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Survivor motifs and the flavour of myth: Marvel's medievalist Thor

Thesis presented by

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for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University College Cork

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2025

Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

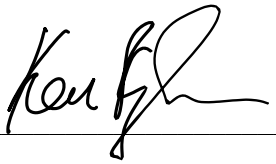
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A note on texts, translations, and usage

For reasons of consistency and clarity, I refer throughout to the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*, while recognising that these terms reflect modern editorial practice rather than medieval Icelandic usage. References to the *Poetic Edda* follow the Íslenzk fornrit edition: Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (eds), *Eddukvæði*, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014), while English translations are from Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, revised edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). References to the *Prose Edda* are to Anthony Faulkes (ed.) *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2nd edn, 2005) and Anthony Faulkes (ed.) *Edda: Skáldskaparmál, 1: Introduction, Text and Notes* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998). Translations are from Anthony Faulkes, *Edda* (London: Everyman, 1987).

Old Norse names are given in normalised Old Norse orthography when referring to medieval sources (e.g. Óðinn), but when discussed in the context of Marvel Comics, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or popular retellings, I use the forms employed in those works (e.g. Odin). For clarity, I do not abbreviate the titles of Eddic poems (e.g. *Þrymskviða*, *Hárbarðsljóð*). By contrast, the very frequently cited books of the *Prose Edda* are abbreviated in references: *Gylfaginning* (*Gylf.*) and *Skáldskaparmál* (*Skáldsk.*). MCU film titles are generally cited in full (e.g. *Thor: The Dark World*), but are shortened in context where no ambiguity arises (e.g. *The Dark World*). References to Marvel Cinematic Universe films and television series are to the versions available on the Disney+ streaming platform as of 2025.

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Abstract

The research here presented examines the survival and transformation of Old Norse myth within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), exploring how a twenty-first-century film and TV franchise of unprecedented scale and success continues to evoke what J. R. R. Tolkien called the 'flavour of myth', despite the radical changes of medium, tone, and cultural context. Through close analysis of the *Thor* films (2011–22), the *Avengers* ensemble films (2012–2019), and the *Loki* television series (2021–23), and comparison with Old Norse sources, nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellings, and Marvel comics, the study situates the MCU within the reception history of Old Norse myth in English-language culture.

To trace chains of transmission, it adopts a heuristic derived from Actor-Network Theory (ANT), mapping the textual, cultural, industry, and creative forces that together shape adaptation. This framework enables the identification of 'survivor motifs' – echoes of the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, captured in thirteenth-century Iceland, that re-emerge in the MCU despite being downplayed or absent from popular receptions, Marvel Comics, and even some scholarly interpretations. Where the persistence or resurfacing of such motifs proves difficult to account for within the ANT model, analysis suggests that these recurrent motifs endure because they are dramatically effective. If so, Tolkien's elusive 'flavour of myth' may, in the case of the Old Norse material, be understood as the faint but persistent trace of performance itself – a quality that links the myths that have survived in written form not only to their twenty-first-century revivals in the MCU, but also to performative and perhaps even dramatic origins. Alongside this, the thesis considers whether that the MCU's freedom from the constraints of direct retelling – and its commitment to long-form, open-ended storytelling – has created conditions in which such motifs can

resurface without the pressure to reproduce specific plots. Rather than preserving the myths, this mode of adaptation allows aspects of character, tone, and world-building that were often muted or reshaped in post-medieval transmission to re-emerge in new configurations. In its final chapters, the thesis considers what these findings may reveal about the myths in their earlier forms: how they functioned in performance, why certain gestures and themes proved so resilient, and whether this perspective might invite a reassessment of long-held assumptions about the Eddic poems and stories.

Introduction: The flavour of myth

> It is an interesting question: what is this flavour, this atmosphere, this virtue that such rooted works have, and which compensates for the inevitable flaws and imperfect adjustments that must appear, when plots, motives, symbols, are rehandled and pressed into the service of the changed minds of a later time, used for the expression of ideas quite different from those which produced them.
>
> – J. R. R. Tolkien, Lecture on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*[1]

> 'What I try to show,' said Persse, 'is that we can't avoid reading Shakespeare through the lens of T. S. Eliot's poetry. I mean, who can read *Hamlet* today without thinking of "Prufrock"? Who can hear the speeches of Ferdinand in *The Tempest* without being reminded of the "Fire Sermon" section of *The Waste Land*?'
>
> – David Lodge, *Small World* [2]

J. R. R. Tolkien posed his question about the power of deeply ingrained storytelling to charge adaptations with vividness and tension in reference to the fourteenth-century English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its sources, but he might equally have had in mind Old Norse myth. The Eddic poems and stories that survive have perhaps even deeper roots than *Gawain*, and have certainly proved to be malleable to later minds, not least Tolkien's own. The present study sets out to test the resilience of the tendency Tolkien observed, but chose not to define, by staging a

[1] For the text of this lecture, see *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 72–108 (p. 72).
[2] David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 52.

contemporary stress-test though a popular adaptation that is far removed from its medieval antecedents in every meaningful way. The case study in question is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a vast web of films, TV series, and related content that has become a cultural phenomenon of the 21st century – not merely the most successful movie franchise of all time, but an ongoing act of contemporary myth-making that continually re-performs and re-negotiates the stories it adapts, revealing how ancient and more modern narrative forms can co-exist within popular cinema. The MCU has repeatedly drawn on Norse myth for some of its most compelling narratives but has rarely felt the need to retell the stories familiar from the twin snapshots that were captured on vellum in thirteenth-century Iceland, editions of which are now customarily referred to as the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*. The MCU's radical re-imaginings of Þórr, Óðinn, and Loki offer a way to test whether the vitality of myth that Tolkien described can persist in such radically altered form – and, if it does, what that endurance might reveal both about the mechanics of modern adaptation, and about the Eddic stories that, however mediated and obscured, still lie in evidence behind them.

The MCU began life in 2008 as a risky venture from Marvel Studios, then an independent player within the Hollywood system.[3] The series quickly established an outstanding track record at the box office, and was acquired by The Walt Disney Company for $4 billion at the end of 2009.[4] The MCU has since grown to become one of the most valuable holdings in Disney's dizzyingly rich collection of IP,[5] while

[3] Joanna Robinson, Dave Gonzales, and Gavin Edwards, *MCU: The Reign of Marvel Studios* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2023), pp. 36–39.
[4] Brooks Barnes, 'Disney Swoops Into Action, Buying Marvel for $4 Billion', *New York Times*, 31 August 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/business/media/01disney.html> [accessed 22 November 2025].
[5] Disney's intellectual property portfolio includes some of the most globally recognisable creative assets, among them *Star Wars*, Indiana Jones, Pixar's animated films, and classic animations such as *The Lion King*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Snow White*.

wielding significant cultural influence. At the peak of its popularity in mid-2019, the MCU shattered box office records, as *Avengers: Endgame* became the first movie to clear $1 billion in receipts on its opening weekend,[6] and audience-reaction videos to the 'Portals' entrance scene and Captain America lifting Thor's hammer went viral.[7] At the same time, Marvel became a lightning rod for anxiety about cinema's future, with Martin Scorsese declaring that the films were not cinema, and Francis Ford Coppola calling them despicable,[8] even as film critics provided positive reviews and audiences flocked to see them.[9]

Despite this rare combination of box office success and critical approval (famous directorial voices notwithstanding) the MCU has attracted little attention from scholars of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and its post-medieval reception – that is, its later reinterpretation and reuse in new cultural contexts. The lack of engagement is, on one level, understandable. At first sight, the MCU's use of the myths – principally in *Thor* (2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022), as well as *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019),

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[6] Guinness World Records, 'Highest Box-Office Film Gross, Opening Weekend (Worldwide)', <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/386028-highest-box-office-film-gross-opening-weekend-worldwide> [accessed 3 December 2025].

[7] See, for example, Susana Polo, 'These Avengers: Endgame Audience Reactions Will Sustain Us in Theater-less Times', *Polygon*, 7 April 2020 <https://www.polygon.com/2020/4/7/21212000/watch-avengers-endgame-live-audience-reactions-captain-america-thor-hammer-iron-man/> [accessed 15 November 2025]; Josh Wilding, 'Avengers: Endgame Star Chris Evans Reflects on Getting "Emotional" Seeing Audience's Reaction to Mjolnir Scene', *ComicBookMovie.com*, 19 January 2021 <https://comicbookmovie.com/avengers/avengers-endgame/avengers-endgame-star-chris-evans-reflects-on-getting-emotional-seeing-audiences-reaction-to-mjolnir-scene-a181765> [accessed 15 November 2025].

[8] Martin Scorsese, quoted in Catherine Shoard, 'Martin Scorsese Says Marvel Movies Are "Not Cinema"', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/04/martin-scorsese-says-marvel-movies-are-not-cinema> [accessed 15 November 2025]; Francis Ford Coppola, quoted in Catherine Shoard, 'Francis Ford Coppola: Scorsese Was Being Kind – Marvel Movies Are Despicable', *The Guardian*, 21 October 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/21/francis-ford-coppola-scorsese-was-being-kind-marvel-movies-are-despicable> [accessed 15 November 2025].

[9] The two final *Avengers* films in the *Infinity Saga*, both featuring Thor among its heroes, made a total of $4.8 billion at the box office. See Appendix 1.

and in the streaming TV series *Loki* (2021–23)[10] – may appear to be so far removed from the Eddic sources that there is little left for even the most open-minded of medievalists to get to grips with. Certainly, anyone expecting to see familiar scenes – such as Þórr testing his manliness among the illusions conjured by Útgarða-Loki, dressing as a bride to retrieve his stolen hammer, or battling the Miðgarðsormr – will have been disappointed.[11] Fans of Marvel Comics, on the other hand, will have been well primed. Marvel's version of Thor debuted as a superhero in issue #83 of *Journey Into Mystery* (August 1962),[12] conjured into existence by the foundational figures of Marvel's Editor-in-Chief Stan Lee and his artist collaborator Jack Kirby.[13] The red-caped, blond-haired god of thunder has been defending humanity in the Marvel world ever since – or at least, defending the interests and values of humanity as filtered through the metanarratives of post-World War II America.[14]

But for all the changes introduced by Marvel – including the fantastical veneer first provided by Kirby's artistry, and updated for screens; the cod-Shakespearean dialogue that Lee loved to use and which is echoed at times in the early films; and the general lack of interest in actually *retelling* the Eddic stories –

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[10] *Thor*, dir. Kenneth Branagh (Marvel Studios, distributed by Paramount Pictures, 2011); *Thor: The Dark World*, dir. Alan Taylor (Marvel Studios, 2013); *Thor: Ragnarok*, dir. Taika Waititi (Marvel Studios, 2017); *Thor: Love and Thunder*, dir. Taika Waititi (Marvel Studios, 2022); *The Avengers*, dir. Joss Whedon (Marvel Studios, 2012); *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, dir. Joss Whedon (Marvel Studios, 2015); *Avengers: Infinity War*, dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (Marvel Studios, 2018); *Avengers: Endgame*, dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (Marvel Studios, 2019); *Loki*, created by Michael Waldron, 2 seasons (Marvel Studios, Disney+, 2021–23).

