 1–14.

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here with "numinous sources of knowledge and power,"[19] but, more than that, with women. A relationship of negative reciprocity prevails between the giants and gods, that is, in the successful efforts on the part of the Æsir to acquire these things from the giants and to prevent the giants from extracting goods, knowledge, or, most importantly, women from the gods. It is this relationship that forms the foundation for the perpetual antagonism between the giants and the gods.

Snorri and other sources also report strict hierarchical rules governing marriage and sexual relations between different groups of gods and other beings. The other group of gods, the Vanir, rank between the Æsir and the giants, but later, once the Æsir's superiority has been established, the Vanir form an alliance with the Æsir. Æsir can enter into sexual union with giantesses and can marry female Vanir. Female Æsir can marry neither Vanir nor giants, and Vanir are often paired with giantesses. Ross concludes that "the social world of Old Norse myth . . . is one in which the Æsir's imposition of hierarchical ranking, in the second generation after they had differentiated themselves from the giant race, had destroyed the possibilities for exchanges of women, first with the giants and then with the Vanir, almost as soon as the possibilities for generalized exchange had come into existence."[20] According to Ross, the aim of the political policies of the Æsir, militantly buttressed by Þór's violent interventions in the land of the giants, was the greatest possible curtailment of reproduction among other groups. But this policy limited chances for marriage for Æsir women who were thus restricted to marrying within their own small, elite group. This imbalanced structure, then, was the primary source of tensions within the realm of the gods and was what put them at risk, ultimately resulting in the downfall of the worlds of both gods and men.

This brings us back to Loki, who plays a unique role in the system of hierarchies described here, and whose function becomes legible in the context of this system. Loki already assumes a special position among the Æsir by circumstance of birth: according to Ross, he is the product of the taboo liaison between a goddess and a giant.[21] The progeny he sires with a giantess—the Midgard serpent, the goddess of death Hel, and the Fenris wolf—are even more monstrous creatures than he, and they play a central role in the final battle against the gods.

[19] Ross, "Why Skaði Laughed," p. 5.

[20] Ross, *Prolonged Echoes,* pp. 99 ff.

[21] Lindow, among others, points out that, while it is probable that Nál or Laufey is a member of the Æsir, this has not been proven. See John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1997), pp. 53 ff.

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In the beginning, Loki plays a crucial—and, as we have since established—ambivalent role in the various marital plots of the gods. As a result of his carelessness or malevolence, he not only puts the gods at risk of substantial losses; in the episode with the theft of Iðunn, his behavior in fact thrusts the gods to the brink of "false reciprocity" identified by Ross as taboo. With the loss of the goddess and her apples of eternal youth—objects which Ross identifies as symbols of the life-giving power of sexual union[22]—the masculine honor and dominance of the gods itself is threatened. At the same time, Loki is always the one who diverts the danger.

We can now determine more precisely the peculiar intermediary role Schjødt identified for Loki in a different context: its is most closely related to the exchange of women within the systems of marriage and reproduction outlined here. As intermediary, Loki threatens the established system but at the same time guarantees its preservation. He can thus be understood as a figure who embodies the fragility and problematics of the system of negative reciprocity.

E. LOKI'S ROLE IN THE SEX-GENDER SYSTEM

Immediately following these events, Loki's actions have a positive effect in winning a giantess as a mate for a Vanr. The giantess Skaði approaches the gods demanding compensation for the death of her father, Þjazi, who was killed by Þórr in the battle over Iðunn. The gods comply with her demand to the extent that they give her a god to marry, but at the same time they trick her out of winning the Áss Baldr as her husband. Instead, she is offered marriage with the Vanir Njǫrðr so that the rules governing marriage in the realm of the gods remain intact. Loki is central to the fulfillment of Skaði's second condition, her demand that the gods make her laugh. Loki accomplishes this with an act that places his dubious sexuality and gender identity in a grotesque light: he ties one end of a rope to a goat's beard and the other to his testicles. A raucous tug-of-war ensures in which the two drag each other around the room, bleating and screaming. Skaði finally breaks out laughing when Loki loses his balance and falls into her lap.

