"…and I thought that was a queer thing to do": Transmasculine Identity in the *Lokasenna*

Loki, as an agent of chaos, is undefinable in many ways. It cannot be argued that he is always acting in his best interest, because he clearly is not. In the *Lokasenna*, a poem in the *Poetic Edda* that shows an exchange of insults between the Æsir, or the Norse gods, during a feast, Loki returns to the feast after being banished for the sole purpose of stirring up trouble and cannot help himself when he must announce that the death of Baldr was his fault. This ends with Loki chained under a mountain and being tortured with a slow poison drip. Whether this is because we no longer have the cultural and social context for his actions, or because it was always meant to be undefinable, these actions can be problematic when we analyze them. Loki does not fit into a binary of good or evil, and this reflection of a lack of binary identification can be seen when interpreting him through a lens of queer identity as well. Specifically, a modern queer identity under the transgender umbrella. Loki's experiences neatly align themselves with a modern understanding of transmasculine identity, and in an older and more historical sense, a shared queer identity for all. Because of this, modern readings and translations of the *Lokasenna* that do not account for this nuance are flawed. These readings make Loki out to be more misogynistic in his dealings with the women at the table than he would seem should he have a shared identity with them; they pit Odin against Loki due to his so-called "perversions" rather than his chaos-seeking behavior, and they lack the nuanced understanding of shared experiences across the spectrum of gender identity that exist in queer spaces. This understanding is important because readings of this story through a heteronormative lens is antithetical to an understanding of gender as a spectrum and a social construct sets Odin up as an opposition to Loki's identity rather than an opposition to his chaos. This further perpetuates those anti-queer biases that can be seen in some translations of this text.

Defining Loki

In her breakdown of Loki's function in the *Prose Edda*, Stefanie von Schnurbein points out the issues that crop up immediately with Loki being so categorically undefinable:

> 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 (109).

She gives a review of the prior scholarship on Loki and his characterization, which is helpful for English speakers as much of this scholarship is in German and Icelandic. This section of von Schnurbein's work runs briefly through interpretations of Loki as a god of fire, based on the analogy of the German word "Lohe", an association with the Christian concept of Lucifer, to his perception as a trickster figure similar to that in Native American folklore (112).

Following the *Prose Edda*, the stories of Loki show him more or less siding with and identifying with the gods, up until the moment in which he causes the death of Baldr. Loki becomes an outright villain at this point, but then in his next story entails his journey to visit Útgarðaloki with Thor, where, as von Schnurbein points out, "he neither assumes a significant role in the action nor is he portrayed as any sort of villain" (114). The issue here is that Loki is often categorized as a villain due to his occasional actions that are in opposition to the gods in

this pantheon, even though his actions that help them do not get him categorized as a hero. In truth, Loki is an agent of chaos, serving only himself for his own reasons – reasons that are not disclosed to the reader nor the other gods in the stories.

Related to his perception as an evil figure, however, von Schnurbein then covers Jens Peter Schjødt's characterization of Loki. She says that "for Schjødt, Loki thus becomes an exponent of the increasing malevolence and moral disintegration of the world that ultimately leads to its downfall," and adds "Loki's magical capabilities, especially his shape- and gender-shifting abilities, consign him to a liminal position between fundamental opposites" (115). What this means is that Loki is treated as a necessary evil. He performs actions considered reprehensible, but his existence in-between categories means that the other gods allow him to remain close for the times he can be useful. This duality of his nature allows him to exist both as a member of the group and as an "other", which in turn paves the way for this conditional and grudging acceptance.

The combination of myths surrounding Loki reflects his duality, and von Schnurbein goes on to explain that the fusion of these ideas into one being "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'" (116). This existence as both natural and unnatural changes the connotation of the words used to describe Loki in scholarship. Kevin J. Wanner adds to the understanding of Loki through a breakdown of descriptive words, saying that

> …while scholars' interpretations of the core Loki or ur-Loki have varied enormously—he has been seen as everything from an elemental spirit of fire, water, or air to a trickster or culture-hero, to a chthonic demon of death, to, most infamously, a spider—many have viewed the trait of cunning as fundamental to his character. (217)

This cunning and craftiness, however, were seen as non-masculine traits, thus further solidifying Loki in the category of "other."