[11] In fact, if early plans had come to fruition, a version of one of Þórr's most famous encounters would have hit the screen. An early draft of the screenplay for *Avengers: Infinity War* included a sequence in which Thor would battle the Midgard Serpent in order to obtain a new weapon. See Eleni Roussos, *Avengers: Endgame: The Art of the Movie* (New York: Marvel, 2019), p. 327.

[12] References to comic book issues are to the cover dates. Actual release dates were usually between one and two months earlier than the date printed on the cover.

[13] The question of how credit should be apportioned between Stan Lee and Jack Kirby remains contested. Mark Evanier summarises the collaborative process in *Kirby: King of Comics*, rev. edn (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017), pp. 84–93. Stan Lee reflects on the origins of Thor in Stan Lee, *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), pp. 140–42.

[14] Robert Genter is among scholars to have argued that Marvel's characters were a direct reflection of Cold War culture. See Robert Genter, '"With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility": Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 40.5 (2007), pp. 917–37.

the Tolkienian flavour of myth still, somehow, pervades. It is there not so much in the sort of authenticity markers that have come to characterise popular engagements with medieval themes (often shaped as much by a vague medieval *imaginary* as by any specific literary, historical, or material source)[15] but, more interestingly, and suggestively, in the cosmology, characterisation, and narrative themes that remain rooted in the myths, and acquire added depth and resonance through them.

The research presented here seeks to identify what I have termed 'survivor motifs' of this kind, and to trace their provenance, situating the MCU within the broader reception history of Norse myth. Yet it aims to do more than catalogue what remains from a long and complex process of adaptation. Source-tracing, in this sense, provides a foundation but it is not the end goal. To locate where a detail comes from is to identify the bones of the ox, to use the fallacy invoked by George Webbe Dasent and later Tolkien.[16] To understand what that detail does, and why it endures, is an attempt to restore some flesh to the bone. We might, for example, note that Eitri, the character who forges Thor's new weapon in *Avengers: Infinity War*, clearly echoes the dwarf who, with his brother Brokkr, forges Mjǫllnir, Gullinbursti, and Draupnir, three of the six treasures of the gods (*Skáldsk.* ch. 35). We could go further and note that the character first appears in the Marvel world in *Thor Annual* #5, September 1976, in a story written by Steve Englehart and pencilled by John

[15] I am grateful to Gabriele Knappe for introducing me to the term 'authenticity markers', used in her paper 'Reimagining medieval vernaculars on the screen', delivered at the symposium The Middle Ages in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Relevance, Reimagination, Inspiration, Stavanger, 2024. I use the term 'imaginary' in the Lacanian sense of a system of images, fantasies, and identifications through which a culture constructs its understanding, following Nickolas Haydock in *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), pp. 5–35.
[16] George Webbe Dasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse*, new edn (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1903), p. xviii; J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-stories', in *The Monsters and the Critics*, pp. 109–61 (p. 120). For a discussion of source criticism, see Tom Shippey, 'Introduction: Why Source Criticism?', in *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays*, ed. by Jason Fisher (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), pp. 7–16.

Buscema.[17] We do not know which source Englehart used in researching the myths,[18] but even if the chain were perfectly verifiable, it would tell us nothing at all about the effect Eitri's reappearance in a cosmic forge in the realm of Nidavellir has in setting up one of the main themes of the MCU as a whole (something I shall explore in Chapter Four). Following E. L. Risden,[19] I therefore treat source criticism as a point of departure rather than a destination: an early stage in examining how later works refunction inherited material within new contexts. Stated as plainly as I can, the chief goal of this thesis, then, is to position the MCU *usefully* within that reception history of the material, by asking why certain echoes persist, how they are remade by the cultural and creative forces at play, and what such survivals may reveal about the myths in their pre-modern forms.[20]

Theoretical lens and methodological approach

In tackling these questions, I test a specific methodology for tracing the process of adaptation – one with increasing applicability to the global film and television industry's approach to storytelling. The recycling of Norse mythology is illustrative of a wider trend of the regular retelling of old stories in new forms. In the current era of franchise filmmaking, studios regularly turn to characters and settings that are tried and tested – familiar enough to lower the barrier to entry for audiences across generations, and pliable enough to create content that will appeal widely.[21] And this

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[17] Steve Englehart and John Buscema, *Thor Annual no. 5* (Marvel Comics, 1976), repr. in Len Wein and John Buscema, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 15 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).
[18] Steve Englehart, email to author (private correspondence), November 2025, stating that he could not recall which source he had used.
[19] Risden, 'Source Criticism', in *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources,* pp. 7–16.
[20] An overview of Marvel's use of the myths in the MCU, incorporating some basic elements of the research presented in this thesis, appears in Kevin Fylan, 'Marvel's Medieval Thor', *Disney and Popular Culture: A Celebration of 100 Years of Disney*, edited by Amanda Rutherford and Sarah Baker (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland/Palgrave Macmillan, 2026), pp. 47–56.
[21] A stark indication of the attraction of existing IP to major studios is that the top fifteen worldwide box-office films of 2024 were all sequels, prequels, or spin-offs, without a single original property.

recycling of mythologies is not a phenomenon unique to western culture. In 2025, *Ne Zha 2* (dir. Jiaozi), an animated take on late-Imperial Chinese myths from the Nezha cycle, mediated by a 16th century fantasy work, become the fifth highest grossing film of all time, with box office receipts in excess of $2.2 billion.[22] In tackling a topic that I hope, then, will have wider application, I begin with a rhizomatic understanding of adaptation, supplemented by a methodological approach drawn from Actor–Network Theory (ANT). My use of the rhizome follows Douglas Lanier's application of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's model to Shakespearean adaptation.[23] The rhizomatic view shifts attention away from an 'arboreal' model of influence that traces works back to a single root, and decentres any notional 'original' in order to emphasise the continuing evolution of texts. Given that the myths in their Eddic versions cannot reasonably be described as 'original', a rhizomatic model has seemed to me to be a legitimate and productive way of approaching their adaptation. Viewed as elements of the rhizome, instead of existing as layers that touch only their immediate predecessors and successors, adaptations of the myths can be seen as providing multiple points of connection with one another – just as the Marvel output makes use of material from various stages of their evolution, and has in turn influenced later adaptations in multiple, proliferating ways.

Thomas Buckley, 'Hollywood's Sequel-Led Comeback Projected to Extend into 2025', Bloomberg, 3 January 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-01-03/hollywood-s-sequel-led-comeback-projected-to-extend-into-2025?srnd=undefined&sref=W6GJF3MS> [accessed 18 November 2025].

[22] For a discussion of the *Ne Zha* films and their reworking of the 16th-century novel *Investiture of the Gods*, see Yanyan Hong, 'Ne Zha 2: the ancient philosophies behind China's record-breaking new animated film', *The Conversation*, 18 February 2025, <https://theconversation.com/ne-zha-2-the-ancient-philosophies-behind-chinas-record-breaking-new-animated-film-249850> [accessed 24 December 2025]. For *Ne Zha 2*'s success, see Box Office Mojo, 'Worldwide Top Lifetime Grosses', <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/ww_top_lifetime_gross/> [accessed 3 December 2025].

[23] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Introduction: Rhizome', in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 3–25; Douglas Lanier, 'Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value', in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, ed. by Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 21–40.

In this way, it has been possible to position the MCU not so much along a cultural line of descent, to adopt a phrase that Heather O'Donoghue uses, itself adapted from Northrop Frye,[24] but as part of a dynamic ecosystem that expands from multiple source points, in multiple directions. This shift in perspective is significant, as under an arboreal, hierarchy-of-descent view, each step further from the medieval texts risks being treated as a derivation of diminishing interest. A rhizomatic lens instead places adaptations alongside one another, as co-existing nodes that in turn generate new connections without any loss in authority.

In analysing the *process* that has brought the myths to life within the MCU, I adopt a framework loosely based on an approach from ANT – originally developed in sociology to examine how social and cultural structures emerge from networks of interacting human and non-human actants. Rita Felski has argued for the applicability of ANT to literary criticism by emphasising the dense web of attachments that bring artworks into being and sustain their circulation.

> Works of art, by default, are linked to other texts, objects, people, and institutions in relations of dependency, involvement, and interaction. They are enlisted, entangled, engaged, embattled, embroiled, and embedded.[25]

These connections and dependencies become even more entangled when there is no straightforward transposition of one text into another, or from one medium into another. This is especially true of the MCU, where each individual film or series sits within, and subordinate to, an overarching narrative that has grown to resemble a mythology in its own right. Considering adaptations of Norse myth as nodes within

[24] Heather O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths*, 2nd edn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2024), p. 133.
[25] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 14.

the rhizome, and using ANT as a heuristic to track some of the many influences involved, has helped conceptualise a process of adaptation that has taken Þórr from the *Eddas* to the MCU, via something close to a thousand appearances in comic book form and a dynamic presence in popular culture, as a collection of forces that act sometimes in co-operation, sometimes in opposition, but rarely in a layered or hierarchical way.

This approach has also proved useful in its practical application. By grouping these forces into loose categories, and examining their influence on the adaptation process, it has been possible to examine plausible pathways for survivor motifs detectable within the MCU. Crucially, it has also helped to uncover cases where details reappear for reasons that are much more difficult to explain. When we find a detail that survives, or reappears, where significant agency from key elements of the network is missing, a natural response might be to ascribe these resurfacings to the tendency Tolkien observed, of myth's elusive power to persevere even in the face of radical changes by later minds. The question I have additionally tried to address is whether the particular qualities of these resurfaced details could help shine a light on what Tolkien's elusive flavour of myth may actually represent.