John Lindow[23] suggests that the episode not be seen exclusively in light of the marital politics but rather in the greater context of the high medieval Icelandic sex-gender system. He points out that the goat's beard, a male attribute attached to a female being, signifies, not only here, but in other examples from Old Norse literature, an expression of ambivalent sexuality. He concludes by asking, "Indeed, if the beard attached to

[22] Ross, "Why Skaði Laughed," p. 5.

[23] John Lindow, "Loki and Skaði," in *Snorrastefna, 25.–27. júli 1990,* ed. Úlfar Bragason (Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992), pp. 130–42.

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one end of the rope is here a false symbol of masculinity, what are we to make of the genitals attached to the other end?"[24] He furthermore suspects—again, with reference to the social framework—that in this episode Loki is humiliated by a reduction of his social status since the possible allusion to the castration motif parsed here was a punishment inflicted primarily on slaves. At any rate, it is clear that Loki, as punishment and recompense for the disorder he threatens to introduce to the marital system of the gods, suffers an abasement of his masculinity and his sexuality.

Thus, the Skaði episode not only sheds light on Loki's position in the marital system but in the sex-gender system as well. Carol Clover provides an original analysis of the sex-gender system as it is reflected in medieval Scandinavian literature. Clover begins with the observation that old Icelandic literature reports on a series of "outstanding women"[25] who are active in traditionally male capacities. Skaði, seeking to avenge her father's death and courting her own mate, ranks among these women. Clover infers from this that the category of "femaleness" was obviously not so rigid that it could not be superseded by other interests, for example, by honor or revenge. She notes further that such women were considered exceptional, but not *unnatural.* As a rule, they are viewed with admiration and ascribed such attributes as *drengiligr,* in Clover's reading the quintessential masculine virtue. Consequently, Clover concludes, the fusion of male and female attributes in one and the same person in the sagas cannot be viewed as unnatural per se, as Schjødt has argued.

But what are the consequences of this sex-gender system for the notion of masculinity? Clover references several studies in her assertion that the "effeminate" male, unlike the "masculine" woman, is for the Scandinavian Middle Ages a figure subject to extreme derision.[26] She further substantiates her claim with a discussion of the domain in which "manliness is most garishly contested: the tradition of insulting."[27] The most spectacular insult known to the old Norse literary canon is the *níð.* It carries with it unequivocal sexual connotations. Its use is prohibited by law in various statutes and is subject to varying degrees of rigorous punishment commensurate to the gravity of the offense. The severest penalty—that of lifelong outlawry—is served for the utterance of the words *ragr, stroðinn,* and *sorðinn.* Contrary to popular misconception, these words do not refer to homosexuality in the modern sense of the

[24] Lindow, "Loki and Skaði," p. 135.

[25] Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 363–87, discussion at 368.

[26] See Folke Ström, *Nið, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973); Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).

[27] Clover, p. 372.

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term but rather designate the penetrated man. With the use of the term *nið,* the insultee is taunted as being "effeminate." Thus, according to Clover's analysis, the category of "man" is even more readily susceptible to mutation than is the category of "woman": "For if a woman's ascent into the masculine took some doing, the man's descent into the feminine was just one real or imagined act away. Nor is the 'femaleness' of that act in doubt. Anal penetration constructed the man who experienced it as a whore, bride, mare, bitch, and the like—in whatever guise a female creature, and as such subject to pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation."[28] The mention of the mare, pregnancy, and birth in this citation brings us back to Loki who represents, not only in the episode with Skaði and the goat, the sexually abased man. His representation of the quintessential embodiment of the *ragr,* or the penetrated man, is particularly marked in the episode involving the construction of the wall around Vallhǫll where, in order to rescue both himself and the Æsir, he transforms himself into a mare and conceives Sleipnir. In addition, it is worth noting here that Loki's affiliation with the magical technique of *seiðr,* which is also associated with *ragr* and femininity, similarly banishes him to the grey zone of the effeminate man.

