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Loki's gender fluidity and bisexuality in Norse mythology and in modern adaptations

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INTRODUCTION

Loki has always been a particularly interesting deity – he is a fascinating, cunning, tricky and definitely ambiguous entity. It is probably due to these reasons that he is still quite popular nowadays, although reinterpreted in a modern key and adapted in order to be more appealing for an audience of the 20th and 21st centuries (e.g. Marvel Comics, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Netflix).

In Norse mythology, Loki was seen as a fluid entity who had the magical ability to shift shape and gender. Because of this power, he can be considered to be genderfluid, a term that refers to a person whose gender identity and/or expression is not fixed, but fluctuates and goes beyond male and female.¹ Moreover, he can be argued to be bisexual, from the moment that he has had relationships with people (and animals, as old myths narrate) of more than one gender.

My first interaction with Loki happened around 2015 when I decided to start watching all MCU films. From the moment he appeared on the screen, I immediately felt a deep connection with him – he is depicted as a misunderstood character, which is exactly how I felt at the time. Ever since then, I became interested in Norse mythology, because I wanted to know more about the original Loki. Growing up, I started questioning my sexual orientation and gender identity, and back in 2017, I realised that I am bisexual and genderfluid. When I found out that Loki is too, I started to feel valid, finally represented and even more connected to him. For this reason, I decided to write this dissertation – I can assuredly say that there is a piece of me in what I wrote.

The goal of this work is to explain why Loki can be considered to be genderfluid and bisexual, through the analysis of how modern adaptations succeeded or failed in portraying these two essential characteristics that make him who he is.

The following dissertation is made up of three chapters. In the first one, I will briefly introduce the main Norse gods and myths, focusing on and dedicating a paragraph to Loki and his shape-shifting abilities. Then, in the second chapter, I will go on by summarising the main points of Gender Studies and Queer Theory, adopting the latter to explain LGBTQ+ terms concerning gender identity and sexual orientation (i.e. queer,

¹ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 13.

bisexuality, pansexuality, non-binary, genderfluid) that might not be familiar to the general public, as well as the importance of using the right pronouns when talking to or referring to someone. The main chapter is the third, which bears the title of this dissertation. I will begin by briefly explaining the influence that Norse mythology has had throughout history, from the Romans until today. Then, I will examine the problem of queerbaiting, a marketing technique that profits from LGBTQ+ suggestiveness that is never intended to be actualised. Last but not least, I will get to the core of this dissertation by analysing how Marvel Comics, the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Netflix have handled Loki's genderfluidity and bisexuality in their productions. In particular, I will focus on Marvel Comics' *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2013), *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* (2019) and *Marvel's Voices: Pride* (2022),² on the MCU film *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and TV series *Loki* (2021-), and on Netflix's TV series *Ragnarok* (2020-).

Finding the sources for this dissertation, especially for the last chapter, was particularly challenging, given the fact that this topic is not widely studied nor talked about, except on social media, where fans write their own non-official theories on the subject. Therefore, in order to write this dissertation, I have read all the Marvel Comics books that I mentioned, watched the film and the two TV series, and made my own reflections and analysis, eventually coming to personal conclusions. Overall, it can be argued that not every modern adaptation has portrayed Loki's sexual orientation and gender identity in a proper, respectful and accurate way, which sometimes lead to mere queerbaiting.

This is a work that deals with inclusivity, respect and representation of oppressed minorities who are finally being acknowledged and given a voice in modern media. It is essential, especially nowadays, to speak about these subjects that are considered to be taboo by too many people. Portraying Loki as a queer individual has helped LGBTQ+ people all over the world to feel more valid and less lonely, myself included. I hope that by reading this, you will be able to understand a few more about these topics, and about me, too.

² Some references to *Loki* (2019) and *Original Sin, Thor and Loki: The Tenth Realm* (2014) will be made, as well.

CHAPTER 1. Norse mythology and deities

Given that the Norse tales were passed down orally, there are a few sources available today. The clearest accounts and greatest overviews of Norse mythology are the *Poetic* or *Elder Edda*, Snorri Sturluson³'s *Prose Edda* and the *Völuspá* (Old Norse: 'Prophecy of the *völva*'⁴), the most known poem of the *Poetic Edda*.⁵

1.1. Cosmology, original pantheon and myths

Long before the Earth came to be, there existed only Niflheim in the north and Muspell in the south: the first was a shapeless, freezing and foggy land, while the latter was the reign of fire. Between them, there was a void, called Ginnungagap. In Niflheim there was a spring called Hvergelmir, from which eleven poisonous rivers flowed, ending in the Ginnungagap. Eventually, these rivers solidified into ice and started spreading across Ginnungagap. In the most southern part, where the two lands met, the ice started melting, creating life. The first two living creatures were Ymir, the ancestor of all the giants, and Audhumla, a cow who freed Buri, the progenitor of the gods. By licking salty ice blocks for three days, Audhumla set Buri free: on the first day his head was revealed, on the second his shoulders and on the third his chest – this was the beginning of the passing of time. Buri and Ymir's daughter gave life to Bor, who married Bestla, a giant's daughter. From their union, three children were born: Odin, Vili and Vé. The three brothers killed Ymir, his blood shed being so much that drowned all the giants except Bergelmir and his wife.

Odin, Vili and Vé took Ymir's corpse to the centre of Ginnungagap. From the giant's flesh came the soil, from his bones came mountains and cliffs, from his teeth came rocks and sand, and from his blood and sweat came the seas which surround the entire world. The night sky is his skull, while the clouds are the remainders of his brain, and the stars and planets are sparks of Muspell's fires. With Ymir's eyelashes, the three brothers created a wall all around the middle of the new world, Miðgarð, in order to keep the giants

³ Snorri Sturluson (1179 – 1241) was an Icelandic historian and politician.

⁴ A *völva* was a seeres.

⁵ J. Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2002. 39.

out of it. By touching a log of ash and a log of olm, Odin, Vili and Vé gave life to the first man and the first woman.⁶

In the middle of the universe, the mighty Yggdrasil rises, a sturdy ash tree. Its branches join the Nine World together:

Asgard, the home of the Aesir. This is where Odin makes his home.

Alfheim, where the light elves live. The light elves are as beautiful as the sun or the stars.

Nidavellir, which is sometimes called Svartalfheim, where the dwarfs (who are also known as dark elves) live beneath the mountains and build their remarkable creations.

Midgard, which is the world of women and men, the world in which we make our home.

Jotunheim, where the frost giants and the mountain giants wander and live and have their halls.

Vanaheim, where the Vanir live. The Aesir and the Vanir are gods, united by peace treaties, and many Vanir gods live in Asgard, with the Aesir.

Niflheim, the dark mist world.

Muspell, the world of flame, where Surtr waits.

And there is the place named after its ruler: Hel, where the dead go who did not die bravely in battle.⁷

Yggdrasil's roots can be found in three worlds. The first, and deepest, one goes into the waters of the spring Hvergelmir, in Niflheim, the primordial underworld. The second one is in Jotunheim, in a spring that belongs to the giant Mimir. The last root goes to a well in Asgarð, the home of the gods. Here is where the Aesir have their councils, and where they will meet before Ragnarök, the final battle. There are three wise sisters, the Norns, who look after the well and the root of the Yggdrasil. This well belongs to Urd (the Fate, the Destiny), Verdandi (her name means "becoming") and Skuld ("that which is intended"). They represent the past, the present and the future. They decide what will happen to every single one of us, they shape our destiny.⁸

⁶ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017 (Italian translation by S. Bertola, *Miti del Nord*. Milano, Mondadori, 2020). 21-5.

⁷ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2017. 21-2. The original source for Gaiman's translation is the *Gylfaginning* section of Snorri's *Prose Edda*.

⁸ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017 (Italian translation by S. Bertola, *Miti del Nord*. Milano, Mondadori, 2020). 30-1.

Considering that there are several gods and goddesses in Norse mythology, the present dissertation will focus on just a few of them: the Aesir Odin, Thor, Loki, Tyr and Heimdall, and the Vanir Niörðr, Freyr and Freyja.

Odin (Old Norse: Óðinn) is the god of poetry, wisdom, hosts and the dead. He is considered to be the *Allafaðir*, so not only the father of all gods but also of humankind. Odin's most important characteristic is his wisdom, which he acquired through self-sacrifice. In order to gain the knowledge of the runes and the magical ability, he hung himself to the Yggdrasil for nine nights, where he could not eat nor drink. He also traded an eye for wisdom – now his eye lies in the spring of Mimir, from which he can see everything. He has two ravens, Huginn ('thought') and Muninn ('memory'), who bring him knowledge and inform him of everything that happens in the world. He is described as a tall man, who has a long beard and is dressed in a long cloak with a hood, which he uses to hide when he visits Miðgarð. Odin is deeply linked to war: every battle is dedicated to him and if one survives it is only thanks to his grace. But if a warrior dies bravely, the Valkyries will bring his soul to Valhalla (Old Norse: 'hall of the slain'), where he will fight and feast alongside Odin.⁹

Thor (Old Norse: Þórr¹⁰) is one of Odin's children – he is also referred to as *Ásaþórr*, 'prince of the Aesir'. Amongst all deities, he is possibly one of the most loved and worshipped. He is the god of thunder and is extraordinarily strong. He wears Megingjord, a belt that doubles his strength and his weapon is Mjöllnir, a dwarfs-forged¹¹ hammer. He is generally described as tall and might, with long red hair and beard. Thor is the protagonist of a great number of the adventures narrated in the myths.¹² The source of his troubles is Loki, a trickster figure – he lives amongst the gods but will fight against them in Ragnarök. He is told to be blood brother of Odin and both a friend and an enemy of Thor. However, in many sources he is considered to be the son of giants, therefore his ancestry is particularly controversial. Loki is even more cunning than Odin, he is convincing, likeable, witty, but at the same time very subtle. He will be the one to

⁹ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017 (Italian translation by S. Bertola, *Miti del Nord*. Milano, Mondadori, 2020). 15-6.

¹⁰ The name Thor derives from the Proto-Germanic *Þunraz, meaning 'thunder'.

¹¹ Dwarfs were the best craftspeople of the Nine Worlds.

¹² N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017 (Italian translation by S. Bertola, *Miti del Nord*. Milano, Mondadori, 2020). 16-7.

guide the forces of evil in Ragnarök. His character will be examined in depth in the next section.

Other two major figures within the Aesir are Tyr and Heimdall, both Odin's children. The first chairs the assembly, while the latter is the guardian of the gods and of Asgarð and the only one to know when Ragnarök will take place.

Within the Vanir, the three main deities are Niörðr, Freyr and Freyja. Despite being a Vanir, Niörðr lives in Asgarð as a hostage.¹³ His son is Freyr, god of fertility, and his daughter is Freyja, goddess of carnal love and fertility. She knows magic and is the first to decide which fallen warriors will follow her.

The gods will eventually fight against the giants in Ragnarök, where they will all die. As stated before, Heimdall is the only one who knows when the battle takes place, but he cannot do anything to prevent or avoid it. The end will begin when eternal winter falls on Miðgarð, and humankind is so hungry and infuriated that war will break everywhere. It will be the twilight of the world and the sun will stop shining, alongside the moon and the stars. Everything will be devoured by darkness and swept away by freezing cold winds. This is the Fimbulwinter. After the ice, earthquakes will come, setting the wolf Fenrir free. Everywhere he goes, he brings firestorms with him. Floods will happen as well, and the Miðgarð serpent Jormungandr will kill all marine life with his venom. Surtr and his children of Muspell will cross the Bifrost¹⁴, which will shatter and turn grey. Loki, who will be able to break free from his prison, will steer a ship full of Hel's soldiers, captained by Hrymr. The final battle will take place in Vigrid. Loki's troops will be joined by Surtr and his army, and by Fenrir and Jormungandr, his children.

Heimdall will blow into the Gjallarhorn, waking up all the gods and calling them to battle. The Aesir, alongside the valiant warriors of Valhalla, will reach Vigrid, where the dark forces will be waiting for them. Frey will be the first to fall, killed by Surtr. Tyr will fight the dog Garm, but they will both end up killing each other. Thor will mangle Jormungandr's brain with his hammer, but the serpent will annihilate him with his poison. Odin will be eaten by Fenrir, who will in turn be assassinated by Vidar, Odin's son. Heimdall and Loki will fight one against the other and die. Surtr's flames will then

¹³ Hostages were treated as hosts because they would grant a peaceful relationship between Aesir and Vanir.

¹⁴ The Bifrost is a rainbow bridge between Miðgarð and Asgarð.

incinerate everything that is left, including the bodies of those who died. Not long after the fire, the ocean will devour the ashes of the world.

This is the end. This is the destiny of the gods. However, a new world will arise from the ashes, Vidar will become the new father of all gods and the sun will shine on them again.¹⁵

1.2. Loki, the shape-shifter

In the light of this dissertation being about the figure of Loki in modern popular culture, it is essential to introduce and analyse the deity's original character as it is portrayed in Norse mythology.