Here, I turn to the second of this introduction's two epigraphs, from David Lodge – another professor of English who, like Tolkien, found a wider audience for his work as a writer of fiction drawing on elements of his own research. Using the character of Persse McGarrigle, an academic ingenu in the novel *Small World*, Lodge introduces the idea that literary influences have the power to operate retrospectively. Shrugging off the scepticism of one of the assembled academics, McGarrigle suggests that later works (in this case the poetry of T. S. Eliot) can be seen to alter the way we read earlier material (here, the plays of Shakespeare). Lodge was almost

certainly inspired by something Eliot wrote himself. In his 1919 essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot argued that the creation of any new work of art has the power to affect works that preceded it:

> The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.[26]

This, it seems to me, is one of the key virtues of the study of reception – that it does not just show us how older works have been repurposed, but may also offer clues to how these stories were transmitted and received in earlier versions. The current research tests the hypothesis that this is true even in the case of the MCU, where the later work is not consciously engaged in an exchange with its medieval sources.

An important qualification concerns the relative lack of sustained analysis of female figures in this study. This reflects a convergence of limitations in both the medieval sources and their modern adaptation. Within the Eddic corpus itself, only Óðinn, Þórr, and Loki recur across a wide range of mythic episodes and narrative contexts. Goddesses such as Frigg and Sif appear more intermittently, making it

[26] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 15.

difficult to trace comparable patterns of survival and transformation across time and media. More decisive, however, is the additional constraint supplied by the MCU itself. Although several female figures are introduced, their roles are unevenly maintained, or much less clearly connected to their mythic counterparts. This weakness is especially apparent in the early *Thor* films, reaching an unfortunate nadir in *Thor: The Dark World*, when Thor explains the 'convergence' to Jane Foster – by this point established as one of the world's foremost astrophysicists – and she responds to the revelation of this astonishing physical phenomenon not with professional curiosity, scepticism, or even simple wonder, but with the remark, 'I like the way you explain things.'

Turning to figures with roots in Norse myth, Frigga appears only briefly in *Thor*, with a screen time of around two minutes, and is removed early in its sequel, before returning for a single scene on an alternate timeline in *Avengers: Endgame*. Sif is detached almost entirely from her Eddic predecessor and retained primarily as a name, with an invented role, inherited from Marvel Comics, as one of Thor's fellow warriors. Valkyrie, who features in *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Thor: Love and Thunder*, and is briefly shown in the climactic battle in *Avengers: Endgame*, is presented as a composite figure, drawing on the image of the *valkyrja* as a culturally recognisable type. Valkyrie may also be a remnant of the comic books, in the form of Brunnhilde, who was introduced in issue #133 of *The Mighty Thor* in 1966. However, the version that has ended up on screen shares few similarities with the figure who appears in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Vǫlsunga saga*, and across a number of the heroic poems in the *Poetic Edda*. In the MCU she is not even referred to by name, though fans assume she is the same character. Hela, despite inheriting a version of the name of Hel from Norse myth and bearing the title 'Goddess of Death'

in *Thor: Ragnarok*, likewise operates less as a survivor of the *Eddas* than as an original antagonist.

Valkyrie and Hela are, in many respects, among the most striking characters in the MCU, and both clearly participate in the modern reimagining of Norse myth. The fact that they are not given dedicated sections in the central analysis should not be taken as a judgement on their interest or importance, but as a reflection of the more specific focus here on survivor motifs. Where Frigga, Valkyrie and Hela – and likewise Heimdall, another character from Norse myth relatively under-used in the series – intersect with the motifs under consideration, they are discussed at the relevant points in the thesis, which is structured as follows. Chapter Two considers the general cosmology and world-building; Chapter Three focuses on the figures of Thor, Loki, and Odin, whose characterisations are much more sustained across the series; and Chapter Four examines fragments of plot and thematic motifs with medieval provenance. Chapter Five turns to a single survivor motif – the sexually charged mockery of Thor – that appears to resist explanation within the ANT-inspired framework, before briefly suggesting further lines of enquiry concerning other motifs. A Coda then reflects on a single example of an MCU technique that may suggest a radically different way of reading the Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð* [‘Harbard’s Song’]. Before turning to these analyses, however, it is necessary to establish the conceptual and methodological framework within which the MCU is approached in this study. The remainder of this opening chapter therefore situates the project within reception studies, surveys existing scholarship on Norse myth in modern media, and clarifies the key terms and methodologies that underpin the discussion that follows.

An unstated barrier to entry

In a monograph published a few weeks after the release of *Thor* in 2011 brought Norse mythology into the MCU, Martin Arnold concluded that the reception history of the Norse god of thunder was effectively at an end. The cause, Arnold reasoned, was an 'irreversible decline' in Þórr's representation in popular culture into 'the ersatz, the kitsch and the lowest common denominator'[27] – comments made in reference to comic books, animation, and other forms of popular entertainment, but not yet to a film that was released after the book had gone to press. Once Thor *had* appeared on screen in the hyper-muscular form of Australian actor Chris Hemsworth – complete with dyed blond hair and ceremonial winged helmet – Arnold published a review that made it clear his view had not shifted much. In it, he acknowledged that the film delivered enough thrills to appeal to its target audience, whatever their level of familiarity with the myths. He likewise noted that the film makers had been able to use Thor's eagerness to wage war with the Frost Giants to raise issues with pointed contemporary relevance to America's post 9/11 interventions in the Middle East. But still, for all its obvious box office appeal, there would be no point engaging with the film's response to its medieval sources because, according to Arnold, Marvel's relationship with the myths, in comic book and in film, had only ever been 'opportunistic'.[28]

Opportunistic is indeed an accurate way of describing Marvel's use of Old Norse myth. Generations of creatives working for the company have cherry picked from the mythology at will – often with no grander design than to meet tight

[27] Martin Arnold, *Thor: Myth to Marvel* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 159.
[28] Martin Arnold, 'Thor the Movie: Politics with a Hammer', *Bloomsbury History*, 5 May 2011 <https://web.archive.org/web/20250911161817/https://bloomsburyhistory.typepad.com/bloomsbury-history/2011/05/thor-the-movie-politics-with-a-hammer-a-guest-post-by-martin-arnold-author-of-thor-myth-to-marvel.html> [accessed 27 November 2025].

publication deadlines. In the words of the comic book historian Charles Hatfield, the work of the artist Kirby '…hardly ever had the luxury of either foresight or hindsight' and was 'commercial in spirit and produced under the unrelenting pressure of serial freelancing'.[29] It is also true to say that Marvel's engagement with the myths has typically been done at several removes from the medieval material. The question is whether this kind of approach should somehow preclude the consideration of the MCU from the study of the myths' afterlife. I will address the question of Marvel's use of secondary sources below, but the issue of selectivity, or failure to *accurately* represent the earlier material and its themes, certainly should not be seen as a roadblock. As Linda Hutcheon has noted in her influential overview of adaptation, the academic trend has shifted from a theoretical approach anchored on comparing new versions with an 'original' text.[30] Other scholars, including Lanier in the field of Shakespeare studies,[31] and Iain Robert Smith, writing about cinematic adaptations of novels and other texts,[32] have argued for the need to move past fidelity discourse, even as they have observed that it seems to possess a residual power that is difficult to shift.

In the context of Norse myth, a fidelity-based critical approach is inherently problematic, given that the most coherent written sources date from centuries after stories of Óðinn, Þórr and other gods must have been circulating in some form. The Eddic poems themselves are hard to date conclusively, yet there is evidence that they preserve elements of mythic and poetic tradition that predate their thirteenth-century

[29] Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 18. To give an idea of the scale of production at Marvel, Kirby alone produced 1,158 pages for publication in a single year in 1962. See John Morrow, *Kirby & Lee: Stuf' Said!* 2nd edn (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2019), p. 25.
[30] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edn, with Siobhan O'Flynn (London: Routledge, 2013), p. xiv–xv.
[31] Lanier, 'Shakespearean Rhizomatics', pp. 21-40.
[32] Iain Robert Smith, *The Hollywood Meme: Transnational Adaptations in World Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 31.

transcription by hundreds of years.[33] Material evidence from the Viking Age (c. 750–1100 CE) strengthens this idea, from the numerous Þórr-hammer pendants recovered from burials that attest to cultic devotion,[34] to the visual evidence that appears across the Viking world. For example, the Altuna runestone in Uppland, Sweden and the Ardre picture stones on Gotland (8th–11th centuries) include depictions of what have been widely interpreted as Þórr's encounter with the Miðgarðr serpent in *Hymiskviða* ['Hymir's Poem'] (st. 24–5), while similar scenes are carved on the Gosforth Cross in Cumbria, England and on the Hørdum stone in Denmark.[35] Skaldic, or court poetry corroborates this idea of earlier transmission of Eddic myth. Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*, composed around 995 CE, recounts Þórr's visit to Geirrøðr's hall – a story retold by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 18) – and suggests that such narratives were already well developed in Viking-Age verse. Further back still, the reconstructed helmet pieces found at Sutton Hoo in England (burial dated c. 625 CE) may preserve visual cues from myths already in circulation. The decoration on the face-mask of the helmet – a bird and a serpent intertwined – perhaps allude to Óðinn's quest for the Mead of Poetry.[36] Together these finds strongly suggest that mythic motifs associated with Óðinn and Þórr had a cultural foothold centuries before their later textual recording.

