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Norse *Loki* as Praxonym

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THEONYMS REFLECT VARYING aspects of divine beings: function, attributes, affinities, behavior as expressed in myth. The transparency of these names is, however, not assured over time. With regard to the pre-Christian Norse pantheon, the names of Óðinn, Týr, Þórr, and Freyr are transparently related, respectively, to heightened emotional state (< Germanic **Wōdanaz*, cf. Old Norse *æði* ‘fury’), simple divinity (Germanic **timaz* as cognate with *Zeus, deus*, etc.), thunder (< Germanic *Þunraz* ‘thunder’), and lordship (< proto-Norse **franjaz* ‘lord’). On the other hand, the name of the arch trouble-maker, *Loki*, has resisted efforts at etymologizing. Yvonne S. Bonnetain’s very thorough examination of the figure, published in 2012 on the basis of a doctoral dissertation from 2005, reviews the history of scholarship on the name and function of the god, whom a contemporary consensus identifies as a trickster figure. Her title, *Loki – Beweger der Geschichten (Loki – Mover of Stories*, from a Norse skaldic epithet), encapsulates her principal thesis.¹ Yet the author reaches no conclusion as concerns the etymology of *Loki*.

In its emotional dimension, the mythical, privileged world of the northern gods and demi-gods is still close to that of humans of all ages. It is a hierarchical, honor-driven society, in which rank and reputation assure status and place in a highly contingent cosmos. The fear of shame seems unaccompanied by any sense of possible guilt. The story-telling tradition accommodates comic situations, perhaps in individual recastings of known myths, but there are no true comic figures, although anomalous figures abound. Loki, genetically an outsider, since his parents both bear names typical for giants, is often ill-disposed toward his fellows, while at the same time remaining an integral part of the community and blood-brother of Óðinn. In the divine community, trouble-making is internalized, as if there were an economy of resources that sought to turn all society members to advantage. Loki’s offspring, the world-serpent Jǫrmungandr, the great wolf Fenrir, the mistress of the land of the dead Hel, and Óðinn’s eight-legged horse Sleipnir are, or become, more marginalized than their sire/dam but are not without function in the greater scheme of things, which also includes an apocalypse.

Although composed in an age when pre-Christian myth was no longer central to the community, the portrait of Loki in Snorri Sturluson’s *Skáldskaparmál*, in the initial review of Norse gods given to Gangleri by the Three High Ones, may be thought to summarize an essential identity of Loki, at least as viewed in the post-conversion period and in terms of the authorial objectives of a thirteenth-century Icelandic man of letters. Key characteristics as listed here will be tried against their realization in myth and story with a view to establishing their relevance for the origin and early history of the name *Loki*. The inquiry, although not theory-driven, will be guided in part by the concept of the *praxonym*, the name borne by the agent of specific actions and practises.

Sá er enn talðr með ásum, er sumir kalla rógbera ásanna ok frumkveða flærðanna ok vǫmm allra goða ok manna. Sá er nefndr Loki ... Loki er fríðr ok fagr sýnum, illr í skaplyndi, mjök fjölbreyttinn at háttum. Hann hafði þá speki um fram aðra menn er slægð heitir, ok vélar til

¹ Summary accounts of Loki in Lindow 2001 and Simek 1993. Recent studies relevant to the present investigation are Bompadre 2001-2002, Frakes 2002, Hansen 2007, Laidoner 2012, Mizuno 2001, Moosbrugger 2001, Murdoch 2001, North 2001, and Zavaroni 2005.

allra hluta. Hann kom ásum jafnan í fullt vandræði, ok opt leysti hann þá með vélræðum. (Snorri 1982: 42-43)

That one is also reckoned among the Æsir whom some call the Æsir's calumniator and originator of deceits and the disgrace of all gods and men. His name is Loki ... Loki is pleasing and handsome in appearance, evil in character, very capricious in behavior. He possesses to a greater degree than others the kind of learning that is called cunning, and tricks for every purpose. He was always getting the Æsir into a complete fix and often got them out of it by trickery. (Snorri 1987: 26)

Such a conception, if operative at an earlier stage, would determine, even overdetermine, the general paths of action available to Loki in other narrative. Yet, from another perspective, we cannot look for character development among the divine principals in traditional stories, although an overall linear teleology, a career, may be discerned. Loki may be examined in several different narrative contexts: his role in extra-communal and intra-communal relations, his behavior in the microcosm of the banquet hall, finally his ostracizing, fettering, and role at Ragnarök.