Neil Gaiman, in his book *Norse Mythology*, describes Loki as

very handsome. He is plausible, convincing, likable, and far and away the most wily, subtle, and shrewd of all the inhabitants of Asgard. It is a pity, then, that there is so much darkness inside him: so much anger, so much envy, so much lust.¹⁶

Loki's role in Norse mythology is often complicated and difficult to trace, but he is a unique figure – being neither a god nor a giant, he is outside the normative structure. There was no cult surrounding him and he might appear as a dysfunctional deity. Despite being extremely clever, his most outstanding feature is probably his trickster nature, which causes many issues for the gods. Nevertheless, he is tolerated by the Aesir, because his stratagems save them as often as they create troubles.¹⁷

One of the qualities of Loki which has not been mentioned or examined yet and which will be one of the main topics of this dissertation is his ability to shape-shift. In many tales Loki is described in a way that is analogous to gender fluidity¹⁸ – he can change his shape in order to look like other people (man or woman) or even animals (male or female). He can have female attributes (for instance, the ability to give birth to Sleipnir, an eight-legged horse¹⁹), but is referred to with male pronouns and described with

¹⁵ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017 (Italian translation by S. Bertola, *Miti del Nord*. Milano, Mondadori, 2020). 205-14.

¹⁶ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017. 13.

¹⁷ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017 (Italian translation by S. Bertola, *Miti del Nord*. Milano, Mondadori, 2020). 17.

¹⁸ Someone is genderfluid when their gender expression and/or identity is not fixed. This concept will be explained in depth in Chapter 2, where context and examples will also be provided.

¹⁹ The story of Sleipnir will be explained later in this paragraph.

masculine terms. He is a uniquely positioned figure, through which it is possible to view gender constructs in the sagas and folklore.

The *Brymskviða* (*The Lay of Brym*) found in the *Poetic Edda* is one of the tales in which Loki appears and it illustrates his shape-shifter character perfectly. This is the story of how Thor lost his hammer and had to disguise himself as a woman to win it back. Mjölnir was stolen by the giant Þrym, who would give it back only in exchange of the hand for Freyja. The god of thunder asks Loki to help him find his missing weapon. In council, Heimdall suggests they dress Thor as Freyja. In response, Thor shows strong reluctance to wear it, because a man showing femininity, in this case by wearing women's clothing, would presumably be considered deviant.²⁰ Loki's response to Thor's complaints suggests that disguising himself as a woman should be considered less shameful than if the giants invaded Asgarð because he had lost his hammer – it is possible to notice that Loki definitely does not share Thor's opinion on a man wearing women's clothes. Eventually, Thor accepts Heimdall's proposal. It is not until the end of the tale that it is revealed that Thor was accompanied by Loki, who disguised himself as a servant, probably not only by wearing women's clothes but by actually shape-shifting into a woman.²¹

Loki also features in the *Gylfaginning* section of Snorri's *Prose Edda*, in *Frá því er er Loki gat Sleipni við Svadilfóra* (*Of when Loki Conceived Sleipnir with Svadilfari*), a story that illustrates both his shape-shifting ability and gender fluidity. One day, a craftsman offered to create a wall around Asgarð which could keep the giants out, claiming he could complete it in three seasons. For payment, he wanted the sun, the moon, and Freyja to be his bride. The gods thought his choice of payment was steep and negotiated that he would be paid only if he completed the wall in just one season, without external assistance. The man accepted with the condition that his stallion, Svadilfari, could help. The gods were unsure, but Loki convinced them that even with the help of his horse, the man would not be able to uphold his end of the bargain, so Freyja, the sun and the moon were not at risk at all.

²⁰ Thor's concern stems from the disgrace inherent in taking on the role of a woman and the subsequent diminution of his status as a powerful and respected god. He believed that the act of cross-dressing would earn him dishonour among the Aesir, who would view him as effeminate or homosexual.

²¹ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017 (Italian translation by S. Bertola, *Miti del Nord*. Milano, Mondadori, 2020). 83-93.

The man started working on the first day of winter. Svadilfari was doing most of the work, effortlessly carrying huge stones. Three days before the winter, when the wall was almost done, the gods sat down for counsel and discussed how they could avoid giving the man his reward. Loki was to blame and was, therefore, demanded to interfere with the craftsman's work, in order to prevent him from completing it. Being unsuccessful, Loki would have faced violence and death, so he swore that he would stop the man and his horse. On the same evening, while the man was working, a mare on heat appeared from a nearby forest and neighed towards the stallion, who ran away into the woods, following her. The man obviously could not finish the wall without his horse. The gods, noticing the man's wrath, realised that he was in fact a giant, and called for Thor to kill him. Strangely, Loki was not there to be praised, as he always did. When he came back he was accompanied by an eight-legged foal, Sleipnir²², who treated him as if he were his mother – and this was actually the case.²³ Sleipnir is Loki's only son who is not fathered but mothered by him, making this instance significant.

It is possible to state that Loki performed what is generally regarded as the ultimate act of femaleness, while still being referred to with male pronouns. The loss of masculinity would have meant a lowering of social status, but despite this fact, it is clear that Loki's ability to shape-shift into a female confers him a sense of uniqueness and a liminal position between the Aesir and the giants.

Loki's character and role in Norse mythology would have been much different without his ability to shift shape as well as genders. Those who see his gender fluidity as a sign of an effeminate man, so as a weakness, fail to realise the strengths Loki has. Shape-shifting allows him to navigate the boundaries between the world of the gods and the one of the giants and hide when needed. His ability to pass as a female is sometimes an instigative action in the tales, but it can be also used to the god's advantage, such as in the tale of Sleipnir's birth.

²² Sleipnir will eventually become Odin's eight-legged horse, the best and fastest of Asgarð.

²³ N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017 (Italian translation by S. Bertola, *Miti del Nord*. Milano, Mondadori, 2020). 53-66.

CHAPTER 2. Gender Studies and Queer Theory: key points and basic vocabulary

In order to understand what will be explored in the next chapter, it is essential to know what Gender Studies and Queer Theory are, as well as become familiar with some key concepts and fundamental vocabulary regarding gender identity and sexual orientation.

Before the 1970s, sociology studied mainly masculinity and androcentric aspects of the social world, such as paid work and politics. At the time, women's only roles were being wives and mothers and were not, therefore, an interesting and worthy enough matter of sociologic studies. The beginning of the academic study of gender can be dated as recently as the late 1960s, its development being due to the second feminist wave.²⁴

Queer Theory, instead, developed in the humanities quite later, in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Following a revolutionary strategy of visibility, groups of gay and lesbian activists adopted the term 'queer', a word that throughout the 19th century had a negative connotation²⁵ and was used as a slur towards homosexual people. They chose this formerly derogative term in order to rebelliously celebrate their 'outlaw' status. Nowadays 'queer' is considered to be an umbrella term²⁶ to refer to members of the LGBTQ+ community, but it is to be used carefully – even though it is reclaimed by some LGBTQ+ people, it can still be offensive to some others.²⁷

The primary goals of Queer Theory are interrogating the privileges of heterosexuality and bringing together aspects of lesbian and gay studies with other postmodern theoretical writing. Moreover, it questions the usefulness of gender binarism and examines its role in the centralisation of heterosexuality.²⁸ Therefore, Queer Theory is also based on the belief that it is impossible to refer to specific groups – e.g. gays,

²⁴ J. Pilcher and I. Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2004. ix.

²⁵ Even though the origin of the word is doubtful, it is said to be from the Middle Low German *quer*, its meaning being 'oblique', 'perverse'. It then became part of the English vocabulary, changing into *queer*, meaning 'bizarre'.

²⁶ An umbrella term is a word used to group other words into a single category that shares the same or similar characteristics.

²⁷ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 7.

²⁸ J. Pilcher and I. Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2004. 128-30.

lesbians, bisexuals and so on – since identities comprehend such a wide range of elements that it is impossible to put them all together under the same category.

Unfortunately, Gender Studies and Queer Theory scholars do not always necessarily agree. Usually, radical feminists are the most sceptical about Queer Theory and its studies – they see it as valorising gay male culture at the expense of lesbian culture, therefore oppressing women once again.²⁹ Given that sexual orientation was not a priority for feminist Gender Studies theorists, a woman's sexual orientation was not contemplated as a possible cause of discrimination. Therefore, even among women themselves there is a great amount of discrimination and inequality – for instance, a lesbian cannot be fired from her job because she is a woman, but she can be fired because of her sexual orientation.³⁰ Moreover, feminist Gender Studies have always considered gender as a dichotomy – there are only men and women – and often thought of trans women as not 'real women'. Contrarily, Queer Theory follows an anti-normative approach that refuses binarism and suggests a more elaborate explanation of both gender identity and sexual orientation, going beyond the dichotomy limits of Gender Studies. Furthermore, Queer Theory formulates a new understanding of gender identity, by referring to it as a wide spectrum of subjectivities that do not necessarily fall under the meaning of the terms 'man' and 'woman'. The present dissertation will be based on Queer Theory and not on Gender Studies, as the latter contemplates neither sexual orientation nor gender identity in their theorisations and studies.

2.1. Sexual orientation and gender identity

Before exploring more specific terms regarding, indeed, sexual orientation and gender identity, it is important to understand the difference between these two. They are often regarded as two terms that can be used interchangeably, almost as if they were synonyms, which they are not. Sexual orientation and gender identity do in fact refer to two different aspects of the identity of a person and it is essential not only for LGBTQ+ people, but for everybody to understand what they mean.

²⁹ J. Pilcher and I. Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2004. 131.

³⁰ M. Albertson Fineman, *Introduction: Feminist and Queer Legal Theory*, in Public Law Research Paper no. 09-76. Emory University School of Law, 2009. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1516647>. Accessed on 16th July 2022.

Sexual orientation is the innate sexual attraction, therefore it is used to describe to whom a person is sexually attracted. It is better to avoid the terms ‘lifestyle’ and ‘sexual preference’, as they imply a conscious choice,³¹ or ‘sexuality’, which refers to sexual activity.³² A person can be attracted to people of the opposite gender (heterosexuality) or of the same gender (homosexuality), to people of more than one (bisexuality, pansexuality, etc.) or can even not be attracted to anyone (asexuality³³). Moreover, sexual orientation is not to be confused with romantic orientation, which refers only to one’s romantic attraction or desires, and does not involve the sexual aspect. Usually, sexual and romantic orientation are in alignment, but it is not always the case.

On the other hand, gender identity is:

A person’s emotional and psychological sense of having a gender; feeling like a man, woman, both or neither. It does not necessarily align with an individual’s sex assigned at birth.³⁴

A person is cisgender when their gender identity aligns with the gender³⁵ assigned at birth. Contrarily, a transgender person is someone whose gender identity and/or gender expression³⁶ does not match the gender assigned at birth. Originally, ‘transgender’ and its abbreviation ‘trans’ were used to describe all those who were assigned male or female at birth and that later in their lives identified as the other gender, but nowadays it is used as an umbrella term for all those people who do not fall into the two traditional gender identities (man or woman). The terms transgender and trans should not be used as nouns – e.g. ‘a transgender’ – because it is offensive and transphobic. It is also vital to avoid using ‘transsexual’ as a synonym, as it implies that a person has undergone gender confirmation treatments³⁷, which is not the case for everybody – not all transgender people want to do it or can afford it.³⁸ Furthermore, it is important not to confuse gender

³¹ Sexual orientation is biologically determined, therefore cannot be considered as a choice.

³² J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 7, 10.

³³ Asexual people are not sexually attracted to anyone and/or have no sexual desire. This does not mean that they necessarily cannot experience consensual sexual intercourse.

³⁴ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 13.

³⁵ Gender is a social construct that refers to one’s self-identity based on biological characteristics.

³⁶ Gender expression is the sum of traits, appearance and mannerism that a person uses to express their gender identity. It might not match the biological sex.

³⁷ Gender confirmation treatments are the medical treatments (hormones, surgery) used to change a person’s physical characteristics in order to align them with their gender identity.

³⁸ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 12.

confirmation treatments with gender transition, as the latter does not necessarily involve hormone therapy and/or surgery, but it can also include adopting the aesthetic markers of a gender (e.g. makeup or facial hair), changing the ‘dead name’³⁹ for a new one, changing the name and sex on legal documents, coming out to family, friends, etc.⁴⁰ Transgender people experience gender dysphoria⁴¹, a medical term that describes an internal conflict that stems from the mismatch between the outward appearance of a person and their gender identity.⁴²

More information on gender identity, focusing on gender fluidity and non-binarism, will be given in paragraph 2.3.

