



Loki then and now: the trickster against civilization

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ABSTRACT

Loki, one of the most mischievous of the Norse gods, is a classic Trickster figure. This mythological character is difficult to define but is an archetype that Jung himself explored. The Trickster can be understood not only as a part of the Jungian individuation process, but also, from an anthropological perspective, as a metaphor for change, embodying the dynamics between the personal and the systemic. Mythological narratives featuring Loki portray him as a figure that frequently challenges the civilising forces of society, a challenge that can lead to either destruction or renewal for the society in question. More recently, however, the character of Loki has been revived as part of a Hollywood film franchise featuring a number of the comic book giant Marvel's characters. This highly profitable enterprise, includes contemporary versions of other members of the Norse pantheon including Thor, Odin and Frigg, but Loki, as played by Tom Hiddleston, has proved a particularly popular character with the fans. This paper examines the history of Loki in the Icelandic Edda as well as the Hollywood commodification of the character in order to explore the psychological importance of the Trickster for the contemporary individual.

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The mischievous and dangerous Loki, one of the Icelandic gods, is a classic example of the trickster figure. The trickster is notoriously difficult to define, and can be seen as an archetype and part of the individuation process (the Jungian approach) or as a metaphor for change personifying the dynamics between the personal and systemic (the anthropological approach). As part of the individuation process, the trickster triggers the psychological change in the individual. Mythological and folkloric narratives portray the trickster as a figure challenging the civilizing forces of society and attempting to destabilize or renew the system.

The original trickster, Loki, appears in the *Elder Edda* (a book of anonymous poems without a definitive publication date) and its younger sibling, the so-called *Prose Edda* (published around the year 1220, and compiled (or possibly written) by the historian, politician and author Snorri Sturluson). Recently, however, the Viking trickster has become part of several highly profitable entertainment franchises alongside his fellow gods and goddesses including Thor, Odin and Frigg. Apart from being the protagonist of a solo Marvel series, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014-ongoing), the infamous Scandinavian trickster

has been featured in a number of Hollywood films such as *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) and *Thor: the Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013).

This paper will examine how the appropriation of the character of Loki by the Marvel and Hollywood industries affects the character (played in the films by Tom Hiddleston). It will also explore why the figure of the trickster has such psychological importance for the contemporary individual; to the extent of becoming a mass commodity.

Why are tricksters always presented as insensitive and destructive? The trickster is a metaphor for change and transition which happen in socio-cultural systems, and so-called 'trickster narratives', whether traditional (mythological, folkloric) or contemporary (film and TV) are invariably preoccupied with gods, giants, heroes and other representatives of the *status quo* being able to handle the chaos caused and damage caused by sudden change. We need stories about tricksters because they make us aware of the dangers of extremes: cultural stalemate on the one hand, and constant change on the other.

Most trickster narratives (mythological, literary or cinematic) share a number of stock themes and motifs that serve as the backbone for the plot. Usually, a trickster narrative starts with the cunning creature being or feeling restricted (often physically), goes on to describe the trickster's escape and its adventures, and ends with the dissolution/transformation of the trickster. The most common structural elements of trickster narratives are being trapped, boundary-breaking, licentious behaviour, scatological humour, bodily transformations, the presence of animals (which I prefer to call 'the animal connection'), naming issues, loss of control over one's body and mind, and the trickster's dissolution/death/transformation at the end of the story. Not all of the elements are necessarily present in one story, film or myth, and their place in the narrative sequence is certainly not fixed. However, the 'end result' of trickster narratives is invariable: forced transformation of the protagonist via chance and loss of control. In other words, the protagonist achieves a new 'status' via sudden loss of shape and change.

Perhaps not surprisingly, human agency is one of the central problems of cultural anthropology. From the point of view of the British anthropologist and semiotician Gregory Bateson, the individual is permanently caught in the developmental tug of war – the process of fission and fusion (which he termed schismogenesis), the rivalry between individual initiative and cultural imperatives (Bateson, 1936, pp. 195–196).

