


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, Guðrøðr 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, Guðrøðr surely must have been one of the best-traveled women of the early eleventh century. See Jochens, “Guðrøðr.”

"Pegi þú, Pórr!": Gender, Class, and Discourse in *Prymskvida*

Jón Karl Helgason

In the first stanza of *Prymskvida* Pórr 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 Jörunheimr. One of these rivals, the giant Prymr, 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, Pórr reclaims the hammer and employs it to kill the clan of giants. Lack is removed, threat is driven away, order is restored. 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, Pórr’s hammer is at the genesis of *Prymskvida*’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: Prymr 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. But as there is nothing in *Prymskvida*’s description of Jörunheimr 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.
Accepting the hypothesis that Loki and Þórðr 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 Ásgard. These suspicions may be encouraged even further when Loki, on his assignment to find out who has hidden Þórðr’s hammer, travels directly to Þrymr’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 Þórðr’s later concern about being called “ærgr”, it is conceivable that he loses his masculine identity because he spends a night with Loki, who is notorious for wavering sexual preferences. 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 Þórðr of his masculinity.

In this context, it is worth recalling how Þórðr gives in, first to the extortion of Þrymr and later to the plans of the other deities to disguise him. When Loki informs Þórðr that the giant will only trade the hammer for Freyja, Þórðr goes directly to the goddess and orders her to dress up as a bride and follow him to Jötnheimr. Freyja’s fierce reflex, “Vreiþ varþ Freyja” — “Vehement was Freyja” (st. 12) contrasts with Þórðr’s submission, but it also echoes his reaction to the loss of his hammer: “Vreiþ vas Vingþórðr” — “Vehement was Vingþórðr” (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 Þrymr—her loss of control over her body—would be comparable to Þórðr’s loss of his hammer. Her reply to Þórðr, “Mik veit verþa vergarnusta, ef ekk meþ þer þi jötunheima” — “You will see me as a nymphomanic, 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 Ásgard.

Before turning from this topic, I want to mention that the lay offers an additional illustration of Þórðr’s dilemma. On his scouting visit to Þrymr, Loki learns that the giant has buried the hammer “átt rostum fyr jörþ neþan” — “eight miles below the earth” (st. 7). This is an interesting detail, especially since Þórðr is designated as “Járþ burr” — “Earth’s offspring,” in the opening of Þrymskvida (st. 1). The stolen hammer, we realize, is buried below the surface of Þórðr’s mother (“jörd”/earth is a feminine noun in Icelandic), approximately in her bowels. Perhaps, this intimacy explains why the Earth burns in flames when the bride (Þórðr 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, Þórðr’s masculine recovery is anticipated by his designation “Óþins sunr” — “the son of Óðinn” (st. 21).
At Prymr's court, Pórr is similarly referred to as "Sífar verr"—"Síf's spouse" (st. 24). After his adventures and entrance into the "other world", Pórr 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 Prymskvíða: "Sva kvam Óðins sýn erndr at hamthri"—"So did Óðinn's son get hold of the hammer" (st. 32).

CLASS

On Loki's return to Ásgarðr, following his discourse with Prymr, Pórr asks his messenger for an updated report on the hammer. Specifically, he orders Loki to deliver the news "á loptri"—"in the air", since those who sit, Pórr 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 Pórr'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, Pórr's development in Prymskvíða is one of slow rising. He is lying asleep 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. Prymr, 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 Jötnheimr signals that this state is about to change. Prymr 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 Pórr'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 Prymr'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 Prymr states that he has gold-horned cows, jet-black oxen, resources and wealth, and only lacks Freyja to make his manor complete (st. 23). Freyja's reluctance to marry a creature from Jötnheimr 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 Prymr'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 Prymr'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 Prymr, perceives human relations in an economy of exchange. Just as Prymr 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 Jötnheimr, 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 Pórr 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 Pórr's formidable weapon in the final stanza. The giants' attempt to better their situation is fruitless; Pórr's recovery of the hammer secures social stability and possibly the privileges of Ásgarðr in relation to the "other" world.

DISCOURSE

While Prymr finds the hammer loaded with social power, its absence enables Loki to go through a remarkable phase of linguistic development. I highlighted above how Pórr directs Loki's oral performance on Loki's arrival from Jötnheimr (st. 10). Pórr'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: “Hýr ný, Loki! hvat ný 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.

It is only when flying to Jötnheimr (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 Jötnheimr (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 þóþ 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 Jötnheimr (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 Jötnheimr. 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 Ásгарðr if the hammer is not recovered (st. 17). In the context of our concern with language, Loki's bold demand, “Peði þú, Þórr! þeira orþa” — “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 Jötnheimr (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.

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 Jötnheimr has prevented her from eating and sleeping during the previous eight days (st. 26 and 28).

Loki certainly demonstrates his physical flexibility in Prymskviða 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 Prymskviða "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 Jötnheimr, 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 Prymskvíða undermines phallocentric 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 Prymskvíða is a product.

NOTES

1. Prymskvíða, 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 “Skúmsmál och den fornisländska äktenskapnormen,” Opuscula, vol. II. Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana, vol. XXV. (1961–77), pp. 154–78.


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 waverling 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 af kvæpi”—“also these words he first spoke”.
COLD COUNSEL
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AND MYTHOLOGY

A Collection of Essays
Edited by Sarah M. Anderson
With Karen Swenson

Routledge
New York and London

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