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Viking Age Magic in Westeros: A Reading of Transgression in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

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Abstract

My study of Norse mythology, primarily sourced from but not limited to the literary canon, is carried out in order to understand the transgressive quality of magic within the Viking worldview, to show that author George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIAF) writes magic and magical characters in much the same way. The ASOIAF series' characterization of magic users strongly reflects elements found within the ancient Norse literary tradition, which in turn must be viewed as originating from a larger oral tradition that exists in the context of trans-Eurasian shamanism, one that often casts the magic user as a transgressor of gender roles and challenger of physical boundaries.

Keywords: *A Song of Ice and Fire*, fantasy literature, Game of Thrones, George R.R. Martin, Norse mythology, queer studies, shamanism, Viking studies

Introduction

The Viking's creation myth is a unique one, quite unlike any other in the world. It begins not with a great explosion, or a divine command, but with the union of two elemental opposites that reach across the void and mingle together, the southerly realm being a land of heat and flames, the northerly a place of bitter cold and frost: Muspellheim and Nifelheim, respectively. This middle place is tempered equally by both climates, and so becomes a place of harmony between two extremes. A place of life, because the first person, the giant Ymir, emerges there, along with the first gods, who will one day give humans their own lives. The Viking knows the world is created from ice and fire.

Even as separated as we are today from the Vikings that roamed the waterways of northern Europe, their influence remains in our films, comics, and literature. Author George R.R. Martin, best known for his book series that inspired the HBO fantasy-drama *Game of Thrones*, calls his vast story *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and the remnants of the ancient Viking worldview are written there for anyone who cares to look. In particular, the practitioners of magic and how they are portrayed in Martin's book series parallel closely the perception that the Vikings had of their own magic users, which is alluded to heavily in their literature. This is seen specifically in the case of those known in the series as skinchangers, or wargs, people who possess the supernatural ability to project their consciousness into the body of an animal, who are simultaneously shunned and revered by their community because of this skill. The Vikings, whose worldview likely encompassed such an understanding of human shapeshifters as being real, treated their own skinchangers in much the same way, people to be regarded with suspicion, but also with grudging respect. Overwhelmingly, the Vikings saw many of these magic-users as being sexually and morally perverse for this fluid identity. While this is alluded to in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, the mistrust skinchangers bear can be read as queer because of the way in which these types of magic users challenge the traditional understanding of what it means to inhabit a body. Therefore, I will argue that the characterization of skinchangers and wargs in Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" can be viewed with this Viking context in mind, and that it is crucial to understanding the way in which these characters function as essentially subversive beings.

It is true that most of the point-of-view characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are all outsiders in their own way. And while most modern fantasy stories do feature the underdog as their hero, Martin goes one step further and chooses to give the spotlight to a multiplicity of characters that all, in some way, struggle to align themselves neatly in the societal constraints of his fictional world. Furthermore, Martin rejects the dualistic morality that he himself has often criticized in modern fantasy fiction, opting instead to create characters who are neither wholly good nor wholly evil. That being said, there is a specific category of characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* that strongly mirrors another literary tradition's: the skinchangers and wargs, the shapeshifters that project their consciousness into animals' bodies. While Martin may attempt to write these characters as neither entirely sympathetic nor deplorable, as with his other characters, I argue these characters' literary precedents, specifically those found in Viking, or Old Norse literature and mythology, demonstrate the way in which these magic-users are conceptualized in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

The Viking Psyche

Although we often speak of the stories of the Vikings as myths, any understanding of the Vikings must begin with the understanding that to the Vikings, at least as far as modern research has shown, their stories were not simply imaginative tales. Rather, they reflected the rich, and in some ways completely alien psychological space that the Vikings inhabited. To even say that the Vikings had a religion would be a misnomer. Their spiritual practices demonstrated the hallmarks of religious rituals, but it was not so much a religion as an essential understanding of the world. Neil Price, one of the foremost scholars in the field of Viking studies today, puts it more poetically:

This question of reality is important because the Vikings did not *believe* in these things anymore than some today ‘believes in’ the sea. Instead they *knew* about them: all this was as much a natural part of the world as trees and rocks. That these beings could not be seen need not have been significant (*Children of Ash and Elm* 32).

The world simply existed as the Vikings envisaged it: a harsh, yet often beautiful place inhabited by mercurial gods, magical creatures, and a host of ever-changing forces just out of sight.

Odin the Queer?