Another British anthropologist, Victor Turner, also explored the relationship between the individual and the system. He theorized that all systems were structures with an in-built internal conflict, triggered by *communitas*, or counter-structures. *Communitas* is 'over and above any formal social bonds' (1975, p. 45). It can be organized and led by a group of disgruntled individuals whose vision of the system's operation and functioning differs from that upheld by those in power. The psycho-anthropological task of *communitates* (sic) is to counter-balance the solidifying actions of the official structure. As a result of this destabilizing tension – the cultural equivalent of the trickster – the system renews itself as the fresh ideas 'feed back into the "central" economic and politico-legal domains and arenas, supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models and *raison d'être*' (Turner, 1979, p. 21). *Communitas* is an inhabitant, and spokesperson, of liminal situations in which 'new symbols, models, paradigms, etc., arise – as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact' (Turner, 1979, p. 21).

Turner employed the term liminal to describe the situations in which the structure was challenged, altered or destroyed. Liminality (from Latin *limen* – threshold) was initially mentioned by the French ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep in his work, *The Rites of Passage* (1909), and later developed by Turner into a set of political and social concepts. It denotes lack of stability, temporary absence of order – a transitional, twilight state. In his analysis of liminality, Turner uses van Gennep's tripartite rite of passage: separation, transition and incorporation.

The first phase, separation, marks the end of the old state of things and the beginning of a new 'order'. The second phase is the liminal period during which 'the ritual subjects pass through ... an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few ... of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses of cultural states' (Turner, 1979, p. 16). The third phase is the time of healing of the developmental rift, when 'the ritual subjects' (initiates, candidates, whole communities in social, political or economic transition) return to their new, 'relatively stable, well-define position in the total society' (1979, p. 16). 'Liminality' – Turner points out – refers to 'any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life' (Turner, 1975, p. 47).

In the narrative structure, the trickster represents an unpredictable element which is introduced into an existing order of things, then challenges or demolishes this order, and the new order is introduced at the end of the narrative – often after the trickster's disappearance. The trickster also changes the status of the characters in the narrative (particularly the protagonist). In this sense, the structure is reminiscent of the tripartite ritual consisting of separation, transition and incorporation. These narrative element also hold good for the cinema were the trickster is often introduced a few minutes after the beginning of the film, after the main order is established and the principal relationships between the characters are outlined. The trickster's lessons (i.e. the lessons learned by the characters during the liminal period of the story) are chaotic but life-changing. Being a-social, anti-social and ultimately anti-structural, the trickster creates change messily and unpredictably, by introducing liminality into the existing order. It also uncovers the reverse side of normality and social reality, which consists of stagnation, predictability and lack of fresh perspective.

Loki is an apocalyptic trickster – the ultimate trickster because he goes after the biggest system created by humans – the entire civilization. Despite the fact that the narrative details (syuzhet) between the mediaeval Loki stories and their contemporary versions vary, the main idea (fabula) remains the same – the trickster mercilessly attacks those in power and nearly causes the end of the world.

Common motifs in trickster narratives

Most trickster narratives (mythological, literary or cinematic) share a number of stock themes and motifs which serve as the backbone for the plot. Usually, a trickster narrative starts with the cunning creature being or feeling restricted (often physically), goes on to describe the trickster's escape and his adventures, and ends with the dissolution/transformation of the trickster. As noted above, the most common structural elements of trickster narratives are being trapped, boundary-breaking, licentious behaviour, scatological humour, bodily transformations, the presence of animals (which I prefer to call 'the animal connection'), naming issues, loss of control over one's body and mind, and the

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Being trapped

Physical entrapment in narratives is an allegory of control and order. It symbolizes the structure's desire for being in charge. The trickster that is not controlled is a menace, unrestrained and therefore unpredictable, it can damage or even destroy the system. Neither the systemic control nor the trickster's actions aimed at blocking it are intrinsically good or bad. In fact, the 'being trapped' motif foregrounds the balance between stability and change. Tricksters can be trapped at any stage throughout the narrative, and when they are locked up, this is usually as a punishment for some misbehaviour such as theft, lying or murder. When a narrative starts with the trickster freeing itself from his prison, the rest of the narrative is devoted to the characters' efforts to regain control over the situation and to recapture or tame him.