2.2. Queer, bisexuality and pansexuality

Before exploring gender identity more in depth, it is imperative to understand what the terms ‘queer’, ‘bisexuality’ and ‘pansexuality’ mean, as they will be used in the next chapter to describe Loki’s sexual orientation.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the term ‘queer’, which originally meant ‘bizarre’, was used as a slur towards homosexual people, especially men – the slur for homosexual women was ‘dyke’, a term that has now been reclaimed by some lesbians. Nowadays, queer is frequently used as an umbrella term, which can be synonymous of LGBTQ+ and its variations. However, some of the people who do not find a label that they think is accurate enough to describe their sexual orientation often describe themselves as queer. Nonetheless, queer is still considered to be a derogative term by some LGBTQ+ members, especially when it is used by cisgender heterosexuals.

‘Bisexuality’ and ‘pansexuality’ are two terms which are cause for controversy, as well. They both refer to being attracted to more than one gender, but they have a slightly different meaning. Originally, bisexuality was used to describe a person who is attracted to their same gender and the opposite one, therefore excluding the possibility of other gender identities and exuding transphobia. For this reason, the term ‘pansexuality’

³⁹ The ‘dead name’ is a transgender’s person name assigned at birth. It is transphobic and can be hurtful to ask for a trans person’s ‘dead name’.

⁴⁰ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 13.

⁴¹ Avoid using the obsolete term ‘gender identity disorder’ as a synonym.

⁴² J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 12.

was created and used for and by those who are sexually attracted to all genders, including pre-surgery transgender and non-binary people – which were thought not to be a source of sexual attraction for bisexual people. Nowadays, these two definitions are both obsolete. The new definition of bisexuality is ‘attraction to more than one gender’, while the definition of pansexuality is ‘attraction without regard to sex, gender identity or gender expression’.⁴³ The main issue is that some of the members of the LGBTQ+ community, even bisexual and pansexual people themselves, still stick to the original definitions, ending in never-ending quarrels – pansexuals blame bisexuals for being transphobic and ‘sex maniacs’, while bisexuals accuse pansexuals of having invented a ‘fake’ and biphobic sexual orientation.

Other common misconceptions about bisexuality and pansexuality is that both bisexual and pansexual people are ‘confused’ and that pansexual people like men, women, and a phantom ‘third gender’, which does not exist.

To conclude, it is possible to state that the difference between bisexuality and pansexuality is minimal – bisexual people are attracted to more than one gender, while pansexual people feel attraction regardless of gender.

2.3. Non-binary, genderfluid and pronouns

In this dissertation, the terms ‘non-binary’ and ‘genderfluid’ are often used to describe Loki – genderfluid in particular is a concept that has already been brought up in chapter 1 and that will be explored in this paragraph.

Both non-binary and genderfluid fall under the umbrella term ‘transgender’. Moreover, non-binary can be used as an umbrella term itself, under which genderfluid falls. Thus it is convenient to focus firstly on the definition of non-binary, a word that “refers to a person whose gender identity and/or expression is neither male nor female”⁴⁴. Therefore, non-binary individuals may identify as somewhere between male and female or completely reject the idea of gender binarism.

On the other hand, gender fluidity has a slightly different meaning – it refers to a person whose gender identity and/or expression is not fixed, but fluctuates and goes

⁴³ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 10.

⁴⁴ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 13.

beyond male and female.⁴⁵ They might feel a little bit of both, neither of them or simply consider the dichotomy to be too restrictive. Some days they might identify more with the masculine or feminine end of the gender spectrum, while others they might fall in the middle of it or even outside.

Another topic that is essential to be familiar with is pronouns. During the last few years, asking for and respecting one's pronouns have gained more importance and are paid more attention to – e.g. many people (not necessarily LGBTQ+ members) put their pronouns in their social media profile bio and some have pins that they can wear every day with their pronouns written on them, while some companies even offer their staff a badge with their pronouns alongside their name.

We are accustomed to using the pronouns 'he/him/his' for those who we consider to be men and 'she/her/hers' for those who we consider to be women. Thus, how should someone refer to a non-binary or genderfluid person? The most widely accepted non-binary pronouns are 'they/them/theirs', but not all non-binary people use them – some go by all pronouns, some may prefer to use both the 'traditional' ones and 'they/them/theirs', some might even use 'neopronouns' such as 'zie/zim/zis'.⁴⁶ Moreover, the pronouns a person goes by can vary from day to day, especially those of genderfluid people.

⁴⁵ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 13.

⁴⁶ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, 2020. 13.

CHAPTER 3. Loki's gender fluidity and bisexuality in Norse mythology and in modern adaptations

This chapter is the focal point of this dissertation – here the modern portrayal of Loki's ability to shift shapes and gender will be discussed. The study will be carried out by analysing recent pop-culture productions that present a modern interpretation of the Norse god: the Marvel Comics series *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014), *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* (2019), and *Marvel's voices: Pride* (2022), the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) film *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and the TV series *Loki* (2021-), and the Netflix TV series *Ragnarok* (2020-). However, before focusing on the analysis of these contemporary portrayals of Loki, some context on the influence of Norse mythology on modern popular culture will be given, as well as some information about the issue of queerbaiting, a contemporary marketing phenomenon that can be very hurtful to the LGBTQ+ community.

3.1. Norse mythology in popular culture

Even though the worship of the Norse gods ended a thousand years ago,⁴⁷ we make implicit reference to the myths and the deities almost every day, especially in Germanic languages. For instance, the names of some of the weekdays in English come directly from the names of Norse gods: Tuesday is Tyr's day, Wednesday is Odin's, Thursday is Thor's and Friday is Frigg's. The choice was not casual, but based on the *Interpretatio Germanica*,⁴⁸ that is the identification of the Roman gods with the Norse ones. Therefore, *Dies Martis*, the day following the "Moon-day" (*Dies Lunae*), referred to Mars, the Roman god of war and battle, who equated **Tiwaz* (later Tyr or Tiw), whence Tuesday. *Dies Mercurii* referred to Mercury, associated with the Greek Hermes, known for his cunning and treachery, exactly like Odin, to whom Wednesday (Old English *Wodnesdæg*) is dedicated. *Dies Jovis* was linked to Jupiter, whose symbols were the lightning and the thunder, like Thor, his day being Thursday. Lastly, *Dies Veneris* bore the name of Venus, the goddess of love. The Norse goddess linked to her is **Frija* or Frigg,

⁴⁷ Nonetheless, there are still some people that identify as Norse pagans and that still worship the Norse gods.

⁴⁸ J. Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2002. 36.

giving us Friday.⁴⁹ Along with the weekdays, it is possible to recognise the Norse gods even in the names of some places, like the Danish Odense, which refers to Odin, or Þórsmörk (Thor's Forest), a popular place for hiking and camping, located in Iceland. Moreover, there are some people, especially in the Scandinavian countries, that are called Freyja, Thor or Baldur.⁵⁰

The era in which Norse mythology had the biggest revival in recent times was the Romantic period, which was largely inspired by gods and myths. Norse mythology became widely known for the first time in a world language thanks to Paul Henri Mallet's 1755 work *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc, ou l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des moeurs, et des usages des anciens danois*, which was translated into English in 1770 as *Northern Antiquities: Or, A Description of The Manners, Customs, Religion, and Laws of The Ancient Danes, and Other Northern Nations; Including Those of Our Own Saxon Ancestors. With a Translation of The Edda, Or System of Runic Mythology, and Other Pieces, from The Ancient Icelandic Tongue*. The translator was Bishop Percy, famous for *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, a collection of ballads and other pieces which had a great influence on English Romanticism. The second volume of Mallet contained a translation of a Laufás *Edda*, a late arrangement of Snorri's *Edda*, done by Magnús Ólafsson, parson at Laufás.⁵¹

At the end of the eighteenth century, translations of Eddic poetry began to appear in the European languages. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Norse mythology was certainly popular, especially in Germany and Scandinavia. Many Romantic painters found inspiration in the Norse myths, while famous Romantic poets rewrote stories from Norse mythology into drama or verse. The prime, and probably most wide-known, example of the influence of Norse mythology in the Romantic era is the opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung), composed by Richard Wagner. It consists of a prologue called *Das Rheingold* (The Rhine-gold), followed by three long three-act operas, *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods). Not only did Wagner write the music, but also

⁴⁹ J. Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2002. 202.

⁵⁰ J. Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2002. 36-7.

⁵¹ J. Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2002. 37.

the book, using an alliterative, archaic German and based his story loosely on the heroic poems of the Poetic Edda centred on *Sigurd*, *Völsunga saga* and the medieval German epic *Das Nibelungenlied* (The Song of the Nibelungs). Although the gods make only small appearances, Odin (called Wotan or the Wanderer) plays a pivotal role.⁵²

From the late nineteenth century up until the German Third Reich, Norse mythology had another revival, this time particularly twisted and grotesque. During those years, a popular movement that rejected Christianity in order to revive Norse Paganism started. Nazis were part of this group that concerned itself with nationalism and ethnicity, and that promoted the Nordic race as the superior one – their aspiration was to create an “original nation” of only those who descended from Germanic populations.⁵³

Nowadays, Norse mythology is sometimes still sadly connected to Neo-Nazism, which incessantly uses Norse symbols, such as runes. Nevertheless, during the last years Norse mythology has had, for the most part, a revival thanks to books, comics, films and TV series. Most people are familiar especially with Thor, Odin and Loki thanks to the success and influence of the Marvel Comics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) *Thor* franchising.

3.2. The issues of queerbaiting

Before moving on to the analysis of how Loki’s shape-shifting abilities are portrayed and revisited in the comic books *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* and *Marvel’s Voices: Pride*, in the film *Thor: Ragnarok* and in the TV series *Loki* and *Ragnarok*, it is essential to become familiar with the concept of ‘queerbaiting’. Queerbaiting is

a term employed by media fans to criticise homoerotic suggestiveness in contemporary television when this suggestiveness is not actualised in the program narrative.⁵⁴

⁵² J. Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2002. 37-8.

⁵³ L. Nighswander, *No Nazis in Valhalla: Understanding the Use (and Misuse) of Nordic Cultural Markers in Third Reich Era Germany*. International ResearchScape Journal: Vol. 7, Article 6, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/irj.07.01.06> Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/irj/vol7/iss1/6>. 3. Accessed on 2nd August 2022.

⁵⁴ J. Brennan, *Queerbaiting: The ‘playful’ possibilities of homoeroticism*, in International Journal of Cultural Studies. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2018. 189.

Therefore, queerbaiting describes a marketing technique where media products suggest homoerotic relationships between characters that are never intended to be actualised. Writers and film companies use this strategy in order to gain the attention, and the money, of viewers who are part of the LGBTQ+ community and cis-heterosexual allies, through the use of hints that suggest that a character or a relationship might be queer, even though this possibility eventually gets completely denied and/or never fulfilled. Therefore, queerbaiting can be defined

as teasing and denying, robbing people of representation and space, an expression of homophobia and exploitation, and reproduction of heterosexism.⁵⁵

Although the number of media that portrays LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships has definitely increased during the last years, there are still many problems with giving them a proper representation. Queer characters are generally introduced only for dramatic effects or plot devices, or for a film/TV series to be politically correct. Moreover, most queer characters are not well-developed and just stick to stereotypes which can be homophobic (e.g. a gay man that is effeminate and only likes to go shopping, or a butch lesbian woman with short hair), making LGBTQ+ viewers feel marginalised and unheard.

LGBTQ+ individuals often feel offended by the fact that their identity is used as a marketing method. The anger people feel and express when accusing a show of queerbaiting stems from the experience of a scarce queer representation in media – heterosexuality is taken for granted, while homosexuality, when made visible, is eventually denied. Unfortunately, it is possible to notice quite a few examples of queerbaiting in popular productions, such as in Disney+ *Loki* TV series, which will be analysed in depth in paragraph 3.4.

3.3. Loki in Marvel Comics

Marvel Comics is an American media and entertainment company. Its precursor was founded in 1939 by the pulp magazine publisher Martin Goodman, who created Timely Comics – the first comic book was *Marvel Comics* no.1 (October 1939), which

⁵⁵ E. Nordin, *From Queer Reading to Queerbaiting: The Battle over the Polysemic Text and the Power of Hermeneutics*. Master's thesis, Stockholm University, 2015. Available at: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:839802/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Accessed 2nd August 2022.

featured many superhero characters. Timely Comics introduced several superheroes during the 1940s, but it fell out of vogue by the end of the decade, changing its name to Atlas Magazines in 1951. At the beginning of the 1960s, the interest in superhero books grew again, and Goodman started commissioning Stan Lee, writer, and Jack Kirby, artist, to create new stories, such as the one of Thor – his first appearance being in *Journey into Mystery* no. 83 (August 1962).⁵⁶ Loki was introduced in Marvel Comics in *Journey into Mystery* no. 85, published in October of the same year⁵⁷ and he later received three solo series: *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2013), *Vote Loki* (2016) and *Loki* (2019).