The passage of the *Lokasenna* that has the most bearing on understanding Loki in the terms of a modern transmasculine identity occur mostly in stanzas 23 and 24:

> Óðinn kvað:
>
> 'Veiztu, ef ek gaf, þeim er ek gefa né skylda,
>
> inum slævurum, sigr,
>
> átta vetr vartu fyr jǫrð neðan,
>
> kýr mólkandi ok kona,
>
> ok hefr þú þar bǫrn of borit,
>
> ok hugða ek þat args aðal.'
>
> Loki kvað:
>
> 'En þik síða kóðu Sámseyu í,
>
> ok draptu á vétt sem vǫlur;

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vitka líki fórtu verþjóð yfir,

ok hugða ek þat args aðal.'

For reference, here is the translation of this section that I find most accurate, taking into consideration my understanding of the nuance that Loki's identity being defined as transmasculine brings to the reading (North et al., stanzas 23-24):

Óðinn said:

'Know that if I did give to the man I shouldn't have,

victory to the more faint-hearted,

Eight winters you spent beneath the earth

milking cows, as a woman too,

and there you have borne children,

and I thought that was a queer thing to do.'

Loki said:

'And you, they said, practised witchcraft on Samsø,

and beat on a lid like the sibyls.

Like a witch you went through a nation of men,

and I thought that was a queer thing to do.'

In another translation the line "and I thought that was a queer thing to do" is translated as "I call that a pervert's way of living" when spoken by Odin and "and I call *that* a pervert's way of living" when spoken by Loki (Crawford 105). The issue here is that this translation carries a modern bias against identity that is not cisgender and heterosexual that cannot be proven to have existed in Iceland before the arrival of Christianity to the region.

Returning to von Schnurbein's analysis of Loki, it is important to note the influence that Snorri Sturluson had on the *Prose Edda*, and the lasting affect that this has on later translations of all Old Norse Icelandic texts, both Saga and 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" (124). This would mean that any "other" or "unnatural" identity attributed to Loki comes from this post-Christian worldview and is not inherent to the Old Norse Icelandic culture. Keeping this in mind, I decided to attempt a word-by-word translation of this one sentence myself with the help of an Old Norse Icelandic dictionary. This interpretation is as literal as possible, keeping original context fixed firmly and ignoring culturally Christian influences.

Ok = and

Hyggja (Hugða) = to think, mean, believe (thought)

Ek = I

Þat = that

Args (Argr) = effeminate

Aðal = nature, disposition, inborn native quality

Does perversion apply if something is an inborn native quality and an aspect of the nature of the person described? From a literal point of view, no. Perversion is "the diversion of something from its original and proper course, state, or meaning; corruption, distortion" (OED Online). Perversion cannot be innate and so a translation in which Odin and Loki refer to one another as perverse for their experiences cannot be correct. What this must mean then is that the effeminate nature referred to by each of them is something natural and a part of them since their conception as characters and ideas, or since their birth if we are treating them as real people.

DEFINING GENDER IDENTITY

The stories of the gods both reflect and influence humanity in a cycle. An example of human action that reflects concepts the gods introduce is Auðr from *Laxdaela Saga*, who is said to wear men's breeches. Women could and did wear pants in this time, but she is specifically said to have worn breeches with inset gores, for a penis she presumably did not have. In *Female Masculinity and the Sagas of Icelanders* Gareth Lloyd Evans brings her into the discussion and says that "cultural masculinity…ascribed to a female-sexed character can be found in a number of the sagas of Icelanders" (59). While this is a clunky way to phrase it, he is correct. The fact is that she is a character performing masculinity and she is assigned female at birth (AFAB). In this context and this time, all we are told is that she is a woman. Because of this, Evans describes her experiences as female masculinity.

