OF THEFT AND THUNDER: COMEDIC CROSSDRESSING IN MORGESON'S "ÞRYMSKVIÐA"

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ABSTRACT: In *The Elder Edda*'s predominantly tragic collection of Old Norse poems, "Þrymskviða" ("The Lay of Thrym") stands apart as a comedy centering on a gender-bending taboo: Thor crossdressing as the goddess Freya to retrieve his stolen hammer, Mjölnir. This paper investigates how the poem maintains its structural logic of comedy—as the inverse of tragedy—despite Thor risking accusations of *ergi* (unmanliness) and *níð* (social dishonor) by violating the 12th-century Grágás-laws that explicitly forbade crossdressing. Through analysis of both Old Norse and translated versions, I argue that the narrative carefully distinguishes between aesthetic transformation (crossdressing) and total transformation (shapeshifting). Thor's bridal disguise remains superficial, with the narrative maintaining masculine pronouns and emphasizing the discrepancy between his feminine appearance and masculine behavior. Further, I examine how divine precedents, particularly Odin's practice of *seiðr* (traditionally feminine magic) and Loki's gender fluidity, establish that gods operate beyond human legal constraints. The poem's resolution through extreme violence becomes essential to the comedic mode, transforming Mjölnir from a symbol of union back into an instrument of masculine dominance. Ultimately, "Þrymskviða" offers what the rest of *The Elder Edda* rarely does: hope that cosmic order can be restored, and that the anthropomorphic gods, as well as the people worshipping them, can retain agency over their fate.

Introduction

In Norse mythology, the gods are anthropomorphic, meaning that—although they belong to the realm of the Æsir and the Wanes, the two groups of Norse gods—their bodies obey the laws of physical anatomy. They bleed as humans bleed, and their lost limbs do not regrow; their godly bodies behave as human bodies do. And yet, some of the Old Norse gods can *hamskifte*, meaning they can shapeshift or change their *ham*—skin—into beings other than themselves. As opposed to other mythologies such as the Roman, where Athena jumped out of her father's skull, the gods in Norse mythology procreate as non-deities do. In the wings of godly weddings, then, lie physical romance and sexual relations between husband and wife. The poem this paper will focus on—known as "Þrymskviða," or "The Lay of Thrym"—plays on these marital expectations and turns them on their head by having two men nearly marry each other.

Fig. 1. *Ah, what a lovely maid it is!* (Smith).

The Elder Edda, also known as *The Poetic Edda*, commits to writing centuries of oral tradition telling the Old Norse tales of their gods. These are tragic tales, the majority of which relay bloody narratives of violence and vengeance that often end in death and despair. "Þrymskviða," while violent, stands out for its comedic undertones and romance, however subverted. Written in Iceland in the 13th century, "Þrymskviða" relays how Thor's hammer, Mjölnir, gets stolen by a Jötun—a being of the lower Giant-race—and of how Thor must dress up as the Wane, Freya, to retrieve Mjölnir.

Unlike the rest of *The Elder Edda*, this particular edda operates within a framework I will liken to a comedy. Crucially, this use of 'comedy' does not only denote the humorous genre intended to evoke laughter from an audience, although several scholars have observed the comedic, teetering on parodic quality of the masculine Thor dressed in bridal linen (Frankki 426). More specifically, comedy will amongst other components refer to a narrative structure in which social norms are restored at the end of the poem, reestablishing the world-order that was present at the beginning. In other words, "Þrymskviða" functions as a comedy in the sense of being the structural inverse of tragedy: where a tragedy begins in order and descends into disorder, a comedy ultimately restores the initial world-order at the end. Through the transformative framework of *ham* (my trans.) as opposed to crossdressing, I examine how this particular edda maintains its comedic structure

despite—and because of—its subversion of gender norms and the apparent violation of Grágás, the 12th century Icelandic law, when Thor cross-dresses as a woman. That the poem qualifies as a comedy suggests a degree of cultural acceptance of these transgressive elements, and I am especially interested in investigating how acceptance of such a taboo may be possible: if social death is at stake, how can crossdressing be funny?

I argue that three key conditions enable "Þrymskviða" to qualify as a comedy: a discrepancy between seeming and being; a restoration of the world-order; and, finally, an understanding that—despite being anthropomorphic—the Old Norse gods often break laws that non-godly humans must adhere to. Ultimately, I argue that hope is at stake in this *edda*: although the world-order gets upended when Thor's hammer is stolen, order gets restored by the poem's end. The return of Mjölnir—and Thor's masculinity—signal that things can return to what they were; there is hope for the world's survival yet. This paper draws upon two works of translation: the 1895 Danish version by Nobel-prize winner, Karl Gjellerup, as well as the newer English translation by Olive Bray. At times, I will conduct my own translations from either the Danish or original Old Norse versions and will mark them accordingly.

Before turning to a formal analysis of "Þrymskviða," a brief background on the context of *The Elder Edda* will be useful. In the year 536, three volcanoes erupted simultaneously, leaving the northern hemisphere covered in a layer of smog for years. The global temperature dropped several degrees Celsius over three summers, causing mass famine and death. Early Norse mythology was born from people who, for generations, lived in a world that nearly made them go extinct. The notion of Ragnarok—the Norse mythological belief in an extinction event informed by that of the 536 volcanic eruptions—mirrors the doom-like environment from which the early Viking Age arose (Gibbons 2018; Abildlund 2014; Britannica 2024). Much of *The Elder Edda* carries traces of these gloomy decades — except for "Þrymskviða." Though set in a world where cosmic order is threatened, from Thor's hammer being stolen and his masculine honor mocked, to divine power rendered vulnerable, the poem ends with restoration, not ruin. Through its comedic mode, "Þrymskviða" offers something rare in its mythological context: the possibility of return, and of recovery. It suggests that even after profound disorder, there is hope that the world can be made whole again.

