

LOKI

An Informational Outline

Divine race: Jotun, honorary Aesir

A/K/A: Loptr, Lodur (disputed)

Immediate family:

Father: Faubauti;

Mother: Laufey or Nal;

Brothers: Byleist and Helblindi (one or both may be references to his blood-brotherhood with Odin).

Wife: Sigyn;

Mistress and/or Concubine: Angrboda;

Children: Ali/Vali and Nari/Narvi (by Sigyn), Fenris, Jormungand, and Hel (by Angrboda); Sleipnir (fathered by Svadilfari). Father of an unnamed child by Tyr's wife (also unnamed). An otherwise obscure reference in Voluspa hin skammarelates that; Lopt was impregnated by a wicked woman, from whom every ogre on earth is descended; (Larrington translation) Unlike the birth of Sleipnir, which was quite usual in its own fashion, this pregnancy came about because he ate the heart of the woman, who had been burnt for unspecified reasons.

Blood-brother of Odin.

Appearance: Pleasing and handsome; (Gylfaginning). Other conjectural descriptions exist, but this is the only one which appears in the Eddas.

Attributes: Ambivalence - Loki aids or hinders the gods as it is convenient to him, or when necessary to save his own skin; the wise fool; - renowned for his cleverness, he manages to find himself at a disadvantage because of his thoughtlessness many times; humor - he is the only one of the Aesir who can make Skadhi laugh after her father's death; indiscriminate sexuality - in addition to Sigyn, Angrboda, and Svadilfari, he's also slept with Skadhi, Sif, Freyja and Tyr's wife (and, no doubt, others).

Treasures: None, although he influenced the making of Mjolnir, Draupnir, Gungnir, Gullinbursti, Skidbladnir, and Sif's hair. Borrowed the feather cloaks of Freyja and Frigg, as well as Ran's net on one occasion, although the net is also said to be his invention.

Sacred Beasts: None, unless one counts those Loki has appeared in the shape of at one time or another: mare, fly and/or flea, salmon. The similarity between the Swedish word lokke (spider) and Loki has suggested this as one, although it appears nowhere in the myths.

Star Lore: The dog star, Sirius, is referred to as Lokabrenna.

kennings: How shall Loki be referred to? By calling him son of Faubauti and Laufey, of Nal, brother of Byleist and Helblindi, father of Vanargand, i.e., Fenriswolf, and of Jormungand, i.e., the Midgard serpent, and Hel's and Nari's and Ali's relative and father, brother, comrade and table-companion of Odin and the Aesir, Geirrod's visitor and casket-ornament, thief from giants, of goat and Brisingamen and Idunn's apples, relative of Sleipnir, husband of Sigyn, enemy of gods, Sif's hair-harmer, maker of mischief, the cunning As, accuser and trickster of gods, contriver of Baldr's death, the bound one, wrangler with Heimdall and Skadi.

Also: Faubauti's terribly sly son; the sea-thread's (Midgard serpent's) father; not very trustworthy tryer of war-thunder-Gaut (Thor); vulture-way (air=Lopt, a pun on this alternate name for Loki); the cargo of incantation-fetter's (Sigyn's) arms (alternately: the burden of Sigyn's arms); the raven-god's (Odin's) friend; Honir's good friend; the tryer of Honir's mind; the wolf's father; the thief of Brisingamen girdle; the hawk's offspring (Loki, in bird form); ale-Gefn's (Idunn's) flowing corpse-sea (blood) hound (wolf, thief).

Hall:None (Where does he live, anyway?)

Miscellany:

After the Aegir's feast, Loki is hunted down and captured by the Aesir; his son Ali is turned into a wolf and kills his brother, Narvi. His son's entrails are used to bind him to three boulders, and Skadhi places a poisonous snake where its venom will drip down on him. His wife Sigyn remains at his side, holding a bowl to catch the venom. When she must go to empty it, the venom strikes Loki and causes such agony that the earth shakes with the contortions of his torment. He will remain bound until all fettered creatures are loosed at Ragnarok.

Loki is the antagonist of Heimdall; they will slay one another at Ragnarok. Loki fights on the side of his family by birth, the Jotuns, rather than that of his blood-brother Odin and the Aesir.