Of course, these observations are well-trodden ground for scholars of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, who have always recognised the Eddic sources as post-

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[33] See Bernt Ø. Thorvaldsen, 'The Dating of Eddic Poetry', in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 72–91. See also Christopher D. Sapp, *Dating the Old Norse Poetic Edda* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2022). Sapp's linguistic and metrical analysis supports composition in the AD 900s for many of the mythological poems.
[34] Neil Price, *Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 389.
[35] Stefan Brink, 'How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 105–136 (p. 106); Lilla Kopár, 'Eddic Poetry and the Imagery of Stone Monuments', in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*, pp. 190–211 (p. 204).
[36] Stephen Pollington, *Woden: A Historical Companion* (London: Uppsala Books, 2024), p. 91.

conversion receptions of pre-Christian myths.[37] Nevertheless, what does seem to abide more generally is a bias that privileges the 'shaggy' medievalism and 'shaggier heroes' that Umberto Eco identified,[38] especially in comparison with more fantastical interpretations. From within this view, the closer an adapted work is to the earliest available source material, and the more respectfully those sources are treated, the more favourably the new work tends to be considered.[39] As Haydock has noted, medievalist film-making is seen in much academic criticism 'as being analogous to a scholar's "interpretation" of written sources' – with a concomitant expectation that film makers should remain as faithful to them as they can.[40] The alternative view is that the proliferation of imaginative new encodings has had an invigorating effect. Tolkien's own mythopoeia has contributed to the remarkable popularity of the myths today, as have the many children's and adult retellings and the more inventive use of Norse material in English-language fantasy fiction by writers such as Diana Wynne Jones, Joanne Harris, Francesca Simon, and Neil Gaiman.[41] Within cinema and streaming, the MCU sits alongside mythic reimaginings such as Netflix's Norwegian-language series *Ragnarok* (2020–23), which recasts Þórr, Loki, and the *jötnar* as players in a contemporary climate crisis, and Zack Snyder's violently animated *Twilight of the Gods* (2024). In gaming, too, Norse mythology has been

[37] The *Eddas* were written down more than 200 years after Iceland's conversion to Christianity in or around 1000 CE. See Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
[38] Umberto Eco, 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages', in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 1–58 (p. 53).
[39] As Kristel Zilmer observes, earlier scholarship often regarded adaptation as inherently 'secondary and inferior'. More recent theoretical work treats adaptation as a legitimate mode of reception in its own right. See Kristel Zilmer, '"Nobody Owns the Myths": Adaptations of Old Norse Myth in Tor Åge Bringsværd's Vår gamle gudelære', *Scandinavian Studies*, 90.2 (2018), pp. 161–94 (pp. 162–63).
[40] Nickolas Haydock, 'Arthurian Melodrama, Chaucerian Spectacle, and the Waywardness of Cinematic Pastiche in First Knight and A Knight's Tale', *Studies in Medievalism, 12* (2002), pp. 5–38 (p. 7).
[41] Carolyne Larrington, 'The Myths of the North in Children's Books', in *Magical Tales: Myth, Legend and Enchantment in Children's Books*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington and Diane Purkiss (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2013), pp. 47–80.

increasingly foregrounded. The *God of War* franchise's shift into an Old Norse setting in 2018, continued in *God of War Ragnarök* (2022), exemplifies the pull these myths exert. Around this core has grown a wider ecosystem of Viking-age and saga-based medievalisms – from prestige television and film like *Vikings* and *The Northman*, to manga titles such as *Vinland Saga*, which has also now been adapted for the screen.[42] Amid all this, O'Donoghue observes that the myths have had 'a major impact on Western culture',[43] while Larrington concludes that they have played a substantial role in shaping the cultural imagination in Britain and America over the past fifty years.[44] Many factors are surely at play in this continued recycling of stories from the myths, not least the risk-averse, follow-my-lead nature of the modern film and TV industry, but it also seems clear that audiences continue to find relevance in even radically reinvented material based on these old stories.

Key definitions I: The Norse myths

'Myth', as a term, tends to be understood more intuitively than through a single analytical frame, and I make no attempt here at an all-encompassing definition.[45] For the present study, I seek only to clarify my own use of terms. Here, 'Norse mythology' and 'the Norse myths' refer specifically to the literary representations of the gods and the related cosmology from what has survived of the pre-Christian religions of northern Europe. The catch-all term Norse myth thus centres around the two connected works from thirteenth century Iceland commonly referred to as the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. These are by no means the only

[42] *Ragnarok* (Netflix, 2020–23); *Twilight of the Gods* (Netflix, 2024); *God of War* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018) and *God of War Ragnarök* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2022); *Vikings* (History, 2013–20); *The Northman*, dir. Robert Eggers (Focus Features, 2022); Makoto Yukimura, *Vinland Saga*, manga series, 29 vols (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2005–25).
[43] O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, p. 75.
[44] Larrington, *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think,* p. 204.
[45] Frog, M., 'Myth', *Humanities*, 7.1 (2018), pp. 1–39 (p. 2).

sources we have, and are far from being the earliest, but they are the most coherent examples of the myths as a collection of stories. The *Prose Edda* was written, or at least compiled, by the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson around 1220, and consists of four sections, which are conventionally referred to by the titles *Prologue*, *Gylfaginning* ['The Tricking of Gylfi'], *Skáldskaparmál* ['The Language of Poetry'], and *Háttatal* ['List of Verse-forms'], although they may not have been written, or intended to be read, in this order.[46] The work was seemingly intended as a handbook for poets, and Snorri drew on a sizeable number of poems to tell his stories.[47] Versions of many of these poems are found in the Codex Regius, a manuscript discovered in an Icelandic farmhouse in 1643, and which now goes by the designation GKS 2365 4to.[48] This manuscript dates from around 1270, perhaps 50 years later than Snorri was writing the *Prose Edda*, but contains poems that must have been circulating in some similar form, given that Snorri quotes from them.

Eleven of the poems in the Codex Regius, along with several others found in other manuscripts and generally deemed to be Eddic, are concerned with cosmology and/or the deeds of Óðinn, Þórr, Loki and other Æsir and Vanir gods and goddesses, and are customarily referred to as the mythological poems. *Vǫlundarkviða* ['Poem of Volund'] is frequently described as a bridge to the heroic poems of the Codex

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[46] Jón Karl Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas*, trans. by Jane Victoria Appleton (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), pp. 55–70. The principal manuscripts of the *Prose Edda* are Codex Upsaliensis (U, DG 11 4to), from the early fourteenth century, Codex Regius (R, GKS 2367 4to), first half of the fourteenth century, Codex Wormianus (W, AM 242 fol.), mid-fourteenth century, and Codex Trajectinus (T, Utrecht University Library MS 1374, late sixteenth or early seventeenth century). Codex Upsaliensis preserves a curtailed version of *Háttatal*, and is the only manuscript to supply the heading *Gylfaginning*. See Faulkes, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, pp. x–xv.

[47] John Lindow, *Old Norse Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 14–15.

[48] Distinct versions of some of the poems are found in other manuscripts, as are other poems that are now customarily referred to as Eddic, principally *Baldrs draumar* (AM 748 I a 4to), *Grottasöngr* (in three manuscripts of the *Prose Edda*)*, Rígsþula* (Codex Wormianus, AM 242 fol.) and *Hyndluljóð* (in *Flateyjarbók,* GkS 1005 fol). For the preservation history of the poems, see Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Transmission and Preservation of Eddic Poetry', in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry,* pp. 12–32. For details on *Grottasöngr*, I have also drawn on Clive Tolley, ed. and trans., *Grottasöngr* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008).

Regius, which deal with heroes of Germanic legend including Sigurd and Helgi. While Marvel Comics also introduced a handful of storytelling elements that can be traced back to these heroic poems, almost nothing of substance from these sources has made it into the MCU beyond the composite character of Brunnhilde/Valkyrie noted above. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, references to the Norse myths are to the mythological poems, and the corresponding stories told in the *Prose Edda*, unless stated otherwise.[49] It is in these texts that we encounter the fullest available realisation of the characters, cosmology and narratives that formed the basis for popular retellings starting in the mid-nineteenth century, and indirectly became the basis for Marvel's Thor.

Key definitions II: Reception and its study

The post-medieval reception of Norse myth refers to the critical, cultural, and creative afterlives of the stories, characters, and cosmologies that have survived from the pre-Christian north into the present. This reception encompasses a vast array of responses: from editions and translations, to the many imaginative reworkings that have appeared across literature, art, music, drama, comic book, and film, many of which exist within complex intertextual relationships: from Wagner's *Ring* cycle (completed in 1874) and responses to it in music like Christopher Rouse's *Heimdall's Trumpet* (2012), and altogether different forms like Chuck Jones's six-minute cartoon for Warner Brothers *What's Opera, Doc?* (1957); from the fantasy fiction of Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp's *The Roaring Trumpet* (1940) to Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001); from Marvel's *The Mighty Thor* to the comic book

[49] Mythological figures also feature in some of the Icelandic legendary sagas, as well as in the work of the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, whose Latin work *Gesta Danorum* ['Deeds of the Danes'] is generally dated to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, broadly contemporaneous with the composition of the *Prose Edda*. These works are referenced where relevant in later chapters.

series *Valhalla* (1979–2009) by Danish author Peter Madsen.[50] Any study of reception, in turn, must involve an attempt to illuminate these responses in some way – for example, to account for the chains of transmission, to examine the particular appeal that the past has held on those who have engaged with the material, or to analyse its effect on receiving audiences, including later adapters, who have been influenced not just by the original source material but also by subsequent mediations.

This last point is crucial for understanding Marvel's place within the fuller picture of the afterlife of Norse myth. The MCU rarely invokes Old Norse sources directly, yet in itself this is entirely in keeping with a long history of adapters working with the myths at second or third hand. Bishop Percy's hugely influential *Northern Antiquities* (1770) was an adaptation of the work of the Swiss Paul Henri Mallet, whose French-language retellings in turn relied upon Peder Hansen Resen's seventeenth-century *Edda Islandorum*.[51] To choose another example, Thomas Gray's poem *Fatal Sisters* (1776), which popularised the grisly image of Valkyries weaving human entrails, was based not directly on the Old Norse of *Darraðarljóð* ['Song of Dörruðr'] but on Torfæus's Latin paraphrase of Thomas Bartholin's edition.[52] More recent authors, including A. S. Byatt, Gaiman, Harris, and Melvin Burgess, were likewise inspired by popular retellings they encountered as children rather than the

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[50] Richard Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, first performed complete at Bayreuth, Germany, 1876; Christopher Rouse, *Heimdall's Trumpet* (2012), for amplified trumpet and orchestra; *What's Opera, Doc?*, dir. Chuck Jones (Warner Bros., 1957); Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp, *The Roaring Trumpet* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940); Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (London: Headline, 2001); Marvel Comics, *The Mighty Thor*, first published in *Journey into Mystery* (August 1962); Peter Madsen, *Valhalla*, 15 vols (Copenhagen: Interpresse, 1979–2009).

[51] Percy, Thomas, *Northern Antiquities; or, A Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the Ancient Danes, and Other Northern Nations* (London: T. Carnan and W. Flexney, 1770). For details on Percy, see Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse Poetic Translations of Thomas Percy: A New Edition and Commentary* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), p. 2. For early translations see Carolyne Larrington, 'Translating the *Poetic Edda* into English', in *Old Norse Made New*, ed. by David Clark and Carl Phelpstead (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007), pp. 21–42.

[52] See Alison Finlay, 'Thomas Gray's Translations of Old Norse Poetry', in *Old Norse Made New*, pp. 1–20. Finlay makes the case that Gray's 'imitation' of Eddic poetry in *The Fatal Sisters* and *The Descent of Odin* started a fashion for 'the supernatural, craggy, and mysterious' (p. 2).

