

ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON

## Óðinn as mother

### The Old Norse deviant patriarch

#### Óðinn the patriarch

The Old Norse god Óðinn is presented as the father of all the gods in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* from the early 13th century: "Sá heitir Alföðr at váru máli ... Lífir hann of allar aldir ok stjórnar öllu ríki sínu og ræðr öllum hlutum, stórum ok smáum ... Hann smíðaði himinn ok jörð ok lopt ok alla eign þeira" (He is called Alfather in our tongue ... He lives forever and rules all his kingdom and governs all things, great and small ... He created heaven and earth and the air and all their properties) (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 10).<sup>1</sup> It seems fairly obvious that this particular deity is the *patriarch* of the gods but leaving nothing to chance, Snorri reiterates this later in the narrative, firmly establishing Óðinn in the patriarch role: "Óðinn er æztr ok elstr ásanna. Hann ræðr öllum hlutum, ok svá sem önnur guðin eru máttug, þá þjóna honum öll, svá sem börn föður" (Óðinn is the highest and the oldest god. He decides over all matters and even with their own great powers, the other gods all serve him as children serve their father) (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 27).

What is a patriarch? In this instance, he is not only a creator but also a

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<sup>1</sup> The text of this edition has been normalised by me; all translations in this article are my own.

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Ármann Jakobsson, Reader, Dept. of Icelandic and Culture, University of Iceland, Reykjavík. "Óðinn as mother: the Old Norse deviant patriarch". *ANF* 126 (2011), pp 5–16.

**Abstract:** This article concerns the contradictions in the portrayal of the Old Norse god Óðinn in two 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic sources, Snorra-Edda and Heimskringla. It is argued that these sources present Óðinn at the same time as a patriarch and as a deviant figure involved with shamanism, shapeshifting and many kinds of queer behaviour. The author argues that though this Óðinn figure is full of contradictions, they can be explained by the superhuman status of gods who do not necessarily need to heed the restrictions and morals they impose upon humans.

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figure of power. He is old and thus, presumably venerable, he clearly requires obedience and as he seems to command respect, one might then imagine that he is himself eminently respectable and solid. This is a fairly universal rule; even patriarchs of criminal “families” are respectable within their own domain, if not in society at large. And, above all, the patriarch must exude manliness. No doubt can exist about the state of the patriarch. He has to be unambiguously aged, powerful, superior, respected and male. But is this really the case with Óðinn when we review the Old Norse tradition as a whole? Are Óðinn’s age, gender, power, superiority and respectability all dependable, or is he something entirely different?

This study will be concerned mainly with the contrasts and ambiguities in the representations of Óðinn in the major mediaeval sources that have determined how the later generations perceive Old Norse mythology. That there should be contrasts in these sources might be considered somewhat surprising given that two of the most important ones are believed to originate from the same 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic mythographer, Snorri Sturluson.<sup>2</sup> What I will examine below is therefore the ambiguities inherent in the Old Norse myths of Óðinn rendered to us by Snorri.

Of course Óðinn had a life before Snorri. Presumably he was a cult figure for many centuries and not only in Scandinavia but all over Germanic Europe, from the British Isles to Lombardy, but it is actually not necessary to cast such a wide net to find the contrasts in the portrayal; they are all evident in the Óðinn presented to us by Snorri. It is the 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic representation of Óðinn as such that is the subject of this study and no claims will be made as how close it is to an actual heathen Óðinn myth. Furthermore it seems more than likely that the heathen Óðinn myths were varied and diverse.

