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Gender, Othering and Loki

by

Amanda Munson

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Gender, Othering and Loki

With many enigmatic characters and engaging stories, Norse literature and mythology have had a formative impact on English literature from the early Middle Ages in poetry like the *Edda* and many Icelandic sagas. A lot of scholarship has been done on Nordic myth and literature, including character studies on many figures, especially Odin and Thor. However, it is difficult to find studies of the figures who make up the "other" in Nordic tales, such as the trickster Loki. While Loki plays a significant role in many tales, his position as the "other" in general Norse mythology and folklore is perhaps what makes him so interesting to study. This othering is directly related to the fact that Loki is described in many tales in a way that is analogous to gender fluidity— that is displaying a male and a female identity at varying times and moments through out the stories, including displaying the ultimate feminine behavior of giving birth to such creatures as Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse, while still being ultimately described with masculine terms. In comparing and contrasting Loki's characterization with other portrayals of masculinity and femininity found in both of the *Eddas* as well as in works like *Njal's Saga*, Loki's unique position can be better explored. By studying the literature of the period from this angle, readers could gain not only a wider understanding of the society that created the stories, but also of the influence the stories had on shaping literature through the ages. As neither a god nor a giant in Norse myth, Loki is outside the normative structure; as a figure with female attributes, but referred to with male pronouns, Loki is uniquely positioned as a character through which to view gender constructs in the sagas and folklore.

Gender and Loki in Mythology

Since the Norse tales were passed down orally, there are few sources available today. Unfortunately, much of the knowledge available of Norse mythology was recorded after the conversion to Christianity. General consensus has the conversion to Christianity taking place in the tenth century, however this was based on when the monarch converted, allowing for a lot of leeway between the beliefs of the government and the people (Kieckhefer 44)¹. The better known and perhaps most accessible sources come from the Eddas. The poetic, or elder Edda was recorded by an anonymous author sometime in the eleventh century². The prose Edda was written by Snorri Sturlusson, a noted historian and writer of sagas, such as *Heimskringla* (Saga of Kings), in the earlier parts of the thirteenth century, and is divided into three parts: the "Gylfaginning" (the tricking of Gylfi), "Skaldskaparmal" (the language of poetry), and "Hattatal" (list of verse forms); the "Gylfaginning" contains most of the mythological tales in the text.

Despite these sources, or perhaps because of them, Loki's role in Norse mythology is often convoluted and can be difficult to trace. Information particular to Loki is either not easily available or existent, as, according to Stephanie von Schnurbein, "Loki appears neither as a functional deity nor was there any cult surrounding the figure," citing a lack of archaeological evidence as well as a lack of place names linked to Loki in Scandinavia (von Schnurbein 110). Because of this, what information available about Loki is strictly literary in nature, making Loki part of the "domain of literature (de Vries 8). Though this record is fragmentary, scholarship regarding the figure has been traced

¹ The date of conversion being in the tenth century refers to most of Scandinavia with the exception of Iceland, which officially converted in the year 1000 through a declaration at the equivalent of a modern parliament, the Althing, which was a gathering of all the chieftains of the country (Magnusson 19).

² According to the preface of the Elder Edda referenced here, the collection of the piece was compiled by Sæmund Sigfusson, a well travelled and apparently well known lover of literature particularly the old sagas. However, this attribution was not given to Sigfusson until the 17th century by a bishop named Brynjolf Svansson. However, other texts consulted do not refer to Sigfusson as compiler and simply mention that it was written anonymously.

back to Jacob Grimm, who claimed Loki was possibly a goblin or god linked to fire.³ Other scholars have been quick to point out the similarities in Loki and the portrayal of the Christian devil in medieval literature, a portrayal which skewed the perception and role of the character (de Vries 17). Later scholarship after the World Wars attempted to focus on determining the nature and role of Loki with widely varied conclusions, from being merely a reification of Odin to a spider (von Schnurbein 112-3).⁴ Jan de Vries claimed, "It is admitted by all scholars that the most outstanding feature of Loki is his character as a trickster and a thief" (de Vries 253), an idea which has remained as a universally accepted characterization of Loki to the general public.

Scholars also brought into question the risky topic of authorial intention, particularly in regards to Snorri Sturlusson. Yvonne S. Bonnetain suggests in her article, "Potentialities of Loki," that Sturlusson had a specific goal in mind while writing both his Edda and his saga, *Heimskringla*. According to Bonnetain, these two pieces of literature were written between two diplomatic trips Sturlusson made to Norway, which then had control over Iceland. She suggests that Sturlusson wrote the Edda to encourage an Icelandic national identity and independence from Norway, as well as increasing his personal wealth and notoriety (Bonnetain 1). Another possible goal of Sturlusson's writing was the desire to create a history of the pagan beliefs of pre-Christian Scandinavia that was acceptable by the dominant Christian powers. Sturlusson's foremost goal however, despite these suggestions, seems to have been to preserve the art of skaldic

³ This assumption on Grimm's part was an "onomasti analogy" of the German Lohe (von Schnurbein 112). Despite this mistaken connection, it remains a popular notion, and is often seen as a cause of the connection made between Loki and the Christian devil.

⁴ Although the argument that Loki was a spider came from an article by Anna Birgitta Rooth that sought to find an answer without the use of non-Scandinavian mythological aspects, it is impossible to deny the similarities this would draw between Loki and the African Anansi, especially as Rooth appears to be the only scholar to have called Loki himself a spider.

poetry in light of the growing popularity and presence of courtly poetry (Sturlusson xv). Others, like Stephanie von Schnurbein question whether Sturlusson's writing can be considered an accurate portrayal of Norse myth, or if we should consider Sturlusson "A creative author of poetical mythological novellas" (von Schnurbein 110). Regardless of authorial intention or accuracy and scholarly opinions on the *purpose* of Loki in Norse mythological writings, the fact remains that stories featuring Loki in a prominent role "are present in each of the three most significant genres of Scandinavian literature" (von Schnurbein 110). In these stories, he ultimately ends in direct opposition to the gods, despite acting as a deuteragonist of sorts in some of the tales. What is clear is that Loki was separate from the others in the stories, whether godly or monstrous in nature.

