

Exercise 1

Read the following extract, and consider the following questions. We'll discuss your readings in plenum.

- What cultural categories (e.g. masculine/feminine, native/foreign, gods/giants) can you identify in the text(s)?
- Who crosses these categories, if anybody?
- Who enforces these categories, if anybody?
- What are the consequences of any transgressions?

Text: *Þrymskviða*, str. 12-28 ('The Poem of Thrymr')

Context: In this eddic poem, the god Thor wakes up to find his hammer, Mjöllnir, has been stolen by Thrymr, the enemy of the gods. The extract begins when Loki flies back from visiting Thrymr, bearing that bad news: the giant will only return the hammer in exchange for the hand of Freyja in marriage.

Extract:

12. Then they went to see the beautiful Freyja,
and these were the first words which he spoke:
'Dress yourself, Freyja, in a bridge's head-dress!
We two shall drive to the land of the giants.'
13. Freyja then was angry and snorted in rage,
all the halls of the Æsir trembled at that,
the great necklace of the Brisings fell from her:
'You'll know me to be the most sex-crazed of women,
if I drive with you to the land of the giants.'
14. Together all the gods came to the Assembly,
and all the goddesses came to the to the discussion,
and the mighty gods debated,
how Thor and Loki should get the hammer back.
15. Then Heimdall, the whitest of the gods –
he can see far ahead as the Vanir also can – said:
'Let's dress Thor in a bridal head-dress,
let him wear the great necklace of the Brisings.'
16. 'Let keys kingle about him
and let women's clothing fall down to his knees,
and on his breast let's display jewels,
and we'll arrange a head-dress suitably on his head!'
17. Then said Thor, the vigorous god:
'The Æsir will call me a pervert,
if I let you put a bridge's veil on me.'
18. Then said Loki, son of Laufey:
'Be quiet, Thor, don't speak these words!
The giants will be settling in Asgard
unless you get your hammer back.'

19. Then they dressed Thor in a bride's head-dress
and in the great necklace of the Brisings,
they let keys jingle about him
and women's clothing fall down to his knees,
and on his breast they displayed jewels,
and arranged a head-dress suitably on his head.

20. Then said Loki, son of Laufey:
'I'll go with you to be your maid,
we two shall drive to the land of the giants.'

[Thor and Loki are welcomed at Thrym's hall.]

24. They came together there early in the evening,
and ale was brought for the giants;
He [Thor] ate one whole ox, eight salmon,
all the dainties meant for the women,
the husband of Sif drank three casks of mead.

25. The said Thrym, lord of ogres:
'Where have you seen a lady eating more ravenously?
I have never seen any woman with a bigger bite,
nor any girl drink so much mead.'

26. The very shrewd maid sat before him,
she found an answer to the giant's speech:
'Freyja ate nothing for eight nights,
so madly eager was she to come to Giantland.'

27. He [Thrymr] bent under the veil, he wanted to kiss her,
but he sprang back instead right down the hall:
'Why are Freyja's eyes so terrifying?
It seems to me that fire is burning from them.'

28. The very shrewd maid sat before him,
she found an answer to the giant's speech:
'Freyja did not sleep for eight nights, so madly eager was she to come to Giantland.'

[Thrymr brings out the hammer to use it in the marriage ritual, but Thor grabs it and kills him and all of the other giants.]

trans. Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), pp. 98-100

Exercise 2

Read the following extract, and consider the following questions. We'll discuss your readings in plenum.

- What cultural categories (e.g. masculine/feminine, native/foreign, gods/giants) can you identify in the text(s)?
- Who crosses these categories, if anybody?
- Who enforces these categories, if anybody?
- What are the consequences of any transgressions?

Text: *Gylfaginning*, ch. 42 ('The Deluding of Gylfi')

Context: *Gylfaginning* was constructed by the scholar-statesman Snorri Sturluson in the 1220s as part of his "Prose Edda". It retells pre-Christian mythology that was once well known, not so that 13th century Icelanders could worship pagan gods, but so that poets could use the mythology as a source for metaphors, analogies, and poetic language. The text takes the form of a human king (Gylfi, disguised as a man called Gangleri) asking questions about the pre-Christian deities, and receiving answers from three mysterious figures – High, Just-as-High, and Third – each of whom is simultaneously Óðinn in disguise. This extract details how Loki, Óðinn's foreign-born blood-brother, gets the gods into and out of trouble with a visiting giant builder.

