

### **Sympathy for a Jötunn: The Justification of Loki's Actions**

You'll find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, *Return of the Jedi*

One of the most poignant descriptions of Loki lies within Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, when readers are told, "That one is also reckoned among the Æsir whom some call the Æsir's calumniator and originator of deceits and the disgrace of all gods and men. His name is Loki or Lopt..." (26). Further names for Loki include Lökkemand, Lokke, Luki, Loptr and Hveðrungr, revealing him to be a not only complex, but also enigmatic figure. Yet those with only a passing familiarity with the Nordic mythos often place him in one of two roles: either as comedic relief, or as the quintessential adversarial figure of Norse myth. It could be argued that Christianity dominates Western thought processes to an immense degree even in contemporary times, and that this leads to a lack of relativistic perspective(s) when dealing with topics that are anathema to a given era's predicated values. Tribalistic dynamics in mass psychology can still apply when encountering concepts like blood vengeance, that today's society considers barbaric; a conceited form of thinking often takes shape, which smacks of the "noble savage" argument of yesteryear. Yet regardless of what prompts such disregard for previous traditions and laws, this essay contends that Loki was not simply a primeval nihilist seeking to dance among Miðgarðr's ashes, but rather an individual whom had suffered intensely under the hands of an oppressive and manipulative regime. When examined in light of the societal and cultural obligations shared by many denizens of Norse mythology, including the Æsir pantheon themselves, Loki's suffering proves so grand in scope that his acts of vengeance were born out of isolation rather than malevolence. Considering the legal norms of the Scandinavian countries during the medieval period while acknowledging the anthropomorphism prevalent in Nordic myth will not only exonerate Loki for any and all wrongdoing, but also shift the blame towards the truly guilty—yet unrepentant—Æsir.

## The Corruption of Sworn Fellowship

Betrayal is the only truth that sticks.

Arthur Miller

William Ian Miller describes the notion of *fóstræðralag* or blood brotherhood as an oath-dependent aspect of the medieval Nordic culture. This complex pact was subject to public reinforcement, based on “The sense that the implicit obligations of kinship, friendship and affinity needed occasionally to be supplemented by obligations undertaken with great formality” (174). Within this framework, it is safe to assume that any such hallowed enterprise required a firm commitment by both participants involved, as all troubles and concerns were to be considered shared regardless of the context. If Loptr was a depraved and malevolent being from the very onset, it seems curious that Óðinn would even subject himself to these sacraments in relation to such a being in the first place. Jan de Vries offers a keen insight into the decision by this so-called “calumniator” when mentioning that, “According to the *Lokasenna* [*Loki’s Quarrel*] he has in former times sworn blood brotherhood with Othin and there is no reason whatever to suspect him of bad intentions” (202). If anything, at this point it is Loki should have been suspicious of Óðinn, since an important aspect of the All-Father’s attitude toward giants (such as himself) can be seen in the nearly genocidal pogrom that had been ongoing against the Jötunn race—until the sole survivors escaped to the edges of the world by sailing away on a tide of their own blood. Whether Loptr originally perceived Óðinn’s offer of blood as an authentic attempt at settlement for the killing of the giant Ymir (the forebearer of the Jötunn race, i.e. the family lineage from which Loki hails) during the Æsir’s creation of the world, or as an effort to halt further aggression between the Æsir and the Jötnar, it seems that the initial settlement had been accepted in good faith.

Of course, it has been demonstrated time and time again within the Nordic mythology that oaths sworn by Óðinn are broken whenever it is in his best interests. Indeed even among the strongest contenders Óðinn might still be deemed a notoriously untrustworthy, deceptive and manipulative god. This assertion is best proven within the poem *Hávamál* (*Sayings of the High One*) from *The Poetic Edda*, as it is here that the All-Father directly admits likely malfeasance on his part when instructing humankind in political tactics:

If you've another, whom you don't trust,  
 But from whom you want nothing but good,  
 Speak fairly to him, but think falsely  
 And repay treachery with a lie.

(19)

With Loki often depicted as a powerful figure within the Jötunn faction, one with a great aptitude for both the oratory and sorcerous arts, it would seem entirely remiss on Óðinn's part to ignore any such potential threat prior to the advent of Ragnarök. Considering this propensity for strategic deception alongside the oracular knowledge that Óðinn gains from the seeress during the *Völuspá* (*Seeress's Prophecy*) in the *Poetic Edda* makes it clear how Loptr is quickly placed within the camp of the enemy. The seeress tells the All-Father that "A ship journeys from the east, Muspell's troops are coming, and Loki steers" (10). With this condemning statement concerning the end times, whatever possible benevolent or noble intentions Loki may have had in accepting the pact would have been inevitably met with secretly preordained hostility, especially when he is considered the enemy by a known prevaricator. Indeed Óðinn, like any great Machiavellian figure, would likely attempt to manipulate and use a potential enemy for his own gain.