In one of the stories in the *Prose Edda*, Loki the trickster is famously captured by the Aesir the collective name for the Norse gods and goddesses, tied to a stone and locked in a cave to prevent him from unleashing Ragnarok – a chain of apocalyptic events which would end the gods' rule. Prior to his capture, Loki kills Odin's 'perfect' son Baldr and gatecrashes the gods' feast with the intention to insult the guests and to remind them of his powers to trigger chaos. Odin and his fellow Aesir have no intention of risking their future, and the future of the world, and 'repay him in a way that he will long feel' (Byok, 2005, p. 70).

Predictably, Loki tries every trick in the book to avoid capture. When the Aesir are looking for him, he builds a house on a mountain in order to be able to see any approaching danger quicker, and transforms into a salmon to hide in waterfalls and rivers. Neither of these tricks help as the gods manage to collectively catch him by using the net that he himself had invented:

Loki was captured and with no thought of mercy he was taken to a cave. They (the Aesir) took three flat stones and, setting them on their edges, broke a hole through each of them. Then they caught Loki's sons, Vari and Nali or Narfi. The Aesir changed Vali into a wolf, and he ripped apart his brother Narfi. Next the Aesir took his guts, and with them they bound Loki on the top of the three stones – one under his shoulders, a second under his loins and the third under his knees. The fetters became iron.

The Skadi took a poisonous snake and fastened it above Loki so that its poison drips on to his face. But Sigyn, his wife, placed herself beside him, from where she holds a bowl to catch the drops of venom. When the bowl becomes full, she leaves to pour out the poison, and at that moment the poison drips on to Loki's face. He convulses so violently that the whole earth shakes – it is what is known as an earthquake. He will lie bound there until Ragnarok. (Byok, 2005, pp. 70–72)

The 'pioneering device' consisting of stones, parts of dead Narfi and a snake is meant to postpone Ragnarok although somehow the Aesir know that it will eventually happen. The theme of locking up Loki in the hope to avoid the end of the world also appears in all three

Marvel films featuring Loki's contemporary incarnation. For instance, in *The Avengers* Tom Hiddleston's character is imprisoned in a transparent box to prevent him from stealing the Tesseract – a cube containing an Infinity Stone which is the source of unlimited energy. A trickster cannot be entrusted with such a weapon because he has an unstoppable urge to destroy the structure's stability.

Restrained tricksters can be presented as suffering and heroic, malevolent and dangerous or playful and stupid – but their task is always to defy and dupe the system. Their transgressions are also of differing importance. For instance, Prometheus is an example of a heroic prisoner; Loki, who directly threatens to bring down the pantheon, is a malevolent one; and the Native American tricksters Wakdjunkaga and Coyote, who find themselves trapped inside a dead animal's skull, are foolish and impudent. Imprisonment inside the belly of a monster, giant fish or whale, with subsequent escape, is one of the most popular versions of this motif.

The entrapment metaphor also describes the destructive potential of the trickster, who becomes more powerful the longer he is kept inside his cage. If neglected by the system, change tends to accumulate and grow. The Aesir hope that imprisoning Loki in a cave is a strong enough measure to prevent him from causing Ragnarok. The cinematic Loki is a true escape artist: in *The Avengers* he manages to disappear from his transparent prison. He also taunts the agents of SHIELD that the cage they built is not strong enough from a trickster and a magician. At the start of *Thor: The Dark World* the trickster is locked up in the dungeons for his and others' good, but is released by Thor who needs allies on his side to deal with the Dark Elves.

Overall, 'being trapped' is an important structural element which embodies a psycho-anthropological counterweight to the system's authoritativeness and exactitude.

