

caps still dominated among the presents intended for the Eskimos in North America and Greenland; see Richard Vaughan, *Northwest Greenland: A History* (Orono, Maine, 1991), pp. 64–5.

89. Guttentag and Secord, *Too Many*, pp. 29–30.

90. On the lack of alcohol as adding to the failure, see Jenny Jochens, “Gender and Drinking in the World of the Icelandic Sagas,” in *A Special Brew: Essays in Honour of Kristof Glamann*, ed. Thomas Riis (Odense, 1993), pp. 155–81.

91. The two manuscripts use slightly different formulations.

92. Wallace (n. 10, p.42) estimates that during the Vinland expeditions the Norse in Greenland may have comprised no more than between 600 and 1,000 inhabitants.

93. Eventually becoming the ancestress of several Icelandic bishops, Guðríðr accompanied her husband to Norway, and after his death she went on a pilgrimage to Rome. With journeys to Greenland and Vinland, several trips back and forth between Norway and Iceland, and a final voyage to Rome, Guðríðr surely must have been one of the best-traveled women of the early eleventh century. See Jochens, “Guðríðr.”

“Pegi þú, Þórr!”: Gender, Class, and Discourse in *Þrymskviða*

Jón Karl Helgason

IN THE FIRST STANZA OF *Þrymskviða* Þórr wakes up and discovers that his hammer has been stolen. Consequently, his native district of Ásgarðr is placed in a state of emergency, vulnerable to an invasion by the rival inhabitants of Jötunheimr. One of these rivals, the giant Þrymr, has obtained the hammer and refuses to return the weapon to Ásgarðr unless the goddess Freyja accepts his proposal of marriage. But just as surely as the plot of this Eddic lay is prompted by theft and extortion, it is safely terminated by recovery and revenge. In the last stanzas, Þórr reclaims the hammer and employs it to kill the clan of giants. Lack is removed, threat is driven away, order is restored.¹ Or so it seems. Contradicting its conclusion, the lay leaves us with strong impressions of social disintegration: traditional boundaries of class and gender have been violated, language has been usurped by a new authority.

Despite its absence throughout the lay, Þórr’s hammer is at the genesis of *Þrymskviða*’s narrative action; the reader’s perception of this ambiguous symbol shapes his or her understanding of the text. As a thunder-instrument, the hammer has been conceived of as a fertility symbol. That definition complies with a traditional understanding of the lay as a myth of natural phenomena: Þrymr and the giants represent the forces of winter, attempting to delay the coming of spring by capturing the thunder-instrument or, even better Freyja, the goddess of fertility.² But as there is nothing in *Þrymskviða*’s description of Jötunheimr which implies a particularly wintry region, such a reading has its limitations. In the following, I offer three additional interpretations of the hammer, emphasizing respectively its sexual significance, its social value, and its linguistic relevance.

GENDER

In relation to *Prymskviða's* theme of sexuality and gender, the hammer can be seen as a symbol of Þórr's masculinity and power. Deprived of his instrument, Þórr turns into a woman, one of the most extraordinary women of Old Icelandic literature. When Freyja refuses to go to Jötunheimr and marry a giant, the gods decide to send Þórr in her place, disguised as a bride. Þórr is very much opposed to the idea, as he is afraid of being called "argr"—woman-like, homosexual, sissified (st. 16).³ He is nonetheless compelled to take over Freyja's role and act as a woman, at least for a while. That seems to be his best chance of recovering the hammer and becoming a "whole" man again. In keeping with this pattern, Prymr only feels empowered to claim Freyja when the hammer is in his custody. Without it, as the final episode of the lay exhibits, the giant is impotent. Prymr asks his servants to bring forth the hammer and place it on the maiden's knee, "brúpi at vígja"—"to consecrate/dedicate the bride," he ambiguously adds (st. 30).⁴ The disguised Þórr, on the other hand, smiles when he recognizes the implement in his lap, where it belongs; he has reclaimed his masculine identity and is able to blast the giants.