Many things could be given as a reason behind Loki's otherness. In order to truly understand the othering done to the character of Loki, it is less important to study the function of the character in the tales than it is to study the way in which he is characterized. As stated before, the sources most readily available and upon which other authors have drawn their information are primarily the eddas. While the poetic and prose edda are the primary sources for mythological information, very little of the tales in the poetic edda actually feature Loki in a prominent enough role to shed much light on his character. In fact Loki is only mentioned by name in three of the tales included in the Elder Edda, one of which belongs to the Volsunga Saga and in which his role is quite small. In the poetic edda, he is first mentioned in the Voluspa, or the Vala's Prophecy, and then he is not mentioned until line 38; " Bound she saw lying, under Hveralund, a monstrous form, to Loki like. There sits Sigyn, for her consort's sake, not right glad," which appears to be in reference to Baldur's death, though no direct attribution is applied

to Loki (Thorpe). Loki's children Fenrir the wolf and Hel make it into the story before he does, and when he is mentioned, readers are given no specific details about his actions, appearance, or relationships, with the exception of mentioning his wife Sigyn. In this tale, he is only mentioned again as leading the monsters into battle against the gods during Ragnarok. Loki is not mentioned in greater detail in the poetic Edda until several tales later in "The Lay of Thrym, or The Hammer Recovered." It is in this tale that the poetic edda begins to shape Loki's character. This tale also begins to illustrate ideas of masculinity and how Loki stands out in opposition to some of these notions.

The Lay of Thrym is the story of how Thor (though he is referred to by different names throughout the text) lost his hammer and had to disguise himself as Freya to win it back. Loki's role in this tale is critical in this text, and though in the earlier section of the Elder Edda the Voluspa, he is portrayed as an enemy of the gods, he is treated like a confidant by Thor. The second line of the poem is, "And first of all these words he [Thor] uttered: "Hear now, Loki! what I now say, which no one knows anywhere on earth, nor in heaven above; the As's hammer is stolen!" (Thorpe). The two go together to Freya, and it is unclear which of them asks Freya to borrow her feather cloak (the request is written as "Wilt thou me, Freyia, thy feather-garment lend, that perchance my hammer I may find?"), Loki is the one who uses the cloak to try to seek out the missing weapon. According to Jan de Vries, Loki using Freya's cloak in order to fly "is a commonplace incident of Scandinavian mythology" (de Vries 40). This is an interesting note because not only does the hammer, and thus the implicit responsibility for losing it, belong to Thor and not Loki, but the fact that Freya's cloak is worn only by either herself or Loki in the tale shows that Loki was comfortable using a woman's article of clothing, a striking

difference from Thor, who shows extreme reluctance to do so. Loki discovers in his traveling looking for the hammer that it was stolen by the giant Thrym, who states, " it shall no man get again, unless he bring me Freyia to wife" (Thorpe 9). Upon hearing this, Thor tells Freya to dress herself as a bride, which she refuses to do (13-14). In council, it is the god Heimdall who suggests they dress Thor as Freya, saying: "' Let us clothe Thor with bridal raiment, let him have the famed Brisinga necklace./ Let by his side keys jingle, and woman's weeds fall round his knees, but on his breast place precious stones, and a neat coif set on his head" (16-17). Thor's response to this shows that femininity in, or at least the wearing of women's clothing by, a man was likely considered deviant at best. He replies, "'Me the Æsir will call womanish, if I let myself be clad in bridal raiment" (18). Though the specific wording suggests that the core of the issue is with the notion that the clothing is *bridal* garb, this is an oversimplification. At minimum, cross-dressing or adapting behaviors of the opposite sex was punishable by outlawry (Frankki 428). Knowing this shows that, although the poem was likely meant to be comical, Thor's reluctance stems from a very real fear or concern of the society at the time. Characters who cross-dressed in fiction were similarly reviled during the middle ages, unless the device was used comedically and it was obvious to the readers that he was actually a man, or if the act of cross-dressing served a purpose and was in some fashion inexpertly done, and the episode ended with the character's masculinity no longer in question (Frankki 431-2). Thor's massive appetite in Thrym's hall and his over bright eyes are ways in which his behavior or appearance fails to be feminine, while in the end he reasserts himself as truly masculine by taking up his hammer and slaying the giants. However, while the solution of cross-dressing appears to be and is taken by Thor as an

affront to his masculinity, Loki's response to Thor's complaints suggests that disguising himself as a woman should be considered less shameful than if the Jotuns (giants) invaded Asgard because Thor had lost his hammer (19), which shows that although the dominant idea of a man wearing women's clothing considered the action repulsive, Loki does not share this opinion and, it could be suggested, is rather more pragmatic than his peers.

Loki also goes with Thor "as a servant," (Thorpe 21) though it is not until near the end of the poem when the two are in Thrym's court, that it is revealed that Loki also disguised himself as a woman, and then he is not mentioned by name but simply referred to as, "the all-crafty serving-maid" (Thorpe 29). Thus, the wearing of women's clothing is treated as either not an unusual occasion for Loki, or is not treated with many specifics because of the practical nature of the necessity for such a disguise. John McKinnell suggests that Loki's transformation into Thor's serving lady is literal, and not merely as a result of changing clothing in his article, "Myth As Therapy: The Usefulness Of Prymskviða." He also points out that while in female dress, Thor is referred to with masculine pronouns and titles, except by Thrym, the giant he successfully tricks. Loki on the other hand is only referred to as Thor's maid (McKinnell 6). Furthermore, McKinnell, notes the usage of a couplet containing the usage of a numeric referential "in the neuter form, normally used of a mixed-sex group" (5). While the couplet he refers to, "við scolom aca tvau í iotunheima," [We two shall drive to the worlds of giants]" (qtd. in McKinnell 5) is indeed used to refer to Thor and Freya, it is also used to refer to Thor and Loki. McKinnell takes this to mean that Loki has physically become a woman, but the self-referential use of the neuter form of two in a situation where the use of the masculine

would be expected shows, verbally, Loki's gender fluidity, since there are no lines in which Loki's changing clothing or forms is specifically detailed (McKinell 5-6).