Given the likelihood that any unscrupulous motives behind Óðinn's oath of blood-brotherhood were obscured behind false words and pleasantries, another catalyst would then be required to prompt the quintessential misgiving that had been brewing within Asgard. While the Æsir's penchant for cruelty is demonstrated consistently throughout Norse mythology and affords many illustrations to which Loki would have been a direct witness, the Æsir's ongoing disdain for any associated with the Jötunn race (constantly manifested in the deeds of Þór) would only serve to quicken the gestation of mistrust within Loki's breast. With their greed and propensity for murder well known throughout the mythological cycle, it was the building of Asgard's walls and the ill-fated recompense the builder received afterward, which would tear back the veil of civility that obscured Loki's newfound social network. Daniel McCoy attests within *The Viking Spirit: An Introduction to Norse Mythology and Religion*, that during the culmination of this tale, "The terrified gods spoke of breaking the oath they had sworn to the giant mason, and of killing him before he was able to finish his work" (165). This violation of a sacred oath reveals the ease with which social and legal conventions could be cast aside by the Æsir, especially when dealing with those of the inferior Jötunn bloodline, thus hinting at how miniscule Loki's worth was perceived to be by those who were supposedly considered kin—at least, based on the word of Óðinn.

While this would certainly foment doubt on Loki's behalf concerning his social standing, what truly hindered any credibility that the Æsir may have had in future dealings with Loki, occurred when they sought to blame him for their own shortcomings. Nothing speaks more eloquently of moral decay and prejudicial treatment amongst the supposedly divine when, "Though all of the gods were to blame for this sorry state of affairs, having all sworn the same oath... they found a scapegoat. Loki, they recalled, had gone out of his way to argue on the giant's behalf... They resolved to put him to death" (McCoy 165). Loki receives two very specific

revelations based on this nearly unanimous decision of both the Æsir and the Vanir; his efforts in negotiation had been dismissed as an act of malevolence, and despite the bargain being agreed upon by the entirety of the pantheon—sans Þór—his life is considered of lesser worth in comparison to the wages agreed upon. The builder's requested wages of the sun and the moon seems to pale in comparison to the agreed-upon marriage of Freya; the Æsir's choice of betrayal and violence rather than keeping their oath and allowing the marriage to proceed is certainly consistent with a xenophobic or negatively ethnocentric view of blood purity (and in Norse mythology, marriage negotiations often seem to be the continuation of war by other means).

The entire episode raises the question of whether Loki could ever be considered an equal in the eyes of the Æsir and Vanir, to say the least. While Loptr does manage to avoid being slain, and moreover is able to resolve the situation in a positive fashion for his foster-kin after they have threatened his life to force him to perform an act of witchcraft, it is important to note that there was no outside force that compelled these deities to give their sworn oath of safe conduct and fair bargaining to the builder. Instead, like an errant child fearing punishment for lying or possessing a grasping nature, they were exceedingly quick in placing culpability on the one individual that was unlike themselves, all in an effort to remain blameless and find justification for their actions. Taking all this into account, if there had been a fair number of doubts on Loki's behalf concerning the validity of his sworn brotherhood with Óðinn, this unjust condemnation by the Æsir would inevitably cement them. With this episode as the catalyst which fomented distrust between Loptr and the Æsir, it was the eventual subjugation and torment of his bloodline by those he had considered kin, which initiated his drastic change from misguided trickster to violent antagonist.

## The Abuse of Family and The Loss of Kinship

Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children.

William Makepeace Thackeray

In medieval Scandinavia familial bonds were extremely important, to the point of structuring a person's world. In *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, William Ian Miller attests that kinship and sworn obligations each required ongoing reinforcement: "Keeping good kinship did not come naturally. It required work and foresight to maintain the bonds in working order. This task was aided by norms of mutual aid and reciprocity. And it was also aided negatively by anticipated threats from others" (164). Within this social construct, kinship bonds could be interpreted as both a duty and a source of strength which could be drawn upon by any individual who held such ties. Thus, to remove the kinship bond is to remove an obvious source of power, which is precisely what occurred with regards to Loki's progeny.