The most important part of understanding this female masculinity is taking it a step further to recognize that it is simply the precursor to non-traditional masculinity, which Evans fails to do. What Evans describes in this chapter as female masculinity is a good introduction to a similar idea of non-traditional masculinity. It is important to note that what I refer to as traditional masculinity is cisgender heterosexual masculinity that is appropriate and accepted in the society being spoken about. Gender non-conformity, even that expressed by someone who is cisgender and heterosexual, is not a facet of this traditional masculinity. That would fall under non-traditional masculinity. The reason that I use this term, non-traditional masculinity, is because it is important to note that the wide array of queer identities that exist today could stem from this one identity in the past. Culturally, there appears to have been two categories of gender identities – that of cisgender heterosexual men and that of everyone else. Non-traditional masculinity refers to the fact that cisgender heterosexual masculinity was the ideal, and anything deviating from that, even if these deviations were different from one another, had one common and singular identity – "other."

This sense of identity that is outside the scope of Evans' definition is clearly alluded to in Carol Clover's work that he tries to dismiss. She describes the social binary as one that runs "between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on 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)" (13). Something that she says prior to this in her article really drives this point home: "Better a son who is your daughter than no son at all" (5). The fact is that

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this masculinity that Clover describes is much more in line with what I consider to be a faithful interpretation of the available texts, and Evans does not take his scholarship far enough in his considerations of the social order.

Past his definition of female masculinity, though, Evans says, "in saga literature, masculine women – whose female bodies do not fit culturally-normalized expectations of a masculine subject – have their masculinity foregrounded, and thus encourage us to examine the construction and, indeed, constructedness, of masculinity" (60). This is a fine starting point, but this definition lacks the nuance needed to understand that what he refers to as female masculinity can be applied in many situations, and not just those in which a woman in the sagas is seen as coveting a male experience or wishes to enact a masculine form of violence against a man, thus reversing their usual roles in the action. Female masculinity in this sense could be applicable to the masculine identity of anyone who is not a cisgender heterosexual male from this period. Thus, when Evans adds that "female masculinities cannot – and should not – be elided with male masculinities: they serve a different purpose within these narratives" he has clearly failed to recognize the wide variety of people and experiences included in "female masculinities" in these pre-Christian Norse myths. (62). In a modern understanding of gender this span of identities could be anyone who exists in a wide array of experiences; anyone from a heterosexual transgender man to a cisgender butch lesbian, nonbinary people among multiple birth assignments of sex, transgender women, or even cisgender gay men. While this is by no means an exhaustive list of sexuality and gender experience and expression, this variety shows the range of modern identity that could be considered a part of this early form of gender variance.

At this point it is necessary to return to Clover and her work from the point that Evans began to deviate rather than expanding. Clover begins her work with a telling of a story of Auðr and her experiences with having a masculine identity given and taken from her by traditionally masculine men. This is a key place to begin to define cultural expectations for traditional masculinity. The most important part is when the men who come to visit restrain Eyjólfr from attacking Auðr. Eyjólfr has named her traditionally masculine in his actions while his fellows name her non-traditionally masculine, and none of it is Auðr's choice. Identity is given and named by others, but it is not there for the taking for anyone experiencing it. It is only allowed that those that *are* are allowed to name those that *are not*. The easiest example is thinking of *us* versus *them*. The *them* do not know that this is who they are unless the *us* tell them that they are the "other." This is the point that this shared identity of non-traditional masculinity becomes the building blocks for the later queer umbrella.

In defining gender identity, *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler is an important resource. Evans quoted it in his chapter of *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, and in general, this work is the basis for most of modern understandings of gender and sexuality in queer spaces. Butler writes: "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (10). What this means is that physical sex-traits do not need to be coupled with gender construction and identity. This reflects a modern perception of queer identity, and in fact gender and sexual identity as a whole, as a spectrum. There is nothing tying any one person to a specific label that they are not choosing for themselves. This idea seems very modern, but in looking at the spectrum of gender, or the "rainbow coalition" that Clover refers to, it becomes obvious that this is an old idea brought into the light once more.