Loki features prominently in one other tale in the Elder Edda, called "Oegir's Computation" or "Loki's Altercation." This tale takes place after Loki has been chased out of a drinking hall by the Æsir for killing one of their host's servants whom the gods were praising (Thorpe). This tale consists largely of Loki and the various gods exchanging insults upon Loki's return to the drinking hall, and leads up to Loki's being chained under a venomous serpent. Loki starts the insult battle, though the reason behind it is a little unclear. He states before entering the drinking hall, "Strife and hate to the Æsir's sons I bear, and will mix their mead with bale," though the reason for his hatred is not given in this tale (3). Loki's insults mostly suggest that the women are unfaithful to their husbands or have too many sexual partners, while his insults to the men question their courage or ability in battle, or suggests that they are not the fathers of their children, with the exception of Odin. For example, he says to Bragi: "Go and fight, if thou art angry; a brave man sits not considering" (15) and to Tyr, "Thou couldst never settle a strife 'twixt two" (38) and "...to thy wife it happened to have a son by me" (40). To Freya he says, "I know thee full well; thou art not free from vices: of the Æsir and the Alfar, that are herein, each has been thy paramour" (30). To Frigg he says what may be one of the more damning lines, "I am the cause that thou seest not Baldr riding to the halls" (28) which implies Loki's involvement in Baldur's death and prevention of Baldur being brought back from Hel⁵. The gods' responses are similarly charged. Niord says, "but 'tis a

⁵ Given the nature of the situation- both Loki and the others are drinking and already angry, and they are all insulting each other- this line seems less of an admission of guilt than a way to create more chaos by saying what will most hurt Frigg. It is quite likely that this line in particular led to Loki being directly involved in the physical action of Baldur's death later in Snorri Sturlusson's recording of the Death of Baldur, as

wonder that a wretched As, that has borne children, should herein enter" (33) while Odin says, "Thou wast eight winters on the earth below, a milch cow and a woman, and didst there bear children. Now that, methinks, betokens a base nature" (23). However, while Odin and the majority of the other gods seem to be suggesting is that Loki is the only male amongst them who has adopted, at some point, female abilities or habits, Loki counters this claim with, "But, it is said, thou wentest with tottering steps in Samsø, and knocked at houses as a Vala. In likeness of a fortune teller, thou wentest among people. Now that, methinks, betokens a base nature" (24)⁶. While Loki's female abilities are brought up continuously against him, Odin's female disguise is not brought up or questioned by the others. In fact Frigg replies to Loki, " Your doings ye should never publish among men, what ye, Æsir twain, did in days of yore. Ever forgotten be men's former deeds" (25). The tale continues in this fashion until Thor arrives and threatens to kill Loki with his hammer. Loki then leaves, and turns into a salmon to escape the angered gods. He is caught and bound to a rock below a venomous serpent⁷. Though His wife Sigyn tries to catch the venom in a bowl, when she empties it, Loki is burned and "shrank from it so violently that the whole earth trembled." The purpose of this punishment is not quite clear. The punishment itself also appears to be chosen at random, though by involving both of Loki's children with his wife Sigyn, as well as Sigyn herself, it suggests that a general goal would be to further separate Loki and his family (his

opposed to a more passive role being involved in the failure of Baldur's resurrection which seems to be more the case here.

⁶ Fortune telling or seið, was considering women's magic, though Odin was known to be a practitioner. In fact in some tales, Odin gave up one of his eyes to gain knowledge, or spent time hanging in the World tree for three days, as related in the Voluspa earlier in the text.

⁷ The punishment is incredibly similar to the punishment the Greeks gave to the Titan Prometheus after he gives fire to mortals. It could be that the similarity is due to the influence of Classical mythology on literature recorded in the middle ages.

monstrous children Fenrir, Hel, and Jormungandr⁸ have already been physically separated from the rest of the pantheon) from the gods. Because the punishment and the insults Loki receives are heavily influenced by his feminine role as a birther of children or disguising himself as a woman, and not, like they are among the other males about his strength, courage, or virility, the portrayal of Loki's gender identity is a tool in his othering from his peers.

Loki appears more frequently in Snorri Sturlusson's Edda than in the elder Edda, and his otherness is also linked to a more malevolent nature. In the Gylfagining, Loki is introduced as a character of questionable loyalties:

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 possessed 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. (Sturlusson26)

Immediately following this description, Sturlusson describes the three monstrous children Loki fathers with the giantess Angrboda, Fenrir the wolf, Hel, and Jormungandr the Midgard serpent, all of whom have a role to play in Ragnarok (29). Loki's family as a whole is described as "pretty terrible" (29) making it clear that they are held in lower regard than the rest of the characters.

The next story involving Loki in this portion of Sturlusson's Edda is about Odin's eight legged horse, Sleipnir, who Loki gives birth to as a mare. This story illustrates both

⁸ Fenrir, Hel, and Jormungandr are Loki's illegitimate children with the giantess Angrboda and are distanced due to their monstrous nature.

Loki's shape shifting abilities and the pinnacle of his gender fluidity. This story tells the building of the gods' home in Midgard, and starts with "a certain builder" who offered to build a stronghold that would stand against the giants, and to do so in only three seasons (35). The builder (who is not named at this point in the tale, nor described in any fashion) also stipulates his method of payment: Freya for his bride as well as the sun and the moon. Sturlusson writes that the Æsir "held a conference, and this bargain was made with the builder that he should get what he demanded if he managed to build the fortification in one winter, but on the first day of summer if there was anything unfinished in the fortification then he should forfeit his payment" (35). Loki is charged with making sure the builder is allowed to have his horse, Svadilfæri, help him. The builder comes incredibly close to succeeding, and the gods panic when they see how close he is to completing the task. They hold another council arguing about who agreed to the builder's terms, and decide the "he must have been responsible for this decision who is responsible for most evil, Loki Laufeyirson," and that if Loki could not find a way to force the builder into not completing the task, he would be killed by the gods. Loki is not described as one of the Æsir, who are the ones earlier in the tale that held a council to agree, and yet they blame him for the problem and threaten him if he does not fix the problem. This is an example of how he is othered by the gods, though it is not specific to his gender identity or any particular trait that has been illustrated thus far in the text.