Loki's role as a manipulator is illustrated in the tales in *Skáldskaparmál* and in a number of poems in *Edda* (*Völuspá*, *Drymskviða*, *Reginismál*, *Baldrs draumar*, and *Hyndluljóð*; Neckel and Kuhn 1962).² Loki's remedial interventions as shape-shifter, trickster, and fixer invariably occur in the context of tension-filled relations with giants, not in the resolution of problems internal to the society of the gods. *Drymskviða* concerns the recovery of Þórr's hammer; *Reginismál*, hostage payments in gold (see further below). Similarly, the Master Builder story recounted in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* revolves around difficulties in paying a giant "contractor" who claims Freyja as wage. The stories highlight Loki's ingenuity, his thinking and acting "outside the box" of the gods' culture and conventions, his readiness to assume even the most abject forms, such as a mare.

Intertwined in the Loki scholarship of the past two centuries have been questions – now perhaps somewhat dated in conception – of the original function of this divine figure and of the etymology and later connotations and associations of his name. On the count of basic function, earlier proposals reflect the larger preoccupation of the times with the nature and role of myth. Over the decades Loki has been seen as the personification of, variously, fire, air, or water; a vegetation or winter god; elf or demon; servant of the gods or culture hero and inventor; trickster and thief; ultimately a destroyer, an architect of the end of days (historical survey in Bonnetain 2012: 89-154). Proposed etymologies of the name *Loki* (summary in Bonnetain 2012: 273-274) are fewer in number but reflect a similar range and include derivations from *Lucifer* or, from the same Christian perspective, from Old Norse *loca* "unenclosed piece of ground, cave"; from *loga* "fire" or *lopt* "air"; and from the verb *líka* "to close" (cf. past participle *lokinn*).

Among twentieth-century scholars, Julius Pokorny invoked the Indo-European root **leug-* "to break" and saw the essential Loki as "destroyer" (Pokorny 1959-1969: 685). Georges Dumézil (1959) characterized Loki as an impulsive intelligence, potentially both constructive and destructive, whose asocial and amoral mental abilities were engaged to confront and violate social and moral taboos. Even contemporary scholarship is still widely divided on Loki. Anatoly Liberman (1992), on the basis of an etymological argument, sees him as an essentially chthonic figure, John McKinnell (1994: 254-2 55) as "trickster, traitor, accuser", as these scholars focus on remote and socially proximate agency, respectively. In these and other recent studies Loki has been viewed as something of a mid-level abstraction, neither an incarnation of evil, pure malice, or deceit (as might be the case

² Skaldic bynames for Loki that recall his characteristics and adventures are listed by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* (1998: 16).

from a traditional Christian moral perspective) nor, conversely (and more mechanistically), as a depersonified *Potenz*. Enveloping this entire discussion is the incontrovertible fact that, while the nature of myth in general is still under discussion and interpretations of Loki have varied with the scholarly agenda and the western European ideological environments in which these were drawn up, identifications of the essential nature of Loki have been established not only according to the specific tales or accounts in which he figures but also and more importantly according to the period to which these literary artifacts may be dated, so that toward the end of a long evolution in northern tradition Loki could, synthetically, be equated with the devil of Christian theology.

This conception of Loki as the one who resolves crisis – does the gods’ “dirty work” – rather than creating it, invites a brief consideration of whether he might be characterized, as an “instrument” by which a man’s fate is realized. If Loki is to be compared to the Satan of Jewish and Christian scripture, he most resembles God’s “operative” as seen at the beginning of the Book of Job.³ Norse conceptions of destiny are too grand a topic for treatment here but whether an individual’s life course is to be seen as fully determined at birth or as the outcome of a sequence of largely unpredictable events, Loki would indeed seem to belong among the motor forces that effectuate the life-altering, course-changing events that lead to an individual’s specific end – especially when this is one darker than might have been freely chosen. In the sagas of the Icelanders, determined in their own way by the conventions of the genre, men of good will often find themselves in the predicament of Flosi toward the end of *Njáls saga*, faced with renouncing the attack on Njáll and his sons or burning them in their home: “Eru nú tveir kostir, ok er hvárrgi góðr” (“There are two choices and neither of them is good” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, Cook 2001, Ch. 128).