The postulates outlined above may shed new light on other questions associated with Loki as well. What is conspicuous is that, in Snorri's report of the gods, and, indeed, in Snorri's very first depiction of the character, Loki is considered a malefactor even when his actions secure substantial advantages for the gods. Even though Loki has acquired valuable treasures for the gods from the dwarves, the Æsir leave Loki in the Sif episode at the mercy of the dwarves, so that they can punish him at will. The Sleipnir episode, too, makes this clear. The council of gods that convenes to prevent the impending loss of the sun, the moon, and Freya concerns itself primarily with the question of culpability and blame. "And there was agreement among them all that he must have been responsible for this decision who is responsible for most evil, Loki Laufeyjarson, and declared he would deserve an evil death if he did not find a scheme whereby the master builder would forfeit his payment, and they offered to attack Loki."[29] Here, Loki is identified as the culprit even though the suggestion to surrender the sun, the moon, and Freya as payment to the master builder had not previously been identified as Loki's advice. In the beginning of the episode, the only mention of Loki is with reference to his responsibility for assuring that the services of the horse Svaðilfari will be availed to assist the master builder. It is far from clear

[28] Ibid., p. 375.

[29] *Gylfaginning,* chap. 42 (n. 1 above), p. 35. En þat kom ásamt með ǫllum at þessu mundi ráðit hafa sá er flestu illu ræðr, Loki Laufeyarson, ok kváðu hann verðan ills dauða ef eigi hitti hann ráð til at smiðrinn væri af kaupinu, ok veittu Loka atgǫngu.

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that there is as much malicious intent in this action as the gods and some commentators on this scene presume. This advice could just as easily have resulted from Loki's perception of this as the only possible way to ensure that the fortification gets built at all. The wall's construction, even without Loki, is ambivalent because, on the one hand, it is to be built to guard against the giants; on the other hand, a giant is needed to construct it. At any rate, it is important to note that in this episode, as in others, Loki is not primarily an evildoer but rather a figure who sees himself threatened by gods and giants alike. Loki's only option for saving himself from peril is, as in the case of the Skaði episode, through self-abasement as the *ragr* man—a form of degradation that again works to the advantage of the gods. It appears as though it is precisely this trait, his *ragr* nature, which renders him suspect to the gods—and to Snorri—from the onset. It might even be entirely plausible to deduce from this episode that Loki's eloquence and his ability to give sound advice is the very thing that the gods find so unsettling and consider "unmanly."

Cunning and full of magic tricks as he is, Loki's physical capacities are limited. Self-denunciation, magic, and quick-witted words are his only saving graces. Our understanding of this dimension is further enhanced by Clover's ideas. She points out that the Old Norse tradition of insulting is not by any means restricted to charges of "femaleness," but that poverty, defeat, and cowardice are at least as important categories. What they have in common is a preoccupation with power or powerlessness expressed in terms of physical force. It is clear that sexual difference is deeply inscribed in the opposition between power and powerlessness, but Clover postulates furthermore that power, in the medieval Scandinavian context, is a metaphor for gender, not vice versa. The problem centered not on "femininity" in the modern sense of the term but rather on "effeminacy"—a biologically indeterminate characteristic that was held in contempt when exhibited by any person, male or female. The fault line of the social binary, then, ran not between men and women but rather between "able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on the one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men)."[30] Masculinity, then, was a category in double jeopardy: men could lose it, women could acquire it.[31] For me, there is no doubt that Loki and the stories about him also personify this problematic. He represents the "effeminate" man and, for *that* reason, not necessarily because of his malevolence, is subject to derision and considered evil. This is reinforced by his indeterminate class position: he is counted among the Æsir, yet he is often relegated to a subservient role vis-à-vis the gods. This is partic-

[30] Clover, p. 380.
[31] Ibid., p. 381.

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ularly true in his relationship to Þórr—a physically endowed "macho" who can, in many respects, be seen as Loki's opposite. The fact that Þórr—this most "masculine" of gods—is so dependent on Loki's stratagems and wit with words could be traced in part to the desperate overcompensatory nature of the Old Norse "machismo" that Clover has discussed.

V. CONCLUSIONS

So far, my comments on *níð* and *ragr* apply only to those episodes in which Loki functions as an ambivalent aid and harbinger of evil. But that does not yet explain his role in Baldr's death and in the Ragnarǫk. In conclusion, I'd like to present a sketch of three hypothetical answers to this question.