As the narrative opens *in medias res*, we have no concrete evidence which might explain how and why Þórr loses the hammer in the first place. It is safest to assume that Prymr stole the hammer while the owner was asleep, but, for the sake of argument, I would like to suggest that Þórr himself might have been partially responsible for the dilemma. In order to pursue that proposition, we need to focus momentarily on *Prymskviða's* narrative structure. It seems appropriate to divide the lay into four parts or acts according to the alternating settings of Ásgarðr and Jötunheimr. Act A (st. 1–5) takes place in Ásgarðr; in Act B we move to Jötunheimr (st. 5–9); Ásgarðr is again the setting of Act C (st. 9–21); and Act D (st. 21–33) concludes the plot in Jötunheimr. Each act, again, can be divided into scenes, in keeping with spatial or temporal shifts within each of the two worlds. For instance, in the third stanza of Act A Þórr travels from his roost—the setting of the first two stanzas—to Freyja's domicile, which then becomes the setting of the second scene of the act.

With this information in mind, we can turn back to the mysterious disappearance of the hammer. After a futile attempt to find his tool in the the first stanza, Þórr brings Loki the bad news in the second stanza. As there is no indication of any temporal or spatial shift between these two stanzas, the lay's structural logic purports that Þórr and Loki were sleeping in the same quarters the previous night. Þórr's address: "Heyr nú, Loki! hvat nú mælik"—"Listen now, Loki, to what I maintain" (st. 2), even hints that Loki was not particularly attentive when Þórr grabbed for his hammer. We can imagine (imagine indeed!) that Þórr needs to awaken his partner to inform him about the latest developments.

Accepting the hypothesis that Loki and Þórr were sharing the same quarters when the hammer disappeared, devoted readers of Scandinavian mythology will find Loki a likely accessory in the robbery. As a distinguished trickster, he is known for getting the gods into trouble, frequently by furnishing the giants with some valuable treasures from Ásgarðr.⁵ These suspicions may be encouraged even further when Loki, on his assignment to find out who has hidden Þórr's hammer, travels directly to Prymr's residence (st. 5). Without acquitting Loki of these accusations, I want to continue with my interpretation of the hammer as a symbol of masculinity. In view of Þórr's later concern about being called "argr", it is conceivable that he loses his masculine identity because he spends a night with Loki, who is notorious for wavering sexual preferences.⁶ Their union, then, becomes public in Act C when the thunder-god is dressed up as a woman and Loki volunteers to join him as a bond-maid (st. 20). At any rate, one must acknowledge that whoever is responsible for the disappearance of the hammer is initially stripping Þórr of his masculinity.

In this context, it is worth recalling how Þórr gives in, first to the extortion of Prymr and later to the plans of the other deities to disguise him. When Loki informs Þórr that the giant will only trade the hammer for Freyja, Þórr goes directly to the goddess and orders her to dress up as a bride and follow him to Jötunheimr. Freyja's fierce reflex, "Vreiþ varþ Freyja"—"Vehement was Freyja" (st. 12) contrasts with Þórr's submission, but it also echoes his reaction to the loss of his hammer: "Vreiþr vas Vingþórr"—"Vehement was Vingþórr" (st. 1). While such a linguistic parallel may be taken as a mark of an oral tradition, it can also be read as a vehicle of signification, denoting that Freyja's marriage to Prymr—her loss of control over her body—would be comparable to Þórr's loss of his hammer. Her reply to Þórr, "Mik veizt verpa vergjarnasta, ef ekk meþ þér í jötunheima"—"You will see me as a nymphomaniac, if I ride with you to Jötunheimr!" (st. 12), similarly suggest that an advance into the world of the giants stipulates a sexuality going beyond the traditions of Ásgarðr.

Before turning from this topic, I want to mention that the lay offers an additional illustration of Þórr's dilemma. On his scouting visit to Prymr, Loki learns that the giant has buried the hammer "átta röstum fyr jörþ neþan"—"eight miles below the earth" (st. 7). This is an interesting detail, especially since Þórr is designated as "Jarþar burr"—"Earth's offspring," in the opening of *Prymskviða* (st. 1). The stolen hammer, we realize, is buried below the surface of Þórr's mother ("jörð"/earth is a feminine noun in Icelandic), approximately in her bowels. Perhaps, this intimacy explains why the Earth burns in flames when the bride (Þórr in the role of Freyja) and her bond-maid enter the shady region of Jötunheimr (st. 21).

At that climactic crescendo of the lay, however, Þórr's masculine recovery is anticipated by his designation "Ópins sunr"—"the son of Ópinn" (st. 21).