From Snorri’s summary characterization of Loki, we may concentrate on two phrases in sequence, “illr í skaplyndi, mjök fjölbreytinn at háttum.” Faulkes translates “evil in character, very capricious in behavior” but a rendering less colored by morality and more consonant with the evidence would be “malicious in character, very changeable in behavior,” a pairing of motive and method in a figure at once improvisatory, ingenious, resourceful, plastic, multiform, multifunctional, alert to expedients. As the story of the death of Baldr would, superficially, seem unlikely to show Loki as the resolver of crisis, a consideration of Snorri’s account will set the stage for a renewed consideration of the name and possible early, if not original, conception of Loki’s place among the gods.⁴ As for the long-standing question of the nature and degree of culpability of Loki in the death of Óðinn’s son, it is not simply that the blind Hǫðr is excluded on grounds of any disability (on which general subject see further below) from the sport of shooting at the invulnerable Baldr, nor that he is then given a proxy missile, a sprout of mistletoe, and has his hand guided by Loki, so that the throw of the seemingly innocuous, impromptu missile brings the young god down. There are several prior determining conditions. Baldr has had dreams in which his life is at risk and, in the worlds of myth and story, such dreams are never innocuous (*Baldrs draumar*, Neckel and Kuhn 1962). To thwart this threat, oaths not to harm Baldr are extracted from all animate and inanimate matter. Loki is moved by malice toward Baldr when he becomes the center of attention, as the gods find great sport in casting at him with various missiles, thus testing the invulnerability that should result from the fidelity of material reality to the oath (Snorri 2005: 49). Loki disguises himself as an old woman and inquires as to whether *all* matter has pledged not to become instruments in the realization of Baldr’s disquietening dreams. He learns that the mistletoe was not bound by the oath,

³ The term “operative” is borrowed from the discussion of the Book of Job in Mays and Blenkinsopp 2000.

⁴ Snorri’s account is followed here, since it offers a continuous narrative, although it contains details, such as Hǫðr’s blindness, not found in the earlier poetic references to the killing. The latter offer a less sure footing for an appreciation of Loki.

since the pliable, hemi-parasitic plant, an anomaly in the vegetable world, was judged too “young”, immature one might say. Loki then approaches the assembly with a sprig of mistletoe. Hǫðr is standing to the side and in response to Loki’s questions as to his non-participation, says that he has no weapon. It might be assumed that Hǫðr does not participate in the game because his lack of sight prevents such martial activity. But since his name means “battle”, it cannot be assumed that blindness is equated with non-martial characteristics or that it precludes agency.⁵ It may rather be that impaired vision prevents Hǫðr from recognizing the non-oath-bound sprig of mistletoe that Loki intentionally and misleadingly calls a “stick” (*vöndr*). The inevitably imperfect mastery of gods and men over the physical world always leaves a loophole, here in the form of the unsolicited mistletoe, that other forces – destiny, Loki – can exploit.

In his conniving, Loki purposefully centers himself in a node of pre-existent conditions – Baldr’s dreams and the attempt to prevent their realization; the exemption of mistletoe from the oath; Hǫðr’s strength, skill, and acceptance of the apparent harmless nature of the exercise that Loki proposes – to orchestrate a *dénouement* that will prove fatal to Baldr, the individual, and devastating to the gods as a community. Loki confronts a “locked down” situation, where he will introduce a dynamism that moves events toward resolution. After Loki gives Hǫðr the sprig of mistletoe, he turns him in the direction of Baldr. Hǫðr casts. The startling and tragic outcome is preceded by the in-flight transformation of the pliable mistletoe into a hard-pointed, lethal missile. Is this transformation Loki’s doing, an aspect of his own shape-shifting and procreative abilities, which involves redefinitions of the boundaries of sex and species, or is some other or higher causality, that sensed in Baldr’s dreams, at work? Clearly Loki’s malice can be only partially explained, in quasi-psychological terms, by his exogenous parentage. Loki does not himself kill Baldr but exploits a combination of anomalies, a combination previously only a potentiality, to bring this about through the intermediary of the co-opted Hǫðr. In retribution for the death of Baldr, Loki is subsequently caught and bound to a rock, where a snake’s venom drips into his mouth. He will free himself only at Ragnarǫk, when, in a pairing of outsider and watchman, he and Heimdallr will fall at each other’s hands.

This essentially realistic interpretation of the death of Baldr is not the only one entertained by present-day scholarship. There is also evidence and well founded speculation that Baldr’s is a sacrificial death with a view to rebirth, a sequence of events in which even Óðinn may have a role, although allowing the actual implementation of the death to devolve to Loki. Such a sacrifice would reflect, on a larger scale, the reciprocity seen in the gods’ surrender of bodily faculties in return for enhanced abilities, e.g., Óðinn’s pawning of an eye for knowledge, but the question remains as to the ultimate benefit to be gained by the death of the young god, the nature of the trade-off. Is it simply a cyclic annual renewal or the first step in a process of destruction that will ultimately allow the divine community to revive and rule better in a renewed cosmos?

Previous efforts to explain Loki’s role in the society of the Norse gods based on extant myths and other more fragmentary references have been nearly exhaustive. Yet the discussion has stopped short of seeking any kind of greater justification in an archaic society for such functions as trickster, traitor, destroyer, apocalyptic closer, chthonic figure. Could the early Norse world be imagined as under some of stress, creating an epistemological hunger to identify the agent of misfortune?