Snorri Sturluson attributes Baldr's murder by Hod to Loki's influence. This can be neither supported or refuted by reference to verses in Voluspa and Lokasenna, depending on how one chooses to read them. It seems to be refuted in Baldr's Draumr and Hyndluliod, which mention Baldr's death and Hod as his killer, but make no mention of Loki's involvement. The Gesta Danorum of Saxo Grammaticus lays the blame solely on Hod.

Loki is quite probably the most dynamic figure in Norse mythology - one of the few dynamic characters, along with Odin. Most of the other Gods and Goddesses are relatively static: they do not change over time, nor do they alter according to their experiences.

Odin's anomalous character in his roles as a god of wisdom and a god of war are more readily subject to analysis, for in these he merely represents both sides of a single coin. The price of wisdom is often sorrow and disillusionment in equal measure to that which is gained; warfare always implies the ignobility of defeat at the same moment it promises glorious victory. Loki, on the other hand, is the coin, which is flipped and lands on its edge.

If you stop to think on it, for all the times Loki was prevailed upon to get the Gods out of a particularly sticky situation, can you name one single instance when someone did something for him? (Merely deciding not to kill him does not count.) Even when it is perfectly evident from the outset that Loki is the author of their troubles, he is still the one they depend upon to set matters to rights. One might consider this a cautionary tale about the nature of altruism and enlightened self-interest: do what you will for some people and they will more likely resent you than be grateful for being beholden to you.

The unintended consequences of Loki's actions are often more meaningful and far-reaching than the event which set them into motion. Cutting off Sif's hair might have been one of his more juvenile efforts on the face of it, but making amends for this little prank resulted in the making of the Treasures of the Gods: Gungnir, Odin's spear, Mjollnir, Thor's hammer, and the rest.

Of course, I always did wonder whether Mjollnir's short handle did not have some sort of a metaphorical context, especially considering its use in the Lay of Thrym to hallow the bride in an almost painfully obvious use of fertility/phallic symbolism. I have been counseled that it is not the size of its handle, but what Thor did with the hammer, which counts. But perhaps one might view Thor's aggression as just a teeny bit of overcompensation?

Loki offers his head in his wager with the dwarves Brokk and Eitri when they contrive to make treasures equal to those made by the sons of Ivaldi at Loki's behest. But he denies it to them after they have won the bet by pointing out that they might not have any part of his neck. In what will become one of the repeating themes of Loki's appearances in the myth cycle, his lips are sewn shut by Brokk in a vindictive gesture, which has the effect of temporarily binding the flow of his guileful words.

Loki has no need of hammer nor spear nor any other tool while he has the more powerful, yet

more ephemeral, gift of speech. When he occasionally has need of something more tangible, as he does when he borrows the feather-cloaks of Freyja and Frigg, he needs nothing more than persuasion to acquire them. Words, like Loki himself, can be wonderful allies or fearsome enemies, depending on the circumstances.

THE CHARACTER OF LOKI:

I will now analyze Loki's character from the material, which I have already discussed, and I will try to shed some light on Loki's origin and children. It is by no means easy to adequately describe and analyze the multi-faceted character of Loki without ending up with traits that in many ways support, but also in many ways contradict each other. We have found, for example, that is Loki the blood brother of Odin, but that he simultaneously has proven himself the archenemy of him after having caused Baldr's death: that he with remarkable ease can travel from Asgard to Jotunheim and back, feeling almost just as much at ease in either. Three major strands in his character can be discerned, however: Loki as the instigator of conflicts, Loki as the provider and Loki as the transgressor of boundaries.

The Instigator of Conflicts:

When Loki appears in the Eddas, it is mostly in his role of Instigator of conflicts because of some unfortunate circumstance, he is forced to act not according to his own volition but to that of others. Most often, his loyalties to the Aesir are in conflict with a promise given to the giants. On other occasions, he has given advice that would have led the Aesir into destruction, had he not managed to solve the situation in his own peculiar manner. He is the Instigator of conflict, but also the solver thereof: he manages to solve all of the tricky situations he has put the Aesir and himself into, but never without paying the price himself: when saving the day in the myth of the giant builder, he has to suffer the most unmanly act of intercourse with the steed, but also the ignominy of giving birth to the eight-legged fowl, Sleipnir, and when providing the Aesir with their precious gifts he ends up with his lips sown together.