To fully appreciate the stakes of crossdressing in "Þrymskviða," it is crucial to understand the sex-gender system of 13th-century Scandinavia: a system markedly different from both modern norms and from other medieval European frameworks. As Carol J. Clover observes in "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," 13th century Scandinavia had a "sex-gender system rather different from our own, and indeed rather different from that of the Christian Middle Ages" (2). Like the ancient Greeks, men having sexual relations with men was neither frowned upon nor illegal in itself; however, a man assuming the passive role was considered *ergi*, or unmanly, as *The Elder Edda* notes

in several instances ("Mig munu æsir / ergi kalla" 'Me the *Æsir* will / unmanly call' as Thor complains ("Þrymskviða" 16; my trans.)). This anxiety about unmanliness was codified in Icelandic law. The Grágás (or Grey Goose) Laws, compiled in the 12th century and in force throughout the Icelandic Commonwealth, explicitly outlaw crossgender expression. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen notes in *The Unmanly Man,* "The law debarred a woman from wearing male clothes, from cutting her hair like a man, bearing arms or in general behaving like a man… There was a corresponding edict against men appearing in a female role" (Meulengracht Sørensen 22). Within this legal and cultural framework, Thor's donning of bridal garments in "Þrymskviða" is not just comic or humiliating; rather, it's a profound violation of the gender order, one that would have been both socially stigmatized and legally forbidden. And yet, the poem does not end in disgrace or collapse. Instead, Thor reclaims his hammer, restores divine authority, and reasserts the masculine ideal he temporarily subverted. This restoration is central to the poem's hopeful vision: even when order is upended (here, through theft, through disguise, through taboo), it can still be reclaimed. Put differently, the world may wobble, but it does not fall.

The Grágás laws thereby establish a legal backdrop that heightens the stakes of Thor's crossdressing in "Þrymskviða," granted it poses a potential disruption to the societal order that the gods are meant to uphold. However, I argue that while these laws frame human behavior, the Old Norse gods are not bound by the same legal standards; instead, they navigate a moral and social landscape shaped by the concepts of *níð* and *ergi*. *Níð*, a deeply stigmatizing form of social dishonor, was often linked to accusations of unmanliness, or *ergi*, which implied the loss of masculine status and the threat of ostracism. As Clover writes, "the *níð*-taunts figure the insultee as a female and in so doing suggest that the category 'man' is, if anything, even more susceptible to mutation than the category 'woman.'" In other words, if a woman might easily transform into the masculine by wearing pants and fighting in battle, "the man's descent into the feminine was just one real or imagined act away" (Clover 9). In "Þrymskviða," Thor's "descent into the feminine" is not even an imagined act away; it occurs directly on the page as he puts on Freya's bridal clothes. In other words, Thor's donning of Freyja's bridal garb is not just comedic crossdressing but a direct flirtation with the boundaries of masculinity, rendering him vulnerable to charges of *níð*. Yet, despite the looming threat of social inversion, with Thor appearing as the bride of a lower being, the poem never allows this transformation to fully take root. In Njal's Saga, written around the year 1280, a similar situation to Thor's gets discussed: "If you are the bride of the Svinafell troll, as people say, every ninth night he comes and he uses you as a woman" (Clover 9). Njal becoming the bride of a troll implies the threat of passive homosexuality, the (de)masculine role looked down upon by Scandinavians at the time. Moreover, the same scenario—becoming the bride of a lower being akin to a Svinafell troll, and thus risking getting visits in the night to be "used as a woman"—looms in "Þrymskviða." Thus, the question remains: how

can "Þrymskviða" still operate within a comedic structure, despite the threat of Thor's emasculation and, worst case, social death through *níð*?

Thor's temporary crossdressing in "Þrymskviða" does not occur in a vacuum; it echoes with a deeper mythological precedent set by his father, Odin, whose own gender transgressions complicate the categories of masculine and feminine, as Brit Solli notes in *Seid: myter, sjamanisme og kjønn i vikingenes tid* (Solli 2002). A statuette discovered in Roskilde, Denmark, depicting a one-eyed figure (a hallmark of Odin) seated in a dress, suggests this fluidity was not just mythic but visual and symbolic. This crossdressing may tie into Odin being the most significant man to have learned *seiðr*, a traditional Norse magic attributed to women; in fact, to master *seiðr*—and not just its violent underbelly employed to trick the enemy in battle—one would have needed to be a woman. Freya taught Odin how to practice *seiðr*, which would arguably mean that part of Odin needed to be womanly (Solli 2002). In this context, accusations of *ergi*, often leveled against male practitioners of *seiðr*, highlight the broader cultural anxiety around male femininity and the permeability of gender roles. Jeanette Varberg's description of Odin as *tvekønnet* ("two-sexed") on her Gyldendal-podcast, Viking, reinforces this fluidity, proposing Odin as a liminal figure who contains both masculine and feminine elements (Varberg 2020). It also offers an explanation as to why this statuette might have shown him wearing a dress. As Clover argues, "the notion that sexual difference was less a wall than a penetrable membrane has a great deal of explanatory force in a world in which a physical woman could become a social man, a physical man could (and sooner or later did) become a social woman, and the originary god, Odin himself, played both sides of the street" (Clover 18-19). Odin's fluid identity does not mark him as deviant but as foundational. Thus, when Thor crossdresses to retrieve Mjölnir, he follows a divine lineage of gendered transformation. The comedy of "Þrymskviða," then, depends on the audience's assurance that Thor's temporary emasculation is not a break from divine order, but a part of it.