To recall the above reference to a “locked down” situation in the sport with Baldr, Loki and what may be called his processal function will be examined from the vantage point of a hitherto unexplored dimension of the Old Norse verb *líka*, otherwise often adduced in discussions of the god’s name. The regular meaning of *líka* is, as noted, “to close, end, finish” (Cleasby et al. 1957,

⁵ See the discussion of the death of Baldr and of the Blind Slayer motif in Bragg 2004: 111-123, and in Lindow 1997.

Heggestad et al. 1993). It is used of material depletion, for example, a store of food being used up, and in reference to closing apertures such as doors and hatches. In literary texts it is used preferentially of the conclusion and outcome of dynamic human relations, in particular of legal proceedings, after charges and rebuttals have been projected against the impersonal gridwork of the law. As well, *lúka* occurs when men's individual destinies are seen in a judicial context and against the backdrop of a similarly distant fate.

A *leit-motif* of pleading, judgment, settlement, and legal closure runs through *Njáls saga*, even if such litigation and judgment do not similarly check emotions or feuding. It is realized through the verb *lúka* and, in particular, through the present passive form *lúkask* “will be settled, be resolved, turn out.” Contention between Bergþóra and Hallgerðr, the wives of Njáll and Gunnar, leads to the killing of a servant. Gunnar attends the Thing and settles the matter with his friend Njáll. He then says that Hallgerðr may decide her own actions, “en ek skal ráða, hversu málin lúkask” (“but I shall decide how the cases are settled”) (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, Cook 2001, Ch. 36). This key term *lúka* is given additional prominence in the narrative through its recurrent use in direct discourse in reference to public announcement of a settlement and fine. Somewhat later Gunnar says of a related case “Bjóða mun ek, að gera um sjálfr ok lúka upp þegar” – “Then I will offer to fix the amount myself and announce it right away” (Ch. 49). When the evolved case cannot be resolved privately and comes before the Thing, Gizurr, speaking for the “injured” party states “Þó vilju vér nú lúka málinu, þótt þú ráðir einn skildaganum” – “We still want to settle the matter even though you make all the terms yourself” (Ch. 51). Nonetheless, contention escalates and Gunnar sees himself obliged to kill a man. As for the resulting court case, “The time came for the Thing, and both sides came in large numbers. There was much talk how this case would turn out” (“Er þetta nú allfjörætt á þingi, hversu þessi mál myndu lúkask,” Ch. 73).⁶ By this time, litigation has come to dominate the saga and one has a sense that Gunnar's predicament and eventual fate may be under the perverse sign of Loki. Later, Njáll proposes the establishment of Fifth Court to handle cases like Gunnar's, that “cannot be settled or even moved along” (“eigi megi lúkask né fram ganga,” Ch. 97). When extra-legal events reach their climax and Gunnar has been killed, Flosi, the leader of the group of men who have fired Njáll's house, replies to Njáll's negotiating offer that his sons be spared: “I will not make any settlement with your sons – our dealings with them will soon be over, and we won't leave here until they are all dead” (“Eigi vil ek taka sættum við sonu þína, ok skal nú yfir lúka með oss ok eigi frá ganga, fyrr en þeir eru allir dauða” (Ch. 129). The lexical motif of *lúka* “settle, end” is sustained until the end of the saga, when emotions have run their course and can no longer feed the feud; the final words are “Ok lýk ek þar Brennu-Njáls sögu” (“And here I end of the saga of Njal of the burning”, Ch. 159).

This same notion of agreed-upon settlement and the verb *lúka* are also found in one of the tales associated with Loki himself, in Snorri's retelling. In explaining to Gylfi in *Gylfaginning* the compound “otter-payment” as a kenning for “gold”, the High Ones retell the story found in *Reginismál* (Neckel and Kuhn 1962) and its retelling in Snorri. When the otter skin that once enclosed Hreiðmarr's son is found to have one whisker not covered by the gold demanded for the release of the three gods, Óðinn, Loki, and Hœnir, Hreiðmarr gives an ultimatum, that the whisker be similarly hidden, “otherwise it was the end of any agreement between them” (“en at öðrum kosti væri lokit sætt þeira”).⁷ Clearly, *lúka* in its various collocations was an important element of early Norse *mentalité*.

Seen as an instrument in the complex dynamics of these poems and tales, Loki is not the “closer” in the simple sense of the one who ends it all at Ragnarök, as early speculation on the

⁶ A comparable situation and phrasing is found toward the end of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*; Sigurður Nordal 1933, Ch. 82.