Evans says, "While I may personally be of the opinion that dimorphic sex is very much a matter of social construction in itself, the sagas, however, do clearly suggest a naturalized view of a fundamentally binary conception of sex, which can be seen to be of significant importance when evaluating the gender performance of a given character" (61). The issue with the use of the Butler quote by Evans is that he refuses to take that further step necessary to really engage with the concept of non-traditional masculinity. The constructed status is important, but not in the essential way that he understands it. The fact is that there were those in the sagas who were stuck in *us* versus *them* mentality, and instead of considering that essential to society, it is more important to understand that this labeling of "other" is a label that is given instead of a mantle that one would take upon themselves. He is not clearly suggesting a naturalized view, no matter how he frames it. The obvious fact is that there were at least some people in the Old Norse culture that were grappling with issues of gender and queer identity, and this undermines his entire argument.

After focusing on the othering of non-traditional masculinity, Jessica Clare Hancock provides the context needed for traditional masculinity in the Old Norse tradition. In every culture, no matter the period, society ingrains expectations in everyone from the moment we are born. Everything we see is a reinforcement of behavior expectations. While the sagas are different from the stories of the gods, the fact remains that the stories of their gods were guidebooks for the people hearing them to know how to act and the expectations that were had; both the expectations for how they should behave and the expectations for how they should be treated. Using these expectations as a template, it becomes possible to pinpoint how Loki (and by extension, the other gods) deviate from this expected portrayal of traditional masculinity.

An example of this comes from the focus on combat and retaliation as a male duty in the *Poetic Edda*, which Hancock defines as "involving battle prowess, courage, and duty" (219). Hancock says that "identity is inherited" in the sagas, and children are seen to emulate and are punished for not emulating relatives they have never met before. Throughout generations, there is a revenge and rivalry dichotomy that extends from father to son, and this is another aspect of traditional masculinity that is simply expected and understood as something to be acted out from one generation to the next. "In the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, the only lives considered fully 'grievable', in Judith Butler's term, and thus fully recognized as human, are male family members" (234). Here, Hancock's point fits neatly into this understanding of the othering that comes with this non-traditional masculine identity. The only lives that are paid attention to are the ones to whom traditional masculinity is innate. The others become pushed to the side and marginalized in a way that is also seen in many modern societies, such as our own. While this information is about the sagas, it is important to note that in general people turn to the tales of their gods for explanations and representations in which they can see reflections of themselves. This is true both in this context and in modern society, looking at the Christian Bible, for example, and the influence upon western society and politics. This means that the experiences and actions of the people in the sagas can be traced backward and applied to the gods as well.

With this understanding and nuance, the reading of Loki throughout the entirety of the *Lokasenna* becomes more tongue-in-cheek. Loki's conversation with the women at the table comes from a place of shared identity and camaraderie, instead of one of blatant misogyny. It also sheds light on the fact that Odin himself does not always experience traditional masculinity, as when he and Loki come at one another in a contest of wits they both reply to the other with

that same sentence of "…and I thought that was a queer thing to do" in a sort of call and response (North et al., stanzas 23-24).

With this in mind, reading this from that nuanced perspective shows that Odin is not insulting Loki here for this experience, nor is he calling it a perversion. He is highlighting an innate quality of Loki, something that is inborn and inherent to his identity and personhood, and Loki, in his mirroring of this phrase, is doing the same thing for Odin. When this passage is read as people who have a shared identity and experience as the "other", as those experiencing non-traditional masculinity, it becomes much clearer that this is not hatred outside the norms of traditional flyting. Loki's jealousy of the praise heaped upon the servant that he later killed notwithstanding, and up until the point that Loki begins to brag about causing the death of Baldr, Odin and Loki are trading barbs on an even playing field. This isn't to say that one or the other currently has the upper hand solely due to their identity, but that the shared experience that Loki points out renders Odin's argument null by pointing out that the argument had no teeth to begin with.

After establishing this, what logically follows is a modern understanding of this reading. Loki can and should be read as transmasculine to better understand the interplay of identity and action here in the *Lokasenna*. Loki deviates from traditional masculinity in his actions, but the specifics of transmasculinity need to be defined. Gender is already a spectrum when solely biological sex is considered. Compounding that with gender itself being both a social construct and a personal experience, the spectrum of identity becomes so broad that pinpointing any one specific experience and stating that this is the one experience for Loki is absurd and would be so even if he were not an agent of chaos and ever shifting.