The texts here under discussion are thus not necessarily actual pagan representations of Óðinn; the image of Óðinn that has been handed down to later centuries was shaped and moulded by Icelandic Christian authors. This arrives mostly from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as recently shown by Annette Lassen (2011) who focuses not only on Snorri and eddic poetry but also on Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, the legen-

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of *Edda*, the case for the authorship of Snorri Sturluson is fairly strong as the early 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscript DG 11 4to (Codex Uppsaliensis) ascribes the *Edda* to him (see e.g. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. xii and xl). There is on the other hand no evidence earlier than from the 16<sup>th</sup> century that *Heimskringla* (and thus *Ynglinga saga*) is the work of Snorri Sturluson, although it is with little doubt a 13<sup>th</sup> century text. In addition, there is some indirect evidence that Snorri authored at least parts of *Heimskringla* (see Ólafur Halldórsson 1979).

dary sagas, *Sturlunga saga*, the kings' sagas, hagiographic literature, romances and skaldic poetry. As Lassen has demonstrated, these sources should not be amalgamated to make a composite picture of Óðinn; it is far more fruitful to examine each portrayal in its own right. Snorri Sturluson still has a special status as he is responsible for two portrayals of Óðinn.

The Óðinn portrayed by Snorri may or may not be a true portrait of an actual pagan Óðinn, or even a late pagan Óðinn.<sup>3</sup> Christian influences are palpable in the depiction of Óðinn above: the Óðinn who is Alfater seems to be a thinly disguised version of the Judeo-Christian God the father.<sup>4</sup> Thus the 13<sup>th</sup> century Óðinn of Snorri Sturluson is full of contradictions, but that said, they deserve better than to be whisked away as the influences of diverse and opposing sources. One of these contradictions is his stature as a patriarch.

Old, superior and powerful as he is, the gender and respectability of this patriarchal figure can be called into question. I will argue that Snorri leaves us with an Óðinn who is not only a patriarch but also a deviant, a sorcerer, a queer.

## Óðinn the witch

Snorri Sturluson begins his *Heimskringla* with *Ynglinga saga*, relating the ancient history of the kings of Sweden. This history starts with Óðinn, an Asian king who moved to Scandinavia and became venerated as a god after his death whereas a different story with another kind of euphemistic explanation is to be found in the prologue to Snorri's *Edda*.

In the *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn is also a father, indeed he is the ancestor of the Scandinavian kings of the viking age. However, he is depicted not as a benevolent father figure but as a cynical secular ruler who manipulates the Scandinavians into worshipping him: a god who is also a confidence man. According to Snorri in *Heimskringla*, Óðinn is victorious

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<sup>3</sup> It has to be kept in mind that paganism and Christianity co-existed for centuries in Northern Europe, making it hard to determine the influence each had on the other through all this time or to what point this co-existence lead to a dramatic re-shaping of the older pagan legends. But given some gradual developement of Germanic paganism, Snorri's Óðinn would presumably be most representative of West Norse beliefs in the late pagan age although highly coloured by Christian learning.

<sup>4</sup> See Lassen 2011, 266–307. As she notes, Óðinn is not as big a presence in Snorri's *Edda* as one might expect.

and that is the main reason for his veneration. At the same time, he also has other attributes which help him to rule, including the power of sorcery.

The *Ynglinga saga* Óðinn is a witch or a shaman (see e.g. Lassen 2011, 249–52). Snorri states that Óðinn has the gift of prophecy and sorcery, is “forspár ok fjölkunnigr”. It is also related how he “kvað galdra” (incanted spells) in order to reanimate the head of the giant Mímir who consequently becomes his main source of information. He can make his men fight like mad dogs and wolves (“galnir sem hundar eða vargar”) and hence, they become immune from the weapons of others. His speech is all in verse and he teaches magic. After having presented us with all these facts, Snorri gives the following detailed depiction of his powers:

Óðinn kunnir þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttur fylgði, ok framði sjálf, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ærlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mǫnnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mǫnnum vit eða afl ok gefa ǫðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmǫnnum skamlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt.