Like Odin and the other gods, the jokester Loki was embodied physically in a human body; yet, more so than the other gods, Loki often shapeshifts between several different beings — and genders. As Kevin J. Wanner reminds us in his article, "Sewn Lips, Propped Jaws, and a Silent Áss (or Two): Doing Things with Mouths in Norse Myth," "it is worth recalling from time to time that Norse mythical beings are consistently imagined by our sources as having bodies, and that many of the myths feature things happening to those bodies" (Wanner 1). One such myth depicts Loki transforming into a mare to give birth to the foal, Sleipnir, after being impregnated by the stallion Svaðilfari. As opposed to Thor crossdressing as—that is, merely looking like—a woman, Loki becomes a mare. Changing *ham* into female beings, and not merely crossdressing as a woman, raises the question of the discrepancy—and conflict—between changing beings as opposed to dressing as another gender. As James Frankki writes in "Cross-dressing in the Poetic Edda," Loki's "claim to fame rests on his gender-bending antics"

(Frankki 425), a summary of which may be found in Rolf Simek's 1993 Dictionary of Northern Mythology (Simek 193-7). Loki changing into a different being whilst simultaneously taking on a different gender underscores that, while the Old Norse gods may be anthropomorphic, their bodies are allowed to behave in ways the non-godly body cannot, setting crucial precedence for the comedy of Thor teetering on the edge of *ergi* by breaking the Grágas laws. In this light, Thor's breach of gender norms becomes less a violation and more a divine performance, reinforcing the comedic genre's reliance on temporary disorder and its eventual restoration; that is, breaking human laws without breaking the divine order.

The earlier myths of Loki's transformation into a mare set up his transformation into a falcon in "Þrymskviða." In addition, Loki borrowing Freya's falcon-*ham* establishes the transformative power of *hamskifte*, setting up its distinction from clothing. Where changing *ham* transforms the shapeshifter entirely, clothing merely makes them appear as though they have changed — an aesthetic, or performative, transformation. After realizing that his hammer is gone, Thor goes to Freya to borrow her falcon-*ham* for his blood-brother, Loki: "Fló þá Loki, fjaðurhamur dundi… / uns fyr utan kom ása garða," or, "Flew then Loki, feather-ham rustled / till he came without Asgarth" (4; my trans.). By wearing Freya's feather-ham, Loki—otherwise wingless and incapable of flying in his human body—may transform into a being capable of flying away from the Asgarth realm, the home of the gods. Notably, however, the Old Norse version does not use the word "coat" for these feathers, like Bray's English version, but rather "fjaðrhamr," meaning feather-skin, which cognate with the Danish version's "Fjederham" (4). In other words, Loki does not merely wear Freya's coat; he becomes a *hamskifter*, transforming into *hams* different from his own skin. In the English version, this transformation involves a piece of clothing—a coat—thus setting up the later aesthetic transformation of Thor involving Freya's bridal linen. The narrative is not anxious about Loki's transformation into a falcon through Freya's feather-coat, because Loki shapeshifting is not out of line with his typical behavior: Loki's bodily transformation sets a mythic precedent that frames Thor's later crossdressing not as a threat to order, but as part of a divine pattern — allowing "Þrymskviða" to operate within the comedic structures even as it plays with the boundaries of gender.

After learning that Thrym, the Jötun who stole Mjölnir, will take Freya as a bride in exchange for returning the hammer, Thor immediately approaches Freya to convince her to become Thrym's bride: "'Bind thee, Freyja, in bridal linen, / we twain must drive into Jötunheim'" (10). Thor's language suggests a discrepancy between looking and being, marked by the clothing Freya wears. He does not ask Freya to become Thrym's bride, but rather to "bind thee… in bridal linen," that is, to look like a bride by wearing bridal linen. This request reengages the transformative nature of clothing in this narrative, although it slightly complicates its power. While clothing may transform Freya into looking like a bride, Thor reminds us that she is merely "bound" in these linens; Thor's diction suggests that, as soon as she is unbound from these clothes, she is no longer a bride. I argue that

this suggests a distinction between clothing and *ham* in this narrative: when Loki puts on Freya's falcon-*ham*, for instance, he does not merely look like a bird; he becomes part-bird, thus rendered able to fly like one. I suggest we consider clothing in this narrative as prostheses — as articles capable of aesthetic transformation. Bridal linen, then, does not possess the power of complete transformation—like a *ham* might—but merely of aesthetic, performative transformation. This distinction reinforces the comedic structure of "Þrymskviða": Thor's bridal disguise is never a true transformation, but a prosthetically aided performance, allowing the poem to safely explore disorder without threatening the world-order's final restoration.

To retrieve Mjölnir, Thor must wear Freya's bridal linen to transform into appearing as her. The narrative frequently aligns Thor and Freya, but is careful to do so in a way that conveys no slippage between being Freya and merely looking like her. This alignment begins not visually, but syntactically, as both characters express their rage in near-identical terms. When Thor awakens to find his hammer missing, "Wroth was the Thunderer… / His beard was quivering, his locks were shivering / as he groped around him" (1). The description of Thor's wrath includes physical manifestations of his anger, as he starts to shake. Specifically, "skegg nam hrista, skör nam dýja" (1), that is, his beard—his hair—quivers and shakes in anger, connecting this wrath to something inherently masculine. He approaches Freya to make her become Thrym's bride in return for Mjölnir, but when Freya declines, it's with an anger parallel to Thor's initial wrath: "Wroth then was Freyja; fiercely she panted / the halls of Asgarth all trembled under, / burst that mighty necklet of Brisings" or, "Reið varð þá Freyja og fnásaði, / allur ása salur undir bifðist, / stökk þat et mikla men Brísinga" in Old Norse (12). Like the wrath of Thor, Freya's anger manifests itself physically, as she not only pants, "fnásaði," but causes "allur ása salur undir bifðist," that is, makes the gods' halls tremble. Freya's undisputed and angry refusal could be read as masculine, especially when considering the earlier description of Thor's trembling beard. Their shared wrath aligns the two before the narrative physically aligns them once Thor aesthetically transforms into appearing as a bride by wearing Freya's bridal linen. This parallelism supports the poem's comedic structure, as it dramatizes disorder through visual and emotional doubling, while reinforcing that the gods' identities remain intact. In other words, enabling the eventual restoration of order and hope.