However, Loki's solution does involve the way in which he performs gender.⁹

The section ends with, "But Loki had had such dealings with Svadilfæri that somewhat later he gave birth to a foal... and this is the best horse among gods and men" (36). In this

⁹ Loki transforms turning himself into a mare for the three remaining nights left for the builder to finish his work, thereby distracting the builder's stallion and preventing the builder from being able to finish the work in a timely fashion.

section, Loki has performed what is generally treated as the ultimate act of femaleness by giving birth.¹⁰ His other children, mentioned earlier in the text, are fathered by him, not birthed by him, which makes the instance of Sleipnir's birth the more significant. Despite the act of giving birth, Loki is still referred to with male pronouns here and in other myths, making this a mark of gender fluidity.¹¹ For Loki, his gender and sexual fluidity is a result of his magical abilities, and though some of the Æsir, such as Odin have similar shape shifting abilities, scholars like Jens Peter Schjødt Sidlas have suggested that, "Loki's magical capacities, especially his shape- and gender - shifting abilities, consign him to a liminal position" between the Æsir and the giants (qtd. in von Schnurbein 115). In a similar, if rather negative, vein, it has been suggested that because of this position, it would have been easier for the Æsir to create situations, such as the situation with the building of the stronghold in Midgard, where Loki would be forced to "[save] himself from peril ... through self-abasement as the *ragr* man- a form of degradation that again works to the advantage of the gods... [and] renders him suspect to the gods" (von Schnurbein 122).¹² This tone of self-degradation or mocking can then be applied to other stories. For example, after Loki arranges for the kidnapping and return of Idunn from the giant Thiassi, which results in Thiassi's death, Thiassi's daughter comes

¹⁰ This is not the only instance in mythology or folklore where Loki gives birth, although it is the more widely known one. There is a folktale about Loki eating the heart of a witch and giving birth to trolls. In Nordic tales, it is suggested that eating the heart of someone or of a creature was thought to imbibe the qualities of the creature to the person who ingested it, as is seen in the *Volsunga Saga* when Sigurd eats the dragon's heart (de Vries 218-19).

¹¹ Although gender and sex are defined differently, with the former being a social construct and the latter being the biological sex assigned to one at both, in this instance, they are closely linked. Though Loki is identified using male referents here, he is criticized for his performance of actions that are socially *and* physically defined as feminine or for women. Gender fluidity refers to identifying as either gender variably and in varying ways. Someone who is gender fluid may present and feel like they are more female on some days and male on others (Terminology).

¹² Stefanie von Schnurbein uses the term *ragr* to mean the "penetrated man" or a man who allows other men to have sex with him (120-2). Other scholars and critics like de Vries use the term *ergi* which was most closely described as meaning effeminate (215).

to the court, and as part of the recompense she demands from the gods, they must attempt to make her laugh. Loki is only able to do this by tying a "cord round the beard of a certain nanny-goat and the other end round his testicles, and they drew each other back and forth and both squealed loudly. Then Loki let himself drop into Skadi's lap, and she laughed" (Sturlusson 61). This has been suggested to be an example of self abasement or self mockery, but also of "self castration" (North 148). The loss of masculinity would have meant not only ridicule, but also a lowering of social status, due to the view during the time period that saw women as lesser than men physically, mentally and therefore socially (Bullough 32). These arguments about self-castration and debasement, however, center solely on a loss of masculinity, and do not really explore the possibility of feminine traits being both voluntary and positive for a characterization. Despite this fact, it is clear that Loki's gender, specifically his ability to change gender and comfortably perform both masculine and feminine roles and tasks, keeps him othered from the other characters in Norse mythology.

Scholars have spent a lot of time considering Loki's function in Norse myths as something separate from his gendered performances. However, it is clear that in instances like those found in both the poetic edda and the prose Edda by Snorri Sturlusson, that Loki's character and role in Norse myths would have been much different without his ability to shift shape as well as genders. Though some scholars have seen his gender fluidity as a sign of the effeminate male, they fail to take into account the strengths given to a character who is able to perform the traditionally feminine behaviors, such as giving birth. Due to this ability, Loki is able to navigate the boundaries between the world of the gods and that of the giants. His ability to shape shift not only allows him

to hide when needed, but is also used to the gods' advantage numerous times in the eddic tales. His ability to pass as female is sometimes an instigative action in the tales, and the fact that Loki is able to bear children, and does so numerous times, serves the desires of the gods, such as in the "Lay of Thrym."

Gender in the sagas

While the eddas provide an example of how gender was portrayed, specifically for Loki, a more in depth and less fantastic view of gender norms in literature of the time can be found in the sagas. The Icelandic sagas were primarily composed during the thirteenth century, many by anonymous authors, and though they were primarily for entertainment, they were also considered to be a part of the "official literature" of the time, along with other types of common medieval literature (Magnusson 10). A large number of the sagas take place in earlier time periods, specifically those before the conversion to Christianity, and many are also inspired by historical events. These sagas continue to be a source of academic fascination, and much has already been written about the role gender may play in them. Unfortunately, many of these studies, diminish the role of the women in the texts to petty, unfaithful or undutiful wives, instead of as actors operating within a society which was characterized by different values and gender roles and expectations from both the society of the saga writers (thus bringing into question how much credence the sagas can truly be given as purveyors of accurate portrayals of gender) as well as from current modern society.

The female characters in these texts use the expectations of gender roles, both for themselves and for their erstwhile husbands, in the society in which they would have lived to achieve their own ends without, as has been suggested by some scholars, using

what might be called "feminine wiles." Their sexual behavior and supposed sexualities (often placed on them by the reader) is not, as this section will attempt to portray, the motivating factor behind their actions. Articles have also been written about the Valkyrie who figure prominently in other tales including the *Saga of the Volsungs*, which served as the source for the German *Nibelungenlied*, which was later inspiration for Wagner's opera *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*, whose portrayal of the Valkyrie, such as Brunhilde, likely colors current popular conceptions of such characters, and thus might also impact modern scholarship of the study of gender in the sagas, particularly for female characters.

Perhaps the text best suited for this study, and one commonly used for examining gender roles due to its portrayal and potential defiance of societal expectations of gender performativity, *Njal's Saga* provides a wide array of characters to study, both male and female. Like most of the sagas, it was written by an anonymous author in the thirteenth century, and "more vellum manuscripts of *Njal's Saga* have survived than of any other saga," suggesting that the saga was well received or popular enough to warrant the expense of manufacturing so many copies, making it more accessible to a wider audience (Magnusson 24). *Njal's Saga* is also an interesting text to discuss because it is inspired by actual historical events which took place around the time of the official conversion to Christianity. Due to the conversion to Christianity in 1000 a.d., the moral code slowly changed from the old Germanic one based on loyalty to kin and to a leader, to a code more aligned with Christian values (Magnusson 20). This shifting moral code has been viewed by some scholars as represented by the female and male characters in the text (Roswell 8).