(Óðinn knew the most powerful art and practised it himself, that which is called sorcery, and that is how he knew men’s fate and things not yet passed, and he could cause death or unhappiness or illness to others, or take their senses and powers from them and give to others. But this magic, in its execution, is so queer that men could not practice it without dishonour and thus the goddesses were taught this art). (*Ynglinga saga*, p. 19)

Here we learn that Óðinn is not just the Alfater of *Edda*, a paragon of manly virtues, but also a magician or, more aptly, a witch since his magic is perceived as a female quality. We are told that this sorcery is queer: it is not for men, and therefore seen as a female practice.

However, even though *Ynglinga saga* informs us about the terrible *ergi* of the *seiðr*, it also reveals that Óðinn practised it and remained the patriarch of the gods. It is also revealed in this saga (p. 17) that in spite of all his queer practices, Óðinn remains not only the god of the poets but also the god of war and warriors. In the *Edda* it is furthermore revealed that in his war efforts, he is not associated mainly with his sons but with the valkyries and with Freyja (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 31). Though Óðinn has male servants, it is his female entourage that accompanies him to the battlefield (see e.g. pp. 27 and 40).

It is debatable then, whether his warlike persona is really masculine or feminine since, like sorcery, his presence at the battlefield seems another case of his adopting a role otherwise reserved for women. With Óðinn’s

army of valkyries he seems to belong to a female world: he is a leader of amazons, perhaps more mother than father as in this particular army there are no males.

A patriarch would seem to be as manly as a man can be, but as the *Edda* suggests by linking him to the valkyries and *Ynglinga saga* states firmly in regards to his sorcery, this particular patriarch is practising things which, if practiced by someone else, are regarded as unmanly and deviant, and thus queer. And just like Óðinn's role as Alfater is a fundamental aspect of his character in the *Edda*, the sorcery in *Ynglinga saga* defines him too. Within the *Ynglinga saga* Óðinn is first and foremost a witch, and it is suggested that this makes him queer as the witch is female.

Unfortunately Snorri does not inform us of how this queer magic is practiced and why it is queer, and he obviously finds it prudent not to reveal too much about the practice of *seiðr*; thus leaving scholars to speculate about it to this day (see Tolley 2009, 155–64). The word *ergi* is also problematic, although queer is a good translation in the sense that if the examples are studied, unmanliness seems to be central to the word's meaning.<sup>5</sup>

The *Ynglinga saga* passage cannot be easily disregarded as non-authoritative as regards Óðinn's image in Snorri's day or the queer nature of *seiðr*. One reason for this is that it is not the only instance of the *seiðr*, and indeed Óðinn's practice of it, being referred to as unmanly. In verse 24 of *Lokasenna*, a poem usually presumed to be pagan in origins or at least no older than from the first years of Christianity in Iceland (around the year 1000), although it is preserved in a late 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript, the god Loki, a deviant and treacherous deity who has somehow managed to become Óðinn's fosterbrother, accuses Óðinn of exactly this, of having somehow become unmanly through sorcery:

En þik síða kváðu  
Sámseyju í  
ok draptu á vétt sem vqlur;  
vitka líki  
fórtu verþjóð yfir,  
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On the concept of *ergi*, see esp. Noreen 1922, 37–65; Almqvist 1965, esp. pp. 63–66 & 194–201; Ström 1972; Sørensen 1980, esp. pp. 22–24; Gunnar Karlsson 2006; Ármann Jakobsson 2008a; Ármann Jakobsson 2008b. In the last article I discuss more examples of how Óðinn seems to be regarded as sinister and queer by 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century (Christian) Icelanders.

<sup>6</sup> The word “síða” (practice sorcery) is actually an emendation; the Codex Regius manuscript has “síga” (lower oneself).

(But they said you brewed sorcery  
 in Samsø  
 and consulted the oracle like sybils.  
 In the guise of a wizard  
 you subjected the male sex  
 and that is the way of the queer.)  
 (*Norræn fornkvæði*, p. 117)

The verse is admittedly opaque. It is far from unambiguous whether Loki is comparing Óðinn to sybils (the word *volur* is ambiguous) or how Óðinn subjected the male sex (cf. Strömbäck 1935, 22–25; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2007). What can be ascertained is that Óðinn is a sorcerer and thus, in a way that is not made quite clear to us, he is queer.