But before this performative transformation can take place, Thor must first be convinced that he, and not Freya, should become Thrym's bride. Here, the narrative introduces the god Heimdal, another man whose gender fluidity is part of his identity — and power. Indeed, Thor is not the only man whom the narrative aligns Freya with; in several instances, the narrative draws parallels between her and Heimdal, too. Heimdal—whose name may have been etymologically connected with Mardöll, one of Freya's names in Old Norse (Britannica 2024)—is a mysterious god whose role was to blow the horn to forewarn Ragnarok's approach. In this story, he's described as being "of gods the fairest" (14). The diction here, and specifically the word "fair," aligns him with "fair Freya" (7, 10, 11, 22), a recurring descriptor of her. These parallels are crucial since Heimdal—

like Thor's father, Odin—was versed in the practice of *seiðr*, and specifically in the ways of the Wanes: "Spake then Heimdal, of gods the fairest; / even as the Wanes could he see far forward" (14). Like Freya, a Wane, Heimdal can see into the future. The Wanes—an older group of Norse gods who became part of the Æsir after the Æsir-Vanir war—were known for their connections to fertility and seeing the future (Crawford 2015). As with all *seiðr*, predicting the future was mostly a woman's craft, and would have been seen as *ergi* for a man to practice: as Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir writes in "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the 'Íslendingasögur,'" "In practice, seiðr seems to have been more or less exclusively the territory of women; male practitioners were stigmatized as contaminated by *ergi*, passive homosexuality, which was considered highly shameful" (Friðriksdóttir 416). In other words, the deliberate reminder that Heimdal could tell the future adds to the notion that this is a narrative dealing largely with gender transgression. It also further exemplifies that not just Thor, but several other male characters in this narrative, play with gender, as "knowledge of the future [was] predominantly, although not exclusively, a female trait" (Friðriksdóttir 424). Heimdal's role as a Wane-adjacent seer shows that Thor is neither the first nor the only man to be aligned with Freya in this story. Crucially, however, none of these alignments disrupt the characters' established identities beyond the scope of "Þrymskviða." Heimdal does not become a seer solely for this tale, just as Thor's crossdressing remains a temporary performance, not a lasting transformation.

Heimdal's foretelling of Thor's future does come true. As Heimdal urges Thor to dress up as Freya, Heimdal says:

> Come bind we Thor in bridal linen,
> let him wear the mighty Brisinga-men.
> Let us cause the keys to jingle under him,
> weeds of a woman to dangle round him,
> and over his breast lay ample jewels,
> and daintily let us hood his head' (14-15).

After Loki silences Thor's objections with Loki's own prophecy of the future, which involves the Jötuns overtaking Asgarth unless Thor retrieves his hammer (17), Heimdal's foretelling is realized:

> Then bound they Thor in bridal linen,
> eke with the mighty Brisinga-men.
> They caused the keys to jingle under him,
> weeds of woman to dangle around him,
> and over his breast laid ample jewels
> and daintily they hooded his head (18-19)

Syntactically, Heimdal's prediction and the subsequent reality are nearly identical. In fact, the main difference between the two verses is the shift from a focus on Thor—who, at first, needs convincing—to a focus on the others gods: the "they" who need to transform Thor into appearing as a bride because they must save

Asgarth from being conquered by Jötuns. This alignment of present to future is imperative to the prospect of restoring the world-order at the end of the narrative.

The narrative once again aligns Thor and Freya as he accepts her rejection of dressing up as a bride and thus must do it himself. The dialogue urging both of them to wear the bridal linen is strikingly similar: "'Come bind we Thor in bridal linen, / let him wear the mighty Brisinga-men"' (14). Earlier, when Thor urged Freya to wear her bridal linen, he exclaimed, "'Bind thee, Freyja, in bridal linen"' (11). Syntactically, the two commands are nearly identical, arguably foreshadowing the imminent transformation of Thor into Freya, or into a bride wearing Freya's bridal linen. Crucially, Thor wearing her necklace, Brisingamen—which previously burst from Freya's rage—marks him as not just any bride, but as Freya. Like Mjölnir, Brisingamen is deeply tied to identity and power; for Thor to convincingly pose as "fair Freya," he must wear this emblem. That the necklace, once broken, is now reassembled and worn again suggests that what has been fractured can be restored, even if it is at the hands, or around the neck, of someone else. This mending reflects the poem's larger arc: that the world order may once again return to what it was before Thor's hammer was stolen and the power and social hierarchy were disrupted.

The linguistic interpretations of the translated versions argue for the success of Thor's aesthetic transformation from Thunderer to future bride. While Olive Bray's English translation refers to Freya's bridal linen as "weeds of a woman," Karl Gjellerup's Danish version translates venvaðir as "Kvinde-Klæder" or "woman's clothes" (15). In its interpretation of the original, Bray's translation may lend itself to the Victorian "widow's weeds," the clothing a mourning widow would wear after the passing of her husband. Of course this connotation would not have been accessible to *The Elder Edda's* Old Norse readership, but it does—intentionally or not—nonetheless foreshadow Thor's fate as a widow after killing his coming husband, Thrym, upon retrieving Mjölnir. The Danish translation's "Kvinde-Klæder" may be a play on *lændeklæder*, a loin cloth traditionally worn by men but visually similar to a woman's skirt. Both translations create an alliteration not found in the original. Further, the bodily language in this passage seems to transform Thor's very body into that of a woman's, as "over his breast laid ample jewels." This description lends itself to a feminine body, whose ample breasts are decorated with a heavy necklace of jewels. The adjectives of this description add to Thor's aesthetic transformation, as they "daintily" hood his head. Significantly, though, this final line describes his face becoming veiled, reminding us that, while the gods may be able to make Thor look like a woman (and specifically, like Freyja), he does not become her. At the moment of a future unveiling of his face, he would be revealed to be a man, transformed back into Thor, whom the narrative knows was always hiding beneath the hood. Disorder is only temporary while the true order—Thor's masculinity and divine role—remains intact and ready to be restored.