⁷ Snorri 1998: 45-46, Snorri 1987:100.

meaning of the name would have it. Rather, his actions recall the verb *líka* used with the prepositions *upp* and *aptr* to signify “to open” or in the phrases such as *líka upp gjörð* “to deliver a judgment” (cf. the noun *líkning* “discharge, payment”). In situations that already have a determining structure, whether a building contract that the Æsir cannot honor or an invulnerable young god who must nonetheless die, Loki functions as a precipitant or catalyst that unlocks, loosens the complex of circumstances. Where an impasse had existed, dynamism is restored; change is effected, irrespective of the moral coloration it may have or be given. Thus, we may judge particularly apt the subtitle of Bonnetain’s work, *Loki: Beweger der Geschichten*, based as it is on the kenning *sorggærr sagna hrærir* “pain-maddened mover of stories,” as found in the poem *Haustlong* by Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni,⁸ if we understand by “mover” not so much a principal in the stories as an intrusive remedial and resolving force, often a mover almost without motive. Put more bluntly, Loki is the one who brings the missing part to the social mechanism, allowing it to acquire dynamism and move toward resolution. But such closure as is effected is only provisional, since Loki and his monstrous progeny will also play a decisive role in the final battle of Ragnarök between the gods and the forces of chaos led by the giants.

On the basis of onomastics, Loki may be identified as the resolver of crisis, he who locks together the disparate pieces of a predicament and remedy. The theonym *Loki* can then be plausibly associated with the Old Norse verb *líka* “to close”, yet not so much in reference to the closing down of the divine world as in Loki’s intervention to break through impasses before which the Æsir find themselves. Against this thesis may be weighed the generally recognized great age or historical depth of the name *Loki*, which has contributed in its own way to difficulties in identifying a satisfactory origin, and the suspicion that *líka* in its use in negotiations, in contracts, and at law (“to close a deal, make a settlement”) may be a relatively late figurative extension of the basic sense “to close”. Other slim lexical evidence, hitherto unrecognized in scholarship on Norse mythology, offers a compelling alternative explanation of the name *Loki*, one that does not entail the special pleading made above on behalf of *líka*.

The reconstructed Indo-European roots **lek-* and **lok-* had at their semantic core the ideas of criticism, reproach and blame, and, in some derivatives in Germanic, blame carried a step further to injunction or prohibition. Cognate with Latin *loquor* “to speak out”, are Greek *λόσκω*, Old High German *lahen*, Old Saxon *lahan*, Old Frisian *lakia*, *lekia*, all “to blame, accuse”, and Old English *leán* “to blame” (Pokorny 1959-1969: 673, Köbler 1993 and 2014). A related Old Norse derivative is the verb *lá* “to blame” with the gerundive *luandi* “being excusable”. The editors of *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* comment on the rare appearance of the lexeme, while also speculating on its probable great age (“It is curious that no instance is on record from old writers, although the word must be old”; Cleasby et al. 1957). Could an association with Loki, the blamer *par excellence*, have created an aversion to more widespread general use of *lá*? With the retained intervocalic *-k-* otherwise seen only in Frisian, *Loki* suggests a formation dating to a distant northern Germanic past. The name *Loki* may then be best explained as a derivative of the Indo-European root *lok-* “to accuse, blame”. The suffix *-i*, indicative of diminutive size or familiar status, is frequently met in Old Norse names for preternatural beings such as dwarves and giants but does not regularly occur in the names of the male Æsir and Vanir, with the exception of *Bragi*, god of poetry, and *Alí*, possibly late additions to the pantheon.

In support of a derivation of *Loki* from an archaic Germanic **lok-* “to blame, accuse”, we return to the first epithet used by Snorri of Loki in the capsule portrait early in *Gylfaginning*: *rógberi*, rendered “slanderer, backbiter” in authoritative lexicographical works. Loki’s acerbic verbality is nowhere more evident than in the essentially dialogic poem *Lokasenna* (*The Contention of Loki*; Neckel

⁸ Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni, *Haustlong*, in Finnur Jonsson 1912-15, I B 014-017, St. 9.

and Kuhn 1962) as found in the *Poetic* or *Elder Edda*,⁹ much of content of which is replicated in Snorri's work.

The scene is the great hall of the sea-god Ægir, a setting both secure and public, in which the Æsir and Vanir have gathered for a drinking feast. The prose prologue to the poem begins with the topic of verbal behavior in the banquet hall. Loki has purposely not been invited to the feast, because of his known disruptive presence, although the prose introduction to the extant poem would have him previously ejected from the hall and now seeking re-admittance. His exchange with the host's servant is revealing. Loki is told that none in the hall has a "friendly word" for him (*í orði vinr*, st. 2), setting the scene for the exclusively verbal encounters that follow. Loki retorts that he will blend mead with malice and vaunts his ability to exchange "wounding words" (*sáryrðom*, st. 5, repeated in st. 19; the motif is also found in *Reginismál*, st. 3-4). Once in the hall Loki demands that he be assigned a due place. He reminds Óðinn that they had sworn in an exchange of blood never to drink ale except in each other's company (st. 9). Óðinn agrees to Loki's admission and seating in the hall, lest Loki "speak words of blame" (*qveði lastastqfom*, st. 10).¹⁰