Shamanistic strains in Old Norse literature had been apparent to researchers as early as the 19th century, but it wasn’t until more recently that the connections between broader, Eurasian shamanism and Viking religious practices were asserted in a more concrete manner. This is likely due to the sexual aspects that underlie shamanic practices, as well as the Viking world. Early scholarship in the modern era about Vikings was carried out by Victorian-era scholars; even until the 1940s, Nazi Germany provided the bulk of the contribution to research into ancient Germanic peoples, and while not entirely without its legitimate contributions, it is often rightfully dismissed as rubbish.¹ Suffice it to say that the Viking queerness was often overlooked if not downright ignored. Even up until the post-war era, certain translators of the Old Norse corpus appeared to be downright coquettish in their analyses, glossing over otherwise unambiguous references. While in the popular mind an image of the Vikings as purely heterosexual and cisgender exists, this is a product of earlier, often incorrect, more conservative sensibilities.

In Old Norse literature, Odin is famous for having a dizzying array of names. Neil Price, in his tome *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, lists 204 names alone for the god, as recorded in skaldic poetry, noting that his list is by no means exhaustive. Many refer to his characterization as a god of war, still others to his sorcerous reputation (66, 67). But there are two names in particular that stand out: *Jalkr* and *Tveggi*, “Gelding” and “Double,” or

¹ Nazi Germany’s obsession with occultism did occasionally produce legitimate works. Neil Price writes that Otto Höfler’s research, with which the torch for Old Norse mysticism was primarily carried during the 1940s, despite the impetus behind it, “its actual content is generally free from such bias and is indeed of serious quality,” calling it “still very relevant today” (*The Viking Way* 47).

“Hermaphrodite.” These two kennings, or poetic by-names, are significant for several reasons. For one, they call into question the commonly supposed masculinity of the patriarch of the Norse pantheon, but more importantly, they belie the tension between non-normative sexuality and gender presentation that existed within Viking culture, and its parallels with shamanism as it existed in the shamanic heartland of Eurasia, Siberia.

The interpretation of Odin across history is in some ways a perfect parallel of the historical misrepresentation of Viking culture. While earlier scholars may have been more comfortable with chalking up these names to mistake, when considered in the context of Viking-age culture it becomes clear that these names belie a more nuanced portrait of the god. The kenning *Tveggi*, translated by Neil Price as “Double,” or “Hermaphrodite,” admittedly is a slightly ambiguous translation, perhaps fitting for a god famed for his duplicitous nature. It can refer to hermaphroditism, but it also is often rendered simply as “Twofold,” as in the case of Henry Adams Bellows’ translation of Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*. Yet the kenning *Jalkr*, meaning “Gelding,” is harder to ignore. Referred to as such within Sturluson’s *Grimnismal*, or the *Lay of Grimnir*, *Jalkr* is a name that appears to have only the singular meaning. This had evidently mystified scholars of even the recent past, as the name is often left untranslated in modern English-language editions of the *Grimnismal*, which is often accompanied by a footnote that claims ignorance of the meaning. Bellows’ translation simply states, “Nothing is known of... Othin’s appearance as Jalkr” (104), while Lawrence S. Thompson refers to it in the index as “a name of Odin” (117). Lee M. Hollander’s edition merely ignores the word, and waves away the accusation leveled at Odin that the god dressed and performed the rituals of a witch, saying, “Othin was the god of magic, but there is no other reference to his ever having disguised himself as a witch” (160).²

While it is true that much of the oral tradition of the Vikings has been lost, perhaps scraps of forgotten myths remain. However, the same cannot be said of Odin’s alleged hermaphroditism. Odin, a figure notorious for his relentless pursuit of knowledge, is well-known for having gone as far as hanging himself from the World Tree, Yggdrasil, without food or water, to gain the secrets of runic magic. He is said to have stabbed himself with a spear during his ordeal (Larrington 32). Centuries of Christian influence, in addition to resistance to viewing Odin in a non-normative light, have caused this act of penetration to be viewed as chaste, directed at his side, just as Christ was wounded on the Cross. Yet when approached with Odin’s dubious gender representation in mind, in addition to his disreputable affinity with sorcery, an alternative locus of the spear wound can be divined. Recent interpretations have suggested that this was more than a simple flesh wound, being instead the source of his starkly unambiguous kenning: *Jalkr*, or “Gelding.” This reading of the figure casts Odin’s ritual sacrifice on Yggdrasil as permeating deep into the realm of non-normative gender reveals the tension underlying the Viking’s relationship with magic, and in turn, its precedents in Eurasian shamanism.

² Admittedly, the analysis of this poem is complicated by the forum in which it takes place; the piece, the *Lokesanna*, or *The Flyting of Loki*, features Loki verbally abusing each of the gods in turn, with each of them returning remarks in kind. It is difficult to say how much of Loki’s attacks are hearsay, as some are repudiated and others not.

Shamanic Flight

What we today call shamanism was first observed by Western eyes by early Russian colonists in remote Siberia. The people they encountered there displayed religious practices that were characterized by the presence of a person within their community who, often in frenzied or ecstatic fits, acted as mediators between the seen and unseen worlds. These shamans, named after the Tungus word *śaman* (Stutley 3), who addressed the spiritual needs of their community, were also overwhelmingly characterized by a kind of gender presentation often unseen in the Western world.