Thor is not the only man who undergoes a performative transformation into womanhood by crossdressing, although his is the transformation that produces the most anxiety. I argue that this is because Thor's crossdressing contradicts his typical masculine behavior, whereas Loki frequently takes on different *ham*s. In this story, Loki crossdresses twice: once by equipping Freya's feather-coat and becoming her falcon-*ham*, and later by also wearing "kvenvoðir," "woman's weeds," and transforming into Thor's bridesmaid, or "serving-maiden (20, 26, 28). Instead of Thor and Freya traveling to Jötunheim to retrieve Mjölnir, as Thor attempted to foretell by telling Freya that "we twain must drive into Jötunheim" (11), Loki is the one who tells Thor that "we twain will drive into Jötunheim" (20). This repetition of Thor's earlier command, but with Thor dressed as—and syntactically in the role of—Freya, reveals that his superficial transformation is complete. Linguistically, he has become Freya, with the descriptive language mirroring his visual transformation into her as well. Despite this doubling, the narrative offers no description of Loki's second transformation outside of him declaring that it will occur. Does he take off the maiden-costume once Thor gets his hammer back, for instance? The narrative's lack of answer renders Loki's crossdressing nonthreatening. I argue that this lack of anxiety stems from the fact that this cross-gendered behavior is not a single, unique slippage on Loki's part. *Hamskifte* is part of Loki's nature, meaning that his crossdressing does not need to get resolved for the world-order to be restored by changing him back into a masculinely-clothed, male-conforming body at the end of the story.

To retrieve Mjölnir from Thrym, Thor cannot simply dress as any woman: he must convincingly appear as fair Freya herself. This transformation demands more than a superficial disguise; it requires Thor to bridge the gap between seeming and being. Crossdressing as a specific woman unifies the anxiety around seeming and being, for Thor must not merely look like any woman, but also behave like Freya would behave. Thrym is not seeking just any bride; he wants "Freyju að kvæn," or "as bride fair Freya" (7) in return for Mjölnir. Thus, for the world-order to be restored, Thor must "become" Freya, and in order for this performative transformation to be complete, he cannot just wear her clothes the way Loki wore her feather-*ham*: in lieu of shapeshifting into Freya, Thor must behave like her. The narrative signals the discrepancy between Thor looking like as opposed to being Freya when he fails to also behave like she would: "Thor ate an ox and eight whole salmon, / with dainties all as should a damsel, / three full cups of mead he quaffed" (24). Thrym immediately notes this discrepancy between how his new bride looks and how she behaves, saying "'Didst ever see damsel eat so bravely? / Ne'er have I seen one bite so boldly, / nor a maiden quaff more cups of mead!'" or, "'Þá kvað það Þrymur, þursa drottinn: / Hvar sáttu brúðir bíta hvassara? / Sák-a eg brúðir bíta breiðara / né inn meira mjöð mey um drekka'" in Old Norse (25). Even Thrym's diction, subconsciously or not, notes this masculine behavior. "Hvassara" and "breiðara," or "bravely" and "boldly," contrast with how a damsel should be behaving. Thor's slippage between seeming and being allows the narrative to maintain a careful distinction: Thor may look like Freya, but he does not become

her. Thus the narrative may ease its anxiety around Thor's crossdressing, for while he may be able to trick the giants by looking like Freya, the narrative rests assured knowing that he is not also behaving like her. The comedic tension stems from this discrepancy, which is safely resolved when Thor regains his hammer and is once again called "the Thunderer" (1, 31). Thus, Thor's masculinity—and by extension, the world-order's divine stability—remains intact at the end of the poem.

Linguistically, the narrative is not convinced by Thor's transformation by crossdressing as Freya, further signifying the gap between appearing as a woman and being a woman. On the way to his wedding day, the narrative immediately genders Thor: "Rent were the mountains, earth was aflame; / fared Odin's son into Jötunheim" (21). Despite wearing dainty jewelry across his breast and being bound in Freya's bridal linen, the text still refers to Thor as "Odin's son." Throughout the wedding itself, Thor is only called "Freya" in dialogue; the narrative is meticulously careful to delineate Thor's aesthetic transformation as only superficial. Thrym exclaims, "'Stand up, Jötuns! and strew the benches! / Now shall ye bring me as bride fair Freyja, / daughter of Njörd, from Noatun" (23). The juxtaposition of Thor's son and Njörd's daughter seems to be the first hint at ridiculing Thrym, who believes he is marrying Freya but will eventually meet his death by Thor's hammer. Put differently, there exists an awareness that the real Thor—Odin's son—is merely bound, and not fundamentally transformed, by these bridal linens, and will break out of them once the time is right to restore the world-order.

Specifically, the narrative creates a disconnect between Thor's appearance and his behavior by consistently referring to him as "Thor" during his excessive—and masculine—behavior at the dinner table. From verses 24 to 28, the text jumps from referring to him as "Thor" in description, and as "Freya" in dialogue. This discrepancy highlights the success of Thor's aesthetic transformation, as the Jötuns do not have access to the narrative's descriptive language. When Loki defends how "Thor ate an ox and eight whole salmon… / [and] three full cups of mead he quaffed" (24), the "crafty" serving-maiden says, "'Nought has Freyja these eight nights eaten, / so sore her yearning for Jötunheim" (26). This answer remains faithful to Thor's performative transformation into Freya, referring to him as such while using female pronouns. Yet the narrative calls Loki "crafty," mirroring how he crafts this untrue but clever response. Loki retains an awareness of who's hiding beneath the bridal veil, serving as a reminder that they only tricked Thrym, and not the narrative, into believing that he is marrying Freya. This, too, is comedic: a powerful god fooling a lower being not only reestablishes the social hierarchy but does so through wit, implying the Jötuns' lack of intelligence.