Boundary-crossing

Tricksters are notorious boundary-breakers. In myth, folk tales and literary and cinematic narratives they cross all kinds of boundaries, from physical (such as property borders) to metaphysical (for instance, sacred cultural values and taboos). Metaphorically, this means that the trickster has no respect for the structural aspect of the social. Neither does he respect the *structuring* function of the system. He does not accept 'the way things are', and keeps attempting to re-draw the map. Civilization is born with the emergence of boundaries, physical as well as psychological: rules of decency and propriety, property borders, psychological boundaries, etc. Boundaries separate the unconscious, pre-civilized man (or child) from an adult member of community, conscious of his actions and prepared to take responsibility for them. It is these boundaries that the trickster keeps challenging and disregarding.

In classical mythology, the trickster is often depicted as a *psychopomp*, a mythical conductor of souls to the nether regions. The Greek Hermes and the Roman Mercurius are both psychopomps; in many other trickster stories the right to cross the boundary between life and death is designated as immortality. The role of the psychopomp emphasizes the trickster's transcendent qualities, among which is the ability to transgress the frontier between consciousness and the unconscious. Traditionally, Loki's psychopomp connection includes his daughter, Hel, who presides over the realm of the dead. The

modern Loki is presented to us as the son of Laufey (who in Marvel's version is a man rather than a woman) – the king of Frost Giants residing in Jotunheim. In *Thor* Loki repeatedly crosses the bridge separating Asgard from Jotunheim in order to assist Laufey in his life-long dream of destroying Odin. He also leads the giants into Asgard to challenge Odin's rule.

The tricksters are also notorious taboo breakers. Taboo-breaking in fairytales ensures that no corners of the structure remain unexplored (and therefore too tempting and attractive for visitors). The medieval Loki crosses all possible boundaries of decency when he insults the gods at the feast into which he bursts uninvited. The cinematic Loki does not have any boundaries either – his identity, including gender identity, is fluid. He frequently changes sides. His numerous allies (Odin, Thor, the giant Laufey) are also his enemies as they cannot trust him and never rely completely on his support.

Many tricksters are shameless thieves – which means transgressing one of the basic frontiers ever invented by civilization – private property. The original Loki steals the goddess Idunn and her golden apples of youth. Tom Hiddleston's Loki steals everything he can lay his hands on, from the powerful stone inside the Tesseract, to others' appearance and identities, including that of his father.

Tricksters' compulsive desire to cross and break boundaries has both 'high' and 'low' meanings. On the one hand, the trickster is a pre-civilized, shameless creature incapable of belonging to the system and following the rules laid out for everyone. On the other, he is someone capable of challenging a structure precisely because he does not know its true value and is not afraid of its power. The trickster simply has no respect for the structure.

Shapeshifting

Tricksters are notorious shapeshifters. They frequently change their appearance, transform into various animals and objects – even change their sex. Parts of their bodies fall off, but they grow back or can be reattached onto the body. Following Radin's and Joseph Henderson's argument, the trickster is an incomplete individual, a fluid transitory path from animal to human (Von Franz, 1964, pp. 103–104). A creature steeped in 'primary omnipotence', he thinks he is part of the world, and therefore can hardly be expected to be fully responsible for his body's actions. While a fully-fledged individual (ideally) feels psychologically complete, the trickster is not entirely aware of his physical and psychological fragmentedness.

It is not easy to damage a trickster permanently, for his very power lies in his unconsciousness. When murdered or challenged by gods, giants or natural powers tricksters tend to spring back to life or rebuild themselves from scratch. Many tricksters lack a stable sense of sexual identity. The shapeshifter Loki transforms into an old woman in order to catch the goddess Frigg off guard, and find out from her what object might hurt the otherwise inharmable Balder (it is mistletoe) (Byok, 2005, p. 66). Baldr, who represents perfection – ultimately the Jungian Self – annoys the imperfect Loki because nothing can destroy this beautiful son of Odin. Loki wants discover the substance that may kill the object of his envy:

After changing himself into the likeness of a woman, he went to Frigg at Fensalir. Frigg asked this woman if she knew what the Aesir were doing at the assembly. The woman replied that everyone was shooting at Baldr, yet he suffered no injury. Then Frigg said: 'Neither weapons nor wood will harm Baldr. I have received oaths from all of them'. Then the woman asked: 'Have all things given their oaths not to harm Baldr?' Frigg answered: 'A shoot of wood grows to the west of Valhalla. It is called mistletoe, and it seemed too young for me to demand its oath'. Immediately afterwards, the woman disappeared. (Byok, 2005, p. 66).