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, one of the leading experts on Siberian shamanism within the English-speaking world, agrees that one of the hallmarks of a successful shaman is the way in which these figures embodied both sexes. Balzer points to the traditional Yakut story still told today of a male-bodied shaman, put in charge of a young child, who grew breasts and fed the child himself in the absence of a wet nurse (243). Balzer, like others before her, notes that this intermediary position between physical and spiritual realms is exemplified by the way in which their shamans embody characteristics of either sex; a powerful shaman is often distinguished by their ambiguous gender presentation (254). Their supernatural ability is connected indelibly with the shamanic tendency to non-traditional (by Western standards) forms of gender presentation. Mandelstam quotes anthropologist Bernard Saladin D'Anglure, communicating that among these shamanic communities, it was believed that "an individual who was socialized in such a way as to straddle the gender boundary ought to be able to span all boundaries" (246). Transgression of traditional boundaries was at the heart of transformative power.

When considered against the backdrop of Viking representations of sorcery, particularly Odinic magic, the parallels become clear. Connections were made between the Viking representations of sorcery within literature and the broader phenomenon of shamanism as it exists elsewhere in Eurasia as early as the 19th century, when Norwegian academic Dag Strömbäck, author of the seminal work *Seidhr*, drew the first formal parallels between the sorcerous practices alluded to in the Old Norse texts and the still-extant spiritual practices of the indigenous, non-Germanic Scandinavians to the north, the Sámi. From then on, there has been a growing consensus that Viking-age magic does share certain parallels with broader Eurasian shamanism.

Neil Price in particular has been at the forefront of this movement, recently proposing a theory that the Viking-Sámi relationship was not as fraught as previously believed, arguing instead for a shared cultural zone between the two groups spanning thousands of square miles in central Scandinavia. Price points to the existence of numerous burial sites of people dressed in both the Viking and the Sámi styles within the same locality, suggesting a level of coexistence previously unimagined (*The Viking Way* 196). Price's most recent works have called for a complete reevaluation of Viking studies in light of this and maintain that the religious practices of the ancient Norse peoples represented the western edge of a cultural continuum spanning the entirety of Eurasia. Although his sweeping theory is original, it is not unprecedented, as it coincides with, or is inspired by, recent works urging scholars to reexamine Odin and other Viking-age characters as shamanic emanations.

Key to this understanding of Viking-age magic is the shamanic element of the sexual abnormal, or rather, the non-normative. Considering that “abnormal” presentations of sexuality were a hotly contested one within Viking society, this may seem at odds with Viking-age culture as bearing some kind of continuity with other forms of Eurasian shamanism. Yet Mandelstam, as well as other authors, have observed that shamans within their respective Siberian communities were in no way without their own form of stigma, noting that shamans are often ostracized, even while respected (Mandelstam 243). It is difficult to evaluate exactly historical Viking attitudes towards magic users, but it appears the Vikings had similar attitudes. Magic, specifically a form of sorcery called *seithr*, was seen as the province of women and shamefully unmanly for other men to perform. Why exactly this was the case is unclear, but it likely had to do with the association of *seithr* with transformative magic, particularly shapeshifting.³ The figure of the shaman was a stigmatized one, whose existence outside the boundaries of normativity reflected their powerfully magical strength. This characterization can be applied, by extension, to that of the magic-users, specifically the shapeshifters, of the Viking world.

Sex and Sensibility: Magical Taboo in the Viking World

Despite this deep stigma, portrayals of *seiðmaðr*, or men who practiced *seithr*, have frequented Old Norse literature. Chief among them is Odin, whose masculinity is defamed by Loki, who accuses him of dressing as a witch and practicing witchcraft, likely a reference to the perceived unmanliness of *seithr*. It could also reflect a historical reality, as Viking burial sites have revealed skeletons, when chromosome-tested, proved to have been dressed in the clothes of the opposite sex.

The incompatibility of normative masculinity with that of sorcery has been one long recorded in Old Norse literature. Britt Solli puts it bluntly, saying “the art of *seid* was associated with so much *unmanliness* (in Old Norse *ergi*) that men could not practice it without shame” (195), although it was acceptable for women to do so. *Seid*, or *seithr*, was the most powerful kind of magic referenced in the Old Norse literary corpus, and particularly associated with shapeshifting. The *ergi* that Solli mentions is the term that was used to describe what Price calls “a complex kind of moral horror” (*Children of Ash and Elm* 170), one rife with associations of sexual submissiveness. Solli makes it clear that “the term *ergi* must be understood contextually and not as a synonym for homosexuality” (195), and that sexual deviance as it was understood by the Vikings was tied to conceptions of “sexual impotence or unmanliness” (195). In a culture that hinged upon the honor of the individual, accusations of practicing magic as a man, of being *ergi*, risked social suicide. Ármann Jakobsson connects the state of being *ergi* with the essential functions of sorcery, the crossing of borders. Jakobsson agrees that those frequent accusations leveled at Odin reflect his border crossing as a sorcerer (11). Male magic users occupied a fundamentally transgressive role in Viking society, and by extension, Viking-age literature, because of the way in which they challenged boundaries.