The Provider:

Loki as the Provider is in many ways connected to his function of being a trickster/culture bringer. He does not only provide the Aesir (and hence mankind) in general with the net but he also provides three Aesir in particular with the attributes that constitute their functions in Dumézil's tripartite system: Thor with the hammer, Odin with the spear and Freyr with the golden boar.

Loki's connection with the net and cobweb has been thoroughly discussed in its folkloristic context by Rooth and Celander, and as that aspect goes beyond the scope of this essay, I will only discuss this connection as it appear in the Eddas. According to Snorri, Loki invents the net but that he destroys it when the Aesir approach in order to capture him. The most intelligent of the gods, Kvasir, finds the remains of the net in the ashes and reconstructs it in order to catch Loki. In the Poetic Edda, however, it is the sea-goddess Ran who lends her net to Loki when he wishes to capture Andvari. If Loki is to be seen as the inventor of the net, why does he himself invent the instrument of his own destruction? If not, why does Snorri make him the inventor of the net when the Poetic Edda explicitly makes the net the property of Ran?

In the myth of Sif's hair, Loki is forced to make up for the loss of Sif's hair, which he himself has cut off, and returns not only with a golden wig for Sif but also with impressing gifts for other Aesir, namely: the spear Gungnir for Odin, Sif's golden wig for Thor, and the ship Skidbladnir for Frey. The three gods also receive gifts from the dwarf with whom Loki made his wager and whom he tried to cheat Draupnir, the magic multiplying ring for Odin, Mjolnir for Thor and the golden boar to Frey. Loki does not, of course, give these latter gifts but it is he who has instigated their conception. Loki thus becomes the provider of the most powerful, if perhaps not the most perfect, weapon of the gods and therefore their most important protection from the giants: Mjolnir, the hammer of Thor. This hammer, when wielded by Thor, the fierce warrior, slants the odds in the gods' favor. Moreover, he provides Odin with the mighty spear Gungnir and Freyr with Skidbladnir: he is in fact solely responsible for providing the gods with the instruments and

symbols of their mythological functions.

The Transgressor of Boundaries

Loki transgresses boundaries not only as shape-shifter but also as transgressor of gender boundaries, being able to change his sex at will. He is neither áss nor giant, but seems to be able to pass as both whenever feeling like doing so. Most of the situations in which he has become the instigator of conflict relate in some way or another to his shape-shifting ability and/or crossing the border between the land of the gods and of the giants. Hence, Loki is external to the system, but essential to its function, and thus it is as a mediator between the outside and inside, partaking of both, that he operates.

Loki seems to have no difficulty with changing his shape: in the Eddas, he appears as falcon, as salmon, and as mare. His relationship with beasts also manifests itself in his progeny: his two sons Fenrir and Jormundgand are a giant wolf and a monstrous serpent respectively. When disguised as mare, he becomes pregnant and gives birth to Sleipnir: it is clear that assuming other shapes does not give him any extraordinary powers except for that of the shape assumed; his actions as a falcon is limited to those of a falcon, and becoming pregnant in the shape of a mare consequently results in giving birth to a horse! In the Thazi-myth, Loki is travelling in falcon-shape and is captured by Thazi just because of the limits of his present shape: no bird can escape when its feet are trapped, not even a god in bird-shape. Thazi subsequently recognizes Loki because his eyes give him away: here the falcon-guise reveals its weakness. When in salmon shape, Loki is caught by Thor around his salmon tail, and his grip being so firm that the salmon's tail is said to get its slim shape from Thor's grasp. Here too Loki is restricted in his actions to those restrictions that apply to the shape he has assumed.