Interestingly, the same differentiation between description and dialogue cannot be found in the narrative's depiction of Loki as Thor's serving-maiden. There exists no discrepancy between description and dialogue for Loki post-crossdressing; his transformation into Thor's serving-maiden is total, as evidenced by Loki's own agency and ownership: "Spake then Loki, the son of Laufey: 'I will

fare with thee as thy serving-maiden"' (20). The narrative immediately holds two truths at once: that Loki is the son of the woman Laufey, and that he will transform into a serving-maiden, or bridesmaid. As opposed to Thor, who had to be convinced by several gods to crossdress—if not forced with a doomsday-like vision of a future ruled by Jötuns—Loki immediately volunteers to go with Thor. Thus, Loki retains his agency even as he becomes a serving-maiden: unlike Thor, who had to be forced by the other gods to crossdress, Loki chooses this transformation willingly. In Gjellerup's Danish version, the narrative even switches to feminine pronouns when referring to Loki in serving-maiden-form: "Hos hin trædske Terne da sad, / Svar paa Thursens Tale hun fandt:…" meaning, "With craftiness serving-maiden sat /Answer to Thrym's speech she found: …" (26; my trans.). While the original Old Norse does not use gendered pronouns in this verse (akin to the ungendered Danish pronoun, "hin," used in the first line above), the Danish translation argues that Loki's transformation into a serving-maiden is convincing enough to be complete. Not only does the translation consistently refer to Loki as a serving-maiden, both in description and dialogue — the narrative even transforms him into a woman linguistically. Given that genderfluidity is intrinsic to Loki's character, the Danish translation's lack of linguistic anxiety around his transformation reinforces the narrative's comfort with Loki's *hamskifte*, as opposed to Thor's crossdressing, which disrupts normative masculinity and therefore demands resolution for the social norms to be restored.

The only time Thor gets referred to as "her" is in Olive Bray's version, when Thrym is about to lift the veil and consummate their marriage with a kiss. Neither the Old Norse nor the Danish language necessitates any pronoun following the verb "kiss," meaning that any English translation must make a decision: when describing how Thrym stooped "'neath the veil, to kiss [Thor]" (Bray 27), a name or pronoun should follow the verb, 'to kiss.' In Old Norse, Thrym merely "Laut und línu, lysti at kyssa," that is, lifted the linen, desiring to kiss (27; my trans.). Bray writes that, "Stooped then Thrym 'neath the veil, to kiss her" (27), signifying that, in this moment, Thor is, syntactically and narratively, closest to becoming a woman. I argue that this use of female pronouns stems from the anxiety of a physical confrontation, that is, of actually letting Thrym kiss Thor, thus rendering him *ergi*, or even *nið*. Not only is the veil of his bridal linen lifted; his transformation into a woman would become complete as he would not only look like Thrym's bride but, by way of kissing him, act like his bride. The moment Thrym stoops beneath the veil, Thor's crossdressing gets reduced from a performative transformation—akin to that of Loki—into nothing more than a disguise hiding beneath a veil. The narrative makes a decision, as "back [Thor] leapt the hall's whole length" (27), mirroring Thrym's physical act with a physical response — leaping back the entire length of the hall. As such, Thor refrains from becoming *ergi*, and does not become the passive recipient of Thrym's sexual behavior, but rather responds by a physical reaction in kind.

Thor's physical reaction begs another question: why did Thor and Loki not respond to Thrym's thievery by stealing back Mjölnir from him before even

considering crossdressing? When Loki flew to Jötunheim and met Thrym, the Jötun admitted to stealing and hiding Thor's hammer: "'I have hidden the Thunderer's hammer / eight miles under, deep in the earth / and never a being back shall win it / till he bring me as bride fair Freya"' (7). Thrym describes that he has hidden Mjölnir eight miles under, deep in the earth, which likely refers to Hel's realm, or Helheim, located deep in the earth beneath one of Yggdrasil's three roots. In Old Norse, *hel* even means "hidden." By revealing the hammer's approximate hiding place, Thrym reveals where Loki and Thor could find Mjölnir. "Þrymskviða" could have been a story about Thor venturing into the realm of the dead to steal his hammer back from the Jötuns and Helheim's ruler. But this possibility is never even considered as an option for Loki and Thor, who immediately comply with the terms that he must "bring [Thrym] as bride fair Freya." I would argue that this compliance of Thrym's terms is born from a need to humiliate Thrym. However, stealing the hammer back is not sufficient humiliation, as this would only be an eye for an eye, so to speak; Thor needs to humiliate Thrym through domination—i.e., more extreme violence than thievery—to dismiss any possibility of getting accused of being ergi. Since Thor ends up on top narratively, he subverts the notion of passive homosexuality insinuated by Thrym stealing Mjölnir from Thor when he was sleeping — that is, while he was immobile and, thus, passive. Ultimately, this is what legitimizes Thor's crossdressing: the notion that he only looks like a woman so he may act like a man by retrieving his hammer and beheading its thief.