³ Some scholars have suggested that the ritual staff used in the Viking religious ceremonies bore phallic connotations and that engaging with it was considered unmanly. Others have argued that the spiritual possession at the heart of Viking age magic was too reminiscent of sexual passivity for it to be appropriate for men.

This theme extends into one of the most prominent forms of *seithr* as it exists in the Old Norse literary corpus: shapeshifting. Jakobsson acknowledges the connections between the two, writing, “As Strömbäck (1935, 160-190) noted long ago, there is a clear link between *seiðr* and shapeshifting in Old Norse mediaeval [*sic*] texts” (12). Admittedly, the Vikings likely had a more flexible idea of personhood than we do today; Old Norse texts refer to a four-part soul, of which a person’s physical shape was just one. Neil Price writes:

[I]t is appropriate to remember the distinctly porous border between the nature of humans and the nature of animals, manifested in the potentially shifting qualities of the *hamr*, the ‘shape’it is thrilling to consider that the Viking mind went even beyond the boundaries of the human in this respect (*Children of Ash and Elm* 179).

This fact, when compared to the fact of the Vikings’ intense discomfort with those who did transgress these borders, may seem odd. Why create a world that conceptualizes such boundary-hoppers, if only to assign an unshakeable stigma to them, being, “as a rule, regarded as sinister and subhuman” (Jakobsson 12)? As mentioned before, the idea of this fluidity of identity was indelibly tied to sex and gender. Regardless, we see often throughout Viking-age literature the repercussions of those who dabble in *seithr*, particularly men.

Already mentioned is the deity Odin, the fact of his widespread worship being held at odds with his non-normative identity. Less ambiguous, however, is the trickster figure Loki, who is cast within Norse myth as a much less sympathetic character. Loki and his machinations, as they appear in Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose and Poetic Edda*, assist the other gods “as often as they get them into trouble” (25), in the words of author Neil Gaiman. But eventually, Loki’s antics become malevolent, and the other gods chain him deep beneath the earth, where he is said to one day break free, gathering an immense army that will oppose the rest of the gods during the Armageddon-like event, Ragnarok. Loki’s characterization reflects his devious nature, and it is particularly in his capacity as a shapeshifter that this comes to the forefront.

In the Viking world, there were many ways to insult a man’s honor. As noted before, to accuse a man of embodying *ergi* was a serious offense. Ursula Dronke remarks that several ancient Scandinavian laws specifically address this, saying that it is prohibited to slander that a man has “borne children, been used as a woman, or is a mare, bitch (or any other female animal)” (362), and that elsewhere in Iceland, such accusations are legal grounds for a duel. This is confirmed by Neil Price, who refers to the poetry of one eleventh century Þormóðr kolbrúnarskáld Bersason, who recounts how he, upon having it “said that he behaved with men in the manner of a mare with stallions” (*The Viking Way* 174), promptly murdered the offenders. So, when we encounter Loki, who is said by Snorri Sturluson to have seduced another’s horse in the form of a mare, giving birth later to Odin’s famed eight-legged steed Sleipnir, it is clear that we are to understand the trickster as being likewise dishonorable, and perversely so. Although Loki, like Odin, is a frequent shapeshifter, he is distinguished among the other male gods for his role as a mother to a horse. His sexual ambiguity, itself the product of his magical prowess as a shapechanger, is seen as the root of Loki’s perverse nature.

Elsewhere in Old Norse literature, some shapeshifters acquire a slightly more tragic cast. Timothy Bourns, in “Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas,” writes that “human-wolves” are almost always portrayed as “evil-minded and vicious” (646). In the case of the *Völsunga saga*,