Drink in hand, Loki toasts all the gods – save Bragi. Bragi senses what is in the offing and is ready to buy Loki off with gifts, if he will refrain from annoying his fellow guests. None deterred, Loki begins a sequence of defamatory statements by accusing Bragi in veiled terms of cowardice (st. 13). In tension-filled references, Loki's artful digs target both the central functions of the various gods and goddesses, e.g., sexuality and procreation under the aegis of Freyja, and their supposed failings in these respects when measured in terms of human morality, the same Freyja's sexual promiscuity. This two-edged rhetorical strategy is complemented by the poet's chosen poetic structure, in which each divine figure accused by Loki rises in his or her own defense but is also vindicated by a companion, who then becomes Loki's next victim. As in the adventurous myths in which Loki is an agent, a pre-existent situation is in place, in the sense that the gods' supposedly reprehensible actions have occurred in the past but are not openly acknowledged in the community. Loki brings them into the light of day, "outs" the gods and puts their behavior "on the record." Through a verbal act, shame is created where previously only suspicions and misgivings may have existed. But to what end?

Finally, Þórr arrives in the hall and Loki bows before the concrete threat of physical violence. The gods' purpose has been only to silence Loki to spare them public mockery (st. 61), although all these misdeeds must have been known to the divine community and Loki is only recalling past deficiencies. In an important sense, Loki's social criticism is in support of the heroic ideal but this is not a heroic poem, rather an artful scolding with comic overtones. Loki's place in the order of things is not challenged, at least not in this poem. The prose epilogue, however, has Loki obliged to escape in the form of a salmon.

In Loki's charges (if true, he is no slanderer), the chief failings of the gods are actions that invite mockery: the sentinel Heimdallr's muddied back under the roots of the world-tree, Týr's hand lost to the wolf Fenrir, Óðinn's deceitful partiality that may favor the unworthy in battle, the cowardice of Óðinn, Bragi, Byggvir, even Þórr. Especially prominent are accusations of various kinds of sexual transgression: Óðinn's practice of the unmanly sorcery called *seiðr*; Þórr and miscegenation (killing giants but having sexual relations with giantesses); Freyr's incest and infatuation with a giantess; Freyja and Njörðr, incest; Sif, adultery; Iðunn, blindness to personal honor in having sex with her brother's killer. That Loki himself should also be open to most of these charges – in particular miscegenation in the form of cross-species sexual congress and

⁹ Helpful introductions in Larrington 1996 and Orchard 2011.

¹⁰ Old Norse had other terms for abusive language, among which *skotyrði* and *skútyrði*, related to the verb *skjóta* "to shoot" (cf. the obsolete English *to scout*). Coincidentally perhaps, this links Loki's mockery in the banquet hall with the death of Baldr (cf. English "take a shot at" = "mock, criticize").

procreation – scarcely mitigates the crimes, in his view. Unmanliness and unbridled female sexual appetite are charges to which the early Norse seem to have been particularly sensitive. Njǫrðr is called *áss ragr*, translated by Carolyne Larrington (1996) as “pervert god”, which accurately captures the prejudice of the times.

While Loki often chooses innuendo, his more direct charges also allude to other tales in Norse mythology. Thus, *Lokasenna* serves as a literary catalogue but with most of the action of the tales seen from a judgmental, potentially comedic, perspective. Although some of the transgressions of the gods have implications for the preservation of Ásgarðr from the giants and other malign forces, most concern morality, as seen from a human perspective. The Norse gods sense the mounting threat of Ragnarøk (st. 39, 41, 58) but, Loki seems to suggest, this is in part the result of their own domestic misdeeds. Loki signals the weakening of the societal bond. The poem suggests that it is the center, not the border, that cannot hold. Loki says that this will be the last feast Ægir hosts for the gods; flames will play over his hall (st. 65). This prediction, in the nature of a performative utterance, recalls the association of Germanic **laban* with injunctions and prohibition.

Loki is the the Blamer but he is also the Mocker. He exploits the potential of verbal art to defame his fellow-gods and thereby draws on the same generative power that is realized in his anomalous offspring and ingenious solutions to divine problems but also in the extraconventional techniques of wit, the novel juxtaposition of two previously unrelated but now pressingly, congruently relevant entities.