At Þrymr's court, Þórr is similarly referred to as "Sifjar verr"—"Sif's spouse" (st. 24). After his adventures and entrance into the "other world", Þórr can be identified again with his father, rather than his mother, and be characterized as a husband instead of "argr". This retrogression of gender is finally certified in the conclusive lines of *Þrymskviða*: "Sva kvam Óþinn's sunnr endr at hamri"—"So did Óþinn's son get hold of the hammer" (st. 32).

CLASS

On Loki's return to Ásgarðr, following his discourse with Þrymr, Þórr asks his messenger for an updated report on the hammer. Specifically, he orders Loki to deliver the news "á lopti"—"in the air", since those who sit, Þórr explains, often leave something out of their accounts, and those who lie down are likely to tell lies (st. 9). These stage directions are certainly significant for the lay's concern with discourse, but before beginning that topic I would like to demonstrate how the stanza possibly supplies us, more generally, with a code of preferable postures, valid for the narrative as a whole. According to Þórr's judgement, it is best to be in the air (flying or standing), it is worse to sit, but worst of all is lying down.

Contemplated from this point of view, Þórr's development in *Þrymskviða* is one of slow rising. He is *lying* asleep in bed at the beginning of the poem, but we must assume that, after *sitting* impatiently throughout the wedding-feast, he will *stand* proudly with the hammer in his hands at the end of the lay. Þrymr, in comparison, does better than the furious thunder-god in the early phases of the plot, *sitting* quite relaxed when Loki meets him for the first time, braiding gold-cords for his dogs and dressing the mane of his mares (st. 5). The affection which the giant shows his livestock testifies to his bachelorhood—he does not have a wife to care for and decorate with jewels—but his bride's arrival in Jötunheimr signals that this state is about to change. Þrymr orders his fellow giants to *stand up* and prepare his halls for the wedding (st. 22), and he presumably stands himself at this pinnacle of his career. However, the giant's good fortune is short-lived. His fall is anticipated when he stoops down to kiss the fake bride in the latter half of the wedding-feast (st. 27) and he will *lie* dead at Þórr's feet before the night is over (st. 31).

Needless to say, Figure 1 should not be taken too literally; it is primarily expected to turn one's attention from the lay's theme of sexuality and gender towards its reflections on social "standing" and marriage. It certainly seems that Þrymr's desire for Freyja is inspired as much by the prospects of improved social "standing" as by that of having someone to receive his gold-cords and affection. The hammer is significant for the giant because of its exchange value: he wants to use it to "buy" Freyja, thereby adding a wife to his other belongings. This interest in possession is unveiled when Þrymr states that he has gold-horned cows, jet-black oxen, resources and wealth,

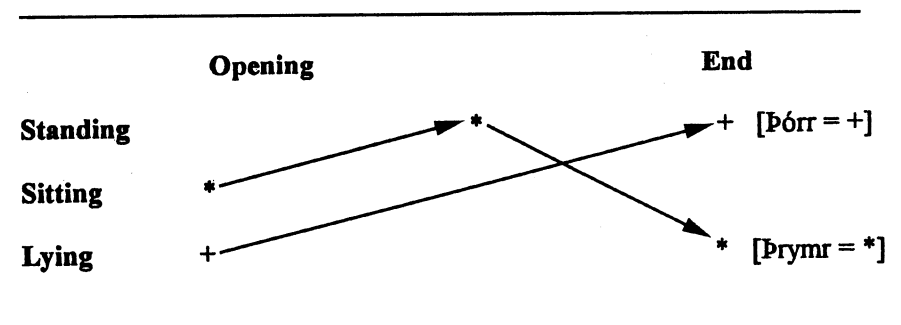


Fig. 1. The Development of Þrymr and Þórr

and only lacks Freyja to make his manor complete (st. 23). Freyja's reluctance to marry a creature from Jötunheimr indicates that the giants are, in one way or another, perceived of as inferiors by the inhabitants of Ásgarðr (st. 12). Consequently, we can assume that Þrymr's marriage with Freyja would bind him to a more noble family than his own.

In this context of sexual politics, it is interesting to examine how Þrymr's anonymous sister enters the scene at the end of the wedding-feast. In her only line, she orders the bride to hand over the dowry—some red rings that are presumably a part of the wedding dress. In return, she adds, Freyja will receive her love and favour (st. 29). The sister, just like her brother Þrymr, perceives human relations in an economy of exchange. Just as Þrymr attempts to buy a bride with the hammer, so Freyja is supposed to buy herself a favourable sister-in-law with the dowry.