Eddas themselves.[53] Working at one or more removes from the Old Norse sources has not prevented scholars from taking modern engagements with the myths seriously. In a field that has flourished in recent decades, dedicated studies span children's literature, fantasy fiction, visual arts, metal music, digital gaming, as well as the appropriation of the myths by far-right groups.[54] Few, if any, of the adapting authors considered in these studies could claim to have worked from Old Norse sources directly. Yet oddly, it appears that the MCU remains largely untouched by this critical attention. What analysis that does exist is discussed in the literature review below, but, to the best of my knowledge, as of December 2025, there has been no sustained study of the MCU as medievalist adaptation of Old Norse myth. The present work responds, in part, to this omission and to any sense that the MCU's adaptations have failed to meet an unstated threshold for scholarly consideration – perhaps because they are perceived, following Arnold, as unserious ('kitsch'), an

[53] In A. S. Byatt, *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), the author makes repeated reference to a book she encountered in her childhood entitled *Asgard and the Gods* (see Appendix 5). Gaiman does not mention a specific source for his novel *American Gods*, but in the introduction to his later *Norse Mythology*, he reveals that he read popular retellings by Roger Lancelyn Green and Kevin Crossley-Holland, as well as Marvel Comics. Neil Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), p. xvii. Burgess acknowledges in a note at the end of his novel, *Loki* that he was introduced to Norse myth through Barbara Leonie Picard's *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (1953). See Melvin Burgess, *Loki* (London: Andersen Press, 2022).

[54] On children's literature see in particular David Clark, 'Norse Medievalism in Children's Literature in English', in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Research and Reception, Volume II: From c. 1830 to the Present*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), pp. 367–400, and his monograph *Children's Literature and Old Norse Medievalism* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2023); on fantasy and science fiction, Randi Eldevik, 'Old Norse Mythology in Anglophone Fantasy and Science Fiction from 1940', in *Pre-Christian Religions of the North, II*, pp. 321–66; on visual arts, Sarah Timme, 'Norse Myths in the Visual Arts of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: A Short Catalogue Raisonné', ibid., pp. 457–64; on metal music, Imke von Helden, 'Barbarians and Literature: Viking Metal and its Links to Old Norse Mythology', in *The Metal Void: First Gatherings*, ed. by Niall W. R. Scott and Imke von Helden (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), pp. 257–64; on computer games, Robert Houghton, *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2024); and on far-right appropriations, Nicolas Meylan and Lukas Rösli (eds), *Old Norse Myths as Political Ideologies: Critical Studies in the Appropriation of Medieval Narratives* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

inferior imitation ('ersatz') or insufficiently high culture ('lowest common denominator').[55]

Key definitions III: Forms of adaptation

The use of characters, settings, and plot-fragments familiar from the Eddic sources indicates that Marvel's use of Norse material in the MCU warrants categorisation as adaptation. The question is what kind. Given that the term itself is loose enough to incorporate anything from Snorri's use of Eddic and Skaldic poetry to educate poets, through to the kind of remediations in music, opera, and fantasy fiction mentioned above, some further elaboration will be useful. In this thesis, I distinguish between three routes through which the myths have circulated outside Scandinavia: translation, retelling, and reimagination – by which I mean works that extract elements from the myths and redeploy them in new ways. This category overlaps with what Julie Sanders calls 'appropriation', a term she ascribes to creative acts that take a 'more decisive journey away from the informing text,' often involving ideological reframing.[56] This definition would certainly encompass many modern uses of the myths, including elements of the MCU. However, because the term 'appropriation' carries significant discursive weight, and is frequently associated with politically charged forms of cultural re-use, I adopt 'reimagination' as an umbrella term that is further defined below.

Translations

One of the most significant routes through which Norse myth travelled beyond Scandinavia was via the chains of translations that developed from the seventeenth century. The process effectively begins with Resen's *Edda Islandorum* (1665), the

[55] Arnold, *From Myth to Marvel*, p. 259.
[56] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 35–38.

first printed edition of the text of the *Prose Edda*, featuring translations in Danish and Latin and drawing on the *Laufás Edda* compiled by the Icelandic priest Magnús Ólafsson.[57] *Edda Islandorum* also included Latin versions of *Vǫluspá* ['The Seeress's Prophecy'] and *Hávamál* [Sayings of the High One], but the other Eddic poems were not available in full until the publication of the *Copenhagen Edda* by the Arnamagnæan Commission (1787–1828). The first English translation of any Eddic poetry appeared in 1676, when Aylett Sammes incorporated renderings of several verses into *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata*.[58] A more substantial phase of translation followed the publication of the *Copenhagen Edda*. Amos Cottle's *Icelandic Poetry; or, The Edda of Sæmund* (1797) drew heavily on its Latin texts, before William Herbert published his *Select Icelandic Poetry* (1804), which was based on direct knowledge of Icelandic and Danish.[59] A complete English version of the *Prose Edda* based directly on the source material did not appear until 1842, from George Webbe Dasent.[60]

There is a strong case for treating translations of the *Eddas* as falling under the broader category of adaptation. Theorists such as Susan Bassnett have emphasised that translation, rather than a like-for-like transposition, is better understood as a negotiation, in which the translator mediates between cultures and across time.[61] Larrington's illuminating survey of Eddic translations, her own included, shows how translators inevitably imprint their individual 'prejudices and

[57] For Magnús Ólafsson's work crafting a systematic presentation of *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* see Kevin J. Wanner, 'The Prose Edda', in *The Cambridge History of Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. by Heather O'Donoghue and Emily Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. 477–98.
[58] Larrington, 'Translating the *Poetic Edda* into English', p. 21.
[59] Ibid., p. 24.
[60] George Webbe Dasent, *The prose or younger Edda: Commonly ascribed to Snorri Sturluson* (Stockholm: Norstedt and Sons; London: William Pickering, 1842).
[61] Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, 3rd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 8.

predilections' on the text.[62] Turning to the *Prose Edda*, Kevin J. Wanner praises Anthony Faulkes's translation, *Edda* (1995) for offering 'a very literal, precise and plain-spoken rendering of the original text'.[63] Yet even the most literal translation requires interpretative judgement. As Eco reminds us, translation must work sense-for-sense rather than word-for-word,[64] and in the case of the *Prose Edda*, the challenge is heightened by the condition of the manuscripts. Many of the verses Snorri cites are poorly preserved, leading Faulkes to acknowledge that parts of his English version 'should be regarded as tentative and are often the result of guesswork'.[65] On this basis, and in light of the kinds of interpretative problems Faulkes identifies, translation may be seen as fitting the category of adaptation.

Retellings

Perhaps the most influential form of adaptation on popular culture has been the retelling of the myths in popular editions that have involved selecting and reshaping Eddic stories into a more or less coherent collection for the general reader. As Tom Birkett notes, such works occupy a grey area within adaptation studies,[66] yet as a tradition they have had an outsized impact. Between 1857, when the established children's author Annie Keary and her younger sister Eliza together published *The Heroes of Asgard and the Giants of Jötunheim,*[67] and 1962, when Lee and Kirby reimagined Thor for Marvel Comics, at least 46 English-language retellings

[62] Larrington, 'Translating the *Poetic Edda* into English', p. 40.
[63] Wanner, 'The Prose Edda', in *The Cambridge History of Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 484.
[64] Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003), p. 6.
[65] Faulkes, *Edda*, p. xxii.
[66] Tom Birkett, '"Here Are the Words of the Æsir Themselves": Retelling the Master Builder Myth between Translation and Adaptation', in *The Medieval North and Its Afterlife*, ed. by Sín Grønlíe and Carl Phelpstead (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2024), p. 283.
[67] Annie Keary and Eliza Keary, *Heroes of Asgard and the Giants of Jötunheim* (London: David Bogue, 1857).

appeared in Britain and the United States.[68] The Kearys' model was taken up on both sides of the Atlantic by a wide range of writers – novelists, popular historians, mythographers, journalists, academics, teachers, translators, and poets – many of whom aimed their versions at children. In doing so, they often sought not only to entertain but to instruct and moralise. As Kristel Zilmer has noted, the guiding principle of the retelling is not fidelity to a particular text, but the carrying forward of stories into new cultural contexts.[69] This shift permits creative reshaping for clarity and entertainment, and to suit the intended audience. As John Stephens and Robyn McCallum observe, retellings inevitably mirror the value systems of the cultures that produce them,[70] and when written for children, this has often entailed censorship, particularly of sexual or violent material.[71] In practice, that saw Victorian and early twentieth-century authors adapt Norse myth to match the moral outlook of their age, canonising a version of the stories that was reassuring for family or classroom settings. The impact of these works can be seen in the extent to which they established conventions that still influence how the myths are told today. Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* (2017), for instance, follows an instantly recognisable sequence of stories and set of characterisations found in most early retellings.[72]

But while the Kearys' book may have been the first to be marketed as a discrete collection of tales, it would be overly simplistic to claim it as the first collection of retellings. Earlier nineteenth century works, by writers such as Nathan

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[68] For a full list see Appendix 5. I do not include in this tally compendia such as Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable* (Boston: Bazin & Ellsworth, 1855), Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942) or Ruth Smith, *The Tree of Life* (New York: The Viking Press, 1942), which all feature brief and derivative selections of Norse material alongside other myths.
[69] Kristel Zilmer, 'Nobody Owns the Myths', *Scandinavian Studies*, 90.2 (2018), pp. 165–167.
[70] John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), p. 255.
[71] Dimitra Fimi, 'Review of *The Northern Path: Norse Myths and Legends Retold … And What They Reveal*, by Douglas "Dag" Rossman', *Folklore*, 119.2 (2008), pp. 238–39.
[72] Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*. Gaiman says he avoided re-reading retellings he had grown up reading but they clearly left an impact in a collection of stories that is surprisingly conventional.