In this dissertation, the comic books *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* and *Marvel's Voices: Pride* will be analysed more in-depth, but some references to *Loki* and *Original Sin, Thor & Loki: The Tenth Realm* (2014) will be made, as well. The whole analysis will be carried out in light of the thesis of this dissertation being about how Loki's shape-shifting abilities have been translated and adapted into gender fluidity and bisexuality in contemporary pop-culture productions.

Throughout older Marvel Comics books in which Loki appears, he shape-shifts mostly when he is in need of a disguise, and not really to express his gender. The first time that Loki's gender identity is explained is in *Original Sin, Thor & Loki: The Tenth Realm #2* (2014), when Thor and Loki find themselves in a society run by women:



Figure 1. J. Aaron, A. Ewing, S. Bianchi, L. Garbett, A. Dall'Alpi, N. Woodard, *Original Sin, Thor & Loki: the Tenth Realm #2*. New York, Marvel Comics, 2014. 8.

⁵⁶ T. DeForest, *Marvel Comics*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 28th July 2022. Available at Encyclopedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marvel-Comics>. Accessed on 2nd August 2022.

⁵⁷ This is not the first time Loki appears in Marvel Comics, for his first appearance was in *Venus* no. 6 (August 1949). Nevertheless, the Loki that we know today and that will be analysed in this chapter is the one introduced by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1962.

It is essential to notice that Loki says “so am I, sometimes”. He is not saying that he can shape-shift into a woman, he is saying that he is one sometimes – that is how he, or maybe it is more correct to say she, feels and wants to present him/herself. This characteristic can be obviously associated with the concept of gender fluidity.⁵⁸ Moreover, every time that Loki presents him/herself as a female, she uses only ‘she’/’her’ pronouns and typical feminine adjectives or appellatives, such as ‘goddess’, as will be explained in the analysis of *Loki: Agent of Asgard* later in this paragraph.

Another interesting example is Odin referring to Loki as “my child who is both”⁵⁹ and “my child who is both son and daughter”⁶⁰. Even the All-father respects his child’s gender identity and does not confine it as merely shape-shifting. Loki is always Loki, and as such s/he is expressing his/her identity through the ability to shift between gender. It would be incorrect to say that s/he only uses his/her power to disguise him/herself when s/he needs to.⁶¹

Loki: Agent of Asgard is the comic book series that presents the highest number of references to Loki’s shape-shifting powers and, therefore, is the most fascinating to analyse. The first issue was released in February 2014 and the whole series consists of 17 books. Loki is in a mission for the All-mother, and is sent to Miðgarð to collect five keys that Odin had once forged for him, should he be worthy enough to have them. While on Miðgarð he becomes friend with Verity Willis, a girl with the power of always knowing if she is being told the truth or lied to. Loki will discover later in the comic that he is manipulated by King Loki, a villainous future version of himself, who is much similar to the old Loki, before he died and resurrected. Suddenly, Loki’s morality gets inverted due to a spell performed by Scarlet Witch and Doctor Doom, but unlike the other villains who turned into heroes, he is not as straightforward. Although being good, he can still be disloyal⁶². During a battle, Loki fights and wins against an evil version of his brother

⁵⁸ See Chapter 2.3. for the definition of gender fluidity.

⁵⁹ J. Aaron, A. Ewing, S. Bianchi, L. Garbett, A. Dall’Alpi, N. Woodard, *Original Sin, Thor & Loki: The Tenth Realm #5.5*. New York, Marvel Comics, 2014. 16.

⁶⁰ A. Ewing, L. Garbett, A. Fabela, C. Cowles, W. Moss, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #1*. New York, Marvel Comics, 2014. 11.

⁶¹ In this paragraph, both he/him and she/her pronouns will be used to refer to Loki when talking about him/her in general and/or when it is not clear if s/he is presenting as a man or a woman.

⁶² This is because Loki’s real nature is always very ambiguous: he is not good and he is not bad, he doesn’t belong neither in Asgarð nor in Jotunheim. Therefore, even when his morality is inverted, he cannot exclusively be neither a hero nor a villain.

Thor,⁶³ whose morality is also inverted. A few moments after the battle, the moralities get inverted again into their original ones. As an effect of Scarlet Witch and Doctor Doom's spell, Loki can no longer tell lies – he confesses that he had murdered the reborn 'real' Loki and for this reason he gets banished from Asgard and sent to Midgard. Here Loki tells Verity about the atrocities he committed while he was a Young Avenger, which results in her leaving him alone. King Loki appears and tells him that no matter all the good things he did, he will always be seen as the God of Lies. Loki is then sent into a metaphorical space where both Kid Loki and King Loki tell him that he cannot change, although, willing to change his destiny, Loki seemingly annihilates himself and goes to a changed new future on Midgard, where Verity is back. He now claims to be the God of Stories, and not the God of Lies, as he was before. During the Multiverse final battle, where King Loki is the villain, Loki joins the Asgardian forces, making King Loki flee into the ether. Loki is seen as a hero, but he does not want to keep fighting or ever again having to 'pick a side'. Eventually, Loki explains to Verity that a new universe will be born, but he is not sure if he will be the same person in the new reality.

As it is possible to notice, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is a modern media that is inspired by Norse myths and characters, even if reinterpreted. When adapting and creating new stories with Loki as a protagonist, the writers at Marvel Comics decided to keep Loki's ability to shape-shift. Some examples of Loki shifting his shape can be seen in issue #11, where he firstly transforms into a woman and then into a human-sized fox, and in issue #8, where he becomes a unicorn. It is interesting to notice that the authors of the comic decided to make him shape-shift into animals, as this is something that never happens in the MCU films and TV series. Nonetheless, this dissertation will not focus on Loki shape-shifting into animals, but will pay attention to him transforming into a woman, as an expression of his gender identity.

In issue #1, Loki states: "...but I am Loki. And more than that... I am myself."⁶⁴ Loki is, indeed, always himself, even when he shape-shifts. His physical appearance and how he decides to present do not change who he really is on the inside. It is important to notice that this sentence is uttered right in the first issue of the comic series, almost as if

⁶³ While in Norse mythology Loki and Thor are not related, in Marvel Comics and in the Marvel Cinematic Universe they are portrayed to be brothers, both children of Odin.

⁶⁴ A. Ewing, L. Garbett, A. Fabela, C. Cowles, W. Moss, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #1. New York, Marvel Comics, 2014. 15.

the writer wanted to remind all the readers that they are always dealing with the same character even when he shape-shifts. This not-so-subtle reminder is brought up once again in issue #16, when Loki shifts into a female-presenting version of himself: “But I’m still me. I’m always me.”⁶⁵ Nonetheless, the first time that Loki shape-shifts into a woman is in issue #5, as stated before:



Figure 2. A. Ewing, L. Garbett, A. Fabela, C. Cowles, W. Moss, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #1. New York, Marvel Comics, 2014. 11.

Here Loki is explaining to Verity how hard it is for him to shape-shift into something that he is not, while shape-shifting first into a feminine version of himself, and then into a fox-like creature. Again, he can change very rapidly and easily when he is still being Loki – this point will be stressed throughout this dissertation, for it is important to acknowledge that Loki is not creating a whole new other identity, but only expressing himself thanks to his power.

In issue #14 we can see Loki shape-shifting into a female version of himself, uttering: “I’m me. First, last and always.”⁶⁶ From now on, until she shifts back into a male, she will use feminine pronouns and appellatives, as it happens on page 9:

⁶⁵ A. Ewing, L. Garbett, A. Fabela, C. Cowles, W. Moss, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #16. New York, Marvel Comics, 2014. 7.

⁶⁶ A. Ewing, L. Garbett, A. Fabela, C. Cowles, W. Moss, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #14. New York, Marvel Comics, 2014. 8.



Figure 3. A. Ewing, L. Garbett, A. Fabela, C. Cowles, W. Moss, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #14. New York, Marvel Comics, 2014. 9.

Again, Loki is stressing the fact that s/he is never going to be only one thing, asserting his/her fluidity in gender and in expression.

In the preface of the following two issues, Loki is described as the goddess of the stories and “Moon-Queen”, and feminine pronouns are used when referring to her. This changes to “god of stories”, “Moon-King” and to masculine pronouns only when she shape-shifts back into a male-presenting version in issue #16. As a matter of fact, Loki does not stick only to gendered terms, but is comfortable also using neutral terms, for instance “big-person” instead of “big-boy”:



Figure 4. D. Kibblesmith, O. Bazaldua, V. Olazaba, D. Curiel, C. Lopez, *Loki* #4. New York, Marvel Comics, 2019. 21.

It can be also noticed that throughout the entire comic series, Loki (and King Loki, as well) wears black nail polish, which is a feature that we are often accustomed to seeing on women. This can be considered to be an expression of femininity or of crossing gender stereotypes. The fact that he has his nails painted the entire time might be a reminder of his feminine side, which is always inside of him, even when he decides to present himself

as a man. Indeed, it would be inaccurate to assume that he cannot express both genders at the same time. In any case, Loki is going beyond the concept of gender roles by having his nails painted and they do not necessarily make him effeminate.

Thor & Loki: Double Trouble is a comic book mini-series⁶⁷ released in March 2021. This short series portrays the dynamics of the brotherly relationship of Thor and Loki perfectly, where the latter keeps tricking the first into doing things that will get them both in trouble. Loki dares his brother to break into Odin's vault and steal a powerful relic, the Lur of Luramena – when played, it summons Mildred, the Miðgarð serpent's sister.⁶⁸ While blaming one another, their attempts to calm Mildred down fail and just create more chaos. Eventually, Odin restores the order and commands his two sons to clean up the mess they had made. Loki confesses he had stolen a magical sphere from the All-father's vault and tries to use it to speed up the process of cleaning up, actually opening a portal that hurls the two into a void where the orb gets lost.⁶⁹ In this parallel universe, two female versions of Thor and Loki exist. Lady Thor helps them find the magical sphere, which got stolen by her sister, Lady Loki.⁷⁰ After a short and hilarious shape-shifting fight between the two Lokis, the two brothers eventually manage to win the sphere back and find their way home.⁷¹

Loki shape-shifts many times in this mini-series: he transforms into a horse,⁷² a serpent,⁷³ a baby bird,⁷⁴ a bear, a mouse, a cat, a racoon, a bat, and a fox.⁷⁵ However, while in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* Loki often shifts gender, this is not the case for *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble*. In the mini-series, the character of Lady Loki is introduced, as well as Lady Thor. Therefore, from what this dissertation stated up until now, is it possible to consider Thor to be genderfluid, too? This would be an inaccurate conclusion because

⁶⁷ It consists of only four issues.

⁶⁸ M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #1. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021.

⁶⁹ M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #2. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021.

⁷⁰ M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #3. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021.

⁷¹ M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #4. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021.

⁷² M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #1. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021. 8. This is probably a reference to Snorri's *Edda*'s myth *Frá því er er Loki gat Sleipni við Svaðilföru* (*Of when Loki Conceived Sleipnir with Svaðilfari*), the story of when Loki shape-shifted into a female horse in order to distract the stallion Svaðilfari, while he was helping his owner in building a wall around Asgarð (see Chapter 1.2.).

⁷³ M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #2. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021. 10.

⁷⁴ M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #4. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021. 5.

⁷⁵ M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #4. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021. 10-13.

neither Thor nor Loki is shifting his gender. After misusing Odin's magical sphere, they both get thrown into another universe, where female variants of them exist.⁷⁶ Of course, being their woman versions, they all share the same characteristic and are basically copies one of the other, except for their biological sex. Lady Loki is not Loki, she is a parallel Loki that lives in a parallel universe. It would be wrong to think of her as Loki, for they are two completely different beings and not the same person shape-shifting from one gender to another.

Thus, is it possible to describe Marvel Comics Loki as genderfluid? It most probably is. First and foremost, it is essential to keep in mind that *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* is a mini-series that got cancelled just after four issues, therefore it is impossible to know if the writer of the comic, Mariko Tamaki, actually wanted to explore Loki's gender fluidity later in the series. In her and Gurihiru's series, Lady Loki is introduced as a separate character from Loki, and not as him shape-shifting into a woman. For this reason, it would be more adequate to take into better consideration *Loki: Agent of Asgard* in order to understand more about Loki's gender identity. Throughout the series, the fact that Loki is always Loki even while shape-shifting into a female version of himself is stressed many times. Loki him/herself says: "But I'm still me. I'm always me."⁷⁷ to remind the readers that they are not dealing with a new, completely separate character. Consequently, it is possible to describe Marvel Comics Loki's gender identity as genderfluid. His/her ability to shape-shifts allows him/her to easily express his/her identity – s/he is always him/herself when s/he shape-shift into a man or a woman. As it has been stated in Chapter 2.3, gender fluidity refers to a person whose gender identity and/or expression is not fixed, but fluctuates and goes beyond male and female.⁷⁸ This description fits Loki's gender identity flawlessly: Loki is neither a man nor a woman, but s/he can be whichever s/he wants, whenever s/he wants, not only to disguise him/herself but also to express his/herself.