Transgression of Gender:

Transgression of gender boundaries is another of Loki's typical traits, a trait which he shares with Odin, and which is intimately connected to his appearing as mare in the myth of the giant builder, where he changes both shape and sex. He dresses up as a woman in rymaskvida and when consulting Frigg about the mistletoe in the myth of Baldr's death, and even crosses the border and becomes female: as the giantess okk who refuses to cry over Baldr and when milking cows and giving birth to children in the underworld

The family of Loki Snorri tells us about Loki's family in detail: ;svá, atkalla hann son Fárbauda ok Laufegar, Nalar, bródir Byleists ok Helblinda. In the Poetic Edda, Loki is referred to as Laufey's son in Thrymskvida st.20 and in Lokasenna st.52, and the kennings of Voluspast.51 and Hyndluljóð st.40: Byleist brother, give further evidence to his relation with Byleist. Loki's relationship to Helblinda as being a person in his own right is not as certain as is his relationship to Byleistr, as Helblinda is also used as a name for Odin in Grimnismal st.46. de Vries suggests that Byleistr and Helblinda are two other names for Odin, and finds support for his suggestion in Lokasenna, where Loki claims his rightful place at the table because of his blood brotherhood with Odin, thus establishing the close relation between the two of them.

Loki's Parents:

Farbauti and Laufey, we know very little. The only time Farbauti is mentioned in the Eddas is in the passage quoted above, whereas Laufey's name is used in kennings in the Poetic Edda as mentioned, in addition to her being mentioned in Snorri's Edda. Rooth suggests that the names carry symbolical meaning. Farbauti, which is considered to mean the wind, may well be concerned with the wind as the cause of illnesses, given the evil nature of Loki. The meaning of Laufey, on the other hand, is more problematic, and to correctly define her name as 'lövjerska', a woman who fiddles with medicines and herbs, seems uncertain. Her alternative name, Nál, suggests according to Rooth a connection to a shooting pain, just as being pierced with a needle. The names of Loki's two brothers, Helblinda and Byleistr, also carry symbolical meaning: Helblinda meaning totally blind and Byleistr meaning lame, or crippled. Here Rooth points to Irish Celtic influences, which will be discussed in detail elsewhere in this essay, where the transition from monsters and demons to hypostases and illnesses or defects is also obvious.

Loki as a Father:

Loki is also the father (and mother!) of many beings: he has two sons with his wife Sigyn, Nare or Narve and Vale, and three children with the giantess Angrboda: Fenrir, Jormundgand and Hel; to these children he is the father. He has also conceived a foal with the stallion Svadilfari, Sleipnir, and lastly he has given birth to the giantess Hyndla after having eaten the burnt heart of a dead woman.

Loki's bestial children are strongly connected with the eschatology of the Eddas: Fenris and Jormundgand as well as their father both play crucial roles in the last battle between the Aesir and their enemies. His daughter Hel falls into a somewhat different category: she is the queen of Helheim, and gathers there her army of the evil dead. Jormundgand is not altogether evil, though: when committed to biting his tail at world's end he really is a part of the cosmological order, as de Vries claims.

LOKI IN OTHER MYTHS:

In the myths where Loki appears on his own, we find that his character is divided in two: one personality who follows the usual pattern of getting into trouble and then saving his skin by means of wit and trickery, and the other where he really lives up to his reputation of being a malevolent demon and acts out of pure malice. Examples of the first part we find in the myth of Sif's golden hair, where Loki acts as provider, and of the second in the myth of Baldr's death, where Loki assumes the shape of a woman, examples can also be found in Lokasenna. Lastly, (in a supreme example of his evil nature) we find Loki marshalling the Aesir's enemies at Ragnarok, where there can be no doubt about his evil intent.

The Myth of Sif's Hair:

The myth about Sif's hair starts when Thór finds out that Loki has cut off all of his wife Sif's hair. Thór threatens to kill Loki, who promises to go to the Svartalfar and make the dwarfs produce golden hair for Sif. The dwarfs are eager to please, and produce not only golden hair for Sif, but also a marvelous ship for Frey and a magic spear for Ódin. Loki then challenges two other dwarfs to make even better things, and puts his head at stake. The dwarfs set to work, and Loki who is afraid of losing his head tries to disturb them, and by transforming himself into a fly, he interferes with their work. His attempts are not all in vain: the dwarfs manage to produce a golden boar and a golden ring, both of which are flawless, and a hammer, Mjollnir, which shaft is a bit too short. Who really won the bet becomes a matter of dispute, which is settled by the Aesir, who deem that Loki has lost his bet and that he therefore also must lose his head. Loki escapes but is captured by Thor and brought back. He then agrees to letting the dwarf cut off his head, as long as he does not touch his neck, which, of course, is impossible. The dwarf then sews Loki's lips together in wrath with a string called Vartare.