Drake (1804), and S. A. Dunham (1839), though now all but forgotten,[73] were among the first books in English to present selections from the Norse myths in a digestible form for non-specialist readers. Grenville Pigott's *Manual of Scandinavian Mythology* (1839) is more frequently cited as a milestone in the reception history of the Norse myths, although his summaries are effectively a reworking of Adam Oehlenschläger's *Nordens Guder: et episk digt* (1819) rather than an engagement with the Eddas themselves.[74]

It was not until 1851 that concise and accessible précis of the principal myths written in English with direct reference to the Eddic source material became available, through Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* vol 1.[75] In his introduction, Thorpe provided concise, readable summaries of nearly all the mythic episodes that would later form the backbone of the popular canon. The Keary sisters used Thorpe as their principal source in delivering a book with a framing device that presents the stories as being told by to a group of children gathered at the family house before Christmas. One of the children has seen a copy of Percy's *Northern Antiquities*, and, after asking to hear the tales read aloud, the adults oblige with a series of stories based around the days of the week, starting with Wednesday, or 'Odin's-Day'. The book was reissued in 1860 as *Christmas Week and Its Stories: The Heroes of Asgard* but it was when the much larger publishing house Macmillan acquired the rights and released a revised edition, *The Heroes of Asgard: Tales from*

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[73] Nathan Drake, *Literary Hours; or, Sketches, Critical, Narrative, and Poetical*, 3 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1804), III, pp. 273–459; S. A. Dunham, *The History of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans; and John Taylor, 1839), II, pp. 43–150. Wawn makes no reference to either work in his meticulous study *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000).
[74] Grenville Pigott, *A Manual of Scandinavian Mythology* (London: William Pickering, 1839); Adam Oehlenschläger, *Nordens Guder: et episk digt* (Copenhagen: H. F. Popp, 1819).
[75] Thorpe, Benjamin, *Northern Mythology: Comprising the Principal Popular Traditions and Superstitions of Scandinavia, North Germany, and the Netherlands, vol. 1* (London: Edward Lumley, 1851), pp. 1–84.

Scandinavian Mythology (1870), that it really took off.[76] This new version removed the conversations with the children and added a lengthy introduction written by Annie alone,[77] as well as acknowledgement of a number of secondary sources.[78] The re-tooled book helped kick-start the vogue for retellings.[79] By the year 1910, there had been at least 25 published works of retellings in English, including several that have remained popular to this day, including H. A. Guerber's *Myths of Northern Lands*, first published in 1895 and still in print in multiple formats. The enduring, but largely forgotten, influence of the Kearys is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that in October 2024, a lavish new edition of their work was released as *The Macmillan Collection of Norse Myths*, with a new foreword by Michael Morpurgo, but with no recognititon for the Kearys on the front or back covers.[80]

The fashion did not end there, with retellings continuing to come thick and fast in the following decades. As Arnold has noted, the years immediately following the Second World War saw a lingering unease around Old Norse material, coloured by the widespread perception that the myths had been appropriated by the German National Socialist regime.[81] This likely contributed to a pause in new titles, but the market soon picked up in popular culture at least. From 1951–53 Olivia E.

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[76] *Christmas Week and its Stories; or, the Heroes of Asgard. By the author of "Mia and Charlie", "The Rival Kings", "Sydney Grey".* (London: Charles Henry Clarke, 1860); *The Heroes of Asgard: Tales from Scandinavian Mythology*, rev. edn (London: Macmillan, 1870).
[77] Unpublished letter from Annie Keary to Alexander Macmillan, 1869, British Library, Add. MS 54922, vol. CXXXVII, fol. 105.
[78] The authors are listed as Simrock, Mallet, Laing, Thorpe, Howitt and Dasent, with no further detail.
[79] The Kearys' work is mentioned by Rudyard Kipling in his children's book *Puck of Pook's Hill* (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 14, and was republished in both the United States and Britain, including in a school's edition, *The Heroes of Asgard: Tales from Scandinavian Mythology*, ed. by M. R. Earle, with a new introduction, glossary, and textual edits (London: Macmillan, 1905).
[80] *The Macmillan Collection of Norse Myths* (London: Macmillan, 2024). Foreword by Michael Morpurgo. The Kearys are credited inside, but the omission of their names from the cover is striking.
[81] See Arnold, *Thor: Myth to Marvel*, p. 36. As Verena Höfig observes, the Nazis made less systematic use of the material than is often assumed. Yet the prominent use of runes, pseudo-pagan rituals, and the ideological enthusiasm of figures such as Himmler ensured that an association between Norse myth and National Socialism was very strong. Verena Höfig, 'Reception', in *The Cambridge History of Norse-Icelandic Literature*, pp. 91–110 (pp. 100–101).

Coolidge's *Legends of the North* appeared, followed by Dorothy G. Hosford's *Thunder of the Gods* and Barbara Leonie Picard's *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes* – the latter being the work that so influenced Burgess.[82] Marvel also played their part in the chain of retellings started by the Kearys. In the early days of Thor as a comic book hero, Lee and Kirby retold a number of familiar stories from Norse myth in 'Tales of Asgard', which existed as a supplementary series in *Journey Into Mystery* and later *The Mighty Thor* in 49 issues, from #97 in October 1963 to #145 in October 1967. In this series, Marvel promised readers 'Fantasy and legend from the home of mighty Thor', as Lee explained:

> Before man could read or write, he had his legends! And no legends were more thrilling, more colorful, more filled with fantasy and high adventure than the legends of Asgard, home of the gods! Thus, with great pride, we present this new, trend-setting series, based upon highlights of Norse mythology - - tales of Asgard, the birthplace of the mighty Thor!! [83]

While this supplementary strip eventually petered out, Marvel writers and artists continued to mine handbooks and retellings of the myths to introduce details and storylines for the main *Thor* strip. For example, *Ragnarǫk* is first mentioned in #119, via a typically portentous introduction from Lee:

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[82] Olivia E. Coolidge, *Legends of the North* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951); Dorothy G. Hosford, *Thunder of the Gods* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1954); Barbara Leonie Picard, *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950).

[83] Stan Lee and others, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor, vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2017), p. 5. It was Kirby who was responsible for most of the stories in *Tales of Asgard*, with Lee providing only the dialogue. Lee commented: 'Certainly 90 percent of the *Tales of Asgard* stories were Jack's plots, and they were great! He knew more about Norse mythology than I ever did (or at least he enjoyed making it up!). I was busy enough just putting in the copy after he drew it.' Quoted in *Stan Lee: Conversations*, ed. by Jeff McLaughlin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 152.

> And there, for all to see, the three most fearful words of all time - - the words announcing Ragnarok, the twilight of the Gods - - the day the world will perish! Ragnarok, the day of the last great battle - - the day in which it has been written the gods themselves will perish! Ragnarok, the only moment that Odin himself awaits with fear and dread! Is Ragnarok truly upon us?? By the bristling beard of Odin, we shall learn more next issue! So be it! [84]

This version of Ragnarǫk, told across several issues, introduces the flying trolls of Queen Ula and a band of voyagers called the Argonauts, before culminating in a final, fiery confrontation. Over the decades, Marvel Comics went on to retell many of the canonical Norse stories in more recognisable form. For example, Alan Zelenetz adapted the tale of Loki's theft of Sif's hair *Thor Annual* 11 (see Chapter Five) and Roy Thomas reworked the Útgarða-Loki episode in *Thor* #272.[85]

The proliferation of retellings aimed at the popular market has only accelerated. In addition to works already mentioned, popular contributions have come from scholars such as John Lindow and Birkett, alongside a steady stream of new versions from writers of all kinds, and the pace shows no sign of slowing. In 2025 alone, newly published retellings include Honor Cargill-Martin and Pauliina Hannuniemi's *She Speaks: The Women of Norse Myths in Their Own Words*, Samantha Newman's *Norse Myths*, Terry Gallagher's *The World Tree of Norse Mythology*, and Ben Hubbard's *Norse Gods & Myths*.[86] Few, if any, of the non-

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[84] Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, 'Tales of Asgard: Gather, Warriors!', *Journey into Mystery*, no. 119 (April 1965), repr. in *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 3 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).
[85] *Thor Annual* #11 (1983), repr. in Alan Zelenetz, Bob Hall, Mark Bright, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 22 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn). Thor #272 (1978), repr. in Len Wein and others, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 17 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).
[86] John Lindow, *Myths and Legends of the Vikings* (Santa Barbara, CA: Bellerophon Books, 1979); Tom Birkett, *The Norse Myths: Stories of The Norse Gods and Heroes Vividly Retold* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2018); Ingri d'Aulaire and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, *D'Aulaires' Book of Norse*

academics could claim to have used the *Eddas* directly, with later retellings bearing clear influences from earlier works, as I will discuss below. This is the rhizome in action: comics feeding into literature, scholarship feeding back into popular retellings, and new works in turn becoming gateways for the next generation of writers. What emerges is a proliferating network, in which Marvel represents one of many redistributors of mythic material, helping to sustain its continual reinvention.

Reimaginings:

A common use of the myths that goes beyond simply retelling the stories is to take one or more characters from the mythology and transplant them to a different setting, or to explore them from an original point of view. In recent decades, authors have found the character of Loki, in particular, to be highly malleable in this regard. Diana Wynne Jones in *Eight Days of Luke* (1975), Harris in *The Gospel of Loki* (2014) and *The Testament of Loki* (2018), Louie Stowell in *A Bad God's Guide to Being Good* and its sequels (2022–2024), and Burgess in *Loki* (2022) have all employed this kind of tactic to give a fresh perspective on the myths.[87] Byatt goes a stage further in *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (2011).[88] In this novel she refracts the myths through two lenses: first, her childhood memories of *Asgard and the Gods*, a Victorian handbook about the myths, which includes retellings of all the common tales,

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Myths (New York: Doubleday, 1967); Brian Branston, *Gods and Heroes from Viking Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1978); Morgan J. Roberts, *Myths of the World: Norse Gods and Heroes* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1970); Philip Ardagh, *Norse Myths and Legends* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999); Honor Cargill-Martin and Pauliina Hannuniemi, *She Speaks: The Women of Norse Myths in Their Own Words* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2025); Samantha Newman, *Norse Myths* (London: Arcturus, 2025); Terry Gallagher, *The World Tree of Norse Mythology: Myths and Legends of the Norse Gods, Goddesses, Heroes and Monsters from the Nine Realms of Yggdrasil* (London: Flame Tree Publishing, 2025); Ben Hubbard, *Norse Gods & Myths* (London: Arcturus, 2025).

[87] Diana Wynne Jones, *Eight Days of Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Joanne Harris, *The Gospel of Loki* (London: Gollancz, 2014) and *The Testament of Loki* (London: Gollancz, 2018); Louie Stowell, *A Bad God's Guide to Being Good* (London: Walker Books, 2022), and sequels (2023–24); Burgess, *Loki*.