Njal's Saga has many characters, but those who are mentioned most frequently in relation to gender are Njal, his friend Gunnar, and their wives, Bergthora and Hallgerðr respectively. Like Loki, the female characters seem to be frequently maligned in the literature. Though the current study of all of the characters often appears to be hindered by modern conceptions of sexuality, gender, and society (perhaps, due in part, to centuries of predominantly Christian worldviews and attitudes influencing both scholarship and societal expectations and romanticism of the past), this is particularly evident in how the women are viewed and often dismissed. Through much of the scholarship, the female figures are credited with causing much of the ensuing turmoil, as resulting from the on going quarreling between Bergthora and Hallgerðr in *Njal's Saga*, which leads to many deaths and ultimately the burning of Bergthorsknoll. However, the fact that Njal and Gunnar fail to act according to the expected roles by choosing to not take retribution or by placing their friendship over their familial ties is often overlooked or not mentioned. Instead, the female characters are accused of acting outside propriety and blamed for the ensuing tragedy while their husbands remain blameless in the eyes of most scholarship.

This attitude can certainly be seen in articles like Heather O'Donaghue's "Women in *Njal's Saga*" or Thomas Rowell's "Gender Roles and Symbolic Meaning in *Njal's Saga*." O'Donaghue's essay starts out strong by claiming, "[g]ender distinctions rest on social and cultural differences between men and women rather than biological ones-that is on socially conditioned ideas of what is "natural" behavior in men and women," however, she also claims that the two genders are "mutually exclusive" (83). This idea leaves no room for any of the characters to exhibit any sign whatsoever of traits

stereotypically associated with the opposite gender. If, as she claims, the two are "mutually exclusive," then the idea that the defining characteristics of gender are socially defined is slightly diminished, since this notion would remove character agency for female characters particularly in medieval literature like that of the sagas, since as O' Donaghue makes a point of stating, women were considered as property of their male relatives (84). O' Donaghue further contradicts herself by explaining that widows could become financially and sexually independent, even if this independence was portrayed as "threatening" (84). In O'Donaghue's claim regarding the exclusivity of the genders and their expectations, widows, such a Gunnhildr, would not perfectly fit into the prescribed behaviors and attitudes of femininity, if, as she claims, women were generally considered to be property of male relatives and thus lacking of power. This would force such figures into a sort of third gender or gender neutral state. The fact that such characters are, according to O'Donaghue, portrayed as comical (such as Chaucer's Wife of Bath) or sexually deviant to "defuse the threat" (85) is a point that she fails to connect to her previous claim by not explaining how such figures would fail to follow the gender expectations of the time, particularly, since female Nordic characters, especially those in positions of power were, as Jenny Jochens states in *Women in Old Norse Society*, expected to act according to the so called "sober queen topos" (Jochens 111). According to this trope, men were the figures most allowed to physically and verbally express emotions, including grief, while women were generally depicted as quiet and internally expressive of their emotions as opposed to the externally expressive men, which gave men control over language and relegated women to silence (Jochens 111).

O' Donaghue also focuses heavily on sexual behaviors as defining factors in gender identity. She states, "[s]exual relations between men and women are, of course, central to masculine and feminine ways of behaving" (84). This seems like a broad generalization of characteristics, and her use of the phrase "of course" for emphasis attempts to establish this as a known, proven and accepted fact. There is however, no way to prove this, and in such a statement, there is no room for children, who are too young for sexual relations to influence their personal interactions in the world, which would invalidate claims that Hallgerðr's appearance, specifically the description of her eyes as "thief's eyes" (Magnusson 39) "foreshadows her behavior" (Roswell 6). Sexual relations, or sexuality based insults, are in fact only explicitly involved in two plot points, one which has an arguably small part in the saga as a whole.

The latter of these points is the storyline that follows Hrut and his involvement with Gunnhild, a relationship which O'Donaghue claims makes Hrut "the object of an imperious and overbearing sexuality" (85). After Hrut goes to Norway to claim an inheritance, he involves himself with Gunnhild, the king's mother, despite being engaged to Unn (Magnusson 42-3). As the king's mother, Gunnhild has influence over the king and uses her position to get Hrut accepted as a liege. She says, "if Hrut does what I say, I shall look after his claim...and I will get him into the favor with the king" (43). Gunnhild's influence does *not* derive from her sexual relations, but instead from her familial relation as the king's mother. In fact she has derived enough power of her own that she has built up a reputation; according to Ozur, "the moment we refuse her invitation, she will hound us out of the country and seize all we own; but if we accept, she will treat us as handsomely as she has promised" (43), though this is the only instance

where readers are told by a character how Gunnhild was viewed. When Hrut decides to return to Norway, he lies to Gunnhild about not having a woman waiting for him there. It is this deceit that causes her to curse him, as she says, "...And now you must suffer as well as I, since you did not trust me with the truth" (49). Truthfulness was a quality important to Norse culture (Ciklamini 94), and with this information and the fact that Gunnhild takes no further action against him, it's fairly clear that the sexual relationship is not the defining aspect of her character, even though she does not appear again.

The effects of Gunnhild's curse however, do lead to negative effects in a different sexual relationship, which helps set the stage for the conflict throughout the first half of the saga. Gunnhild curses Hrut so that he will not be able to consummate his marriage and relationship with Unn, though he will still be able to have sex with other women (49). Unn in turn, seeks her father, and it is under his counsel that she feigns illness before Hrut leaves and declares a divorce whilst he is gone (52-3). O' Donaghue calls this action inscrutable, however, at the same time, Unn is following the dictions of her prescribed gender, by seeking her father for advice and not acting on her own. If the action is inscrutable, it is not Unn's fault as she is following advice, and failing to consummate a marriage was legal grounds for divorce or annulment.¹³ Instead of Unn being the one who deviates from her prescribed gender roles, as is implied in O'Donaghue's article, Hrut, by being unable to consummate their marriage is the one failing to live up to the gender standards. However, Hrut does not receive the insults that

¹³ Failing to consummate a marriage is still grounds for annulling a marriage in the United States, if the impotency of the partner was unknown before the marriage began. In the case of Unn and Hrut, it must be assumed that Unn was not aware of the curse laid on Hrut. The curse is not mentioned as such again after it is laid on him. Furthermore, though it is not discussed in the saga, a man whose marriage was being annulled or going through a divorce on the grounds of impotency would have had to endure examinations in order to prove this impotency, which would have led to further humiliation on Hrut's part (Bullough 41).

other male characters do when they do not fulfill the expected masculinity. When Mord, Unn's father tries to get her inheritance back, but refuses to fight Hrut for it, he gains "nothing but ignominy" (Magnusson 55) and is ridiculed by those present at the Althing for being seen as a coward, despite being much older and in poorer health than the challenger Hrut. The following disagreement about retrieving Unn's dowry and claim to her estates leads to Gunnar's involvement in the saga and is the beginning of his involvement with Hallgerðr, since as a kinsman, Unn asks him for his help in retrieving the property.