First, invoking the concept of *níð,* one could devise a psychological explanation for Loki's change of behavior. According to this model, Loki's malevolence would be seen as a reaction to insults about his difference, his dubious origins, his physical weakness, and his *ragr* nature—insults that reach their climax when the Æsir's death threats force him to transform himself into a mare and give birth. With relation to Baldr's death, then, his behavior could be interpreted as an act of vengeance in which he applies his unique capacities to work to his advantage: his eloquence, his cunning, and his shape-shifting ability.

Second, if, on the other hand, one adopts as a point of departure the notion of Loki's role as intermediary rendering him an exponent of the world's demise, one would have to modify Schjødt's conclusion. Loki would thus not embody the "Un-*natural,*" but would have been portrayed by Snorri (and possibly other authors before him) to personify the problematics of the marital- and sex-gender systems of their time. Should this hypothesis prove viable, one would have to conclude that—at least for Snorri—these problematics represented social exigencies pertinent enough to have merited prominent positioning in the context of the world's demise. Evidence to support this thesis can be found in two incidents involving Loki: first, the mistletoe, the plant that Loki gives Hǫðr to kill Baldr, appears itself to be an item which is located between established categories.[32] Second, Snorri's Loki foils the plan to circumvent

[32] Evidence for this is presented in Bruce Lincoln, "Places Outside Space, Moments Outside Time," in *Homage to Georges Dumézil,* ed. Edgar C. Polomé (Washington, D.C.: Journal of Indo-European Studies, Institute for the Study of Man, 1982), pp. 69–81. These considerations are also taken up in Richard L. Dieterle, "The Song of Baldr," *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986): 285–307. Dieterle assumes that the mistletoe represents the element of air and thus indirectly represents Loki himself who is also called Loptr (air). From this, he concludes an early dating of Loki's role in the myth of Baldr's death; Snorri evidently was no longer in a position to comprehend the esoteric meaning of the lists of oaths because they were so old. For a critique and discussion of these theses, see Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance,* p. 61. Lindow stresses that, for his understanding, the mistletoe's position "'betwixt and between' ordinary classification" is central to the myth of Baldr's death.

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the world's demise a second time when he transforms himself into an old woman in order to prevent Baldr's return from the underworld.

A third model of interpretation could take as its point of departure a comment made by Carol Clover in the closing passages of her discussion of the Old Norse sex-gender system. Clover suspects that this system was gradually reconstrued with the increasing encroachment of Christianity. Femaleness assumed more clearly defined contours and was thus set at a distance from maleness. Masculinity now seemed less threatened and "softness" became more acceptable in men.[33] One could attempt to incorporate this transformation into a theory of Loki's function in *Snorra Edda.* It has been suggested that the prominent function Snorri allows Loki to assume in Baldr's death could be traced to Christian influences. According to this paradigm, Baldr is seen as a prefiguration of Christ and Loki as the embodiment of the Christian devil. If this were the case, Snorri's "bedeviling" of Loki would have to be viewed in conjunction with Loki's capacity as intermediary in the marital systems and with his *ragr* nature. It would then seem plausible to contend that Loki's gender crossing only appeared to be an "unnatural" threat to the world order with the introduction of the more pronounced distinctions between maleness and femaleness under Christian influence. Thus the "unnaturalness" Schjødt sees personified in Loki would be a concept that first came into existence under the influence of Christianity.

As previously mentioned, I do not think these questions can be satisfactorily explained here and I would like to stress the hypothetical nature of the three postulates presented above. One thing seems, however, indisputable: Snorri's emphasis on Loki's ambivalent behavior in the context of problematic marital alliances among the gods and the particular attention granted his gender-ambiguity indicate that these questions were of utmost concern to thirteenth-century Icelandic society. One could endeavor to reconcile these postulates with von See's thesis that Snorri intended to minimalize the differences between pagan and Christian religions in the interest of accentuating cultural *continuity.* This would lead us to conclude that the problematics around the marriage- and the sex-gender system seemed ideally suited means for achieving this end. This, then, could be one explanation for Snorri's elaborate narrative development of the gender ambiguity and other ambivalences in the figure of Loki in his *Edda.*

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[33] Clover, p. 386.

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