Extract:

Then spoke Gangleri: 'Whose is the horse Sleipnir? And what is there to tell about it?'

High said: 'You do not know details of Sleipnir and are not acquainted with the circumstances of its origin! – but you will find this worth listening to. It was right at the beginning of the gods' settlement, when the gods had established Midgard and built Valhalla, there came there a certain builder and offered to build them a fortification in three seasons so good that it would be reliable and secure against mountain-giants and frost-giants even though they should come in over Midgard. And he stipulated as his payment that he should get Freyia as his wife, and he wished to have the sun and moon.

Then the Æsir went into discussion and held a conference, and this bargain was made with the builder that he should get what he demanded if he managed to build the fortification in one winter, but on the first day of summer if there was anything unfinished in the fortification then he should forfeit his payment. He was to receive from no man help with the work. And when they told him these terms, then he asked that they should permit him to have the help of his stallion called Svadilfreri. And it was Loki that was responsible for this being granted him.

He set to work the first day of winter to build the fortification, and at night he hauled up stone with the stallion. And the Æsir thought it a great marvel what enormous rocks this stallion hauled, and the stallion performed twice the deed of strength that the builder did. But at their agreement there had been mighty witnesses invoked and many oaths, for the giants did not think it safe to be among the Æsir without a guarantee of safety if Thor were to return home, but at the time he was gone away into eastern pans to thrash trolls.

And as winter passed the building of the fortification advanced rapidly and it was so high and strong that it could not be stormed. And when summer was three days away then he had almost got round to the entrance of the fortification. Then the gods took their places on their judgment seats and tried to think of what to do and asked each other who had been responsible for the decision to marry Freyia into Giantland and to spoil the sky and heaven by taking away sun and moon and giving them to giants. And there was agreement among them all that he must have been responsible for this decision who is responsible for most evil, Loki

Laufeyiarson, and declared he would deserve an evil death if he did not find a scheme whereby the builder would forfeit his payment, and they offered to attack Loki. And he, being afraid, swore oaths that he would manage things so the builder would forfeit his payment, whatever it cost him to do it.

And the same evening, when the builder drove out for stone with his stallion Svadilfreri, there ran out of a certain wood a mare up to the stallion and neighed at it. And when the stallion realized what kind of horse it was, it went frantic and tore apart the tackle and ran towards the mare, and she away to the wood and the builder after them, trying to catch the stallion, and these horses ran around all night and the building work was held up for that night. The next day not as much building was done as had been the case previously.

And when the builder realized that the work was not going to be completed, then the builder got into a giant rage. But when the Æsir saw for certain that it was a mountain-giant that they had there, then the oaths were disregarded and they called upon Thor and he came in a trice and the next thing was that Mjollnir was raised aloft. Then he paid the builder's wages and it wasn't the sun and moon, instead he stopped him from living in Giantland and struck the first blow so that his skull was shattered into fragments and sent him down beneath Niflhel. But Loki had had such dealings with Svadilfreri that somewhat later he gave birth to a foal. It was grey and had eight legs, and this is the best horse among gods and men.

trans. Anthony Faulkes, *Edda* (London: Everyman, 1987), pp. 35-36.

Exercise 3

Read the following extract, and consider the following questions. We'll discuss your readings in plenum.

- What cultural categories (e.g. masculine/feminine, native/foreign, gods/giants) can you identify in the text(s)?
- Who crosses these categories, if anybody?
- Who enforces these categories, if anybody?
- What are the consequences of any transgressions?

Text: *Hákonar saga góða*, ch. 17 ('The Saga of Hákon the Good')

Context: this saga describes the life of King Hákon 'the good' Haraldsson, who was king of Norway c. 943-961. Hákon was raised as a Christian in England, but returned to seize the throne of Norway as a young man. Much of the saga describes his dealings with powerful Norwegian lords, and his running feud with his rivals for the throne, Erik 'blood axe' and his sons. This extract is from a section of the text where Hákon (and his savvy friend Earl Sigurth) travel around Norway shoring up support among provincial Norwegians.

Extract:

In fall, at the beginning of winter there was a sacrificial feast at Hlathir, and the king attended it. Before that, if present at a place where theath sacrifice was made, he was accustomed to eat in a little house apart, in the company of a few men. But the farmers remarked about it that he did not occupy his high-seat when there was the best cheer among the people. The earl told him that he should not do that; and so it came that the king occupied his high-seat [on this occasion].