The animosity between Hallgerðr as Gunnar's wife and Bergthora, Njal's wife acts as a foil to the friendship between the two men. While some critics have argued that the quarrel is not important, stating that "the rivalry has no function in the plot, but is simply a bit of prefatory matter" (Anderson 421-2), the fact that the quarreling and the ensuing problems caused by it leading up to Gunnar's death take up nearly half of the text would suggest otherwise. This section of the text also allows readers to better examine the characters and their subscription or deviation from gender norms better than the latter half of the text, which deals largely with the Conversion.

Hallgerðr's first two marriages end badly. She is described as "impetuous and willful" (Magnusson 55), traits which make her less desirable as a wife, compared to her great beauty. She causes the end of her first marriage by mismanaging the household affairs, and when her husband slaps her, she asks her foster father to avenge her.

O'Donaghue describes this first marriage of Hallgerðr as a deception; she claims that Hallgerðr was intending to have Thorvald killed all along. However, there is no evidence of that in the text itself, and when she says, " Hallgerðr encourages her foster-father to

kill þorvaldr," (87) she neglects to mention that it is only after he has struck her so hard that she is bleeding and Thjostolf asks her what she would like done that there is any hint that Hallgerðr does not like her husband specifically. O'Donaghue's claim that in widowhood from this first marriage, Hallgerðr gains power may, however, be well founded, as she is able to have a part in the negotiations of her second marriage to Glum (O'Donaghue 87), despite the fact that a woman's consent was not needed for a match (Self 155). When, however, Hallgerðr and Glum argue and he hits her, a very similar scene to her first marriage is played out with her foster-father, Thjostolf, with the difference being that she expressly forbids Thjostolf to do anything, saying "This I forbid you to avenge...you are not to take a hand in our affairs however they may go" (Magnusson 70). Thjostolf, who had been living with them as a retainer, ignores her and kills Glum anyway, which leads Hallgerðr to send him to Hrut. O'Donaghue claims that Hallgerðr sends Thjostolf to Hrut, she was planning his death, however this is unclear from the text, as she simply says, "he [Hrut] will look after you" (71). Sometime later, Hallgerðr marries Gunnar and meets Bergthora, Njal's wife, and their negative interaction during this meeting causes a series of revenge killings.

In contrast to Hallgerðr, Bergthora appears to be a capable and well respected wife. She is however "not conventionally feminine" (O'Donaghue 88). Where Hallgerðr's appearance seemed to predict trouble because of her beauty, Bergthora is plain, even bordering on masculine in appearance. She is called "drengr goðr," which was a term typically used for men and could alternately be translated as being a good person or as being "a manly person" (O'Donaghue 88). Where it's been implied that Hallgerðr had some form of power *in between* marriages due to her widowhood,

Bergthora also wields power in her home life. She hires servants without Njal's previous assessment, and tells the servant Atli, "I have as much say in hiring servants as [Njal]" (101) when he approaches looking for a position. She later sends Atli to kill Hallgerðr's servant, insisting that Njal would not object, even though Hallgerðr will retaliate despite a settlement having been made. Thomas Roswell claims in, "Gender Roles and Symbolic Meaning in Njal's Saga," that "the masculine culture did not regard women who transgressed their gender roles in the same way as men who did so...[allowing] for the recurring theme of women in a male role in Njal's Saga" (3). This implies, both that Bergthora, as appearing more masculine and taking more authority in the household was an acceptable deviation outside of the gender norms, but it also serves to suggest that the act of seeking revenge is a masculine responsibility, a claim that is directly contradicted by O'Donoghue who claims that revenge was "women's work" (88). In this way, Bergthora acts the same as Hallgerðr. Both women continue their feud in escalating succession, despite the fact that after each killing their husbands reach a settlement for monetary compensation. Roswell suggests that the men choosing to resolve problems using peaceful means through the legal process by arranging for settlements is meant to represent the shift to Christianity, while the more vicious behavior of the women in pursuing blood as recompense is meant to represent the older pagan Germanic ways (8).

The female characters are indeed the ones who goad the more bloodthirsty men into taking action over various offences. In Hallgerðr's case, the offences are more often against her, while Bergthora typically induces the men around her, generally her sons and particularly Skarp-Hedin, to violence when they themselves have been insulted. The two

differ in other ways, namely that Hallgerðr is patient and will wait to see retribution for an offence she has seen. Perhaps the most important instance of this is during the attack on Gunnar which results in his death. When Gunnar is attacked at his home, his bow string is cut and he asks Hallgerðr to use locks of her hair to make a new bowstring for him.¹⁴ She refuses:

'Does anything depend on it?' asked Hallgerd.

'My life depends on it,' replied Gunnar, 'for they will never overcome me as long as I can use my bow.'

'In that case,' said Hallgerd, 'I shall now remind you of the slap you once gave me. I do not care in the least whether you hold out a long time or not.'

(Magnusson 171).

In this scenario, it is clear that Hallgerðr waited to get vengeance for the offence against herself, while manipulating those around her into the very actions that result in the end of her third marriage.