[88] For recent 'reimaginations' including those by Byatt and Gaiman, see Kathryn Hume, 'Loki and Odin', *Studies in the Novel*, 51.2 (2019), 297–310, p. 304.

adapted by M. W. Macdowall from a work by the German scholar Wilhelm Wägner;[89] and second, her sympathetic view of Loki, imagined not simply as a character but as a kind of narrative force. I return to this idea of Loki-as-story-engine in Chapter Three. Other authors have employed their own tactics to make the myths anew. Rick Riordan uses a formula he refined in his earlier use of classical myth to tell stories of a teenager placed into the world of the Norse myths in his *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series (2015–17). A generation or so earlier, Douglas Adams had fun introducing Odin and Thor in *The Long Dark Tea-time of the Soul* (1988), the second of his Dirk Gently novels. Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) is a less comedic work but he does something very similar to Adams in imagining that not just the Norse gods, but deities from myriad belief systems, remain alive, largely forgotten and unworshipped, in the United States.[90]

The world of Norse myth has also proved a useful staging ground for drama making social or political points. The Netflix TV series *Ragnarok* does this especially well, telling the story of an eco-disaster in the fictional Norwegian town of Edda, as versions of the gods do battle with the polluting giants of Jutul Industries. Taking a different tack, *The Witch's Heart* (2021), a novel by Genevieve Gornichec, makes Angrboða a central character and explores her story beyond her meagre representation in the *Eddas*. To this list of reimaginings we could add many more uses of the myths across gaming, for example in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), and in film and TV, as in the recent Netflix animated series *Twilight of the Gods* (Snyder 2024). Marvel's use of the myths in the service of its own overarching

[89] M. W. Macdowall, *Asgard and the Gods: The Tales and Traditions of Our Northern Ancestors, Told for Boys and Girls*, adapted from the work of Dr W. Wägner and edited by W. S. W. Anson (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1880).
[90] Rick Riordan, *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard,* 3 vols (London: Puffin, 2015–17); Douglas Adams, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* (London: Heinemann, 1988); Gaiman, *American Gods*.

mythology in the MCU – and to address issues including leadership, succession, justice and retribution – seems to be very much in tune with this kind of usage, as I will explore in subsequent chapters.[91]

Literature review: Expanding the limits of reception

Writing specifically about Eddic poetry, O'Donoghue has provided a useful working definition of reception that I would paraphrase as being the study of (i) the post-medieval dissemination of the source material, (ii) the critical response to it, and (iii) the influence of those texts on later adaptations.[92] This three-part model is well represented in the two-volume *Research and Reception*, edited by Clunies Ross (2018).[93] The first volume traces reception from the earliest encounters of audiences with the Eddic myths up to c. 1830, while also observing, importantly, that even early responses – including Snorri's own – constitute a kind of reception, capable of exerting enormous influence on subsequent artistic uses of the myths.[94] From there, the work charts later developments up to the rise of Romantic nationalism, when figures such as Denmark's N. F. S. Grundtvig and others laid claim to the myths for national projects. Subsequent scholarship has explored these processes in detail. Simon Halink's edited volume *Northern Myths, Modern Identities* (2009)[95] and Sophie Bønding et al.'s *Mythology and Nation Building* (2021)[96] both highlight the close entanglement of myth and cultural politics in the nineteenth century. Another

[91] *Ragnarok*, Netflix, 3 seasons (2020–23); Genevieve Gornichec, *The Witch's Heart* (New York: Ace Books, 2021); *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, dir. Tameem Antoniades (Ninja Theory, 2017); *Twilight of the Gods*, Netflix animated series, created by Zack Snyder (2024).
[92] Heather O'Donoghue, 'The Reception of Eddic Poetry', in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*, p. 349.
[93] Margaret Clunies Ross (ed.), *Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Research and Reception*, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).
[94] Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Introduction', in *Pre-Christian Religions of the North I,* p. xxv.
[95] Simon Halink (ed.), *Northern Myths, Modern Identities: The Nationalisation of Northern Mythologies Since 1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).
[96] Sophie Bønding, Pernille Hermann, and Sophie Katrine Salling (eds), *Mythology and Nation Building: N. F. S. Grundtvig and His European Contemporaries* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

reference point is *The Norse Muse* (1999), co-authored by Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth, which reported on a research project into the reception of Norse myth in western culture. The report stresses that there was no true 'rediscovery' of Old Norse poetics: they had remained an active force in Iceland since Snorri and, from the seventeenth century, in wider Scandinavia.[97] Mallet's work, therefore, is valued less as a breakthrough than as a successful vehicle for carrying Norse myth to a much wider audience. Still, 'rediscovery' remains the customary way of framing the Romantic explosion of interest in the myths. *The Norse Muse* offers a five-stage model of reception history, culminating in the 'Decline of National Romanticism' with particular attention to the tainted legacy of the Nazi appropriation of Norse myth and its lingering consequences – a factor the authors suggest has precluded a new Nordic cultural renaissance.[98] It must be assumed that this in fact refers to the absence of a high-culture renaissance. The report does not address the resurgence of Norse myth in twentieth-century popular culture.

Wawn's *The Vikings and the Victorians* (2000) is indispensable in charting how the Victorian imagination shaped and popularised the figure of the Viking. Wawn emphasises the importance figures such as William Morris and Dasent had in introducing the myths to wide audiences and includes in his survey a number of works for children, including the retelling by the Keary sisters. Elsewhere, Wawn is especially clear in laying out what he calls the cascade effect of cultural transmission: from editions of the primary texts, to dictionaries and grammars, to translations, and finally into paraphrase, paintings, poetry, drama, and novels.[99]

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[97] Margaret Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth, *The Norse Muse: Report from a Research Project on the Reception of Old Norse Literature in Western Europe* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999).
[98] Margaret Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth, *The Norse Muse,* pp. 6–24.
[99] Wawn, 'Victorian Viking Novels', *Beck Lecture Series*, University of Victoria, 4–5 February 2004, <https://becklectures.uvic.ca/visit_2004_wawn_andrew.html> [accessed 19 November 2025].

David Ashurst provides thoughtful analysis of the way this kind of cascade works, as he traces the influence of Thorpe, Oehlenschläger, Pigott, and the Kearys from 1837–1876, and even sketches a theoretical pathway toward Marvel Comics.[100] He makes no attempt to be exhaustive, however, and chooses to omit, for example, Julia Goddard's *Wonderful Stories from Northern Lands* (1871), which would go on to influence Macdowall in her 1880 adaptation of Wägner's work, which would in turn have such an effect on Byatt.[101] Still, Ashurst is persuasive, like Wawn, in identifying the Victorian moralising impulse – the introduction of Sunday-school values into myth – as a key factor in shaping the canon of retellings.

The seven volumes of the *Edda-Kommentar* series, edited by Klaus von See, Beatrice LaFarge, and others (1997–2019), offer invaluable studies of the reception of individual poems. Here the focus is on high culture: literary, scholarly, intellectual contexts, rather than the popular retellings and adaptations. The second volume of *Research and Reception* broadens the scope to consider how the myths have been reused, reimagined, and appropriated across media from around 1830 to the present. Its strength lies in this breadth, covering responses in children's literature, opera and music, theatre, modernist literature, science fiction and fantasy, visual art, and the political exploitation of the myths by far-right groups. Of particular note is David Clark's chapter on children's literature. In it, Clark surveys the wave of retellings that emerged in the later nineteenth century and traces their influence on writers such as Kipling and C. S. Lewis, who in turn helped shaped generations of medievalist fiction. Both here and in his monograph *Children's Literature and Old Norse*

[100] David Ashurst, 'Eddic Myth, Victorian Values: The Popularisation of Old Norse Mythology in Britain, 1837–1876', in *Sang an Ægir: Nordische Mythen um 1900*, ed. by Katja Schultz and Florian Heesch (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), pp. 45–71.
[101] Macdowall calls Goddard's *Wonderful Stories* a 'charming book'. Macdowall, *Asgard and the Gods*, p. 191.

Medievalism (2023), Clark provides useful analysis of how Norse material was repackaged for young readers in historical fiction and fantasy, though he stops short of extending this trajectory to Marvel Comics or the MCU.

O'Donoghue is explicitly engaged with popular culture up to and including the MCU, via the updated edition of her *From Asgard to Valhalla* (2024). She notes that the films draw primarily from the comics, observes the presence of Thor in post-war comics even before *The Mighty Thor*, and, interestingly, highlights design echoes of Reykjavík cathedral in the look of the MCU's Asgard.[102] Jón Karl Helgason's *Echoes of Valhalla* (2017) makes another sustained case for the cultural relevance of the myths, assessing their creative reuse by modern writers and artists. He devotes considerable attention to Marvel's introduction of Thor, showing that Kirby's pre-Marvel work with Norse motifs strongly shaped the look and feel of Thor in *Journey into Mystery* and *The Mighty Thor*.[103] His analysis here is meticulous, but when it comes to the MCU, he restricts himself to the claim – echoed in his contribution to *Research and Reception II* – that Marvel has fashioned an 'independent mythological sphere' where the films are free to do whatever they wish so long as they remain faithful in spirit to the comics.[104] This is an interesting observation, but one that risks writing off the films as of little interest to scholars. Among specialists, Larrington's analysis of the films in *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think* (2023) is more substantial.[105] She traces Thor's journey from *Journey into Mystery* through the movies, noting both continuity with the Eddic material and creative reworking. In particular, she highlights the nightmares that

[102] O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, pp. 169–71.
[103] Jón Karl Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas*, trans. by Jane Appleton (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), pp. 18–32.
[104] Jón Karl Helgason, 'Nordic Gods and Popular Culture', trans. by Jane Victoria Appleton, in *Pre-Christian Religions of the North* II, pp. 419–53.
[105] Larrington, *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2023).

foreshadow *Thor: Ragnarok*, which function as a cinematic echo of Baldr's foreboding dreams in *Baldrs draumar* ['Baldr's Dreams'], an idea to which I will return in Chapter Three. She comments on the portrayal of Thor as humanity's protector and identifies familiar mythic figures such as Surtur and Hela.[106] Continuing her analysis, she argues that the cinematic Thor resonates because he contends with recognisably human emotions and setbacks – a point that aligns strikingly with Lee's own reflections on his approach to drawing his characters.[107]