As Chart 1.0 makes evident below, none of Loki's natural children emerge unscathed from Asgard's manipulations. All four children should have been considered extended family (being born outside of wedlock is not a problem for Óðinn's son Þór, for example), yet instead they were enslaved, imprisoned, banished, or mutilated by the Æsir. Perhaps the reason was the Æsir's disgust with their abnormal forms, or the Æsir's fatalism regarding the seeress's prophecies; on the reasoning behind the torment of Loki's children, see *The Poetic Edda* (10-11) and *The Prose Edda* (27). While this persecution may commonly be accepted as a necessary evil, it would actually serve as the final tipping point that drove Loki to seek vengeance. If the brood of Loki had been treated with respect, any inherent antagonism Loki may have held towards the Æsir and Ásynjur could have then potentially been muted or eradicated, thus preventing both the Father/Mother and his children from striking against the gods during the advent of Ragnarök.

**Chart 1.0: Loki's Natural Children**

<b>Appellation</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Treatment by the Æsir</b>	<b>Justification</b>
Sleipnir	Svaðilfari & Loki	An eight-legged Stallion born of Loki. He was conceived shortly after Loki was forced to distract the giant mason's workhorse, under pain of death, during the building of Asgard's walls.	After being carried to term by Loki in the form of a mare, the firstborn of Loki is commandeered by Óðinn, serving as his steed throughout the Nordic cosmology.	There is no known justification within either the <i>Poetic Edda</i> or the <i>Prose Edda</i> for this enslavement, but Óðinn (and his chosen heroes like Sigurd the Volsung) benefit from it.
Hel	Loki & Angrboða	A woman who is normal on one side of her body, the other side displays the pallor of death and decay.	Banished to the underworld that shares her name, this child of Loki had taken no action towards the Aesir.	The Æsir were concerned about Hel and incited a preemptive banishment and punishment.
Fenrir/ Fenrisúlfr Fenris-wolf	Loki & Angrboða	A giant wolf capable of speech and possessing intelligence, cunning, and concern for his reputation.	First tolerated by the Æsir, the Fenris-wolf is later deceived and bound by sorcerous means. The bound wolf is then mutilated with a blade set between its jaws.	A prophecy alluded to Fenrir slaying Óðinn. His rate of growth was of great concern to the Aesir; action was taken as soon as he was strong enough to pose a threat.
Jörmungandr/ Miðgarðsormr (Midgard Serpent)	Loki & Angrboða	A giant serpent capable of encircling the whole world by grasping its own tail in its mouth.	Cast into the Ocean surrounding Midgard.	A prophecy alluded to Jörmungandr slaying Þór during Ragnarök.

While the most visible of the Æsir's motives and justifications concerning Loki's brood have already been established, their actions also contained a hidden side involving political effects such as dependence and protection. William Miller further expounds upon the intricacies of kinship bonds by stating, "The networks established and maintained were mobilized in matters of sustenance and support, law and feud, conviviality and mourning" (139). Because Loki had been upholding his bond with Óðinn by constantly assisting the Æsir in their squabbles and battles against the Jötnar, he may have been viewed as a traitor by the majority of his own people, who would always see him as tainted by association with the race of beings that sought the extinction of any and all of Ymir's brood. Thus isolated from the Jötnar, any support Loki could have received for his natural children from their father's bloodline was eradicated; these children were forced outside of the established hierarchy of both peoples, which inevitably gave rise to Loptr's resentful

acceptance of being perceived as a bondman or having garnered dependent status, in exchange for being afforded security against potential enemies (many of whom are in fact his own kin), thus placing him further under Æsir influence and control. Public devaluation aimed at isolating the target by removing the political and societal benefits of kinship inevitably includes a psychological aspect. Loptr's two children with his wife, the Ásynjur Sigyn, should have been considered as legitimate offspring, but he would have been justified in worrying about their fates given his own uncertain status among the Æsir and their treatment of his other children. Moreover, as the United Nations acknowledges, a quantifiable measure cannot be placed on parental love: "The loss of child custody places fathers at a significant risk of physical and psychological ill health" (73). Evidence of paternal bereavement can be seen throughout Old Norse literature, for example in Egill Skallagrímsson's poem "Loss of Sons." The view that Loki indeed agonised over his children's suffering must be given proper consideration; and a bereaved mind would be more likely to find a solution in culturally sanctioned vengeance.

### **Lawful Retaliation and the Price of Vengeance**

Revenge is an act of passion; vengeance of justice. Injuries are revenged; crimes are avenged.  
Samuel Johnson

In this context, it is debatable whether or not Loptr's involvement in Baldr's death was even criminal. To truly discern whether his actions were righteous or illicit, the edicts of that time period must be considered in light of Harold Berman's view that, "A society's belief in the ultimate transcendent purpose will certainly be manifested in its processes of social ordering, and... will likewise be manifested in its sense of an ultimate purpose" (4). In essence, if the law is based on the divine, then the divine would conversely be constrained within the laws that have been created, especially within a culture where words purportedly held preternatural power.