On other occasions, Loki transforms into a fish, a falcon and many other things. He also has shoes that allow him to race through the air, which he uses to escape dwarves. His modern version also enjoys changing shape, which he uses to mislead his opponents and escape from the numerous prisons to which he is regularly confined by the gods. His behaviour also defies fixed gender identity, which many fans keep pointing out in their numerous fan art which emphasizes the effeminate, soft traits of Loki's character as well as his fluid sexuality.

At one point in *Thor: The Dark World*, Loki demonstrates to his brother (played by Chris Hemsworth) the range of shapeshifting he can achieve, including the guise of Captain America. He also turns Thor into Sif (a female warrior and childhood friend of Thor) for a moment. At the end of the film he shamelessly transforms into his father Odin, and is so convincing in this role that he completely fools Thor. His less magical and more human powers of disguise include the ability to play a good son and a victim, and to change sides, which he successfully does several times in *Thor*. When Thor attempts to stop his brother escaping from the SHIELD cage in *The Avengers*, Loki evaporates and reappears on the other side of the cage, trapping Thor inside.

Shapeshifting is closely linked to the issues of shame and identity, while the theme of resurrection metaphorically represents the individuating, identity-making component of the trickster impulse. The 'simple' tricksters such as Coyote and Raven in the Northern America canon have no concept of shame and no stable vision of themselves, and therefore lie and deceive without any qualms. However, the tricksters who use deception, shapeshifting for survival purposes and discard shame in order to reclaim their identity from the system.

The trickster's dissolution

In many trickster tales – and this is particularly noticeable in large cycles containing a series of trickster transformations – the trickster spirit is dissolved at the end of the narrative. After the creative, chaotic unconscious energy has been woken up for the purpose of disrupting the stale (personal or social) order, it must go back to its dark wellspring. The trickster impulse does not die but is absorbed by the personality structure, and becomes an essential part of the individuating forces which would later closely guard the balance between the personal and the social in the individual's life. The trickster energy is still alive underneath the structuring forces of the social order.

One of the common narrative sequences in the trickster genre is 'trickster tamed'. The narrative opens with the release of the trickster from a small and stifling place, and ends with the trickster being under control again. Loki, in all his incarnations, has to be controlled by the system, he simply cannot be left at large. At the end of *The Avengers* and

Thor Loki is captured and inoculated. This is slightly different in *Thor: The Dark World*, which ends with Loki being in control – but then again, it is a plot device aimed at ensuring the next instalment of the Marvel cinematic franchise.

The ‘taming of the trickster’, or his dissolution, signifies the victory of the civilizing forces over the dark powers of the unconscious. It also shows that the trickster impulse can be dangerous, needs to be used sparingly – and only for the purposes of regeneration and renewal.

The trickster and sex

Another prominent feature of the trickster is his obsession with sex. Because he is a shapeshifter and breaker of taboos, he is capable of having sex with virtually any object. For the trickster, sex is a very vague notion and is certainly not subject to control or prohibitions – or even the strictest taboos. Most cultures have a catalogue of ‘indecent’ fairytales containing the sexual adventures of rogues and fools. For instance, both Northern American Coyote and Wakdjunkaga cycles include stories which depict the tricksters as over-sexed owners of uncontrollable penises, whereas Russian fairytales of the ‘indecent’ kind often portray cunning peasant males duping unsuspecting females into having sex with them.