⁷⁶ M. Tamaki, Gurihiru, *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* #3. New York, Marvel Comics, 2021.

⁷⁷ A. Ewing, L. Garbett, A. Fabela, C. Cowles, W. Moss, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #16. New York, Marvel Comics 2014. 7.

⁷⁸ J. McMillan and S. Blazucki, *Stylebook on LGBTQ terminology*. Washington DC, 2020. 13.NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists,

The last comic book from Marvel Comics that is analysed in this dissertation is *Marvel's Voices: Pride #1*, an anthology published in June 2022, in honour of Pride Month and created by LGBTQ+ writers and artists. It features different stories and various LGBTQ+ characters of the Marvel Universe. This thesis will briefly focus on *Over The Rainbow* and *All My Exes in the Nexus*, the two chapters that feature Loki as one of the main characters.

In *Over The Rainbow* we can see Loki shape-shifting into a female version of himself, although just for a single vignette:



Figure 5. I. Madison III, L. Susi, R. Rosenberg, *Over The Rainbow*, in *Marvel's Voices: Pride #1*. New York, Marvel Comics, 2022. 11.

While her shape is feminine, she flirts with Rúna, a lesbian Valkyrie. Other than this particular scene, this chapter is not of particular interest for the purpose of this dissertation. Moreover, Loki's gender fluidity in Marvel Comics has already been broadly discussed. On the other hand, Loki's sexual orientation is brought up in *All My Exes in the Nexus*. The story opens with Loki⁷⁹ taken hostage by all the exes he has had during his life: they are women, men, but also animals – Svadilfari is present, too.⁸⁰ The writers of this story are undoubtedly hinting at Loki's queerness, although it is never stated if he is bisexual or pansexual. He is definitely not heterosexual, though, forasmuch as he has had both women and men as partners. Given the title of the anthology, one would expect Loki's gender identity and sexual orientation to be addressed with more care, but it is unfortunately not the case of this book.

⁷⁹ Because in *All My Exes in the Nexus* Loki always presents as a male, he will be referred to using masculine pronouns in the dissertation, as well.

⁸⁰ A. Wong, S. Byrne, *All My Exes in the Nexus*, in *Marvel's Voices: Pride #1*. New York, Marvel Comics, 2022. 11.

3.4. Loki in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)

From the beginning of the 21st century, Marvel's profits started to derive mostly from commercially successful films produced by Marvel Studios and therefore part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a media franchise launched with the release of the film *Iron Man* (2008) and bought by the Walt Disney Company in 2009. The many films that have been produced up until now are all based on comic books from Marvel Comics.

One of the most successful MCU productions is the Thor franchising, consisting of four movies: *Thor* (2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022). In each of these films, except for the last one, Loki appears.⁸¹ He also has a solo series, *Loki*, which first aired on the online streaming platform Disney+ in 2021.⁸²

In the MCU, Loki (formerly Odinson, then Laufeyson) is the God of Mischief and the younger brother of Thor. He is the prince of Asgard and the rightful heir to the throne of Jotunheim, as he is the son of the Frost Giant Laufey. In the lust for power and in the desire of becoming King of Asgard, he tries to undermine Thor's ascension to the throne, while desperately trying to receive Odin's approval – he wants to be seen as an equal to Thor. In *Thor*, Odin reveals that he had adopted Loki when he was a baby, just after defeating the Frost Giants of Jotunheim. Loki was then raised as his son and as a prince, with the hope of using him to seal an alliance between Asgard and Jotunheim.⁸³ It can be argued that Loki adopts a position of structural negativity. As soon as he learns about his true identity as Laufey's son, and therefore as a Frost Giant, he rejects Odin's plan of using him as a mean of granting peace between Asgard and Jotunheim. It is difficult to condemn Odin's compassion and good intentions, especially when he decides to rescue an infant Loki from the Giants and raise him as his own son. Indeed, Odin's political strategy of assimilation is considered to be a positive and benevolent act by the general

⁸¹ Loki also appears in *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). It can be argued that he is a recurring figure in the MCU.

⁸² It is important to consider that at the moment of writing this dissertation only the first season of the series has been released. The second part is set to be released on Disney+ in June 2023.

⁸³ *Loki*, (n.d.). Available at Marvel: <https://www.marvel.com/characters/loki/on-screen>. Accessed on 4th August 2022.

public, while Loki's innately destructive tendencies, linked to his true nature and to the fact that he feels used and unloved, make him the monster of the narration.⁸⁴

Thanks to his mother Frigg's teachings, Loki is the most powerful sorcerer in Asgard: he can astral project,⁸⁵ shape-shift, hypnotise, levitate, conjure, perform molecular rearrangement, energy blasts, telekinesis, cryokinesis and teleportation. Moreover, he is able to mystically permeate objects, create breaks between dimensions, connect to others telepathically and see into their memories. He is highly intelligent and a tactical thinker, he is able to manipulate opportunities, events and people in his favour. His relationship with his family is complicated and ambiguous – he occasionally helps Thor, who really believes in him and in his ability to become better, but most of the time he betrays him.⁸⁶

Among MCU fans, Loki seems to be almost more loved than Thor. Indeed, in popular culture, the villain appears to be more fascinating than the hero. The male villain often plays an important role in challenging the models of masculinity that are commonly portrayed in superhero films – with his Machiavellian mind, he threatens to overwhelm the hero, who is usually sustained by hetero-masculinity structures. If the hero represents the idea of the perfect, strong man, the villain is everything that a 'real' man should not be. The villain can be very cunning and powerful, but he will always be doomed to lose. He can easily fit into queer transgression and failure, two characteristics that are far from being typical of a hetero-normative world, therefore the villain's failures can be also regarded as a way of rejecting heteronormativity.⁸⁷ The villain's defeat can be positioned with the politics of masculinity, his failure serving essentially to reinforce the hero's machoism and to crown the white heterosexual patriarchal masculinity as the most dominant. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to consider the villain as a failure of heterosexual masculinity – it should rather be regarded as a rejection of masculinity *tout*

⁸⁴ L. Easton, *Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity: The Villain in the Superhero Film*, in *Cinephile, The University of Columbia's Film Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 2, *The Superhero Film*. University of Vancouver, 2013. 39. Available at https://www.academia.edu/6147250/From_the_Top_of_the_Cowl_to_the_Tip_of_the_Cape_The_Cinematic_Superhero_Costume_as_Impossible_Garment. Accessed on 4th August 2022.

⁸⁵ Astral projection is the ability of a person's spirit to travel to distant places.

⁸⁶ *Loki*, (n.d.).

⁸⁷ L. Easton, *Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity: The Villain in the Superhero Film*, in *Cinephile, The University of Columbia's Film Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 2 *The Superhero Film*, University of Vancouver, 2013. 39.

court.⁸⁸ In addition, it is possible to argue that the villain interferes with the hero's search for happiness and love (e.g. Loki's tricks are the reason why Thor struggles to become the King of Asgard),⁸⁹ but he is not to be treated only as the hero's complement, for he rather is a sign of queer resistance against the white hetero-normative patriarchal social structures that the hero embodies.⁹⁰

Analogous to Marvel Comics' Loki, MCU Loki has shoulder-length black hair, is tall and slim and his skin is particularly fair. These physical characteristics of his are often associated with femininity, and therefore with the figure of a feminised man. Moreover, Loki's strength is his magical ability to cast illusions, shape-shift and astral projecting, all qualities that are considered to be womanly and not efficient enough by the other warriors who are physically strong.⁹¹ As a matter of fact, a villain can also be identified with a feminine figure who intentionally fails in performing proper gender roles. Thus, in this case, the monstrous is a feminised man who threatens the hero's white hetero-masculinity.⁹²

In contrast to Marvel Comics' Loki, the MCU Loki's gender identity and bisexuality are never openly discussed or represented – the only few hints at them are in the film *Thor: Ragnarok* and in the TV Series *Loki*.

Thor: Ragnarok opens with Thor being imprisoned by Surtr, a fire demon, who believes his destiny is to start Ragnarök. After learning that Odin is no longer on Asgard, Thor manages to escape Surtr's prison by killing him with his hammer. Once returned to Asgard, Thor finds out that Loki has shape-shifted into Odin – Thor is the only one who realises the trickery of his brother and forces him to shift back to his original self and to confess where Odin is. The All-father, under the influence of a spell cast by the God of

⁸⁸ L. Easton, *Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity: The Villain in the Superhero Film*, in *Cinephile*, The University of Columbia's Film Journal, Vol. 9 No. 2 *The Superhero Film*, University of Vancouver, 2013. 41.

⁸⁹ L. Easton, *Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity: The Villain in the Superhero Film*, in *Cinephile*, The University of Columbia's Film Journal, Vol. 9 No. 2 *The Superhero Film*, University of Vancouver, 2013. 42.

⁹⁰ L. Easton, *Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity: The Villain in the Superhero Film*, in *Cinephile*, The University of Columbia's Film Journal, Vol. 9 No. 2 *The Superhero Film*, University of Vancouver, 2013. 44.

⁹¹ L. Easton, *Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity: The Villain in the Superhero Film*, in *Cinephile*, The University of Columbia's Film Journal, Vol. 9 No. 2 *The Superhero Film*, University of Vancouver, 2013. 40.

⁹² L. Easton, *Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity: The Villain in the Superhero Film*, in *Cinephile*, The University of Columbia's Film Journal, Vol. 9 No. 2 *The Superhero Film*, University of Vancouver, 2013. 39.

Mischief, has been placed in a retirement home in New York, that is being demolished by the time the two brothers get there. While in front of the ruins of the hospice, Loki is suddenly pulled through a dimensional hole, and a card with an address written on it appears in his place. At that address, Thor finds Doctor Strange, who agrees to help the two gods to find their father, who is in Norway. Odin admits that he is at the end of his life, that Ragnarök is approaching and that Thor and Loki have an older sister, Hela, the goddess of death, whom he had imprisoned because of her dark tendencies. Odin abruptly dies, and Hela emerges from her prison and visits her two brothers. As soon as they understand that she is much stronger than them, they call for the Bifrost in order to return to Asgarð, not thinking that Hela could enter the portal, too – once in it, she will expel the two brothers and head to Asgarð. Thor ends on Sakaar, a planet made of huge garbage mounds. Here he is captured and immobilised on a special chair by Valkyrie, who brings him to the Grandmaster,⁹³ where he learns that Loki is on the same planet.⁹⁴

[Both whispering]

Loki: What are you doing here?

Thor: What do you mean, what am I doing? I'm stuck in this stupid chair. Where's your chair?

Loki: I didn't get a chair.

Thor: Get me out of this one.

Loki: I can't.

Thor: Get me out.

Loki: I can't.

Thor: What?

Loki: I've made friends with this man. He's called the Grandmaster.

Thor: Oh, he's crazy!

Loki: I've gained his favor... The Bifrost brought me out here weeks ago.

⁹³ The Grandmaster is the ruler of Sakaar.

⁹⁴ *Thor: Ragnarok*. Dir. T. Waititi. Perf. Chris Hemsworth, Tom Hiddleston, Cate Blanchett, Idris Elba, Jeff Goldblum, Tessa Thompson, Karl Urban, Mark Ruffalo, Anthony Hopkins, Taika Waititi. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017. Film.

Thor: Weeks ago? I just got here.

[Suddenly Grandmaster is right next to them]

Grandmaster: What are you whispering about?

[Both Thor and Loki react, startled]

Grandmaster (cont'd): Time works real different around these parts.⁹⁵

As soon as Grandmaster appears, Loki immediately steps away from both him and Thor. This could be a normal reaction to being startled, except Loki has never been startled before in the films. When joining the conversation, the Grandmaster already knows what they are talking about, but wants the two brothers to tell him. Loki is visibly conflicted about not revealing to him that they were about to discuss how he gained his favour – this could indicate that he might not want Thor to know in which way this favour was achieved, probably hinting at sexual implications. It would be inaccurate to state that MCU Loki is bisexual just because of this scene, though, as the whole sequence is played off as a joke and the reference to sexual favours is hidden and just used as a comic device. This is the only hint at Loki's sexual orientation that can be found in Marvel films. It can be argued that this is an example of queerbaiting, because Loki's bisexuality is only alluded to and never actualised.

The other Marvel Cinematic Universe production featuring Loki that will be discussed and analysed in this dissertation is the first season of the TV series *Loki*, which premiered in June 2021 on the video-on-demand streaming service Disney+. Soon after seizing the Tesseract⁹⁶ in *The Avengers*, Loki is arrested by the Time Variance Authority (TVA), a bureaucratic organisation whose role is to preserve the Sacred Timeline and prevent the creation of branching timelines, or alternate realities. Loki is sentenced to be pruned, but agent Mobius M. Mobius intervenes and apparently saves him, only to use him in order to help him find a Loki Variant⁹⁷ he is after, who is hiding within apocalyptic

⁹⁵ *Thor: Ragnarok*. Dir. T. Waititi. Perf. Chris Hemsworth, Tom Hiddleston, Cate Blanchett, Idris Elba, Jeff Goldblum, Tessa Thompson, Karl Urban, Mark Ruffalo, Anthony Hopkins, Taika Waititi. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017. Film. The script is retrieved from the English [CC] subtitles available on Disney+.