If Óðinn is indeed a sibyl in this verse, it is one of the few cases where maternal imagery is used about Óðinn in the Eddas but taken in context with his association with women in warfare (Freyja and the amazons), Óðinn's gender role nevertheless begins to seem strangely flexible. In twelfth-century Cistercian writing, maternal imagery to describe God and Christ was prominent (Bynum 1982, 110–69). Óðinn is not usually described in this way but on the other hand, he does not seem too easily confined within a single gender role. Not only is he a leader of amazons but his regurgitation of the mead of poetry (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 85) would seem to make him more the mother than father of the poets.

Two things must be clarified about the concept of *ergi*. It is a fairly wide and ambiguous concept, indeed the word can be used about sorcery, cowardice, same-sex relations between men, female lust, and about females in general, whatever their attributes. This means that it cannot be used (as one sometimes sees done) as a synonym for homosexuality, which is in any case a 20<sup>th</sup> century concept of dubious value even today and of no value when used about mediaeval people (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2007). *Ergi* is closely linked to mediaeval concepts of masculinity and femininity (see esp. Clover 1993; Gunnar Karlsson 2006, 376–77), but not restricted to them.

It is precisely its vagueness which makes it useful, just as the word *queer* is a good translation precisely because it is ambiguous as well as negative. In much the same way, *ergi* is a negative term which covers a wide ground but most of its meanings have something to do with crossing borders. It can thus be argued that a cowardly man has in his cowardice left the masculine role, given that words like *blauðr* are used about women in general in Icelandic texts from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, whether cowardly or not (see e.g. *Gísla saga*, p. 101). Likewise, a penetrated man has been emasculated, or is a sorcerer, according to *Ynglinga saga*.

When committing sorcery, Óðinn is crossing a border. *Ynglinga saga* informs us that Óðinn changes shape (“skipti hǫmum”) and leaves his body as if asleep on the ground whereas he himself is travelling to foreign countries in an instance in the shape of a bird, fish or serpent. This might be connected with the *ergi* inherent in Óðinn’s magic, a quality not necessarily restricted to his gender role.

## Óðinn the serpent

The figure of Óðinn in *Snorra-Edda* is in many ways unique among the Northern gods. For example, Óðinn possesses an unusual variety of names, such as Grímnir, Hárbarðr, Hárr, Gangleri, Viðrir, Hnikarr, Yggr, Þundr, and Hroptatýrr (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 27–28).<sup>7</sup> No other god is known under quite so many aliases. He is also, uniquely in the pantheon of the Old Norse gods, frequently seen in disguise, often as an old wandering man named something other than Óðinn.

A patriarch is usually unambiguously old, powerful and male. He does not seem to need a disguise. Óðinn, on the other hand, seems not to be unambiguously anything. One might leap to the conclusion that the form of an old man is Óðinn’s true visage but that might be premature; given the flexibility of the character, it would be more prudent to simply say this is a guise he frequently adopts. He is often an old man, as befits a proper patriarch, but he can also be something else.

Óðinn is not only a god of many guises and names, he is also, along with his foster-brother Loki, who unlike him is not a patriarch (Loki is indeed a father but also a mother, as he gives birth to Sleipnir whilst being female) but a true deviant and villain, the most prolific shapeshifter among the Old Norse gods (see Orton 2005, esp. p. 308). *Ynglinga saga* (p. 18) mentions Óðinn’s sorcerous shapeshifting and that he can, through magic become a bird or a fish or a serpent, which is related in connection with the information about his queer practices. But *Snorra-Edda* also has narratives like the story of the theft of the mead of poetry, where Óðinn is shown metamorphosing both into a serpent and an eagle in order to carry out his task (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 84–85). The god who has the

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<sup>7</sup> Some of these names are only used in kennings whereas others appear as a part of a disguise, a new identity which Óðinn has adopted. It must be noted that Óðinn is not the only Norse god who is known under several aliases although the multitude of Óðinn names far exceeds those existing for other deities.

ability to make his followers fight like crazed animals is also strikingly bestial himself.