The trickster’s hyper-virility, which he cannot control, has several psycho-social functions. The trickster is a pre-conscious, pre-shame creature incapable of managing his own instincts and systematically failing to tame his unruly body parts. Psychologically he is an ‘omnipotent’ baby – hence his indifference to the behaviour-framing tools (primarily shame) employed by the civilizing forces of the habitus. As such, he is both a fool and a revolutionary – depending on the context and on the qualities of the structure he rejects in a particular narrative. On the one hand, the sexual motif shows to the audience the difference between the proper, adult behaviour and the behaviour before the onset of shame. The audience laughs at the stupid trickster because they can clearly see the ‘civilizing’ boundary which protects them from the dark contents of the unconscious, thus ensuring the safety and stability of the social structure. On the other hand, many a trickster narrative employs the sexual motif to challenge a social structure whose oppressiveness stretches beyond the essential rules of decency and propriety. In this case the trickster uses the power of sexuality metaphorically. As a fundamental anti-structural force with unlimited destructive potential, the sexual instinct is a constant threat to the structuring forces of society.

In Ancient Greece, comedy was often indecent and openly criticized politics (as it does in the work of the great playwright Aristophanes). Virility in this context means defiance of oppression and defence of one’s own individuality and opinion. It is less about sex *per se* as it is about libido as Jung understood it – as psychic energy, ‘the total force which pulses through all the forms and activities of the psychic system and establishes a communication between them’. It is nothing other than ‘the intensity of the psychic process, its *psychological value*, which can be determined only by psychic manifestations and effects’ (Jacobi, [1942] 1973, p. 52). Whereas the noble art of tragedy (as it was defined by Aristotle in his monumental work of literary criticism, *Poetics*) portrayed human beings as being oppressed, tortured and murdered by forces beyond their control, from envious gods to thick-headed politicians, comedy insisted on the individual’s right to stick up his middle finger at them. This action, of course, is potentially calamitous (as it is foolish to disobey authority), but its dangerousness is part of the appeal. Comedy demonstrated resurrection of the

spirit of freedom, and survival of individuality. Its aim was to show that human beings had the right to be themselves regardless of what the authorities wanted them to be.

Even by the standards of folkloric tricksters, most of whom display elements of anti-social behaviour, Loki is a pretty nasty thug. He is also obsessed with sex, and uses it as weapon to taunt the gods and to challenge their powerful status. In the poem 'Lokasenna', or 'Loki's Flyting', which is part of *The Poetic Edda*, Loki gatecrashes a feast of the gods, and starts insulting them one by one. Loki being *persona non grata*, the gods fall silent when he walks into the hall. Upon entering the hall, he announces:

Why so silent, you puffed-up gods:

have you nothing to say to me at all?

Find me a seat and a place at the feast,

or tell me to go away from here! (2011, p. 83)

Loki then proceeds to question the male gods' valiance, and the goddesses' honour. He says to Bragi, the god of poetry:

As for horses and arm-rings,

Bragi, you'll always lack both:

of the Aesir and the elves who are gathered herein,

you are the wariest of war,

and the most shy of shooting. (2011, p. 83)

Loki proceeds to call Odin a 'cock-craver' and taunts Thor with the last battles of Ragnarok which will be so horrible that even the likes of Thor will be scared. Njord, Loki says, was 'a hostage to the gods' and 'Hymir's daughters pissed in his mouth'. He also 'sired a son with his sister'. Tyr's wife, Loki boasts, cheated on her husband with the god of mischief and bore an illegitimate son. Byggvir is 'a little thing', a coward afraid of battles and 'whispering in Frey's ear'. The trickster does not treat women any better: Frigg Loki declares to be 'mad for men'; Freyja he calls a bitch who has slept with all the men and elves in the hall; he announces that Skadi had invited him to bed, and that he also made Sif 'his whore'. Gefion and Idunn are also painted by the trickster as being unable to resist men, particularly muscular ones or the ones who give them presents.

Having thus defamed everyone present, Loki turns his back on the guests and says, evidently pleased with his accomplishment:

I spoke before the Aesir,

I spoke before the Aesir's sons,

What my hearts spurred me to say;

But before you alone will I walk out,

Since I know you do throw blows.