⁹⁶ The Tesseract is a crystalline cube that contains the Space Stone, one of the six Infinity Stones, power gem-like objects, each tied to a different aspect of the universe (Space, Mind, Reality, Power, Time, Soul).

⁹⁷ A variant is someone who deviates from the established path of the Sacred Timeline.

events. They eventually find the Variant, who is revealed to be a female Loki, hidden in an Alabaman supermarket during a hurricane, in 2050. She manages to escape through a portal but is followed by Loki, who attempts to recruit her to help him destroy the TVA and return to Asgard. They get then transported to Lamentis-1, a moon doomed to collide with a planet. Here the Variant reveals to be called Sylvie Laufeydottir and decides to team up with Loki in order to survive. Thanks to her, Loki learns that those who work for the TVA are Variants, too. The TVA eventually finds and arrests them, but after learning that he is a Variant himself, Mobius frees Loki from his cell and, as a result, gets pruned.⁹⁸ Both Loki and Sylvie will later be pruned at separate times. When someone gets pruned they end up in a Void at the end of time – here Loki meets some Variants of himself and stays with them in order to survive. In the meantime, Sylvie is retrieved by Mobius, and they will eventually meet Loki and the Variants. After enchanting and defeating Alioth, a beast that eats all those who end up in the Void, Mobius returns to the TVA, while Loki decides to stay with Sylvie and go to the Citadel at the End of Time, where they meet He Who Remains, the creator of the TVA. Sylvie tries to kill him, but Loki comes to his protection, not wanting to risk a multiversal crisis. Loki and Sylvie’s relationship reaches an apex and they kiss. A few moments after it, Sylvie opens a portal and sends Loki back to the TVA and kills He Who Remains, destroying the Sacred Timeline. Loki looks for Mobius to tell him what happened, only to find out that he does not recognise or remember him, as a result of the new multiversal crisis.⁹⁹

On 6th June 2022, a few days before the *Loki* series came out, a promotional clip was released on Twitter by the official profile (@LokiOfficial) in which it was possible to see a file about Loki,¹⁰⁰ where his personal information are listed. It is worth noticing that under the ‘sex’ section it is written ‘fluid’, not ‘male’ or ‘female’. As soon as the clip came out, Loki’s fanbase exploded in excitement – finally, the MCU God of Mischief’s gender fluidity had been confirmed to match up with what had been in the comics since 2013. Despite the initial excitement, what the file says can be argued to be quite

⁹⁸ When someone gets pruned, they get poked with the end of a stick, which makes them quickly disappear into thin air and sends them to another dimension.

⁹⁹ *Loki*. Dir. K. Herron. Perf. Tom Hiddleston, Owen Wilson, Sophia Di Martino, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Wunmi Mosaku, Eugene Corder, Tara Strong, Sasha Lane, Jack Veal, DeObia Oparei, Richard E. Grant, Jonathan Majors. Disney+, 2021-. TV series.

¹⁰⁰ Loki (@LokiOfficial), Posted on 6th June 2021 at 6.00 P.M. Available at: <https://twitter.com/LokiOfficial/status/1401569573455810561>. Accessed on 5th August 2022.

problematic and an inaccurate representation of gender fluidity. It should be kept in mind that ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are two different things, the first referring to the biological sex, the latter to what a person identifies as. Biological sex and gender identity do not necessarily need to match. When it comes to Loki, the situation is a bit ambiguous. Is he really genderfluid or he just has the ability to shape-shift? The reality is that it is quite difficult to answer this question, as the topic has never been explored in the MCU. When he shape-shifts he can change his biological sex, something that a real-life genderfluid person obviously cannot do. Thus, it would not be completely correct to describe him as genderfluid.

Loki’s writers probably tried to explore his gender fluidity through the creation of the character of Sylvie but failed in giving proper representation. In Episode 4, Mobius refers to her as “Loki’s female self”.¹⁰¹ This affirmation can be considered to be problematic since Loki himself is his own female variant. Moreover, later in the series, Sylvie explains that she does not identify as a ‘female Loki’, but as Sylvie, a wholly different individual with a personality of her own,¹⁰² and therefore not as Loki presenting as a female – she is definitely a separate character. Thus, it can be argued that Loki’s gender fluidity is misrepresented and queerbaited. As a matter of fact, fans were expecting his gender identity to be explored more in-depth throughout the series, and not just be hinted at in a promotional clip or in the post-credit scenes.

Loki’s sexual orientation is brought up in the series, too, even if for a few seconds only. In episode 3, Loki and Sylvie are sitting at a table, drinking something and discussing magic, their past and love interests:

Sylvie: How about you? You’re a prince. Must’ve been would-be-princesses or perhaps, another prince.

Loki: A bit of both.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ *Loki*. S1:E4, *The Nexus Event*. Dir. K. Herron. Perf. Tom Hiddleston, Owen Wilson, Sophia Di Martino, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Wunmi Mosaku, Eugene Corder, Tara Strong, Sasha Lane, Jack Veal, DeObia Oparei, Richard E. Grant, Jonathan Majors. Disney+, 2021-. TV series.

¹⁰² For this reason, some fans theorised that she might be a trans woman.

¹⁰³ *Loki*. S1:E3, *Lamentis*. Dir. K. Herron. Perf. Tom Hiddleston, Owen Wilson, Sophia Di Martino, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Wunmi Mosaku, Eugene Corder, Tara Strong, Sasha Lane, Jack Veal, DeObia Oparei, Richard E. Grant, Jonathan Majors. Disney+, 2021-. TV series. The script is retrieved from the English [CC] subtitles available on Disney+.

Loki states that during his life he has been interested in both men and women. On 23rd June 2021, *Loki*'s director Kate Herron confirmed the God of Mischief's sexual orientation in a tweet:

From the moment I joined @LokiOfficial it was very important to me, and my goal, to acknowledge Loki was bisexual. It is a part of who he is and who I am too. I know this is a small step but I'm happy, and heart is so full, to say that this is now Canon in mcu [...].¹⁰⁴

Unfortunately, this is the only reference to Loki's bisexuality or pansexuality throughout the entire series, but, as Herron says, it is a step forward.

In conclusion, is it possible to say that the Marvel Cinematic Universe gives a good representation of Loki's gender identity and sexual orientation? While his bisexuality is confirmed by the director of *Loki* and mentioned in the series, his gender fluidity is not really represented and just reduced to his shape-shifting abilities. Therefore, it can be argued that the writers of *Loki* did not explore nor portray his gender identity and sexual orientation in an accurate way. On the contrary, this is the case of the Netflix TV series *Ragnarok*.

3.5. Laurits Seier in the Netflix TV series *Ragnarok*

Ragnarok is a Norwegian TV series produced by Netflix that reimagines Norse mythology in current times. It consists of two seasons, respectively released on 31st January 2020 and on 27th May 2021. The third, and last, season is set to be released in 2023.

In the opening scene of the first episode¹⁰⁵ we meet Magne Seier, the main character of the series, his brother Laurits, and their mother Turid – they are moving to Edda, a small fictional Norwegian town located on a fiord. As soon as they get to the town centre, Magne is bestowed with god-like powers by Wenche, a *völva* who presents herself as an old lady. From the very beginning, it is clear that Magne is the reincarnation of Thor, whose role is to lead the battle between gods and giants – in the series represented

¹⁰⁴ Kate Herron (@iamkateherron). Posted on 23rd June 2021 at 11.36 A.M. Available at: <https://twitter.com/iamkateherron/status/1407633677484539906>. Accessed on 5th August 2022.

¹⁰⁵ *Ragnarok*. S01:E01 *New Boy*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series.

by the Jutul¹⁰⁶ family. Unquestionably, Laurits is the reincarnation of Loki.¹⁰⁷ Aside from looking like Marvel Comics and the MCU's version of Loki, he is slightly deceptive and a trickster – he messes up Magne's homework instead of helping him,¹⁰⁸ he is very sarcastic even when talking or arguing with his mother, and he likes mocking people. Moreover, he accurately portrays Loki's dual nature: throughout the series, it is unclear whose side he is on, especially after he finds out that he is the half-giant child of his human mother Turid and the Giant Vidar Jutul.¹⁰⁹ As soon as the audience begins to think that he is actually going to help Magne and stand on his side, he immediately betrays him, even if, most of the times, just apparently. Indeed, Laurits seems to have a personal and unique concept of helping his brother. For instance, he agrees on helping his brother, who is dyslexic, with his homework, in exchange for him finishing to do the washing up on his own. Instead of actually fixing the mistakes he finds, he completely changes his brother's essay by writing the opposite of what Magne had originally written.

Laurits's ambiguous and dual nature is also expressed by him often crossing stereotypical sexual orientation and gender borders. During a school dance, it becomes clear that he is romantically interested in his friend Fjor Jutul, the most popular boy of the school.¹¹⁰ In the next episode, the two boys go for a drive with Saxa, Fjor's sister, and Gry, Fjor's love interest. While in the car the following dialogue takes place:

Laurits: F*****g awesome double date, uh?

Gry: We are not on a date!

Saxa: We are not dating either, Laurits.

Laurits [looking at Saxa]: Who said I was talking about you, anyway?

¹⁰⁶ The name Jutul might be a pun on *jötunn*, the Old Norse word for Giants.

¹⁰⁷ Up until the release of the second season, this was purely a fan theory. Laurits being the embodiment of Loki was confirmed on S01:E02 *What happened to the old lady?*

¹⁰⁸ *Ragnarok*. S01:E01 *New Boy*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series.

¹⁰⁹ *Ragnarok*. S02:E01 *Brothers in arms*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series.

¹¹⁰ *Ragnarok*. S01:E02 *541 Meters*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series.

Fjor: Now you're way off!¹¹¹

Laurits is evidently interested in Fjor, and he is not afraid to admit it, even though he knows that the boy is heterosexual and definitely does not reciprocate his interest. Laurits flirting with Fjor comes to an end as soon as the latter starts dating Gry later in the series. Although some considered Laurits and Fjor flirting just as a joke and not as a hint at Laurits's sexual orientation, all doubts were cleared as soon as the second season was released:

Laurits: I don't believe in race, sexual identities or, uh, normality.¹¹²

In the second season, Laurits falls in love with Jens, a non-straight man¹¹³ who works at the local fast-food restaurant, and who will eventually break his heart by kissing with another man. When Laurits tells his mother that he is in love with Jens, she is very supportive:

Laurits: I've actually met someone, too.

Turid: Really?

Laurits: It's crazy. It just happened in, like, two seconds or something.

Turid: Oh, who is it?

Laurits: He works at the diner. He's tall. Almost... this or maybe like this, actually. Jens.

Turid: Yes, him. That's so nice.¹¹⁴

Although having the support of his mother and of everyone in the series, and although being quite open about his interest in a man and therefore about his sexual orientation, Laurits feels and has always felt as an outsider also because of it.

¹¹¹ *Ragnarok*, S01: E03 *Jutulheim*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series. The script is retrieved from the English [CC] subtitles available on Netflix.

¹¹² *Ragnarok*, S02: E05, *Know Yourself*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series.

¹¹³ Jens's sexual orientation is never made clear during the second season, therefore it is more accurate not to label him as gay or bisexual, although it is certain that he likes men.

¹¹⁴ *Ragnarok*, S02: E01, *Brothers In Arms*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series.

Therefore, is it possible to consider Laurits to be gay? It is difficult to say. He openly talks about being interested in Jens, and therefore in a man, but it cannot be excluded that he might be interested in women, too. He surely is not straight, but throughout the series it is never confirmed whether he is gay, bisexual or even pansexual – thus he can be labelled as ‘non-straight’ or queer.

Laurits’s gender identity is ambiguous, as well. Similar to Marvel’s version of Loki, his physical appearance and his clothing style are particularly androgynous – he is very slim and his facial features are quite womanish, he often wears eye-liner and mascara, paints his nails black and wears skinny jeans, which are typically considered to be a feminine piece of clothing.¹¹⁵ Compared to his brother Magne, who is the tall and muscular stereotype of a strong man, Laurits challenges the models of masculinity. In the first two seasons he never brings up his gender identity, but thanks to the following statement uttered by his mother Turid it becomes evident that he is not cisgender:

Turid [to Laurits]: Can I ask you something? Since you’re a boy or a man, or... I know you don’t recognise gender and sexuality in that sense [...].¹¹⁶

Therefore, it can be argued that Laurits does not identify neither as a man nor as a woman, but he is most likely non-binary or genderfluid. This thesis can be confirmed, or at least be considered to be accurate, due to the fact that he is obviously interested in trans*¹¹⁷ culture and representation. An example can be found in S02:E03, *Power To The People*. After finding out that he is the reincarnation of Loki, Laurits wants to know everything he possibly can about the Norse god. For this reason, he asks his history teacher whether Loki can be considered to be the first trans person of history, having given birth to Jormungandr.¹¹⁸

In contrast with Norse Loki and Marvel Loki, Laurits does not have the magical ability to shape-shift. Despite this, he manages to change his physical appearance through human mundane methods, such as going blonde and, a couple of episodes later, switching

¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that Laurits’s style is also typical of sub-cultures, such as emo and punk, which are very popular among the Scandinavian youth.