At that late point in the lay, the narrative voice characterizes the giantess as being "ill fated" ("en arma," st. 29). This is the first time that the narrator openly disfavours the inhabitants of Jötunheimr, as if to prepare the audience for the giants' defeat. Ironically, the sister's request for the red rings points in the same direction. Without realizing it, she is asking Þórr to reveal his true identity, mentioning it as a premise for a more intimate relationship. That relationship turns out to be devastating for the feminine party, who receives a series of smacks and whacks from Þórr's formidable weapon in the final stanza. The giants' attempt to better their situation is fruitless; Þórr's recovery of the hammer secures social stability and possibly the privileges of Ásgarðr in relation to the "other" world.

DISCOURSE

While Þrymr finds the hammer loaded with social power, its absence enables Loki to go through a remarkable phase of linguistic development. I highlighted above how Þórr directs Loki's oral performance on Loki's arrival from Jötunheimr (st. 10). Þórr's assumed authority over his partner at that

point can be traced back to the opening scene, in which the thunder-god brings Loki on to the stage with the address: “Heyr nú, Loki! hvat nú mælik”—“Listen now, Loki, to what I maintain” (st. 2). Loki does not have a voice at this early hour: he only exists as Þórr’s addressee. In the following scene his presence is still very vague, merely known to us through the plural form “gengu”—“they walked” (st. 3), signifying that Þórr and Loki are on their way to Freyja’s.⁷

It is only when flying to Jötunheimr (st. 5) that Loki exists for the first time independently of Þórr, but he has not yet developed an identity or expressions of his own. He is dressed in Freyja’s feather-skin and is silent except for the coat’s booming. Finally, when Loki opens his mouth upon confronting Prymr (st. 7), his speech is triggered by the giant’s question and is additionally based on the giant’s exact words. Loki’s linguistic abilities seem equally limited when he brings Þórr the news from Jötunheimr (st. 11). Here, he compiles his report from Þórr’s preceding question (st. 10) and Prymr’s own statement about the hammer (st. 8).

A close comparison between Prymr’s speech and Loki’s report shows that Loki is becoming more independent in his linguistic construction. Interestingly, he leaves out the lines where Prymr specifies that he has buried the hammer “átta röstum fyr jörð neðan”—“eight miles below the earth” (st. 8). The question arises whether the omission implies that Loki simply forgets this piece of information and is, in spite of Þórr’s direction, sitting when he tells the tidings from Jötunheimr (cf. that those who sit often leave something out of their accounts). Then again, it is obvious that Loki is still in the air, but chooses not to reveal that the hammer is stored below the surface of Þórr’s mother.

Loki’s next step on the way to linguistic autonomy is taken at the juncture where the gods decide to dress Þórr up as a woman and send him to Jötunheimr. Earlier, Loki has spoken only when spoken to and his speech has consisted mostly of restatements. Here, on the other hand, he speaks with his own words. He silences Þórr’s doubts about assuming a feminine identity and adds that the giants will soon inhabit Ásgarðr if the hammer is not recovered (st. 17). In the context to our concern with language, Loki’s bold demand, “Þegi þú, Þórr! þeira orða”—“Shut up Þórr! these words,” is the ultimate turning-point of the lay. The line, being almost in the middle of the text and between two identical descriptions of Þórr’s female disguise, is so effective that the thunder-god not only accepts the queer identity of a woman, but also does not utter a word from this point onwards. Loki has taken over the discourse. He practices his linguistic powers a little later in order to control the action, informing Þórr that they (the two females) shall ride to Jötunheimr (st. 20). Unlike Freyja, who was fiercely opposed to identical instructions from Þórr before (st. 11), Þórr shows no reaction. He has become a mute, subject to his partner’s directions.