two members of the Völsung clan, Sigmund and his son Sinfjötli, don enchanted wolf pelts, *úlfahamir*, and proceed to terrorize the countryside in their transformed wolf shapes, killing with impunity. Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen argues in “The Níðingr and the Wolf” that this is a relatively stereotypical depiction of wolfish creatures within ancient Germanic literature, as the wolf is necessarily at odds with the livelihood of the sedentary human, especially in the case of the farmer or livestock herder (185).⁴ It is even typical for the outlaw to be referred to as wolf, or *vargr*, in Icelandic literature (185). Already disliked, the “human-wolf” Bourns refers to is the symbol of the wolf made even more perverse by its association with sorcerous boundary-crossing. This is seen in the case of Sigmund and Sinfjötli, who, true to form, behave in a savage manner consistent with the characterization of skinchangers. Sigmund, branded as a coward by his son, attacks him: “Sigmundr bítr í barkann framan’ (Sigmundr bit his windpipe)” (Bourns 645). Sinfjötli is spared by a horrified Sigmund, who, realizing the truth of his actions, prays to Odin to reverse what would otherwise be murder. The father-son pair, now appropriately sobered, burn their magical wolf-skins, rejecting the possibility of further inhuman exploits, but even they, notes Bourns, are aware of their irreparably tainted status (646). Although the Völsung family occupies a prominent position in Germanic mythology, even then, their bloodline is forever tarnished by the fact of their wolfishness, accomplished by degenerate magic. While not sexually perverse as in the case of Loki, Sigmund, and Sinfjötli nevertheless are punished for their magical transgressions. Incidentally, it is this magical wolf-human hybrid that features so often in Old Norse literature that is revisited by author George R.R. Martin in his own modern fantasy series. Like their precedents in the real-world literary canon, the skinchangers of Westeros are often perceived as being molded in the same morally suspect cast.

Skinchanging in Westeros

This now brings us to the World of Ice and Fire. Most skinchangers originate from the north of the continent of Westeros, aptly named the North, and the even more northern region adjacent to it, Beyond-the-Wall, as the region is bounded in the south by an immense wall of ice. The North is a constituent region of the larger Seven Kingdoms and despite retaining a distinct identity from the rest of the continent, is generally viewed as more-or-less civilized. Here, in this medieval-inspired land, the existence of magic users like skinchangers is believed to have disappeared from the North, and those occasionally rumored to be one such magic-user are usually a sign of one’s disreputable reputation. Upon realizing his ability as a skinchanger, the character Bran Stark is warned by his companion of the risk of revealing his secret to others.

“Warg. Shapechanger. Beastling. That is what they will call you, if they should ever hear of your wolf dreams.”

The names made him afraid again. “*Who* will call me?”

“Your own folk. In fear. Some will hate you if they know what you are. Some will even try to kill you.”

⁴ Thorvaldsen notes that his depiction of the wolf persists throughout Icelandic literature. While not necessarily remarkable in itself, the wolf loomed large in the ancient Icelandic psyche despite the fact that wolves are not indigenous to the island (185, 186).

Old Nan told scary stories of beastlings and skinchangers sometimes. In the stories they were always evil (*A Clash of Kings* 393).

However, overwhelmingly, the nobility of the North scoff at the suggestion such a person could exist. As the story takes the reader into the lawless wilds Beyond-the-Wall, it is revealed that here is the one place in Westeros in which skinchangers still do exist and are grudgingly respected even as they are feared.

There are several characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* that I believe best represent a Viking's understanding of shapeshifting. Prominent among them are the children in the Stark family. Said to have ruled the North for thousands of years, House Stark is said to have emerged as a powerful noble family sometime in the distant, mythic past, conquering the entirety of the North. At the start of the events of the ongoing book series, the five Stark children and their bastard half-brother Jon Snow come into possession of six direwolf pups. Each of the children forms an unshakeable bond with their direwolf, and over time begins to think of their wolves as extensions of themselves. The reader eventually discovers that each of the Stark children is possessed of unusually vivid dreams, in which they seem to be looking at the real world through the eyes of their direwolves. While only Bran Stark consciously embraces this skill, the other Stark children remain mostly ignorant of their burgeoning ability, dismissing their so-called dreams as merely strange visions.⁵

“Beastlings and Wargs”: Examples of Skinchangers in Westeros

There are perhaps few other characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* that so accurately mirror Old Norse literary influences as Jon Snow, specifically in regard to skinchanging. Like all his half-siblings, his power is manifested in his pet direwolf, which he has a near-symbiotic relationship with. Jon considers his direwolf, named Ghost, to be “a part of him” (*A Dance with Dragons* 147).

In Westeros, a special term is used to refer to skinchangers who project their consciousness into wolves. This term is “warg”, derived by author Martin from the Old Norse *vargr*. In Old Norse literature, the word *vargr* has two meanings. The first is wolf, and the second is outlaw, one whose criminality has condemned them to the outskirts of civilization (Ryan 26). Icelandic law codes from the Middle Ages frequently used this word to refer to criminals, and this association with the wilderness and liminality denoted an association with predation and savagery. In the 12th-century legal work *Gragas*, it states:

He shall be known as a wolf, as widely as the world is inhabited, and be rejected everywhere and driven away throughout all the world (Barraclough 366).