Bergthora, on the other hand goads her male family members into action when an action has been waged against themselves, "with accusations of effeminacy against the men" (O'Donoghue 91). The first instance of this occurs in the first half of the saga, during the dispute between Hallgerðr and Bergthora. Beggar women who go to Hallgerðr's home insult Njal and his sons, for lacking a beard and being untested in battle respectively. This is the first instance where they are referred to as "Old Beardless and Little Dung-Beards" in the text (Magnusson 114). Hallgerðr goes so far as to have a mocking poem composed, which the beggar women then take to Njal's house. Upon

¹⁴ According to Magnusson's notes in this particular translation, using a woman's hair for a bowstring is commonly found in Latin texts. This anachronism also brings into question the reliability of the text's tone towards the events that happened, along with the overlying Christian influence from the author.

hearing this, Bergthora goads her sons, not entirely successfully, into action. Skarp-Hedin however responds by saying, "We are not women...flying into a rage at everything" (115). His words are not entirely true, as he appears to be the most temperamental of Bergthora's sons. Later in the saga, Hallgerðr again insults Njal and his sons using her names for them. When asked if they named witnesses or took action regarding the insults and hearing her sons reply in the negative, Bergthora says, "Everyone must be thinking that you are all scared to lift your weapons by now" (199-200), implying that her sons are being both cowardly and foolish. She similarly questions their inaction after Njal's son with Hrodny is killed, saying, "You men amaze me. You kill when killing is scarcely called for, but when something like this happens you chew over it and brood about it until nothing comes of it" (214), and though this does not have any direct consequences, "accusations and indirect allusions to the man's physical and/or martial weakness could be used to spurn action" (Self 162), Bergthora's words are clearly intended to goad the men into taking vengeful action.

The women are not the only characters to use sexually-charged insults. Such insults would have been seen as falling under the category of *ergi*, or effeminacy or homosexuality. While "the category of femaleness was obviously not so rigid that it could not be superseded by other interests, for example, by honor or revenge" (von Schnurbein 120), masculinity was not so fluid. According to Roswell, "association with symbols that are affiliated with femininity or other taboos" was all it would take to garner an accusation of *ergi* (2). As with Loki, a male performing stereotypical female gender roles, or even suggested to, was looked down upon in Norse society, and it can be assumed, that this still held true during the thirteenth century when *Njal's Saga* was

written. Accusations of *ergi* were taken very seriously and were treated "with some of the highest possible penalties" (Self 151). Given this extreme attitude, it is no wonder that the feud between Flosi and the Njallsons, particularly Skarp-Hedin, takes a deadly turn.

When Skarp-Hedin and his brother kill Hoskuld, the valley is conflicted. Flosi agrees to come together to work on a settlement with the Njalssons, but Skarp-Hedin is temperamental and ruins to chances, eventually resulting in the burning of Bergthorsknoll and the death of himself and all of his immediate family. While trying to reach a settlement, Skarp-Hedin is called out by multiple people. He is repeatedly referred to as "pale-faced" (Magnusson 245-6) and sharp or unlucky. It is unclear in the text what this could mean, but it is possible that being pale faced could suggest that Skarp-Hedin is cowardly, having killed Hoskuld while he was sowing his fields. Regardless, this combined with his already hot temper is likely what led to his argument with Flosi during the settlement. Njal adds a silk cloak to the pile of recompense being paid to Flosi for Hoskuld's death, however, he appears to have interpreted it as an insult, demanding to know who added it. According to a translator's note, it was not unusual for gifts of friendship to be included in a settlement; however the fact that the cloak could have been worn by either a man or a woman along with the fact that Njal and his family did not have to pay a large sum might have been seen as a direct insult to Flosi (Magnusson 255). Flosi says to Skarp-Hedin, "I think it was your father who gave it, 'Old Beardless,' for few can tell just by looking at him whether he is a man or woman" (255), a clear insult against Njal's person, despite the fact that Njal was not present at this meeting. Skarp-Hedin admonishes him for insulting the elderly, and in return, throws a pair of pants to

Flosi, who demands to know why he would need them. Skarp-Hedin replies with, "You certainly will [need them] if you are, as I have heard, the mistress of the Svinafell Troll, who uses you as a woman every ninth night" (256), which results in Flosi refusing the settlement and declaring that only violence will settle the quarrel. Skarp-Hedin's accusation is particularly harsh, since "anything other than heterosexuality was considered shameful and male/ male sexual penetration was considered dishonorable and strictly condemned" (Self 150). Given this, and the specific outlawry of a man behaving "like a woman every ninth night" (Magnusson 256) means that readers do not need to know anything about the so called "Svinafell Troll." Roswell suggests that Skarp-Hedin's accusation was an insult with the intent to end peace, and that in order to uphold his honor, Flosi would have had to respond with violence (1). The retaliation that Flosi launches results in the Burning of Bergthorsknoll and fighting amongst the people of the valley before being settled years later between himself and Njal's son in law Kari, who escapes from the Burning at the very end of the saga.

Given the fragility of masculinity in the sagas and society they depicted, Njal and Gunnar are as interesting to examine as their wives and the briefly mentioned other women in the saga. Njal in particular deviates from the accepted stereotypical idea of masculinity. Though he is introduced as being wealthy and good looking, he "could not grow a beard" and was known to be "prescient" (Magnusson 74). While this earns him insults from Hallgerðr, it earns him respect from the majority or the rest of the people he comes into contact with, and he is often sought for advice, particularly by Gunnar, whom he advises many times through out the first half of the saga. He sees and tells Gunnar about the trouble that will happen if he marries Hallgerðr, and he predicts that should

Gunnar kill twice in one family and break the settlement it will result in Gunnar's death (135). He sees the attack on Gunnar before it happens, saying, "I see many fetches of Gunnar's enemies. But there is something odd about them; there is ferocity in their look, but no purpose to their actions" (157). Njal also sees his own death, telling Skarp-Hedin that the conflict arising after Hoskuld will result in his death and the death of all of his sons (232-3). Although he is insulted by Hallgerðr for his beardlessness, which could have been considered a sign of impotency (Bullough 42), and his clairvoyance, traits that are generally associated with femininity, the respect he holds in the community portrays Njal as a positive character that shares a similar sense of gender neutrality with Loki.

Despite having a reputation for prescience, a skill similar to the seiðr of Loki and Odin, which was generally considered to belong to the realm of women, Njal is not the only one who displays this trait. Gunnar himself has a prophetic dream about an ambush that he will face, and his vision is depicted in much more clarity than any of those attributed to Njal in the saga. He relays it to Kolskegg, saying:

I was riding past Knafahills, and in my dream I saw a pack of wolves
come out at me. I retreated down to Rang River, where they leapt at me
from all sides, but we fought them off. I shot those that were in the lead, until
they pressed so close that I could not use my bow. Then I drew my
sword... I never used my shield, and did not know what was protecting me. I
killed many of the wolves, and you helped me Kolskegg; but they overpowered
Hjort...Then in my dream my rage was so violent that I sliced the creature in
two behind the shoulder; and with that the rest of the wolves fled.
(Magnusson 147).