Shapeshifting and disguises are not uncommon among gods; one needs only to think of the legend of Zeus and Leda. On the other hand, shapeshifting is usually regarded as a somewhat sinister attribute when mere humans attempt it. There is a stigma attached to most types of shapeshifting. Witches and berserkers, for example, are as a rule regarded as sinister and subhuman in the Old Norse sagas. Shapeshifting involves a somewhat uncanny blend of the human and the bestial. It also potentially leads to deviant sexual behaviour. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, Icelandic penitentiaries list deviant sexual relations with a beast and with a person of your own gender side by side, along with masturbation and incest (see e.g. Gade 1986, 126–31). When Loki transforms himself into a mare and gives birth to a foal fathered by the horse Svaðilfari, he is breaking a double taboo, as he is not only switching gender but also species (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 46–47).

As Strömbäck (1935, 160–90) noted long ago, there is a clear link between *seiðr* and shapeshifting in Old Norse mediaeval texts.<sup>8</sup> If this observation is taken one step further, this could mean that in mediaeval Iceland, being queer was not so easily definable. On the contrary, such diverse acts as magical practices, shapeshifting and sexual relations with members of the same gender could also be considered deviant or queer. It is thus of some interest that all of these deviances were possibly practiced by Óðinn, whom we might thus classify as a queer or a deviant god.

One might add incest, which according to Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, is also practiced by the gods. In this text, Snorri claims that it was the custom of Vanir but not the Æsir to marry their sisters (*Ynglinga saga*, 13), but in the *Edda*, he reveals that Óðinn, too, is guilty of incest: “Jorðin var dóttir hans ok kona hans. Af henni gerði hann inn fyrsta soninn, en þat er Ása-Þórr” (Earth was his daughter and his wife; of her he sired his firstborn who was Ása-Þórr) (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 17).<sup>9</sup> Such unambiguous incest is among mortals one of the strongest taboos; in almost every society incest is considered amoral and sinister, even queer behaviour when practiced by humans.

This does not seem to be the result in the world of the gods, as Ása-Þórr, incestuous offspring as he is, is still an important and powerful

<sup>8</sup> As Tolley (2009, 99–103) has noted, Óðinn's shamanism and its queer connotations are reminiscent of the Greco-Roman god Dionysus.

<sup>9</sup> The theme of the incestuous gods has clear Christian parallels (see e.g. *Hauksbók*, p. 159).



god, a defender of the gods and the most important guardian against the chaos of the giants. And what about Óðinn, the sorcerous god who seems to have his way with animals, other men and his daughter, is sinister and uncanny, and still retains the respect due to the Alfater, the patriarch of the gods? How can Óðinn get away with all of this?

## Gods and deviance

Getting away with it is what being a god is all about. For example, humans are not allowed to have sexual relations with their own gender or their own siblings or descendants, nor with sheep and cattle. On the other hand, Óðinn can be guilty of every kind of transgression. He can be female, he can be an animal, he can commit incest, and yet he retains his patriarch status and dignity. There seems to be an inherent contradiction in the existence of a god. A god who is queer is not queer.

There is a truth to Óðinn the god which is sometimes neglected by those who do not believe in him, who see the legends of *Snorra-Edda* only as narrative and have lost touch with their sacred nature. Óðinn may appear as an old man and yet he is not a man. Óðinn, though created, like gods often are, in our own image, is not human. He is a transcendental being, who may sometimes look like us but is essentially not like us in his transcendence.