Jon Snow already represents many of the liminal qualities suggested by the term *vargr*. As a bastard of a noble house, he had a relatively wealthy upbringing but is prohibited from inheriting land, titles, or indeed, even his father's surname. When his uncle suggests Jon might find success serving at the Wall, located at the northernmost edge of the Seven Kingdoms, this

⁵ A powerful skinchanger, Arya Stark would be a prime candidate for this exploration of skinchanging within this paper, were it not for the fact that her magical skills are complicated by her burgeoning ability to change faces as a trainee of the Faceless Men, a guild of elite assassins, as an analysis of her character would require its own distinct line of inquiry.

seems an almost perfect solution to the ostracization he faces daily. As Diana Marques argues in her paper “A Haunted Forest,” the wilderness beyond the Wall functions as a “space of alterity” and “a counterpoint to the civilized world” (31), and proximity to that space likewise others those nearest to it. Jon becomes a member of the Night’s Watch while at the Wall, where his stigmatized position in Westerosi society as a bastard becomes less important due to the closeness of this wild space. During a ranging beyond the Wall, Jon infiltrates the army of barbarians known as the wildlings and adapts to many of their strange customs. He does this knowing full well he risks accusations of deserting and fraternizing with the enemy upon his return to Wall, which he is in fact eventually confronted with.

Jon Snow is a *vargr* in both senses of the term. Symbolically, he functions as one because of his apparent abandonment of his vows when he feigns deserting the Night’s Watch for the company of the wildlings. Jon is branded by his enemies within the Night’s Watch as a traitor because of his association with the wild, not least because of his newfound empathy for his former wildling companions. His journey into the liminal space that Beyond-the-Wall represents mirrors the status of the *vargr* in Icelandic law codes: a wild, lawless being who borders on the bestial. Jon is even accused as such by one member of the Night’s Watch, who slanders him as a monster during the order’s election for Lord Commander.

“The beast,” he gasped. “Look! The beast that tore the life from Halfhand. A warg walks among us, brothers. A *WARG!* This...this *creature* is not fit to lead us! This *beastling* is not fit to live!” (*A Storm of Swords* 896).

Except this is not, strictly speaking, entirely a false description. Although Jon may deny it to himself, he is undoubtedly a warg, which is evidenced by his vivid dreams of hunting in the body of his direwolf Ghost. It is in the second sense of the Old Norse term *vargr* that Jon also finds an apt descriptor as well, as the sometimes-unintentional projection of his consciousness into Ghost corresponds closely to the practices of the *eigi einhamir*, the specific kind of skinchangers described in Viking-age literature. Jon himself grudgingly acknowledges that “The wolf dreams had been growing stronger, and he found himself remembering them even when awake” (*A Dance with Dragons* 48). There are even several instances of Jon slipping into Ghost’s skin while conscious.

There is another more unambiguous example of Jon’s skinchanging abilities when he, apparently separated from Ghost, deduces his proximity by a sudden, overwhelming desire for raw meat, signaling their unconscious psychic link. As he contemplates accepting an offer to abandon his position at the Night’s Watch for the lordship of the castle he was raised in as a boy, his metaphorical hunger shifts into a more literal one.

He wanted it, Jon knew then. He wanted it as much as he had ever wanted anything. *I have always wanted it*, he thought, guiltily. *May the gods forgive me*. It was a hunger inside him, sharp as a dragonglass blade. A hunger...he could feel it. It was food he needed, prey, a red deer that stank of fear or a great elk proud and defiant. He needed to kill and fill his belly with fresh meat and hot dark blood. His mouth began to water with the thought. (*A Storm of Swords* 894)

Jon is a warg, despite what he may tell himself. The wildings Beyond-the-Wall also refer to him as one, deducing it from his uncommon affinity with his direwolf; “The lad’s a warg, or close enough” (*A Storm of Swords* 76), says one of the wildling leaders.

In short, Jon Snow represents the kind of characterization of skinchangers and *vargrs* that are prevalent in the Old Norse literary tradition. Occupying a peripheral space in Westerosi society as a bastard, branded an outlaw, and existing beyond the pale of civilization, he epitomizes some of the more mundane traits associated with those termed *vargr*. But he also embodies the primary meaning of the term in a much more literal sense as a wolf-bonded skinchanger.

Varamyr, on the other hand, represents exactly the kind of skinchanger that Vikings would have found so morally repulsive. A physically unimposing man, Varamyr Sixskins is a powerful skinchanger generally disliked by other wildlings, and perhaps rightly so. Varamyr was once a kind of local lord, one that had a “dozen villages that did him homage in bread and salt and cider” (*A Dance with Dragons* 9), who would demand sexual favors from his female peasants. He did this not through the strength of his own arms, but rather through intimidation and coercion using his skinchanging abilities, and Varamyr admits that he would send his shadow cat to stalk any woman he desired until she “would follow meekly to his bed” (9). The rule of his small grouping of villages was not a universally popular one, as Varamyr recounts that “From time to time, some village hero would come with spear in hand to slay the beastling and save a sister or a lover or a daughter” (9), whom he invariably kills using his small pack of animals. He recounts that his snow bear once bore the responsibility of “ripping apart four men” (9), and he, possessing the body of his wolf pack’s leader, attacks a group of refugees, killing and feeding on a woman and her baby. Although wilding women Beyond-the-Wall have more say in their marriage prospects than their counterparts south of the Wall, sanctioned by their culture’s mores to violently reject any suitor deemed unworthy, Varamyr circumvents these standards because of his adherence to his own sense of morality and his possession of a magical means to carry them out.⁶ While another lover might physically resist him herself or be avenged by a male relative, Varamyr’s ability to control a pack of dangerous wild animals via magic puts him at an unnatural advantage.