Ale you made, Aegir, but never again

Will you hold a feast after this;
 As for all your possessions which are here
 Inside
 May flame play over it,
 And burn your behind! (2011, p. 95)

The poem reflects not just Loki's relationships with the gods or his relationship with the system he attempts to challenge. The trickster is the mirror of the system it attempts to change or destroy. It identifies the system's most taboo, most sacred, most rigid moments and it is these moments that it targets by its disruptive behaviour. Loki's insults are a negative copy of the structure in which men are expected to be brave warriors and women are dutiful wives. The shame, therefore, is contained in the possibilities of breaking or negating this way of life, such as the loss of masculinity through 'being a poet' or being gay (both become insults in Loki's speeches). Loki even finds a way of challenging the hyper-masculine Thor who he prophesies will die in the battle with the wolf when Ragnarok starts. The goddesses are branded by Loki 'whores' keen to undermine the default patrilinearity with promiscuous and otherwise disgraceful behaviour ('farting', 'pissing into a man's mouth', etc.) and incest. These 'crimes' lead to illegitimate children and otherwise ruined familial lineages. In return, the gods also accuse Loki of gender bending (a usual thing for a trickster as they do not like fixed societal definitions, and gender and sexuality are amongst the most fundamental ones), sleeping with men and giving birth to children. In a failed attempt to shame Loki, Odin recalls a story of the god of mischief living as a woman for eight years and bearing children.

This exchange of insults mirrors the fixed gender positions and related expectations: a woman is a woman, and a man is a man. He is valiant and she is patient and stays true to her husband. No transgender tales, no 'cock-craving' which results from 'liking poetry', 'beating the drum like a lady-prophet' (an insult aimed by Loki at Odin) and suchlike killers of manliness. This is how things are in this particular system, this is how it is built. Anyone trying to challenge the patriarchal way of living with insults and warnings is seen as a dangerous creature. Not surprisingly, the last stanza of 'Lokasenna' contains references to Ragnarok – the doom of the Gods which Loki will supposedly trigger. Loki is the prophet of Ragnarok, he is the one desiring the end of things as they are. When Loki says whatever his heart 'spurs him to say', he is such a typical trickster – completely unguarded, totally lacking respect for the rules of the system, for the hierarchy, for the traditions and rituals. At the same time, like any trickster, he does not have a plan for the future once the system is dismantled. He just simply wants to destroy it.

Similarly, Tom Hiddleston's Loki has a strong element of sexuality, although – evidently because of the film classification restrictions – he cannot call anyone a cock-craver, or attempt to seduce a goddess. 'Loki is pleasing, even beautiful to look at, but his nature is evil and undependable' – says the *Prose Edda* (Byok, 2005, p. 30). This line could have been written about the Marvel Loki. Yet, Marvel could not have possibly have created an openly sexual Loki – mainly because a large chunk of their audience are children and teenagers. In addition, two out of three Loki films (with the exception of *Thor*) have been distributed by Walt Disney Studios. The aura of genderless sexuality which could not have possibly been explored in the films for fear of losing the younger segments of

the audience, is nevertheless successfully explored by fans with numerous memes, drawings and sexualized stories. Fans imagine being seduced by Loki, draw pictures of Loki and Thor enjoying a same-sex relationship, and there is even a strand of Loki fandom which portrays Tom Hiddleston's character as a pole-dancer.¹

Scatological references

Scatology is a regular guest in trickster tales. This kind of basic humour – alongside sexual references – is another fundamental way of deflating the system and dragging it off its high horse. It works because the trickster is unaware of the shameful aspect of all things scatological. In fact, the more 'basic' tricksters such as Northern American Wakdjunkaga and Coyote start off with not being able to recognize that certain bodily functions should remain private. Recognition of privacy, and the birth of shame and decency, constitute the boundary which separates the pre-civilized trickster, jubilant in its omnipotence and brandishing its giant penis, from the human being who has surrendered a big chunk of his freedom to the social order as part of the contract.