¹¹⁶ *Ragnarok*, S02: E05, *Know Yourself*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series.

¹¹⁷ Here, ‘trans’ is used as an umbrella term, as it can be noticed by the use of the asterisk.

¹¹⁸ Loki actually gave birth to Sleipnir and not to Jormungandr. This adaptation was due to screenwriting complexities – it was easier to simulate Laurits ‘giving birth’ to a snake-like creature than to a horse.

back to dark hair. In addition, he cross-dresses, as it can be seen in the last episode of the first season, when he shows up to the school's Norwegian National Day celebration with make-up on and dressed exactly as the headmistress Ran Jutul, to give a speech while making her impression, and therefore criticising her ways and mocking her.¹¹⁹ Regardless of not being able to shift between genders, a characteristic that Norse Loki and Marvel Loki share, Laurits still manages to perform what seems to be childbirth. In S02:E04, *God is God, Though All Men Death Had Tasted*, Laurits learns that he has a tapeworm inside of his stomach, which causes him to eat huge amounts of food, as it happens when someone is pregnant. Later in the episode, his bellyache gets so severe that he is rushed to the hospital. His belly being so bloated that he looks like he is about to give birth, he undergoes an ultrasound exam that reveals the tapeworm to be much bigger than usual ones. The doctors immediately decide to perform an emergency surgery to remove the parasite. After the procedure, Laurits learns that the tapeworm is still alive and decides to keep him as a pet, which will grow and turn out to be the Miðgarð serpent. It is possible to interpret Laurits' surgery as a caesarean delivery – being a biological male who cannot shape-shift, and who, therefore, does not have the ability of giving birth, Laurits still performs the ultimate feminine act of giving life to another being.

In conclusion, when it comes to the reinterpretation of the Norse god Loki's shape-shifting abilities, translated to modern days' sexual orientation and gender identity, Laurits is probably the most accurate adaptation. First and foremost, unlike MCU's Loki, no queerbaiting strategies revolve around this character. His homo- or bisexuality is made clear and confirmed in the series itself, as well as his non-binary identity. Being physically a human, Laurits cannot actually shape-shift, but is still able to change his appearance. Moreover, it is made clear throughout the series that he does not need to look stereotypically like a woman to be non-binary (or genderfluid), while Marvel Loki is considered to be a female only when he shape-shifts into one. What Marvel did both in the comics and in the TV series is a misrepresentation of non-binarism and can be considered to be quite offensive, as it implies that a trans* person must present in a certain way or undergo medical treatments (surgery or hormonal cure) for their identity to be respected.

¹¹⁹ *Ragnarok*, S01: E06, *Yes, We Love This Country*. Dir. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Perf. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. TV series.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has focused on analysing how the Norse god Loki's shape-shifting abilities have been translated into gender fluidity and bisexuality in modern media.

Loki's role in Norse mythology is particularly ambiguous and goes beyond the normative structure, for he is neither a god nor a giant. He is gifted with the magical ability of shape-shifting, which allows him not only to change his physical appearance, but also his gender and even his biological sex, as it happens, for instance, in *The Þrymskviða (The Lay of Þrym)*, when Loki shape-shifts into a woman, and in *Frá því er er Loki gat Sleipni við Svaðilfóra (Of when Loki Conceived Sleipnir with Svadilfari)*, when Loki shape-shifts into a mare and gives birth to Sleipnir, an eight-legged foal. Due to his shape-shifting abilities, Loki can be considered to be genderfluid, since his gender identity and expression are not fixed. He is definitely not scared to perform femininity, instead, he uses it to his advantage, whether he needs it to hide, to deceive his enemies or just as an instigative act towards the gods, who saw it as a weakness.

In modern days, Loki has become the protagonist of comic books, films and TV series, although adapted in order to be more captivating for a contemporary audience. All present-time productions have kept his ability to shape-shift as a power of his, and reinterpreted it as gender fluidity and bisexuality, although not always in a proper and respectful way.

In Marvel Comics' *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, he is seen to be shifting genders more than once. Nearly every time he shape-shifts, he stresses the fact that he is not merely presenting as a woman, but that he actually feels like one, sometimes. Moreover, it can be noticed that when shape-shifting into a feminine body, Loki uses feminine pronouns and gendered terms. On the contrary, in *Marvel's Voices: Pride* Loki shapeshifts just once and for a single vignette, while in *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* he never does.¹²⁰ Therefore, it can be argued that this is the comic book that best represents and explores Loki's gender fluidity is *Loki: Agent of Asgard*. What about Loki's sexual orientation in Marvel Comics? Unfortunately, it has not been explored as much as his gender fluidity.

¹²⁰ Lady Loki is not Loki shape-shifting, but a variant of himself from a parallel universe.

Indeed, only *Marvel's Voices: Pride* brings the subject up. Thus, it is possible to come to the conclusion that Loki's bisexuality is not well-represented in comic books.

In opposition to Marvel Comics, MCU's Loki's gender fluidity and bisexuality are never openly represented, but only hinted at in *Thor: Ragnarok* and in *Loki*. His gender fluidity is only brought up in *Loki*, even if disastrously – instead of making him shape-shift into a feminine body or making him simply discuss his gender identity, the writers of the TV series decided to create a female Loki that does not identify as a variant of Loki, but as Sylvie, a wholly different individual with a personality of her own. On the other hand, MCU Loki's bisexuality is only hinted at in *Thor: Ragnarok*, and briefly mentioned in *Loki*. In conclusion, it is possible to say that the MCU does not give a good representation of Loki's gender fluidity and sexual orientation. Even though his bisexuality is confirmed by the director of *Loki*, his gender fluidity is badly and inappropriately depicted and ended up being mere queerbaiting.

The best representation of modern Loki's gender fluidity and bisexuality can be found in the Netflix TV series *Ragnarok*. Laurits' queerness is straightforwardly confirmed in the series and is not tabooed at all. He is very open about it and, even though it makes him feel like an outsider, he talks about it quite freely. When it comes to Laurits' gender identity it is not clear if he identifies as genderfluid, but it is clear that he falls under the non-binary umbrella term – he wears make-up, paints his nails black and wears stereotypically feminine pieces of clothing. Being a human, he obviously does not have the ability to shape-shift but manages to change his physical appearance and to metaphorically give birth to the Miðgarð serpent, anyway. It is important to notice that, unlike Marvel Comics' and MCU's Loki, no queerbaiting revolves around this character. Moreover, Laurits' gender fluidity is always there – he does not need to shift between gender expressions in order to be considered gender fluid, whereas Marvel Comics and MCU Loki are seen as such only when shape-shifting into a woman.

To sum things up, thanks to his shape-shifting abilities, it is possible to consider Norse Loki to be genderfluid himself, even if this is a contemporary definition which was contemplated neither by the old Norse nor by Snorri. Modern adaptation of the god have both failed and succeeded in representing this characteristic of his. The best depiction is definitely the TV series *Ragnarok*. Laurits's bisexuality and gender fluidity are not the object of queerbaiting and are respectfully and accurately dealt with and performed.

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ABSTRACT IN ITALIAN

Da sempre, Loki è considerato una delle più intriganti divinità norrene: è affascinante, astuto, subdolo e ambiguo in tutto ciò che fa e in tutto ciò che è. Questo suo fascino non ha di certo risparmiato i vari fumettisti, scrittori, sceneggiatori e registi che hanno deciso di renderlo il protagonista delle loro opere, reinterpretandolo in chiave moderna. Dato il successo che Loki sta avendo nella cultura popolare, che continua a proporre nuove versioni e rivisitazioni del dio dell'inganno, questa tesi di laurea offre un *excursus* che parte dai miti degli antichi Germani e si conclude ai giorni nostri, prestando attenzione, soprattutto, all'analisi di come è stata ripensata l'abilità di Loki di mutare la sua forma.

Inizialmente, ci si concentrerà sulla mitologia norrena, più in particolare sulla cosmologia, sul pantheon e sui miti. Purtroppo, non sappiamo moltissimo di questi argomenti, dato che venivano tramandati oralmente. Le principali fonti scritte che sono arrivate fino ai giorni nostri e sulle quali ci si basa per lo studio della religione norrena sono principalmente l'*Edda Poetica* (o *Edda Antica*), l'*Edda in Prosa* di Snorri e la *Völuspá* (*La Profezia della völva*), il più famoso poema dell'*Edda Poetica*. Il primo capitolo di questa tesi inizia presentando il mito dell'origine del mondo, raccontato nella *Völuspá* e rispiegato da Neil Gaiman in *Miti del Nord* (Milano, 2020). Si passerà poi a una breve descrizione dell'albero cosmico Yggdrasil e dei Nove Mondi: Asgarð, dove vivono gli dei Asi, Alfheim, Niðavellir o Svartalfheim, Miðgarð, la casa di noi umani, Jotunheim, la terra dei giganti, Vanaheim, Niflheim, Muspell e Hel. Successivamente, verranno presentate le due stirpi divine e i loro principali componenti, ovvero gli Asi Odino, Thor, Loki, Tyr e Heimdall, e i Vani Niörðr, Freyr e Freyja.

Odino è il padre degli dei e dell'umanità, è il dio della poesia e della saggezza. La sua caratteristica principale è proprio quest'ultima, da lui ricevuta come ricompensa ai suoi sacrifici. Nascosto da un lungo mantello e dalla sua lunga barba, Odino fa spesso visita a Miðgarð. Egli è inoltre legato alla guerra e alla morte: ogni scontro veniva dedicato a lui e le anime dei caduti valorosamente erano destinate al Valhalla. Odino ha diversi figli, tra i più importanti troviamo Thor, il principe degli Asi e dio del tuono. È dotato di una forza straordinaria, che viene raddoppiata da una cintura speciale, Megingjord. Come arma, ha il Mjöllnir, un martello forgiato dai nani. È alto, possente, e

ha lunghi capelli e barba arancioni. Tra i fratelli di Thor troviamo Tyr, colui che presiede l'assemblea, e Heimdall, il guardiano degli dei e di Asgarð. Tra i Vani le divinità di punta sono Niörðr, ostaggio ad Asgarð, e i suoi figli Freyr, dio della fertilità, e Freyja, dea dell'amore carnale e della fertilità. Tutti gli dei saranno destinati a combattere durante il Ragnarök, la battaglia finale, dove tutti loro conosceranno la morte.

Il paragrafo successivo è dedicato a Loki, il protagonista di questa tesi. Nella mitologia norrena, Loki viene descritto come *trickster*, ovvero un imbroglione: egli agisce infatti in virtù dell'inganno, dettato da una grande astuzia. È particolarmente ingegnoso e sempre pronto ad escogitare qualche piano caotico che possa creare zizzania tra gli Asi e distruzione (sarà proprio lui a guidare le forze del male durante il Ragnarök). Loki è un'entità ambigua: è figlio di giganti, ma, tramite un patto di sangue, è anche fratello di Odino e vive ad Asgarð. La caratteristica del dio dell'inganno su cui ci si concentrerà in questa tesi è la sua abilità magica di mutare forma e il sesso biologico. Due esempi di questo suo potere si trovano in *Brymskviða* e in *Frá því er er Loki gat Sleipni við Svadilfóra*: nel primo mito si trasforma in una serva, nel secondo in una cavalla, che darà alla luce Sleipnir, il cavallo a otto zampe di Odino. Grazie a questa sua abilità di mutare forma è possibile definirlo *genderfluid*, un termine inglese che indica una persona la cui identità e/o espressione di genere non è fissa e che va oltre la dicotomia uomo/donna.

Nel secondo capitolo si fa dapprima cenno agli Studi di genere (Gender Studies) e alla Teoria queer (Queer Theory) e si passerà poi alla spiegazione di termini riguardanti l'orientamento sessuale e l'identità di genere, che potrebbero essere sconosciuti ai più. Gli studi di genere nascono alla fine degli anni '60 del 1900, in concomitanza con il movimento femminista. Il loro scopo era quello di allontanarsi dall'idea di un mondo androcentrico e concentrarsi, a livello di studi sociologici, sulle donne. La Teoria queer, invece, è decisamente più recente (la sua nascita è databile tra la metà degli anni '80 e '90) e si interroga principalmente sui privilegi e sulla centralità dell'eterosessualità e del binarismo di genere. Durante il XIX secolo il termine *queer* veniva usato come insulto nei confronti delle persone omosessuali, per cui la scelta di questo termine nella denominazione della Teoria queer è associabile ad un atto di ribellione da parte di gruppi di attivisti gay e lesbiche che hanno deciso di rivendicarlo e che oggi viene utilizzato come *umbrella term* per indicare i membri della comunità LGBTQ+.