This is not to say, however, that all skinchangers are without their own sense of moral code. Varamyr’s inner monologue in his one-off point-of-view chapter reveals that he once served an informal apprenticeship to another skinchanger, Haggon, whom he eventually murdered.⁷ Haggon, Varamyr notes somewhat sardonically, was particularly fond of one word: “abomination,” which he frequently used to describe what he considered taboo acts for skinchangers, saying “to eat of human meat was abomination, to mate with wolf as wolf was

⁶ Women north of the Wall, despite living a more hard-scrabble existence, enjoy considerably more autonomy than their southern counterparts. Wilding women choose their own husbands and as a rule, are free to divorce and even use herbal tea as a rudimentary form of birth control.

⁷ Varamyr assumes Haggon’s identity in more ways than one. He seizes Haggon’s long hall and possessions after murdering him, but years later, when attempting to remain incognito while grievously wounded, takes his old master’s name for his own. This is an irony that does not escape Varamyr.

abomination, and to seize the body of another man was the worst abomination of all" (*A Dance with Dragons* 5). Varamyr pays little heed to these declarations, admits to doing the first two, and is on the verge of doing the lattermost in his point-of-view chapter.

The Vikings would have found themselves in agreement with Haggon, and on one point especially. For them, all magic and skinchanging bore the mark of the perverse, but there were some acts that elevated their moral outrage and horror even further. Specifically, man acts as either a passive sexual partner or as a mother birthing offspring. As was outlined in this paper's previous section, *Sex and Sensibility: Magical Taboo in the Viking World* (6), *seithr* magic was considered an innately erotic practice, one that for men, or male-bodied people, was worthy of nothing short than social ostracization.

Varamyr conforms neatly to this Viking conceptualization of sexual deviance as a male magic user. The skinchanger recalls to himself that, "Haggon would have called it abomination, but Varamyr often slipped since her skin as she was being mounted by One Eye" (*A Dance with Dragons* 12), referring to his female and male wolves, respectively. Not only does he engage in sexual passivity, he does so while in the body of his wolf, a kind of transgression the Vikings would have abhorred especially, for his role in the sex act, but also compounded by his crossing of bodily boundaries while doing so. Varamyr also mentions that he has died "nine times before" (7), a statement which, in and of itself, is a singularly unnatural thing. One of these times was when he was in the body of a female wolf, when he, "once in a wash of blood... brought forth a stillborn cub" (7), whereupon his consciousness returned to his human body. To accuse a man of having given birth in Viking society was perhaps one of the gravest insults a person could level at another (Dronke 362). Therefore, it is in a number of ways that Varamyr is made out to be the definitive example of how Vikings would have categorized skinchangers.

In terms of resemblance Odin, which is to say, the quintessential shaman of Old Norse literature, there is perhaps no other character within the story of *A Song of Ice and Fire* that more closely adheres to it than that of the three-eyed crow. Superficially, this master skinchanger, or greenseer, bears a marked resemblance to Odin. Like the Viking deity, the three-eyed crow shares an affinity with far-sightedness, prophecy, and sorcery. Born Brynden Rivers, he is now an emaciated figure with a symbiotic relationship to a weirwood tree that sustains him in the wilderness Beyond-the-Wall, able to project his own consciousness into a vast flock of crows that circles the tree. Furthermore, in the dreams of Bran Stark, who he calls to him to serve as his apprentice, he appears as a three-eyed crow. All of this mirrors Odin's often-used kenning, Raven-god, referring to both his two ravens which attend him in his hall, bringing him news around the world, and his position as a lord of the gallows and battle. He even is blind in one eye, something Odin was famous for; in his quest for knowledge, Odin sacrificed an eye. Prophecy, ravens, and shapeshifting; all of these things Odin was well-known for. But Brynden's true literary significance lies not with his perhaps more than coincidental resemblance to Odin, but rather the ways in which he exemplifies thoroughly non-normative approaches to existence by magical means.

Like all skinchangers, the very terms of the three-eyed crow's existence challenge conventional ideas about space and bodily boundaries. When Bran Stark first lays eyes upon his future tutor, he is greeted with an unsightly scene, one that signals the blatant disregard for the

normative body that is fundamental to the magic of skinchanging. Martin describes Brynden, writing:

His body was so skeletal and his clothes so rotted that at first Bran took him for another corpse, a dead man propped up so long that the roots had grown over him, under him, and through him. What skin the corpse lord showed was white...Roots coiled around his legs like wooden serpents. One burrowed through his breeches into the desiccated flesh of his thigh, to emerge again from his shoulder. A spray of dark red leaves sprouted from his skull, and grey mushrooms spotted his brow. A little skin remained, stretched across his face, tight and hard as white leather, but even that was fraying, and here and there the brown and yellow bone beneath was poking through (*A Dance with Dragons* 178).