This story only appears in Snorri's Edda, and his account of the story again leaves us with the usual picture of Loki, he who puts himself in deep trouble because of some more or less harmless trick, only to save his skin in the last second. In one aspect, however, this myth does not conform to the pattern: First he offends the wife of the thunder god by cutting off her hair, and secondly he succeeds in damaging the hammer of Thor. He has, whether willingly or unwillingly, tried to incapacitate the fiercest fighter of the Aesir by means of damaging his weapon. But has he really? The hammer of Thor seems to work fine anyway, imperfect shaft or not! Moreover, Loki brings more good things to the Aesir than would suffice to cover the loss of Sif's hair: he provides not only Thor with a hammer: Ódin receives not only a spear but also a golden ring, Frey a golden boar and a ship that easily can be folded up and fitted into a pocket.

Baldr's Death:

In the myth of Baldr's death in Gylfaginning Loki's demonic aspect reveals itself at full strength: here he lives up to his reputation of being the most evil and malevolent of the gods. The story

runs as follows: Baldr has been having dreams which reveal to him that he soon will be dead. The Aesir decide to try and stop this and Frigga makes every creature, living as well as dead take an oath not to harm Baldr in any way. The mistletoe is left out, as it was believed to be too weak to harm anyone. Baldr then becomes practically invulnerable, and the Aesir make it their sport to try their weapons against him, inflicting no harm on him whatsoever. This annoys Loki, who assumes the shape of a woman in order to trick Freyja into telling him how Baldr can be harmed, and he is told that the mistletoe were exempted from the oath. He then designs a missile weapon out of mistletoe, and talks the blind god Höder in throwing it at Baldr. The missile hits and kills Baldr.

The Aesir decide to bring him back from Hel, where he lives after his death. They send a messenger to Hel, who returns with the answer that Baldr may return to the living if all creatures on earth would cry over him. Every creature does so, except for one giantess, who refuses to shed a tear for Baldr. This is, of course, Loki in disguise, and the Aesir decide to catch and punish him, not only for being the instigator of Baldr's killing, but also for keeping him from coming back to life again.

Loki flees, and hides in a house with doors in all directions, assuming the shape of a salmon during the days. He designs a net out of linen, but throws it into the fire when he realizes that his hideout has been spotted, and takes refuge in the river in his salmon shape. The Aesir enter the house, and Kvasir, the cleverest of the gods, sees the net pattern in the ashes and figures out how the networks. He designs a net of his own, and the Aesir then go fishing. Loki is captured and tied to three pointy rocks with the bowels of his son Narfi, and has to stay confined until the end of time. A poisonous snake is placed above his head, dripping its venom on his face, thereby causing him tremendous pain. Sigyn, Loki's loyal wife, then takes a bowl and holds it over Loki's head to protect him from the venom, but when she has to empty it every once in a while, Loki writhes in pain, causing the shaking of the ground we know as earthquakes, in the process.

Lokasenna:

Lokasenna deals with the quarrel between Loki and the other Aesir at a feast hosted by Ægir or Gymir. Loki kills one of Ægir's servants, Fimafeng, because he could not stand hearing the gods' praising of his skill of serving and pleasing the guests. The Aesir kick Loki out, but he returns only to start a quarrel that cannot be stopped by force as the gods had taken a vow of peace inside the hall where the feast was held. Loki is therefore allowed to verbally abuse each and every one of the gods as he sees fit. He starts with reminding Ódin of his promise of blood brotherhood, of which we know nothing else but what is told here. This gives him his rightful place at the table, and once seated, the abuse begins. Time and time again he is asked to be quiet, and he is offered precious gifts in order to keep his mouth shut, but to no avail: he will not stop for anything.

He accuses Bragi of cowardice, Idunn of promiscuity and of having embraced the killer of her husband. Further he accuses Gefjon of having committed adultery, and Ódin of being unfair in his role of deciding upon which of the combating armies to win when presiding at battles. Ódin then reminds Loki of his own faults, (to us unknown) of having spent time in the underworld as a woman, milking cows and giving birth to children. Loki then accuses Ódin of unmanliness, and goes on to point to Frigg's affair with Odin's two brothers when she thought Ódin to be dead.