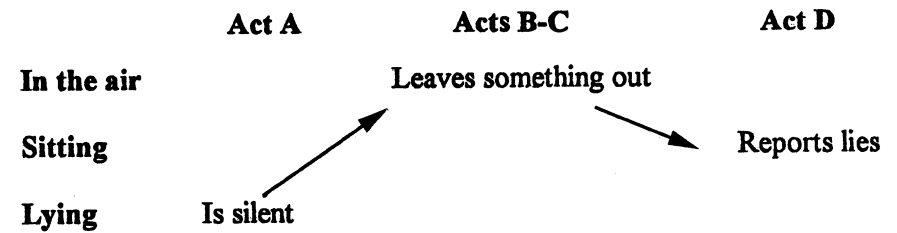


Fig. 2. Loki’s Development

Loki’s final step towards gaining textual control is taken during the wedding-feast. In his disguise, Þórr acts strangely for a woman and becomes an ambiguous “text” which Prymr has problems in “reading.” Loki, Freyja’s fair-looking bond-maid, steps in here as an interpreter, telling an imaginative story which makes the bride’s behaviour more comprehensible and acceptable to Prymr. Freyja, Loki explains, eats and drinks like a man and has fire in her eyes, because her eagerness to go to Jötunheimr has prevented her from eating and sleeping during the previous eight days (st. 26 and 28).

Loki certainly demonstrates his physical flexibility in *Frymskviða* by taking on the roles of a bird and a bond-maid, but more extraordinarily, we follow his rapid progression from being a silent addressee (Act A), towards becoming a messenger (Act B), a director (Act C), and finally a poet (Act D). His linguistic success would, in fact, make him qualify as a candidate if we were interested in uncovering the anonymous narrator of the lay. He is a “centre of consciousness,” the only character present in all the scenes and, therefore, the only one capable of reporting these events.

On the other hand, Loki’s performance in the wedding implies that his accounts should be mistrusted. Furthermore, his whole behaviour is actually apt to make us question Þórr’s code of preferable postures. Loki was *sitting* in the wedding when he lied to the giant (st. 26 and 28), he was still *in the air* (or sitting) when he “forgot” to tell Þórr where his hammer was buried (st. 10), and when Loki was *lying* in bed at the beginning of the lay, he did not have much to say at all.

CONCLUSION

I could conclude by writing that *Frymskviða* “is about” Þórr’s loss of masculinity. We can speculate about the reasons for this loss, but it seems that the only way for the thunder-god to recover his social and sexual identity

is to go “all the way”—dress up as a woman, enter Jötunheimr, and encounter the feminine side of himself. Perhaps the male reader goes through a similar experience merely by reading the poem.

From a slightly different standpoint, I might maintain that *Frymskviða* undermines phallogentric masculinity and social hierarchy. The hammer empowers the male. He uses it to suppress women, turn them into objects, buy them, possess them, and slay them. He uses it to preserve his privileges, to maintain the pyramidal structure of society, to protect social and sexual divisions. In the absence of the hammer, Loki steps forward as an alternative. S/he represents a more unrestrained sexuality and the humorous creativity of which *Frymskviða* is a product.

NOTES

1. *Frymskviða*, Lars Lönnroth observed, shares its narrative structure with a number of other medieval narratives (Eddic lays, folktales, and poems). In Lönnroth's analysis, the model for these are “resan till det andra landet”—“the trip to the other world”. See “*Skírnismál* och den fornisländska äktenskapnormen,” *Opuscula*, vol. II. *Bibliotheca Arnarnagana*, vol. XXV. (1961–77), pp. 154–78.

2. For an early documentation see Karl Weinhold. “Die Sagen von Loki.” *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Alterthum* VII (1849), pp. 1–94. Although Jan de Vries, along with many other scholars, rejects *Frymskviða* as a real myth, he subscribes to this interpretation of the lay. See *The Problem of Loki. Folklore Fellows Communications* 110 (1933), pp. 65–82.

3. Quotations from *Frymskviða* are from *Die Lieder der älteren Edda (Sæmundar Edda)*. *Bibliothek der ältesten deutschen Literatur-Denkmäler* VII. Ed. Karl Hildebrand, Hugo Gering. Paderborn (1922), pp. 146–53; English translations are my own.

4. Richard Perkins discusses the hammer as a double of Þórr's genitalia and the “hallowing” of the bride in *Frymskviða* in “The Eyrarland Image; *Frymskviða*, stanzas 30–31”. In *Afmælisrit Jónasar Kristjánssonar*. Reykjavík (1994), pp. 653–64.