Quindi, seppur accomunati da un distacco dall'androcentrismo patriarcale, gli Studi di genere e la Teoria queer sono, purtroppo, spesso in conflitto tra di loro. Ad esempio, le femministe radicali, ricercatrici negli Studi di genere, non considerano l'orientamento sessuale di una donna come possibile causa di discriminazione. Inoltre, affermano che i generi sono due, uomo e donna, e che le donne trans non sono davvero donne, così come gli uomini trans non sono davvero uomini. Al contrario, la Teoria queer si discosta dal binarismo di genere ed esplora nel dettaglio sia l'orientamento sessuale che l'identità di genere, spesso intesi come sinonimi tra loro intercambiabili, ma che, in realtà, si riferiscono a due aspetti diversi della natura umana. L'orientamento sessuale non è altro che l'attrazione sessuale: non è una scelta, non è una preferenza e non è uno stile di vita. Inoltre, non è sinonimo di sessualità, termine che indica l'attività sessuale, né di attrazione romantica, la quale si limita, appunto, alla sfera sentimentale. Si può essere attratti da persone del genere opposto (eterosessualità), dello stesso (omosessualità), da più di un genere (bisessualità, pansessualità, ecc.) o non provare attrazione per nessuno (asessualità). In questa tesi, ci si soffermerà in particolare sul termine queer, menzionato in precedenza, e su bisessualità e pansessualità, spesso causa di controversie. Inizialmente, l'etichetta 'bisessuale' indicava l'attrazione per il proprio genere e per quello opposto, mentre la seconda si riferiva al provare attrazione per tutti, incluse le persone trans*. Attualmente, entrambe le definizioni sono superate. Infatti, una persona è bisessuale quando prova attrazione per più di un genere, e pansessuale quando prova attrazione a prescindere dal genere.

L'identità di genere, invece, è la percezione che ognuno ha di sé. Per esempio, l'identità di genere di persona cisgender è in linea con il proprio genere assegnato alla nascita, determinato dal sesso biologico. Al contrario, una persona transgender, non si identifica con il proprio genere, ma con altri, non necessariamente con quello opposto. Il termine 'transgender' o 'trans' viene utilizzato come *umbrella term* per indicare tutti coloro che non riconoscono il proprio genere assegnato alla nascita. È importante ricordare che non tutte le persone trans* vogliono, o hanno la possibilità, di ricorrere alla chirurgia e/o alla terapia ormonale. In questa tesi ricorreranno i termini *non-binary* e, in particolare, *genderfluid* (entrambi sono sotto all'*umbrella term* transgender, e *genderfluid* sta sotto a *non-binary*, usato a sua volta come *umbrella term*). Una persona *non-binary* non si identifica né come uomo, né come donna. Questo non significa che siano un 'terzo

genere’, ma semplicemente non si riconoscono in nessuno dei due generi tradizionali. L’identità e/o l’espressione di genere di una persona *genderfluid*, invece, non è statica, ma si muove nello spettro che vede uomo e donna ai poli opposti. L’ultimo argomento che viene trattato nel secondo capitolo sono i pronomi. Tendenzialmente, si usano i pronomi maschili per chi consideriamo uomo, e i pronomi femminili, per chi consideriamo donna. In inglese, i pronomi neutri, utilizzati da molte persone *non-binary* sono ‘they/them/theirs’ or i cosiddetti *neopronouns* ‘ze/zim/zis’. Per quanto riguarda le persone *genderfluid*, in particolare, i loro pronomi possono variare.

Il terzo e ultimo capitolo è il punto focale di questa tesi. Si analizzerà, infatti, come l’abilità di Loki di mutare la sua forma è stata reinterpretata in chiave moderna. Prima di tutto, viene discussa l’influenza della mitologia norrena nella cultura popolare. Si vedrà come, ad esempio, l’etimologia dei giorni della settimana in inglese derivi proprio dai nomi di alcuni dei (Tyr, Odino, Thor, *Frija o Frigg), così come la denominazione di alcuni luoghi geografici, come l’Odense o la Þórsmörk, la Foresta di Thor. Tuttavia, si può dire che la mitologia norrena abbia avuto il suo ritorno più importante durante il periodo Romantico, anche grazie alle traduzioni dell’*Edda* di Snorri e dell’*Edda Poetica* nelle lingue moderne. Il fascino norreno influenzò pittori e poeti, ma anche compositori come Wagner, famoso per il suo *Il canto dei Nibelunghi*. Purtroppo, anche i nazisti del Terzo Reich fecero propria la cultura degli antichi Germani, identificandoli come razza superiore alla quale ispirarsi nel tentativo di ricreare una “nazione originale” composta esclusivamente dai discendenti di questi. Nonostante la mitologia sia ancora, sfortunatamente, associata a gruppi neo-nazisti, si può affermare che negli ultimi anni abbia avuto un *revival* grazie a fumetti, serie TV e film. In questa tesi verranno esaminati, in particolare, i fumetti della Marvel Comics *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014), *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* (2019), e *Marvel’s Voices: Pride* (2022), il film *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) e la serie TV *Loki* (2021-) prodotti dal Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), e la serie TV di Netflix *Ragnarok* (2020-).

Prima di passare all’analisi di questi, però, verrà spiegato cos’è il *queerbaiting*, una strategia di marketing particolarmente in voga negli ultimi anni. Si parla di *queerbaiting* quando un prodotto di intrattenimento cerca di attirare l’attenzione del pubblico alludendo ad una possibile rappresentazione di un personaggio e/o di una relazione LGBTQ+, ma senza mai effettivamente attualizzarla. Questa metodologia

sfrutta la comunità LGBTQ+ stessa, intendendola esclusivamente come fonte di guadagno e popolarità. Vedremo, in seguito, come i prodotti MCU non siano esenti da questa tattica commerciale.

Nell'analisi delle rappresentazioni moderne di Loki ci si concentrerà sullo studio di come la sua abilità di mutare forma sia stata tradotta, in termini moderni, in fluidità di genere e bisessualità. Il primo oggetto di studio saranno i fumetti della Marvel Comics, dove possiamo vedere Loki mutare forma, e quindi esprimere la sua fluidità di genere, solo in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* e in *Marvel's Voices: Pride*, anche se in quest'ultimo solo per una vignetta. Si vedrà, inoltre, come la versione femminile di Loki in *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble*, non è davvero Loki che muta, ma una sua variante che vive in un universo parallelo.

Nella serie di fumetti *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki muta la sua forma e passa diverse volte da un genere all'altro. Ogni volta che lo fa, precisa che, anche se ha mutato forma, è sempre lui, o sarebbe meglio dire lei, dato che quando si trasforma in donna usa i pronomi femminili. Infatti, il suo aspetto fisico o come decide di esprimersi a livello esteriore non cambiano la sua identità. Questa sua fluidità è onnipresente, ed è proprio lui stesso a voler sottolineare il fatto che non sarà mai statico, ma cambierà sempre, pur rimanendo se stesso: Loki non è né uomo, né donna, ma può essere chi vuole e quando vuole. Il suo potere di mutare forma, quindi, non gli serve solamente ai fini di nascondersi o di ingannare il suo nemico (o amico), ma lo utilizza anche per esprimere la sua identità. È interessante, inoltre, notare che in tutti i numeri della serie indossa lo smalto nero, come se servisse a ricordare al pubblico che il suo lato femminile esiste sempre, anche quando presenta un corpo maschile.

Sfortunatamente, l'orientamento sessuale di Loki nei fumetti della Marvel Comics non è particolarmente approfondito. Questo viene, infatti, menzionato solo in *Marvel's Voices: Pride*, quando tutti i suoi ex, sia uomini che donne, si riuniscono e lo prendono in ostaggio. Tuttavia, non si può parlare di *queerbaiting*, dato che la sua bisessualità viene confermata nel fumetto, anche se molto brevemente.

Al contrario, è possibile affermare che sia *Thor: Ragnarok* che *Loki*, entrambi prodotti Marvel Cinematic Universe, siano esempi di *queerbaiting*. Infatti, in nessuno dei due né la fluidità di genere di Loki, né la sua bisessualità vengono affrontate apertamente, ma solamente accennate, nonostante sia sempre stato visto come un personaggio che va

contro l'etero-mascolinità patriarcale tipica dei supereroi. Per quanto riguarda il suo orientamento sessuale, dopo un'allusione ad un rapporto con un uomo in *Thor: Ragnarok*, la bisessualità di Loki è stata confermata nella serie TV e dalla regista di questa. Il suo essere *genderfluid*, invece, viene, disastrosamente, rappresentato nella serie TV *Loki*. Invece di sfruttare la sua abilità di mutare forma, i creatori della serie hanno inventato Sylvie, una variante di Loki che non si identifica in lui, ma in un individuo completamente diverso dal dio dell'inganno e con una personalità tutta sua. Si può quindi affermare che la mancata rappresentazione della sua fluidità di genere, che era stata promessa al pubblico, risulti in *queerbaiting*.

La migliore reinterpretazione di Loki è probabilmente il personaggio di Laurits della serie TV di Netflix *Ragnarok*. Nella seconda stagione, egli parla liberamente della sua infatuazione per Jens, un ragazzo che lavora nel ristorante fast-food della sua città, con il quale non ha paura di flirtare anche in presenza di altre persone. Nonostante il suo orientamento sessuale lo faccia sentire diverso dagli altri, questo non viene trattato come un tabù né da Laurits stesso, né dalla sua famiglia e amici. Per quanto riguarda la sua identità di genere, non è chiaro se sia effettivamente *genderfluid*, ma è confermato che ricade sotto l'*umbrella term non-binary* grazie, in particolare, ad una battuta di sua madre, Turid: “Devo chiederti una cosa, visto che sei un ragazzo, o un uomo, o quello che sei. Ho capito che non schematizzi sessualità, genere e cose così [...]”.¹²¹ Laurits, inoltre, usa il mascara e l'eye-liner, si mette lo smalto nero e indossa vestiti tipicamente femminili, come gli skinny jeans. Ovviamente, essendo un essere umano, non può mutare la sua forma come Loki norreno, della Marvel Comics e dell'MCU: per ovviare a questa limitazione, Laurits cambia diverse volte colore di capelli. Nonostante non possa, appunto, trasformarsi in una donna biologica, “partorisce”, seppur metaforicamente, il serpente di Miðgarð, il quale era originariamente un verme solitario, rimosso tramite intervento chirurgico, che allude, chiaramente, ad un parto cesareo. È veramente difficile trovare esempi di *queerbaiting* in *Ragnarok*, considerando che sia l'omo- o bisessualità di Laurits, che la sua fluidità di genere vengono confermate nella serie. Inoltre, è particolarmente interessante notare come egli non debba necessariamente avere un corpo

¹²¹ *Ragnarok*, S02: E05, *Conosci Te Stesso*. Reg. M. Hagedorn, J. Johansen, M. Kamp Thulstrup. Att.. David Stakson, Jonas Strand Gravli, Herman Tømmeraas, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Emma Bones, Henriette Steenstrup, Gísli Örn Garðarsson, Synnøva Macody Lund. Netflix, 2020-. Serie TV. Lo script è ricavato dall'audio del doppiaggio in italiano.

femminile perché venga riconosciuto come *genderfluid*, al contrario di Loki della Marvel Comics e dell'MCU, dove la sua fluidità è confermata esclusivamente quando si trasforma in donna.

In conclusione, tutte le interpretazioni contemporanee del dio dell'inganno si basano sull'abilità di Loki norreno di mutare la sua forma. Si può dire, infatti, in termini attuali, che egli stesso sia *genderfluid* e bisessuale, dato che ha rapporti anche con maschi (si veda Svadilfari, che, pur essendo un cavallo, è un maschio). Per quanto riguarda le rivisitazioni moderne è possibile affermare che la Marvel Comics abbia dedicato, tutto sommato, abbastanza attenzione alla sua fluidità di genere, in particolare in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, ma molto poca alla sua bisessualità. Al contrario, il Marvel Cinematic Universe ha fatto molto *queerbaiting* su Loki: nonostante la sua bisessualità sia confermata nella serie TV *Loki*, la sua fluidità di genere è stata illustrata in maniera errata. L'adattamento migliore è quello di Netflix che ha inteso e rappresentato perfettamente cosa voglia dire essere *genderfluid*. *Ragnarok*, inoltre, tratta l'orientamento sessuale di Laurits con particolare rispetto, pur affrontandolo con leggerezza, ma senza cadere nel *queerbaiting*.