This dream predicts precisely the outcome of an ambush that Gunnar faces the next day, and the settlements of which earn him the ire of Thorgeir, which eventually causes his death. However, Gunnar, described as "outstandingly skillful with arms" (Magnusson 73) shows concerns over the violent idea of hyper masculinity of society. After killing Skamkel and some others, he says, "But I wish I knew...whether I am any the less manly than other men, for being so much more reluctant to kill than other men are" (135). This questioning, which could be due to the Christian influence of the author and could be seen as a sign of a merciful personality, also suggests that Gunnar is not comfortable with the role society dictated for men.

Many scholars attribute the violence of the women and the relative peacefulness of the male characters to a shift from paganism and an emphasis on heroism to Christianity and lawfulness. This shifted the focus off of the bonds of family and blood ties, often represented by the female characters in Njal's saga, and more towards the Christian influence evident in the thirteenth century text and often thought to be represented by the male characters. This shift away from the importance of kinship, family loyalty and blood ties and towards a more rationalized lawfulness, according to Pat Belanoff, made it "necessary, therefore, for men to find other reasons to justify the male notion of female inferiority" and resulted in, "negative attitudes about both female intelligence and female sexuality" (Belanoff 827). In this understanding the women become vengeful and bloodthirsty while the men became more reluctant to act. However, Carolyn Anderson suggests that the tension between the legal ways of compensation and the drive for vengeance based on "personal and familial oaths of loyalty" hints at an underlying "cultural anxiety over the actual male desire for, and habit

of resorting to violence as the proper response to an offence" (422). Anderson claims that "gender in *Njal's Saga* is inherently unstable as a consequence of the unfinished nature of the entry into the Symbolic by both men and women" (422).¹⁵ Using psychoanalytic theory, Anderson links the female characters to blood, both in the sense of family and in a more literal sense (428). Blood imagery is indeed used in the latter half of the saga by women as a means of goading men into taking vengeance. After Hoskuld's murder, Hildigunn keeps his bloodstained cloak. When Flosi first refuses to seek settlement for his death, she claims that if the situation were reversed, Hoskuld would seek revenge through blood (239). When he still refuses, she, "...took out the cloak...in which she had preserved all his blood. She came back with the cloak and went up to Flosi without a word...She then threw the cloak around his shoulders and the clotted blood rained down on him" (239). Hrodny too uses blood soaked clothing to goad men into action, but in this situation, she uses the cap to convince her brother not to join with Flosi in attacking Njal (289). Hildigunn's uses of the cloak is also linked to the kind of goading used by Hallgerðr and Bergthora, since she also tells Flosi, "I charge you in the name of all the power of your Christ and in the name of your *courage and manhood* to avenge Hoskuld" (Magnusson 240, emphasis added). In this sense, vengeance is seen as "proper male action and lack of that as feminine passivity" (Anderson 427), however, women are able to attain vengeance through manipulating the men around them into action, the only way allowed for them to act, as according to Anderson, family relations (the area of women) belong in the Imaginary, and representation of the self through distance and language (the territory of men) relegated

¹⁵ The Symbolic here comes from Lacan's mirror theory of psychoanalytic theory and is the stage in which a child is able to perceive and understand a difference between themselves and the exterior world and in which language develops.

to the Symbolic as ideated by Lacan and Kristeva (Anderson 425), despite the notion that this transition is never fully realized as people grow. According to this emphasis, the male characters will occasionally be more feminine as they show savage behaviors, with women as the "accusers" (Anderson 433). While the emphasis on the Imaginary and Symbolic is interesting, it cannot negate the importance of the emphasis on the shifting religious and legal attitudes.

Though all of the major characters in Njal's Saga deviate from their prescribed gender roles in some way, the women are more often accused of this in scholarship. Where women like Bergthora and Hallgerðr are seen as violent, others such as Unn and Gunnhild are seen as sexually or romantically callous. These attitudes are seen as being more masculine than traditionally feminine, since women were not supposed to be violent or sexually powerful. While this behavior of women was more acceptable to society, the boundaries of acceptable masculinity were not so flexible, and Gunnar and Njal both have characteristics that would not have been acceptable. Njal is beardless, a point of contention throughout the saga, and prescient, a trait which could be linked to seiðr, a feminine form of divination. Gunnar too has prophetic visions, but also questions the stereotypical ideal of masculinity being tied to killing. Carolyn Anderson summarizes the gender conflicts in Njal's Saga, claiming, "...this saga presents individual subjects whose gender is blurred because their identities are always in process. People in this saga change their behavior, and the discourse of gender does not always constrain them" (435).

Conclusion

Gender fluidity was an important aspect or trait of Norse characters like Loki or those found in the Icelandic sagas. While Loki may have been regarded in a somewhat negative light, and has come to be seen as a trickster god whose purpose is to create mischief, he remains a popular character, because of his deviations from the norm established centuries ago in the Norse mythology, where his gender fluidity and magical abilities allowed him to succeed as sometimes ally to the Aesir. This deviance from gender norms was not exclusive to Loki and could be found in medieval Icelandic sagas as well. The female characters in sagas like *Njal's Saga*, are often viewed in similarly negative light to Loki by scholarship, although the women are not the only characters who deviate from gender roles. The male characters also show deviation, possibly due to the shift in religious and legal environment during the time in which the sagas were set. While gender deviance was prevalent in fiction, oftentimes in a comedic way, it reflected a generalized fear for the masculine audience of a loss of status or ability. However, the fact that women and female characters were allowed, with many restrictions and limited ability, to adopt masculine behaviors or traits in order to achieve their own ends shows that at least for women, the gender binary was not as strict as it may at first seem. Similarly, the fact that characters like Njal and Gunnar possessed feminine traits or abilities, such as prescience, and were seen in a positive light in their community shows that gender fluidity or deviance was not necessarily detrimental to society. When coupled with some aspect of mysticism, gender fluidity in male figures is accepted, as long as it can be used to the benefit of others.

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