When Thor gets reunited with Mjölnir, the diction becomes masculine. Thrym brings out the stolen hammer as a wedding gift "for his bride to hallow," or "brúði að vígja" (30), and the narrative sarcastically describes how Thrym will place Mjölnir "í meyjar kné," that is, "on the knee of the maiden" (30). Twice, feminine nouns—"bride" and "maiden," "brúði" and "meyjar"—are used to refer to Thor. The moment the hammer is placed on his knee, however, the narrative once again refers to him as the Thunderer: "Laughed in his breast the heart of the Thunderer; / strong was his soul when he spied his hammer," or "Hló Hlórriða hugr í brjósti, / er harðhugaðr hamar of þekkði" in Old Norse (31). Although "brjósti," or "breast," is a repetition—serving as a parallel to when the gods lay ample jewels over his breast to make it look like that of a woman—"breast" becomes stripped of its feminine adjectives here. In other words, it becomes more masculine, as it's no longer in syntactical extension with "ample
jewels." It should also be noted that, in both Danish and Old Norse, bryst/brjósti translates to both "chest" and "breast," meaning there exists no separate word for "breast" that is not gender ambiguous, and does not carry a potentially feminine connotation. In verse 31, there is no ambiguity as to whether the word attempts to suggest Thor's chest appears to have two breasts; instead, he laughs in his breast as he grows strong, in a way ripping himself of the feminine connotation and transforming the insinuated breasts into a strong, laughing breast. Narratively, this laughter also signals that we have reached the comedy of the poem, mirroring the structural restoration of order. Once Thor gets reunited with his hammer, he is

also reunited with his power, which further suggests that this power is tied to strength — a typically masculine trait.

The language describing this transformation back into the Thunderer is largely internal. Put differently, these descriptions of Thor shift from external (looks) to internal (being). Instead of focusing on how the jewelry clinks when he laughs in his breast, for example, the descriptions focus on how his heart laughed inside his breast. As though this shift from external looks to internal being manifests itself physically in Thor's violent behavior, "Þrym drap hann fyrstan, þursa drottin, / og ætt jötuns alla lamdi," or, "He first smote Thrym, the lord of giants, / and all the Jötun's kindred crushed" (31). Both to "smite" and to "crush"—"drap" and "lamdi"—are strong, violent verbs that convey Thor's masculinity. This shift in linguistic focus from external to internal descriptions mirrors the shift in Thor: once reunited with his hammer, he no longer has to hide his masculine being behind a veil of external bridal linen. At last, his internal being and external appearance align, signaling not only the restoration of his masculinity but also the re-establishment of the world-order.

Mjölnir as an object of violence and a vessel for masculinity lends itself to the notion that the hammer itself symbolizes the masculine. James Frankki considers the interpretation that robbing Thor of his hammer simultaneously robs him of his masculinity: "The loss of Thor's hammer was interpreted as a sign of vulnerability and weakness, but the fact that it was snatched from him—by a giant, nonetheless—might also be understood as an act of emasculation since the hammer was the source of his strength and virility" (Frankki 430). Indeed, as Kevin J. Wanner notes, "Mjöllnir is the most valued of the gods' treasures and the cosmos's most effective tool of violence" (Wanner 3). The fact that someone can take this object from Thor suggests that masculinity may be lost as well. Further, the hammer being a symbol of masculinity suggests that men are not inherently masculine, but that this is instead something they may earn or equip themselves with like a piece of clothing or a prosthetic. Thus, in order for the world to be right, the poem must end by the most masculine of men regaining Mjölnir — if not, this implies that less masculine men, too, can risk losing their masculinity.

Mjölnir's masculine symbolism lends itself to the notion that the hammer itself is a phallic object. In the book chapter, "Reading 'Þrymskviða,'" from *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, Margaret Clunies Ross writes that "Mjöllnir symbolises [sexual potency], and as… I (1994b) have shown by reference to the shape of surviving amulets and pictorial representations of Mjöllnir from the medieval period, its physical appearance was unmistakably phallic" (Clunies Ross 187-8). As such, I would agree with Clunies Ross that Thrym's theft of Mjölnir could be interpreted as an act of castration, that is, of stealing Thor's manhood from him in his sleep. The fact that he was asleep and "er hann vaknaði / ok síns hamars of saknaði," that is, when "he awakened / and missed his hammer" (1), means that Thor remained passive when his hammer—or manhood—was stolen. As Clunies Ross argues, "Thrym robs [Thor] of his hammer Mjöllnir, which is both the weapon by means of which the god regularly

keeps the giants in control and prevents them from enjoying goddesses and the symbol of his phallic power. This act, with which the poem begins, is… a symbolic castration of Thor himself" (188). Thus, Thor's retrieval of his hammer by physically dominating Thrym becomes essential to the restoration of the world-order; if the Thunderer, the manliest of gods, can be castrated in his sleep—and thus rendered *ergi*—by a being of lower social status, the entire world-order gets threatened. In order for this lay to restore the world-order and remain a comedy, the manliest of gods must get back his hammer and masculinity, because the masculine must be intricately connected with the strength and power it takes to be socially superior in this society.

However, Mjölnir not only symbolizes phallic power and violence: the hammer is also a symbol of marriage and union. To consecrate their marriage, Thrym presents his bride with the hammer: "Then spake Thrym, the lord of giants: / 'Bring in the hammer, the bride to hallow. / Mjöllnir lay on the knee of the maiden! / Hallow us twain with the hand of the Troth-goddess!'" (30). Thrym's language suggests that Mjölnir is essential to "hallowing," or "vígið okkr saman," that is, wedding us together. In the same way a hammer may be used to hurt someone, a hammer can also be used to build something; in other words, the hammer gets transformed into a unifying symbol, an object capable of not just great destruction but also of unification. Like Odin's two- sexedness, Mjölnir holds two truths at once: both of violence and destruction as a phallic symbol of masculinity, and of a hallowing object essential to the Old Norse marriage ceremony. The masculine and feminine exist alongside each other in Mjölnir, just as they do in Thor, who both is the Thunderer and looks like the "maiden" about to marry Thrym.