He also tells her that he is the cause of Baldr's absence, possibly referring to his refusal to weep over him to keep him in Hel. Freyja is accused of adultery and incest, Njördr of having been used as a chamber pot by some giantesses and of having committed incest: Tyr of being unable of solving juridical problems and of not being the father of his own son, Loki himself claiming paternity. The abuse goes on with Loki giving air to all the dark secrets of the Aesir, until Thor comes to the hall and resolves the situation by threatening Loki with his mighty hammer. This does not, however, mean that the peace is broken, as Thor has not taken the vow, having been away in the east killing trolls when the vow was made.

In Lokasenna we find a lot of references to myths and stories about the Aesir that we cannot find elsewhere. Nonetheless, they provide us with important information about the Aesir in general,

and Loki in particular. He has had intercourse with Freyja, with Tyr's wife (of whom we know nothing more than this brief passage) and moreover with Sif, Thor's wife. He freely admits his guilt in the killing of Balder, or rather that it was he that saw to it that Frigg would never see her son again, and he also indicates that his was the guilt when Thazi died, both first and last in line: as the instigator and as the actor.

Ragnarok Voluspa:

Loki is the helmsman of Naglfari, the ship that carries the army of Hel to Midgard. He is also mentioned as brodur Byleists, but after this his participation seems to become insignificant, as he is not mentioned more at all. Snorri's version in Gylfaginning 50 differs somewhat. In his account it is the giant Hrym and not Loki who steers the Naglfari, but Loki is all the more active in the ensuing battle, fighting with Heimdalr, slaying him but is also slain himself.

What is important here is that we find Loki playing a more violent role than before and that he has finally chosen which side to take. Instead of using his wits he actually joins the fray and fights the gods' sentinel successfully, which in some ways contradicts the very essence of his character as the sly manipulator who would rather run off than take the heat. Instead of balancing between good and evil he makes his stand against the Aesir, joining forces with their enemies.

Conclusion:

In this essay, I have analyzed the character of Loki as it appears in Snorri Sturlason's Edda and the Poetic Edda. I have divided the myths in three parts, depending on the context in which Loki appears and what other actors there are. I have also shown that Loki really is not as evil as his reputation has it, except for a few examples where there can be no doubt of his alignment. I have dealt with the three aspects of Loki's character: the instigator of conflict, the provider, and the transgressor of boundaries. I have shown that when he is the instigator of conflict, he is mostly so out of necessity, seldom of his own volition. When appearing as the provider, he provides the most prominent of the Aesir with precious and useful gifts, each according to the function they have. When transgressing boundaries, he readily assumes the form, sex, or race that is needed for the occasion.

Bibliography

Celander, Hilding

1911: Lokes mytiska ursprung, Edv. Berlings Boktryckeri, Uppsala

deVries, Jan

1933: The Problem of Loki, Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, Helsinki

Dumézil, George

1959: Loki, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt

Eddan: De nordiska guda- och hjältesångerna, translated by Erik Brate, 1990, Niloé, Uddevalla

Holtmark, Anne

1964: Studier i Snorres mytologi, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo

Rooth, Anna Birgitta

1961: Loki in Scandinavian Mythology, C.W.K. Gleerups Förlag, Lund

Sturluson, Snorri

1978: Snorres Edda translated by Björn Collinder, Forum, Uddevalla Ström, Folke

1956: Loki- ein mythologisches Problem, Almqvist & Wiksell, Göteborg

1993: Nordisk Hedendom: Tro och sed i förkristen tid Akademiförlaget, Göteborg

Turville-Petre, E.O.G

1964: Myth and Religion of the North, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London

Anderson, Philip N.

1981: "Form and Content in the Lokasenna: A Re-evaluation", *Edda: Nordisk Tidskrift för Litteraturforskning, Scandinavian Journal of Literary Research*, 4, Oslo

Frakes, Jerold C

1987: "Loki's function in the Tripartite System", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, October, Champaign

Näsström, Britt-Marie

1995: Lecture in comparative religion, Göteborgs Universitet, October