Loki and Gender

Loki's experiences can be defined as transmasculine because they fall under the transmasculine umbrella. An umbrella, in this sense, is a metaphor that is used as an educational tool. The "original purpose was for political advocacy; the image suggests sheltering trans-identified and gender-nonconforming individuals from the hard rain of discrimination" (Keywords 259). This grouping also gives a shared rallying point for a diverse array of queer experiences and allows for the varied identities to exist underneath a singular canopy. For these purposes, the transmasculine umbrella encompasses the identities of all persons who are AFAB, are transitioning in at least one aspect, and currently experience some aspect of what they self-determine to be masculinity. The transitioning aspect may be social (this aspect may only be internal as the individual is not in a safe place to come out), it may be hormonal (in the case of testosterone replacement therapy), and/or it may be surgical (in the case of a double mastectomy with chest sculpting and/or one of several different genital reconstruction surgeries). While this may at first, seem like so broad a definition as to be useless, it is meant to incorporate into one community people who experience gender differences in cultural, social, emotional, and/or biological and physical ways. Such an umbrella helps those who would have disparate identities be able to find community and ultimately solidarity.

Loki can fit under the transmasculine umbrella in a modern reading because he is a person who has given birth at one point, so at that point had the body parts associated with that process, and he is now seen as a man. Whatever process Loki took to change his gender presentation, be it magical hormone replacement therapy, some sort of medieval gender

reassignment surgery, a simple social change alerted to his peers, or some combination of the three, it is all we need to see to fit him under this wide umbrella.

The categorization is not the crux of this argument, though. The real importance of reading Loki as transmasculine is two-fold. The most important aspect of seeing Loki as transmasculine (and by extension, seeing Odin as queer as well with some sort of shared gender experience with Loki) is the representation of often marginalized identities in old literature, and the focus is not on that character's gender identity or sexuality. It is an aspect of who they are and it is an innate and inborn quality, but it is not the focus. Such reading gives us an idea of how queerness could have existed in this particular time and place.

The second is that it changes the reading fundamentally. In readings where Loki is called a pervert or is called a slur in other translations (in translations by Crawford and North, Richard, et al.), whether he is queer is not the focus. The focus is on demonizing Loki. In calling him these derogatory names they are implying two things. The first is that being effeminate is somehow wrong, and the second is that Loki is wrong by being this way. In a reading in which both Loki and Odin share aspects of a queer identity of some sort, they are simply flyting. Sure, Loki has caused some problems by killing that servant, and he most definitely pays for it later when he reveals the particulars of his involvement with Baldr's death, but until that moment he is on equal footing with the rest of the gods in attendance.

Loki's shaming of the women in the *Lokasenna* also becomes less biting and more flyting as he is now known to have shared experiences with them. This ties back to the understanding that all transmasculine identities at this point were a sort of proto-queer identity. None of the nuance and varied expressions of the gender spectrum existed or had a name yet, and so they all fell under the same much smaller umbrella. This identity is that of non-traditional masculinity is shared by anyone who is not a cisgender heterosexual man.

Conclusion

This passage of the *Lokasenna* that has been translated here is most important in providing nuance to the reading of Loki's character if we take a closer reading of the exchange of taunts with Odin that occurs. Using my translation of the repeated sentence, I was able to define Loki's repetition of Odin's phrase as a taunting based on shared experiences, rather than that of one that comes from a place of malice and disgust at a perceived perversion. This effeminate quality or queerness is innate, however, and cannot be a perverse experience. This quality can color everything about the way Loki is read in the *Lokasenna*, beginning with his taunts at the women at the table. These jabs then become colored less with misogyny and more with taunting based on shared experiences, mirroring the exchange with Odin in stanzas 23 and 24. This interpretation has placed all the gods on a more or less even playing field, disregarding their status in the pecking order of the pantheon.

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