While Thor looks like a maiden without ever behaving like one, the hammer seems to wed Thor and Thrym, only to be transformed from an object of union into an object of destruction. As Clunies Ross writes: "Only when the marriage arrangements are about to be formalized through the ritual consecration with his own hammer placed on his apparently feminized lap can Thor break the illusion" (Clunies Ross 181). Indeed, the moment Thor gets his hammer back, he kills Thrym before Mjölnir "all the Jötuns' kindred crushed. / Smote he the ancient sister of Jötuns… / And thus Thor won him again his hammer" (31-32). The hammer is instantaneously transformed into an object of powerful violence and masculine dominance, mirroring Thor's own transformative revelation as he "breaks the illusion" of being a maiden, as Clunies Ross writes. What I'm most interested in, however, is the final line of the poem, and the idea that Thor only wins his hammer back after slaughtering the Jötuns. Syntactically, this statement does not describe his immediate reunion with Mjölnir—which occurs the moment Thrym places it on Thor's knee a few verses prior—but rather describes his later victory over the giants. Linguistically, then, the narrative appears to suggest that, had Thor not succeeded in violently dominating the Jötuns as revenge for their lord's attempt at tricking the Thunderer, Thor would not have been worthy of the hammer, and thus not able to "win" it back. As Carol J. Clover writes, "The frantic

machismo of Norse males, at least as they are portrayed in the literature, would seem on the face of it to suggest a society in which being born male precisely did not confer automatic superiority, a society in which distinction had to be acquired, and constantly reacquired, by wresting it away from others" (13). Put differently, Thor's reunion with his hammer symbolizes the world-order's restoration, which may only occur through shattering the illusion of feminine trickery by enacting physical, dominant revenge. As such, this display of extreme violence becomes essential to the poem's comedic mode: without it, Thor would not have won his hammer back, and the world-order would not have been restored.

Despite breaking the Grágás law by having Thor crossdress as a woman, and a narrative teetering on the edge of *ergi*, "Þrymskviða" remains a comedy. This edda operates in extremes, from marriage to murder, and from a hyper-masculine Thor to the Thunder-god crossdressing as Freya. Jan de Vries suggests in his book, *Edda: Goden- en Heldenliederen Uit de Germaanse Oudheid*, that it was likely the narrative's intention to create "a comical contrast" (de Vries 275) with the typical Scandinavian hyper-masculine, war-like portrayal of Thor. The comedy arises in turning Thor's typically extreme masculinity on its head by superficially transforming him into a bride — a comical contrast from his typical portrayal indeed. As Clunies Ross notes, "caricature and overstatement are the hallmarks of Old Icelandic comedy. Þórr's situation in "Þrymskviða" is extreme; he loses his hammer while he is asleep, which deprives him literally of his ability to control the giants and symbolically of his virility" (Ross 184). The means by which Thor restores the world-order are extreme, too, as he "all the Jötun's kindred crushed"; that is, murdered not just Thrym, but all of his relatives as well. For the lay to operate within a comedic structure, the world order must be restored by means just as extreme as was used to disrupt the world order in the first place. Frankki argues that "Thor's response is consistent with the severity of the laws regarding cross-dressing and likely reflect the response of Ice Landers listening to or reading this poem in the Viking Age and beyond" (Frankki 428). As such, I argue that the story is a comedy, not despite its extreme portrayals of both gender-fluidity and violence, but rather because of them. The poem resolves the tension it creates by exaggerating Thor's masculine restoration, transforming him back into the Thunderer: the narrative does not end in tragedy, because Thor does not remain in costume; as such, it is safe to laugh at his transgression, for it was never a complete transformation.

Importantly, the poem ensures that Thor's transgression is framed as both temporary and strategic. Thor's masculinity, and by extension the gods' dominance, is never permanently undermined. Once Mjölnir is returned, Thor's identity and the cosmic hierarchy are restored as he slaughters Thrym and the giants. The very ability to play with disorder, to laugh at it, to perform it, and to reverse it, is what allows the poem to close with comedic restoration instead of tragic disorder. The poem emphasizes the temporary nature of Thor's disguise and culminates in the triumphant recovery of Mjölnir, which restores both his masculine identity and the world order. Further, this restoration neutralizes the

threat of *níð*, allowing the poem to operate safely within the bounds of comedy. "Þrymskviða" thus holds space for disorder only long enough to underscore its reparation, offering not only humor but a reaffirmation of hope that order, identity, and power can be reclaimed — in other words, offering a sense of agency over one's fate.

In its entirety, *The Elder Edda* is a dark, deeply pondering, and often pessimistic collection of poetry. As a whole, the Edda greatly concerns itself with anxieties about the future and what is to come, culminating in the end of mankind, the gods, and the world-order as they knew it through the doomsday-like event, Ragnarok. A comedy borrowing romantic tropes, "Þrymskviða" sticks out from the rest of the eddic poems, leaving us with the question of why this lay is even part of the Edda in the first place. Despite discrepancies in both genre, tone and romance themes, "Þrymskviða" has a major concern in common with the rest of the eddic poems: anxieties about the future. When Thor's hammer gets stolen, the other gods' first concern is the future. Without Mjölnir, the gods are now left defenseless against the Jötuns' possible invasion of Asgarth, as Loki argues in order to convince Thor that he must cross-dress as Freya. If not, the world order might truly be disrupted, as the gods would lose their home, social status, and power. At its core, then, this is a story about the future and the fate of the gods. However, as opposed to the other eddic poems, "Þrymskviða" grapples with these anxieties through comedy; with humor, the narrative assures the reader that, despite an enormous Ragnarok-like catastrophe nearly occurring, the gods do outsmart the lower beings, and Thor does win his hammer back. In other words, the lay provides the gods with agency over their own fates and shows that the world-order may be restored again, even following such extreme scenarios. Similar to other contemporaneous 12th century works, such as Heldris' "Le Roman de Silence," in which a girl must cross-dress as a boy to ensure her inheritance—and whose narrative follows a similar comedic structure—the use of comedy becomes an important tool to tackle larger societal anxieties. Here, the restoration of the world-order necessitates that the marriage plot and typical romance tropes get parodically subverted by Thor regaining his hammer — and agency. As a whole, "Þrymskviða" uses humor to give the anthropomorphic gods—and, by extension, the people worshiping them—agency over their own fates and futures.

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