With the precept that divine law held all accountable having been established, one need not even deny Loki's culpability in the slaying of Baldr in order to defend him against the Æsir. The core of the argument is whether, based on pagan statute, murder was committed in the first place. The key to comprehending Loptr's actions must be found not only in a cultural perspective, but also in lawful sanction. The *Gragas I* defines murder thus: "It is murder if a man hides it or conceals the corpse or does not admit it" (146). It also explains the means to ensure a legal killing:

The killer is to publish the killing as his work within the next twelve hours; but if he is on mountain or fjord then he must do it within twelve hours of returning. He is to go to the first house where he thinks his life is in no danger and tell one or more men legally resident there and state it in this way: "There was an encounter between us," he is to state, and name the other man and say where it was.

Further legal intricacies notwithstanding, the scenario in which the death of another is considered a sanctioned killing has been clearly defined; one simply has to admit one's handiwork in proper fashion and a settlement can be reached. As it turns out, Loki cannot in fact be found in violation of this procedure, except in exceeding the legal requirements by announcing his culpability for the killing before he has even reached a "house where he thinks his life is in no danger." In the poem *Lokasenna (Loki's Quarrel)* in the *Poetic Edda*, he admits to the killing in front of Baldr's kin in an overtly public manner when stating:

Frigg, you want me to say more about  
my wicked deeds;  
for I brought it about that you will never again  
see Baldr ride to the halls.

(85)

With this stated, all conditions have been met; culpability in Baldr's death has been established, all those present had witnessed how it had occurred and the confession had then been done within hallowed congress, at a major feast where the obligations of oaths can be publicly called upon. Unfortunately, the same paradoxical congruence of both culture and law prevents any sort of settlement as, once again, the Æsir and Ásynjur demonstrate their conceited disregard of the law that they themselves have instituted. In summarizing the Æsir's treatment of Loki after the death of Baldr, Daniel McCoy observes the torment and mutilation that Loki endures:

The gods carried the terrified Loki to a cave. There they brought his two beloved sons, Vali and Nari. The gods turned Vali into a wolf and made Loki watch as one of his sons tore apart the helplessly screaming and flailing body of the other. The gods then drew Nari's entrails out of his corpse, drilled holes in three large rock formations in the cave and tied Loki to the rocks with his son's bowels.

(259)

Whether or not Loki was concerned with the aftermath at this point seems superfluous; time and time again he had suffered under the cruel ministrations of the Æsir, so he had to be cognizant of the possibility that such oath breakers and deceivers would justify even torture, witchcraft and killing, presumably based on the "divine right" to violate their own laws. Loki had taken the first few steps of vengeance directed at the Odinic dynasty lawfully, but their response escalated the situation, giving him and his surviving children no option but to fight against the Æsir at Ragnarök.

### **Fimbulwinter On The Horizon**

You can have peace. Or you can have freedom. Don't ever count on having both at once.  
Robert A. Heinlein

Modernity comes with many biases, especially when considering tales which come from a very different historical context. The cultural and legal traditions which may have justified Loki's violent retaliation, as a righteous reaction to both persecution and torment, are alien to most modern thought processes, and in peaceful societies they may be instinctively dismissed as relics of a barbaric era. Yet whoever seeks to understand the trials and tribulations of Loki and the Æsir, would do well to acknowledge that just as Loki was both persecuted and manipulated by the Æsir according to a sanctioned caste system based on blood purism and conquest, so too was his vengeance fully prescribed within the established boundaries of law that permeated this mythos.

Several key elements have been exposed and examined concerning the motivations behind Loptr's actions; the violation of kinship bonds, the betrayal of his trust, and the slaughter of his kin. Any one of these would be reason enough for him to act as he did, and yet it was only at the end—when numerous chances had been given to the Æsir and summarily ignored—that his hand was seemingly forced. It should come to no surprise that Loki's prescribed actions were at once violent and both legally manipulative in nature, as the nature of the game in Asgard was clear by this point. However, having risked everything, Loki's family and person were made to suffer in response, in the harsh terms of a pantheon desperate for control over any possible rivals.

A complicated figure, regardless of whether he is perceived as villain or victim, trickster, giant, or demigod, Loki's actions can be seen in a more favourable light by considering them in the context of culturally sanctioned vengeance in medieval Scandinavia, particularly in the context of biological and social kinship bonds. Seeing Loki's unstable position in relation to such bonds, and the resulting strife for his offspring, may garner a fair bit of sympathy for this maligned and often misunderstood entity. Within the context of archaic Nordic law, Loptr sought justice.

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