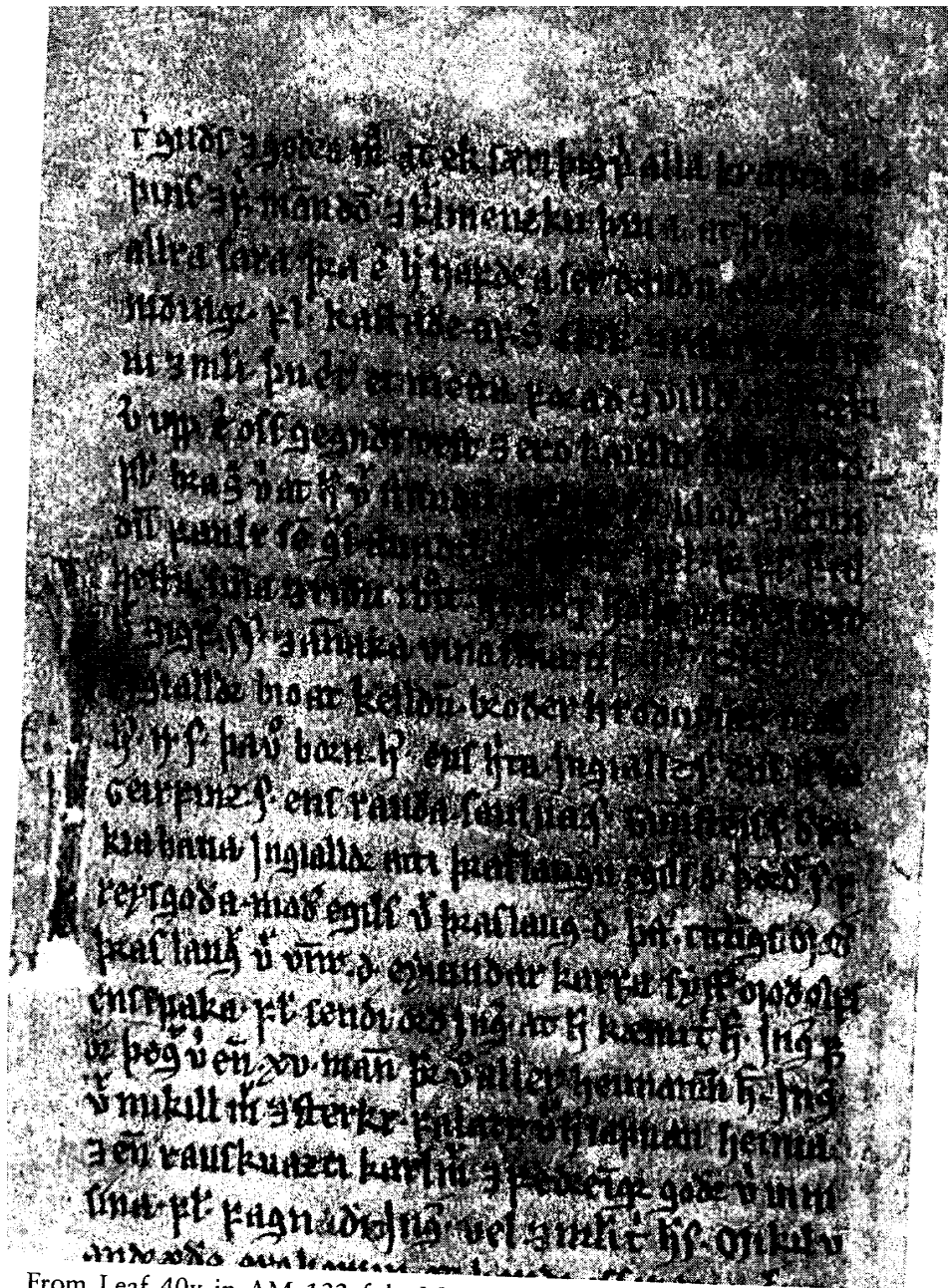
5. Cf. Anna Birgitta Rooth. *Loki in Scandinavian Mythology*. Lund (1961), pp. 235–37.

6. Loki's questionable masculinity is suggested by his second name, “Laufeyjar sonur”—“the son of Laufey” (sts. 18 and 20), linking him with his mother rather than his father. His wavering sexual preferences are additionally underlined in *Lokasenna*.

7. Undoubtedly, it is Þórr and not Loki who addresses Freyja in stanza 3. As in most other cases where Þórr opens his mouth (st. 2, 9, 12), his speech is preceded here by the epithet “auk þat orða alls fyrst of kvað”—“also these words he first spoke”.

COLD COUNSEL
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