But when the first beaker was served, Earl Sigurth proposed a toast, dedicating the horn to Othin, and drank to the king. The king took the horn from him and made the sign of the cross over it.

Then Kár of Grýting said, "Why does the king do that? Doesn't he want to drink of the sacrificial beaker?"

Earl Sigurth made answer, The king does as all do who believe in their own might and strength, and dedicated his beaker to Thor. He made the sign of the hammer over it before drinking." People said no more about it that evening.

Next day when people had seated themselves at the tables, the farmers thronged about the king, saying that now he must eat the horse meat. That, the king would not do under any condition. Then they asked him to drink the broth from it. He refused to do that. Then they asked him to eat the drippings from it. He would not do that, either, and they came near to making an attack on him.

Earl Sigurth said he would help them come to an agreement, asking them to cease their tumult; and he asked the king to gape with his mouth over the handle of the kettle on which the smoke of the broth from the horse meat had settled, so that the handle was greasy from it. Then the king went up to it and put a linen cloth over the handle and gaped with his mouth over it. Then he went back to his high-seat, and neither party was satisfied with that.

trans. Lee M. Hollander, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 110-110.

Exercise 4

Read the following extract, and consider the following questions. We'll discuss your readings in plenum.

- What cultural categories (e.g. masculine/feminine, native/foreign, gods/giants) can you identify in the text(s)?
- Who crosses these categories, if anybody?
- Who enforces these categories, if anybody?
- What are the consequences of any transgressions?

Text: *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 34 ('The Saga of the People of Laxdalr')

Context: *Laxdæla saga* is one of the *íslendingasögur* ('Sagas of Icelanders' or 'Icelandic family sagas'), a genre that generally describes the lives of famous settlers in Iceland. Probably written down in the C13th on the basis of oral storytelling in the region, the saga focuses on a love triangle between Guðrún, and two men, Kjartan and Bolli. This extract describes Guðrún's first marriage, to a man called Þorvaldr Halldórsson.

Extract:

There was a man called Thorvald, who was the son of Halldor Garpsdale -Priest. He lived at Garpsdale in Gilsfjord. He was a wealthy man, but no hero. At the Althing he asked for the hand of Gudrun Osvif's-daughter, who was fifteen years old at the time. The proposal was received not unfavourably, but Osvif said that his terms would make it clear that Thorvald and Gudrun were not of equal standing. Thorvald spoke meekly, and said it was a wife he was asking for, not money. So Gudrun was betrothed to Thorvald, and Osvif alone decided the terms of the marriage contract; it was stipulated that Gudrun should be in charge of their money as soon as they were sharing the same bed, and be entitled to one half of all the estate, no matter how long or little their marriage lasted. Thorvald was also to buy precious things for her, so that no woman of comparable wealth should own finer jewellery than Gudrun; but the value of the estate was not to be affected by such outlays.

People now rode home from the Althing. Gudrun was not consulted about all this, and she showed the strongest displeasure; but there the matter rested. The wedding took place at Garpsdale in late summer. Gudrun had little love for Thorvald, and was hard to please in the buying of valuables. In all the Westfjords there were no jewels so costly that Gudrun did not consider them her due, and she repaid Thorvald with animosity if he failed to buy them, however expensive they might be.

Thord Ingunnarson made himself very friendly with Thorvald and Gudrun, and spent a lot of time with them, and there was much talk about an affair between Thord and Gudrun. On one occasion Gudrun asked Thorvald to buy some gift for her. Thorvald said she showed no moderation, and slapped her on the face.

At Gudrun said, 'You have now given me what every woman wants above all - good colouring; and you have taught me to stop bothering you for things.'

That same evening, Thord arrived. Gudrun told him how she had been insulted, and asked him how she should repay it.

Thord smiled and said, 'I have a good solution for this. Make him a shirt with such a wide neck opening that by wearing it he gives you grounds for divorcing him.'*

Gudrun raised no objection to this, and they dropped the subject. That same spring Gudrun declared herself divorced from Thorvald and went home to Laugar. After that there was a division of the whole estate, and Gudrun got a half of it; it had increased in value by then. They had been together for two years.

* *In a later chapter, Gudrun herself explains that 'The same penalty applies to women [...] as to a man who wears a neck-opening so wide that his nipples are exposed: both are grounds for divorce.'*, p. 126

trans. Magnus Magnusson & Hermann Pálsson, *Laxdæla saga* (London: Penugin Books, 1969), pp. 124-5