Like the sexual motif, scatological references in trickster tales sometimes have social and political allusions. This is common in canons describing a well-established class system (feudalism and later). The trickster in these tales tends to be conscious of his actions, and his choice to ignore shame is also deliberate and conscious. For this type of trickster, profanity and lewdness are some of the few ways of challenging the immobility of the social system. In 'Lokasenna' Loki mixes scatology with sex to make the insults more potent. He says to Freya, the goddess of beauty and fertility:

Shut your mouth, Freya; I know you full well;
 You are scarcely free from flaws.
 As for each of the Aesir and elves here inside,
 At one time you've been their bitch.
 [...]
 Shut your mouth, Freya, you're a witch,
 And mixed up with much spite;
 You straddled your brother while glad gods stood by,
 And then, Freya, you farted. (Orchard, 2011, p. 88)

Loki's mixing of sex and scatology, which maximizes the damaging impact on societal taboos, does not stop at this. He then announces that Freya's father, Njord, was defiled by the daughters of the giant Hymir:

Shut your mouth, Njord, East from here,
 You were sent as a hostage to the gods;
 Hymir's daughters took you for a toilet
 Which is why they pissed in your mouth. (Orchard, 2011, p. 89)

Obviously, Tom Hiddleston's Loki could not have possibly said anything like this. Being a mass and heavily regulated phenomenon, contemporary cinema limits the presence of scatology to comedy, and even there it is carefully managed as it is one of the central taboo subjects in Western societies. Marvel and Disney ensured that their trickster creation is not too edgy, or too risky; that he does not break any real taboos. Besides, contemporary audiences who have a pretty defined vision of the genres, cannot imagine an epic containing comedic elements in the form of scatological references.

Bodily functions and excreta are the first 'victims' of the civilizing efforts of the system in ontogenetic development. This makes profanity an effective tool of protest because it shakes the founding principles of social existence; it transgresses the basic rules of decent behaviour. Civilization, the trickster discovered, can be challenged and scared to death with something as innocuous as a bare ass.

The animal connection

Animals are frequent guests in trickster myths. In fact, they symbolize the trickster's connection with the 'underworld' of instincts and animal behaviour. In all ages and cultures professional and amateur 'fool' entertainers have included 'the animal connection' into their performances and had it reflected in their dress. Horse-tailed Greek satyrs and goat-like hooved fauns of the Roman mythology; eared hoods, feathers, fox-tails, cocks-combs and calf-skins of Medieval jesters (Welsford, 1936, p. 123; Willeford, 1969, pp. 3–4); little dogs accompanying circus clowns and participating in clown acts – all these traditional elements emphasize the trickster's role as a culture hero, as a 'mediator' between the world of humans and the 'underworld' of instincts.

Moreover, many canons do not even draw a clear boundary between the trickster's human and animal characteristics. The mediaeval Loki turns into a salmon and a falcon (in both cases to escape the pursuers), and Tom Hiddleston's trickster has a golden helmet with large horns which metaphorically connect him with the animal realm.

Conclusion

Tom Hiddleston's Loki is a very popular character, capturing the audiences' imagination to the extent that it now has a life of its own as the object of fan art. The character contains most of the original trickster characteristics, emphasizing the importance of the trickster as a metaphor for the unpredictability of change on the one hand, and the importance of managing it on the other. Both the mediaeval and the Marvel sets of narratives focus on the end of civilization as we know it, on the cataclysmic dangers to civilization, and on the importance of management of change.

All things change, the *Eddas* keep reminding their readers, and Ragnarok (the end of the system) is inevitable. However, it can be postponed and, as long as Loki stays in his cave, we – and our civilization – is safe. One often wonders why Loki, evil and untrustworthy as he is, is not completely rejected by the gods and heroes. In the *Eddas* the Aesir often work with him, or use him to accomplish certain deeds (such as using him in contests against the magician Utgarda-Loki (1275). The Hollywood version of the heroes of Asgard let Loki live with them, but keep an eye on him. In *Thor: The Dark World* Thor even asks for his help. It is best to keep

an eye on change, as well as to be aware of the stagnating elements of the system. Loki is a useful element, an important reminder of the fact that without change even the most perfect of civilizations will fall apart.

Note

1. A Google key word search for 'Loki' immediately suggests 'fan fiction', 'fanart' and 'poledancing' as further search terms, with a long list of possible sites to follow up for all three. The 'pole dancing' association stems from a scene in *Thor*, where Loki uses a spear stuck into the ground as leverage during an attack against his brother.

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