While *Lokasenna* is concerned with the loss of reputation, Norse mythology is preoccupied even more with bodily integrity, its violation and consequences, as illustrated by Óðinn’s sacrifice of an eye and experience of pain on the windy tree of the gallows in return for enhanced knowledge (*Hávamál* and *Vǫluspá*). In a quasi-judicial process of disfigurements and restitution, the loss or diminution of a normal and normative cognitive or other physical faculty is compensated by enhanced ability in a more abstract psycho-somatic sense. In the timeless world of myth, the gods are always both acquiring and already possessing such enhanced functions – narrative as Möbius strip. This binarism of loss and gain pervades the pantheon to a degree not fully recognized in the scholarly literature. A brief list of the major gods’ non-normative physicality and hypertrophic abilities is worth pausing over.¹¹ As noted, Óðinn pledges an eye for wisdom and knowledge of the past, present, and future of men and gods. The warrior Týr’s loss of his sword-hand is in the immediate interest of a negotiated but duplicitous containment of the giant wolf Fenrir but may also be compensated on a grander scale in skilful manipulations of social and contractual conventions, wheeling and dealing. The virile and mighty Þórr has a short-handled hammer but may gain in shortness of temper, the capacity for homicidal rage. Freyr, god of fertility, seems on the whole sexually austere and quiescent, although on one occasion he gives his sword away in his infatuation with a young giantess in an otherwise anomalous wooing myth.¹² Heimdallr’s acoustic hearing is sequestered under the roots of the world-tree Yggdrasil, leaving him, nonetheless, a clairaudient sentinel who hears all sounds. Hǫðr is blind but proves a sure shot, Viðarr, mute but iron-footed, Mímir decapitated but uniquely wise.¹³ The handsome Baldr may have albinism and his beauty does not make him invulnerable. His mortality is countered by a capacity for rebirth. Even the pantheon itself is less than integral, in that Ásgarðr has absorbed, after war, a more earth-oriented race, the Vanir. The meta-functions of the gods, acquired through the surrender of some physical faculty, tend toward the immense generative power of Loki, father and mother to a variety of preternatural beings.

¹¹ Bragg 2004 judges this thorough-going ascription of disabilities to be a late rationalization and systematization.

¹² On Týr and Freyr from this perspective, see Sayers 2015 and forthcoming b; on the early characterizations of Óðinn and Týr as *le borgne* and *le manchot*, see Dumézil 1973.

¹³ These latter instances documented only in Snorri 2005.

How does Loki compare to his fellow-gods in terms of faculties sacrificed for enhanced abilities in another dimension? Which faculty might Loki be seen as having relinquished or been deprived of? In the end, Loki's trajectory is from untrammelled freedom of action to confinement, fettered to a rock under the dripping venom of a serpent, but freed in the cataclysm of Ragnarök. On the smaller model of loss and gain, it would not have been one of the senses or a simple body part but something more akin to Freyr's ambiguous sexuality. To recall the charges of *Lokasenna*, some aspects of Loki may be compared to the less community-oriented sides of several of the other gods, Óðinn, Þórr, etc. One might speculate that what Loki has surrendered is the divine equivalent of altruistic humanity, the will to do good yet his malice and cunning often result, on a different plane, in a positive outcome for the gods. To illustrate the species- and sex-crossing products of these two sides, we may contrast the wolf Fenrir and Óðinn's eight-legged horse Sleipnir. Loki's "disability" may be located in the sphere of social conscience, not so much interior consciousness as respect for, and adherence to, social convention, which he violates or deconstructs. By birth an outsider but somehow in the company of the gods, Loki can act without inhibition in innovative, socially deviant, boundary-crossing ways. His methodology is a consistent one, while outcomes are variously for good or ill, depending on predicaments and perspectives largely extraneous to this agency and its mechanism.

His name, a praxonym designating him as the agent of specific actions and practises, is derived from the Indo-European root **lok-* "to blame, accuse". Loki is then the great defamer and accuser, as showcased in *Lokasenna* and summarized in Snorri's portrait, an identity that merges with his (later?) role as trickster and fixer, in that the extent to which his charges are true cannot be known, except to the gods themselves. Deceitful slanderer or saucy truth-teller? In this, Loki embodies one aspect of the putative archaic Indo-European poet of praise and blame, the epideixis or showing attested in classical Greek culture and in literary artifacts from India to Ireland (Nagy 1979, Ch. 12, and Watkins 1995, Ch. 5). As concerns the immediate linguistic evidence derived from *lok-* and *lek-*, Latin *loquor* (earlier *laquor*) 'to speak' may be considered a neutral realization. The collection of Germanic forms, however, is oriented – skewed, one might say – toward the negative pole. Within the world of Norse myth, praise and blame are assumed by discrete agents, the former by the proto-skaldic poet Bragi (to the extent that praise might serve a function in a divine society), the latter by Loki. This might account for Loki's attack on Bragi first of all in the banquet hall, albeit only for cowardice, not poor art, unless it be cowardice to refrain from stating the truth. Bragi had attempted to patronize Loki, offering a horse, sword, and ring for his silence (st. 12), but these are rejected scornfully. Loki speaks what his spirit urges him to speak. Bragi retorts boldly but Iðunn tries to dissuade him from reproaching Loki – as if this were an assumption of Loki's own role!