Although he is a skinchanger himself, Bran, still a young boy, is frightened of the image of Brynden, even after spending some time in his company, and is especially worried by the prospect of one day coming to resemble the greenseer.

But it has to be said that this particular greenseer serves as the definitive example when it comes to moving beyond normative conceptions of being, not merely his subverting bodily boundaries. This is due to the three-eyed crow's ability to use the mystical weirwood tree that has so intertwined his corporeal self to help amplify his skill. As a greenseer, Brynden engages with what T.A. Leederman calls in his essay "A Thousand Westerosi Plateaus: Wargs, Wolves, and Ways of Being" a "troubled temporality" (199). This is because, as Brynden explains to Bran, "Once you have mastered your gifts, you may look where you will and see what the trees have seen, be it yesterday or last year or a thousand ages past" (*A Dance of Dragons* 458). The three-eyed crow also hints that this skill represents just the beginning of Bran's future as an atemporal being, saying that "in time you will see well beyond the trees themselves" (459). This fact is signaled in the story by the place where Bran undertakes his training, a vast network of caves below the surface of the earth Beyond-the-Wall. Here, the burgeoning greenseer is allowed to redefine temporal boundaries in a fittingly atemporal space. We are given a sense of this in Bran's point-of-view chapter:

The days marched past, one after the other, each shorter than the one before. The nights grew longer. No sunlight ever reached the caves beneath the hill. No moonlight ever touched these stony halls. Even the stars were strangers here. Those things belonged to the world above, where time ran in its iron circles, day to night to day to night to day (*A Dance with Dragons* 457).

In addition to this, it is made clear to Bran that as a greenseer, he will eventually become part of a kind of collective consciousness upon the death of his physical body, where he will join the other greenseers, referred to here as the "singers of the forest," before him. Bran's companion, Jojen Reed, says:

"When they died, they went into the wood, into leaf and limb and root, and the trees remembered...Maesters will tell you that the weirwoods are sacred to the old gods. The singers believe they are the old gods. When singers die they become part of that godhood" (*A Dance with Dragons* 452).

Although this particular kind of skinchanging is unique to the mind of Martin, and not attested to within Old Norse literature, the theme of redefining boundaries, which is at the heart of *seithr* magic, corresponds closely to the Viking idea of sorcery.

Conclusion: Beyond-the-Wall and Beyond the Pale

In conclusion, it is possible to locate the literary precedents to *A Song of Ice and Fire's* magical shapeshifters and skinchangers to the Viking-age understanding of such as it is represented in Old Norse literature, which in turn can be understood as a reflection of a larger shamanic, Eurasian cultural continuum. It is not unique for the outlier to be ostracized; it's a trend that history has seen repeated time and time again. A moral judgment is often assigned to the people who fall outside the demarcated norm, as is the case with skinchangers in Old Norse literature. In this context, magical transformation was strongly associated with non-normative existence, often in regard to gender or sex. An analysis of this mindset, as it existed among the Vikings, enables the reader of Martin's fantasy series to likewise approach Westerosi society with a similar appreciation. Armed with this knowledge, one can more accurately grasp the ways each individual skinchanger is discriminated against within their own society, which by extension deepens an appreciation of the character in question. Jon Snow is the supreme outsider; a bastard living on the periphery of Westerosi society between wilderness and civilization, his characterization as the intermediary 'other' is strengthened by a literary appreciation of the skinchanger's role.

A Song of Ice and Fire's author, George R.R. Martin, may or may not have had this specific understanding in mind when he set out to write his sprawling epic, but in any case, it is remarkable to what extent he has managed to replicate it within his own work's depiction of skinchangers. Martin, in his self-professed perennial fascination with the perpetual outsider, has found a perfect playground in the figure of the skinchanger; this type of shapeshifter challenges all presumptions about normative existence, whether it be conventional physical barriers or the separation of differently-sexed bodies. In doing so, Martin's own depiction of the skinchanger, in keeping with the spirit of transgression that defines these characters, moves beyond even the boundaries as portrayed in Old Norse literature; the greenseer the three-eyed crow, or Brynden "Bloodraven" Rivers, in particular, defies more than just the confines of the physical, but time itself.

Essentially, the skinchanger is ostracized for precisely the same reason they can be seen as worthy of emulation. This figure is important for more than simply transgression for transgression's sake. The skinchanger exists to challenge the conventional order of things, to exist outside of normative boundaries, and to serve as a potent symbol for alternate ways of being.

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