Even as he clearly situates him as a human ruler, Snorri Sturluson relates how Óðinn transcends his own body, how he can be at two places at once. The god's body is no ordinary body and restrictions on other bodies do not apply to it. Óðinn's body is not ordinary in any sense, he has only one eye but has exchanged the other for an extra head full of wisdom which enables him to see further and beyond that which those with both eyes in their possession can see. More importantly, his body is not only mutable but divisible.

Óðinn's transcendence is not only corporeal but also moral. Morality, too, consists of the rules set by the gods for mortals to follow but these rules do not seem to apply to the gods themselves. *Lokasenna's* portrayal of the lovelife of the gods establishes that in the bedroom the gods do as they please which seems to encompass more or less everything. In *Lokasenna*, the gods are accused of every kind of queer behaviour and yet they retain their divinity. Óðinn may subjugate the male sex at will though others may not; he remains its god. Moral transgressions do not make a god any less divine.

In spite of the comedy of *Lokasenna*, gods can never be marginal or deviant or queer, only humans can truly be guilty of *ergi*. The gods are above morality, not subject to it.<sup>10</sup> In this, they are to a degree mirrored by absolute rulers who tend to make their own rules and often lead a far more adventurous sex life than regular people. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century (and right up until our time), there would also have been considerable difference between the rules of behaviour applicable to the elite and those strongly enforced on everyone else. Snorri Sturluson was raised in an age when some of the most illustrious magnates of Iceland (e.g. his foster-father Jón Loptsson and the lawspeaker Gizurr Hallsson) had two wives and tried (but did not quite succeed) to get away with not obeying those rules the rest of the populace was expected to live by.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the elite of every age attempts to imitate the gods and disregard the strict rules deemed so necessary for everyone else. In that respect there is no clear difference between the god Óðinn and the Asian ruler Óðinn of *Ynglinga saga* who tricked the men of the North into believing in him. Only in our age and in our part of the world, has modern man, no longer god-fearing, started to adopt this code for himself, thus imitating the gods.

Some of the examples above have also been noted by the Norwegian archaeologist Britt Solli (1997–98). She has argued that Óðinn was a queer god and that this suggests an androgynous image of divinity among the pagans. If that is the case, how does that affect Óðinn's role as the patriarch of the gods? The answer is simply that it does not. While Óðinn behaves in a way that would be queer if a human did it, both in his sorcery, his shapeshifting and his sex life, he is not queer. Being a god, he is above such categories (cf. Bandlien 2005, 57–69). A god is allowed to sire children with animals, his own daughter or even other men – although the last does not seem to have been considered possible in Old Norse mythology – without being queer.

Snorri Sturluson's vivid depiction of how Óðinn is guilty of queer practices, how he changes shape and how he tricks humans by magic, is completely rid of any trace of condemnation. Although Snorri is not known to have worshipped Óðinn,<sup>12</sup> he still accorded him the right to

<sup>10</sup> *Norraen fornkvæði*, 113–23. Cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2001, xiii–xiv; Swenson 1991, 72–79.

<sup>11</sup> Both these magnates were related to the kings of Norway who, according to *Heimskringla*, were actual descendants of Óðinn. Thus it is not so surprising that they would try to get away with behaviour strictly forbidden for everyone else.

<sup>12</sup> Although his father was at one time accused of being a fan (see Ármann Jakobsson 2008b, 51–53).

behave as a god should. And that means being deviant without being deviant, or, rather, being deviant and getting away with it, as moral strictures cannot be applied to gods. Although Snorri also portrays Óðinn as a mortal ruler who tricked people into believing him (*Ynglinga saga*, 11–23), there is no actual contradiction in that. To Óðinn’s followers he is a god; thus he can behave like one.

The divine patriarch is above suspicion. Deviant behaviour cannot make him deviant since human restrictions are beneath him. He does not have to be straight since he cannot be queer. And in essence, the patriarch god does as he pleases.

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