The Witchfather

Unnlauagr’s Odinic quest may seem less of an anomaly in that tracing any journey through the realm of Old Icelandic witches and trolls might inevitably lead us to Óðinn, high god and necromancer, especially evident when exploring the matter of magic and gender. In Heimskringla, Óðinn’s sorcerous abilities are described in no uncertain terms:

Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttir fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mónnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mónnum vit eða afl ok gefa qðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótt ókarl mónnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt.

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

More famous as the patriarch of the gods, the Alfþóðr in Snorra-Edda, Óðinn is here depicted as a powerful witch whose arts are both dark and disturbing. They are, indeed,
too queer for other men to imitate without risking dishonour, a strange paradox when considering just how can the actions of the patriarch be androgynous? How can imitating the actions of the highest-ranking male power in the world render one queer?

Öðinn, as he is described in Heimskringla, is a cunning Asian monarch arriving in the North during the migration period. Along with his fellow Asians, he is successful in duping the innocent Scandinavians into venerating him as a god. In addition to his knowledge of seiðr, he is a shapeshifter who can be in two places at once. Even though Öðinn was in all likelihood a genuine pre-Christian Germanic and Northern deity, there are hardly any authentic records of him from that period. He did, however, retain a significant cultural presence in the post-pagan North as a haunting diabolical spectre that could variously be interpreted as a demon, a zombie or a witch, or, somewhat paradoxically in Snorra-Edda, as a representative of fallible humanity encapsulated in the narratives of the Æsir facing off against the invincible, infernal, sylvan, oriental, fiendish rancor of the giants and their various nefarious allies.

Whether regarded within the parameters of euhemerism or not, Öðinn is a paradoxically human deity. In the sagas he is sometimes occult and untrustworthy, but in Snorra-Edda he is the protagonist of the narrative with whom the human audience is encouraged to empathise. In Heimskringla he is both alien and intimate, an Asian immigrant to the North but also the ancestor of the Norse kings. This is a paradox perhaps shared by all ancestors whose blood flows through us but who nevertheless belong to a distant, nebulous, and somewhat intimidating past—to the ages to whom all of the dead belong, to paraphrase Lincoln’s grieving Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, at his president’s deathbed.

It is in this context that the witch king of the North is presented in thirteenth-century royal biographies, as hu-
manity’s ancestor, and in the everlasting war with giants and trolls depicted in the *Snorra-Edda* and alluded to in Eddic poetry, he has become the representative of frail humanity, commonplace rather than elevated, the normal and familiar rather than the other. In *Heimskringla*, he recognisably remains the same figure presented in the *Edda*, but in addition he is also a deviant and hostile force, a potent necromancer who will rob people of their wits and health and well-being. Ambivalence is drawn to its limits in the figure of Óðinn the witch, so deviant that his arts would cost anyone — excepting him alone — their manliness, and yet he is at the same time the all-father, the patriarch of the gods and the Norse kings, the apex of respectability. Violating not only the imagined binary between good and evil, he also risks traversing back and forth between male and female bodies, losing none of his potency or even his godly virtue in the process. This may be regarded as the prerogative of the god: the labyrinthine apparatus of dead ends that make human life exist within clearly demarcated boundaries can be safely ignored by him — or her or they since a god is unfettered even of the strictures of gender.

Óðinn the patriarch can give himself leave to be a witch and as queer as he wants. He is male and yet he can also become female without losing any of his masculine potency. Those abominable acts that mark Kotkell or Gríma and their kin as anti-social and demonic outlaws who unambiguously deserve death, and make the death sentence that Gísli Súrsson passes and executes upon Þorgrímr Nose in *Gísla saga*, whose trollish and queer sorcerous acts are the nascence of the hero’s misfortune, unquestionably just, can be performed with impunity by Óðinn. The *ergi* encapsulated in his sorcerous rituals, sadly but perhaps crucially never described in explicit detail in the sources, would taint all others but Óðinn himself remains safe from any associated stigma. He is a god and cannot be stigmatized and is alone in being safe from the vagaries of respect.
Even though never stated directly in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the prophetic Njáll whose lack of facial hair allows his enemies to refer to him as a woman, is, on the other hand, perhaps not entirely immune from the stigma of androgyny. As previously mentioned, his paranormal powers are benevolent, unlike Óðinn’s necromancy, which is specifically hostile towards some. It could be inferred, though, that queer practices may be somehow involved here since Njáll is repeatedly branded as unmanly in the saga, mainly with reference to his lack of facial hair. If androgyny is a sign of the witch, then Njáll, son of one of the few named female settlers and possibly an Irish immigrant,²⁴² must awaken some suspicion. And yet he is a patriarch like Óðinn, also almost superhuman in that his advice helps his clients emerge unscathed from every trial, and his prophetic powers, so closely connected to the institutions of society and the order they represent, cannot possibly be identified as witchcraft. Although the modest hero of the saga,²⁴³ Njáll may still be regarded as a liminal figure straddling the boundary separating the normal and the paranormal, where the distinction between male and female is blurred.

In this way we can regard Njáll as an Odinic figure, although no direct references to Óðinn are made in *Njáls saga* (his only mention in the whole narrative is in Hjalti Skeggjason’s infamous ditty from the Christianization conflict in which he calls Óðinn a bitch, a “grey,” making full use of the deity’s feminine aura),²⁴⁴ and indeed Njáll’s fierce adherence to the Christian faith is reiterated on several occasions in the saga.²⁴⁵ But would it really be necessary to mention Óðinn, god and bitch, explicitly in a saga in which the protagonist is both patriarch and benevolent magician? When confronting this aspect of the saga its audience would inevitably ask the same kind of question the audience of *Heimskringla* might ask when the latter is confronted with Óðinn’s witchcraft: can our hero really get away with this queer relationship with the occult, here manifested in his naked chin? Odinic or not, Njáll
has clearly usurped the god of poetry’s position atop the Mount Olympus of the North, and his supremacy remains unchallenged throughout the saga, though he does finally sacrifice his life for an even greater existence in the next world, professing his enduring faith in the Christian God all the while.246

Like Óðinn, Njáll is undeniably sly, and any cunning magnate will inevitably bring to mind the god of wisdom, poetry, and ravens, as similarly exemplified in a famous scene found in Sturlu saga. Here, as late as the year 1181 with Iceland supposedly a Christian land now for generations, an angry priest’s wife named Þorbjǫrg endeavours to symbolically castrate and demonise the chieftain Sturla Þórðarson by coming at him with a knife, attempting to gouge out one of his eyes and thus marking him for all to see as Odinic.247 With this act she would also be marking him semi-pagan, sorcerous, and queer, as his missing eye would be a symbol not only of slyness and wisdom but also of magic and deviance. The wife of a Christian priest must be taken seriously when she attacks a magnate with a knife, although Sturla cleverly manages to deflect the attack. She is here not simply making the statement that Sturla is too sly for his own good. Indeed, a truly noble and Christian magnate could never be compared to Óðinn unless he himself has something of the night about him. Þorbjǫrg’s knife graphically relates its own story, whether the audience trusts its account or otherwise: the story of Sturla Þórðarson, patriarch of the Sturlung family, but to some also a witch, a hostile deviant with paranormal powers.

For a good Christian, Óðinn’s demonic presence cannot be reduced to mere slyness. Albeit a crafty illusionist and a treacherous foreign king, Óðinn was always more than that: the troll of trolls, a demon, an undead, and a witch, his practices queer and his powers utterly alien.