The kinship between *Loki*, and Old Norse *lú* and its Germanic congeners invites a reconsideration of the god's matronymic, *Laufeyjarson*, anomalous in both form and content. The base form here, it has been proposed, is *lauf* "leaf, foliage". Rudolf Simek (1984: 229), however, sees an original *lauf-aimaz* "rich in praise" (cf. German *Lob* "praise"). *Loki Laufeyjarson* would then be read as "Blamer, son of Praise", an antonymical or complementary binary phrasing without known parallel in Old Norse lore (but cf. Irish *Úath mac Imomain* "Terror, son of Great-Fear", synonymical rather than antonymical).¹⁴ Another name that invites explication in this frame of reference is *Loptir*, which seems to reference Loki in some contexts. Although a very speculative chain of extension one could imagine the progression: air > voice > speech > select form of discourse (criticism). The shadowy figure Lóðurr, one of the three gods giving form to the first humans (*Völuspá*, st. 17), has been equated with Loki (summary discussion Haukur Þorgeirsson (2011) and the name may mean

¹⁴ Sayers 1990. Comparison of Loki with Irish Lug and Bricriu in Bonnetain 2012: 138, 303, with Lug in Riutort 2008.

“roarer”. If a derivation from IE *leu-* (3) (var. *lau-*, *lá-*) “to sound, declaim, sing” (Pokorny 1959-1969: 683, Köbler 2014, *s.v.*) were imagined, this positive aspect of Loki could be thought to encompass praise poetry, as the opposite of vituperative criticism. At any event, *Lóðurr*, in terms of phonology and semantics, seems, like *Loki* itself, to be an early formation.

The name *Loki* must be judged a formation on the IE root **lok-* that long predates our extant texts and would, for their hearers, likely have lost any overt association with ON *lá* “to blame, accuse”. The name and its bearer may then have been drawn into the semantic sphere of *líka* in the sense of “to resolve, close off”, which would enhance the connotations of the name in the many tales of Loki as fixer. Yet *Lokasenna*, thought to be a relatively late work, incontrovertibly center-stages Loki as the arch-critic.¹⁵

In a companion study to the present essay (Sayers forthcoming a) I derive the name of the trouble-maker Bricriu *nemthenga* “poison-tongue”, the caustic critic in the Ulster cycle of medieval Irish epic literature, from Irish *brecc* “spotted, speckled, blemished”. In early Ireland satire was believed to raise blotches on the face of its victims (and here we may recall Snorri’s characterization of Loki as “*vǫmm allra goða ok manna*” – “the blotch of/on all the gods and men”). Like *Loki*, *Bricriu*, the Spotter, is then a praxonym. Although the onomastic lens allows the identification of these two blamers, no close genetic link is proposed between the figures of Bricriu and Loki. They appear to be unidimensional avatars of the archaic Indo-European poet of praise and blame, at best social critics who rely on speech acts to police their communities. Loki’s mythic Norse world of monstrous offspring, and shape- and sex-shifting is reflected in mollified fashion in Bricriu’s Irish epic, where monstrosity is simply a proving ground for the hero, not an existential threat. Although heroic ethos dominates the literary *corpora* in which Bricriu and Loki figure, the setting is more often the banquet hall than the battle field: public but secure, convivial yet open to heightened emotions and verbal extemporaneity, as tongues loosen with drink.

Although the essential characters of these figures are given and immutable in the texts, they paradoxically embody dynamism of a specific kind. The names *Loki* and *Bricriu* were initially the embodiments of agency. To view the names *Bricriu* and *Loki*, previously without satisfactory etymologies, as praxonyms and their bearers as masters of satire and provocation prompts the speculation that that many mythic and para-mythic names in western European tradition may be embodiments less of divine characteristics than of divine agency, imbued with even more inherent dynamism than is reflected in extant literary works. In sum, some names, like *Loki* and *Bricriu*, may have much deeper cultural roots than the narratives in which they are now found.

In conclusion, a revised English rendering of Snorri’s portrait of Loki is offered:

Among the Æsir is counted the one whom some call the Æsir’s defamer and the originator of deceits and a blemish on all of the gods and men. He is called Loki ... Loki is pleasing and handsome in appearance, malicious in character, very changeable in behavior. He possesses to a greater degree than others the mental capacity that is called cunning, and ingenuities for every situation. He repeatedly got the Æsir into great difficulties and often extricated the gods from them through trickery.

¹⁵ On the now generally accepted dating of *Lokasenna* to the twelfth century, see the summary discussions in Lindow 2001: 215 and Simek 1993: 193.

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