Elsewhere, interesting work on the MCU has been done by specialists working in the fields of cultural studies, including Terence McSweeney's 2018 *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the MCU,* and comparative religion, particularly the work showcased in Gregory Stevenson's 2020 collection *Theology and the Marvel Universe*, and Michael D. Nichols's *Religion and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, from 2021.[108] McSweeney is one of a number of critics to have seen in Marvel's updated version of Thor a thoroughly Americanised hero.[109] In this view, Thor's entreaty to Odin to march into Jotunheim and 'teach them a lesson, break their spirits so they'll never dare try to cross our borders again!' is a comment on America's foreign policy post 9/11.[110] Arnold, as we have seen, took a similar view in his review of the film. The theological approaches, by contrast, are careful to

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[106] Ibid., p. 70.
[107] Ibid., p. 91. Stan Lee explained his approach to character thus: 'I wanted to write the kind of dialogue that would give the character personality. What did they do when they weren't fighting super-villains? What were their hopes, dreams, aspirations, as well as their frustrations.' Michael Cavna, 'In a Superhero-Heavy Summer at the Movies, Stan Lee Talks About Genre's Appeal', *The Washington Post*, 10 March 2011 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-stan-lee-interview-in-this-summer-of-the-superhero-why-does-the-comic-book-genre-mightily-endure/2011/05/08/AF8NAmiG_story.html> [accessed 28 December 2025].
[108] Terence McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Gregory Stevenson (ed.), *Theology and the Marvel Universe* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020); Michael D. Nichols, *Religion and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2021).
[109] McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble,* p. 24.
[110] *Thor*, 00:12:02

consider the MCU material in mythic terms rather than to seek simple allegories. Interestingly, Nichols sees the Thor-Loki rivalry as being given an added power due to the brotherly relationship given to them first in the comics and then in the movies. In this way, Thor is seen to be battling his 'shadow self' and the confrontation gains psychological resonance as a result.[111]

Overall, it seems clear that there is room for more thorough work examining ways in which the Eddic source material has influenced these hugely popular films and TV series. However, looking beyond the three strands of O'Donoghue's definition, there is another opportunity to adopt the rhizomatic view and consider what we might call the secondary reception of the myths, or the after-effects of Wawn's cascading process. From the time when the myths went viral in popular culture, starting towards the end of the nineteenth century with the proliferation of retellings, these works can be seen to act as an influential new node in the rhizome, with adapters using them as a new starting point, without necessarily turning to the Eddic material to use as their principal sources. I would therefore suggest a fourth strand to O'Donoghue's usage of the term reception to incorporate the intertextual ways in which retellings are not only influenced by sources from medieval Iceland, but by their later adaptations too; and in turn how these later retellings may reflect back on their predecessors in a diachronic dialogue operating in multiple directions. This additional definition, then, would be something like (iv) the multidirectional effects of adaptations of the source material. Viewed as such, the task of this research is not just to gauge how much of the Eddic material has made its way into the MCU, but to consider adaptations as origin points for new versions, or as active nodes in

[111] Nichols, *Religion and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, p. 55.

the rhizome, and to assess ways in which later works may be able to alter our view of the source material.

Chapter One: Networks of influence

> We don't have to be that accurate because we think we can do better. After all, mythology is mythology and who's to say we can't make up our own myths, which is what we're doing, just basing them on other past ones and having a heck of a good time doing it.
>
> – Stan Lee[112]

This chapter provides a practical account of how myth travels in the context of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, preparing the ground for the close analyses that follow. The first section translates the general orientation of Actor–Network Theory into a working method. It defines how the thesis uses three analytical clusters – pre-texts, cultural atmosphere, and production engine – to track influences on the MCU. The chapter next traces how Norse material has been reshaped across successive layers of Marvel storytelling, from the mid-century comic-book and onward to the screen. Finally, it offers a brief overview of the MCU's over-arching story, and assesses the narrative technique that is in use.

Adaptation as process

Linda Hutcheon considers adaptation to be a creative and interpretive act of transposition or remediation of a story that generates a palimpsestic effect, whereby the act of repetition with variation means older works can still resonate with the reader, viewer or audience, assuming they have sufficient familiarity with the earlier material.[113] Applying this definition to the use of the Norse myths by the MCU would be problematic in at least two ways. The first is the assumption that the

[112] Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, interviewed by Mike Hodel, WBAI-FM, New York City, 3 March 1967, Stan Lee Papers, Box 70, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
[113] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. 8.

common denominator of adaptation is the story. Hutcheon allows for edge cases, but her definition would seem to relegate the MCU's relationship with the Norse myths as something more akin to fan fiction, an act of homage, or even of remixing rather than of adaptation.[114] The idea of the remix could be an interesting lens through which to assess the MCU material but on balance I have preferred an expanded definition of adaptation that allows for the kind of re-imaginings that are not necessarily predicated on telling the same old stories. That is because the MCU is not just taking individual elements of the myths, or individual characters, and 'riffing' on them to create something that is essentially different. As I will attempt to show in chapters Two, Three and Four, the combination of characters, cosmology and themes from the myths still at play within the MCU offer resonances that reward consideration as adaptation. Secondly, although this is never stated explicitly, Hutcheon's analysis of the process of adaptation presupposes an author, or an auteur, who approaches an older work, interprets it creatively, and adds a further layer of artistry. Within the MCU, that model quickly breaks down. While President of Marvel Studios and Chief Creative Officer Kevin Feige has played a significant role in shaping the overarching direction of the franchise, he is in no meaningful sense an auteur. While he oversees continuity and tone, he devolves substantial autonomy to the creative teams responsible for each film or series, and all within a corporate structure ultimately accountable to Disney's shareholders.[115] A single MCU production involves multiple, overlapping layers of authorship. *Thor: Ragnarok* provides a clear example. Although the finished film is infused with Taika Waititi's

[114] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, pp. xxv–xxvi.
[115] Feige was originally constrained by having to report into a creative committee at Marvel Entertainment. He has had much more creative freedom since adding the title of Chief Creative Officer at Marvel in 2019, but he still reports into Walt Disney Studios. Tara Bennett and Paul Terry, *The Story of Marvel Studios: The Making of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, 2 vols (New York: Abrams, 2021), 2, p. 31.

unmistakable sensibility, the initial screenplay was developed by the writing team of Craig Kyle and Christopher Yost; Eric Pearson supplied later drafts; and Waititi brought in the writer Stephany Folsom for revisions that substantially lightened the tone. Other moments emerged during filming, including improvisation from the actors. Most famously, the line that comes from Thor when he recognises Hulk, 'He's a friend from work!', was suggested by a child visiting the set.[116] Such examples illustrate that even in a film celebrated for its distinctive voice, authorship remains widely dispersed.

Such objections aside, the kind of layering process envisioned by Hutcheon *could* be a way of explaining Marvel's method of adaptation. The films are, to an extent, an adaptation of elements familiar from Marvel Comics, though still missing the common denominator of the story, and the comic books, in turn, could be regarded as adaptations of retellings of the Norse myths in popular editions. Those popular retellings were based on earlier retellings, or books about the myths, such as those by Thorpe and Rasmus B. Anderson.[117] Those works were based on editions of the *Eddas* that had been prepared by scholars working following the rediscovery of the myths outside Iceland. The problem with this kind of explanation is that it risks over-simplifying a process that has involved thousands of writers, artists and other storytelling creatives, working in an environment where the creative process has been subject to numerous outside influences, including strictures from bodies including the Comics Code Authority,[118] as well as the commercial realities of

[116] Robinson, Gonzales, and Edwards, *Reign of Marvel Studios*, 2023, pp. 505–07. In general, the authors describe the ethos at the MCU as 'best idea wins' (p. 22).
[117] Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*; Rasmus B. Anderson, *Norse Mythology; or, The Religion of Our Forefathers* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs and Company, 1875).
[118] For an overview of the Comics Code Authority, see 'Comics Code History: The Seal of Approval', Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, <https://cbldf.org/comics-code-history-the-seal-of-approval> [accessed 25 November 2025].

creating content aimed at mass market consumers, and at costs running into the hundreds of millions of dollars per film. An important additional point is that it would be overly simplistic to say that the films are direct adaptations of particular comics. While the characters of Thor, Odin, Loki and co that appear on screen are evolutions of Lee and Kirby creations, most of the films could best be described as being informed by the comics rather than based on any single run of issues.[119]

A more useful way of considering the process of adaptation in this context is as an activity that takes place against a backdrop of pretexts and metanarratives. This is the approach taken by John Stephens and Robyn McCallum in their analysis of the way old stories, including myth, are retold to children. They make the key observation that while any retelling must exist in relation to some kind of source, 'this is only sometimes identifiable as a specific work, and stories may lose or accrete elements as they are refashioned over time'.[120] For Stephens and McCallum, retellings of old stories are the result of interaction between three elements: the known story, in whatever form it may be; the operating metanarratives within the culture of the teller; plus the form chosen to tell the story. This is a useful way of framing Marvel's adaptations, and I will bear in mind all these points in attempting to clarify what the MCU is doing. But again, I fear that in itself it is too simplistic to account for the matrix of forces in operation when older storytelling is remediated to suit the needs of a comic book publisher, and then after 50 years of haphazard evolution, is adapted once more to satisfy a Hollywood studio system with radically

[119] The closest we get to this is *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Waititi 2022), which is based substantially on Jason Aaron's *Thor: God of Thunder* arc (2012–14), which introduced the film's villain and his weapon, the Necrosword, as well as Aaron's run as editor of *The Mighty Thor* from 2014–19, during which time Jane Foster became The Mighty Thor after being diagnosed with cancer. However, the film is still only loosely based on these comic books, with all of the dialogue and most of the specific plot points coming from the screenwriters.

[120] John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), p. 114.

different needs, and with all the additional forces of influence that the change of format implies. Some of these forces have already been mentioned – for example, the necessity of making enough money at the box office to make good on the huge financial investment required – but there are many more that must be considered, from the requirement to have characters that will encourage people to purchase toys to the genuine desire of the film makers to satisfy newcomers as well as the most hard-core fans.

It is the multidirectional nature of these influences that makes the use of Actor-Network Theory a useful approach for this analysis. Before considering what this will mean, it is worth pausing to note that Bruno Latour, the theorist most closely associated with ANT, has cautioned that all the basic terms in the name are misleading. Actors should not be thought of as people acting on or influencing a process, but rather anything, living or not, that can affect it; the network is not a network in the sense of a group of forces acting together; finally, ANT is not a theory, but a framework with which to approach potential explanations of the way certain processes function.[121] It is in this sense of a framework that I use it – as a way to picture the process, as we analyse it, rather than to 'solve' it.

As a working model, I therefore treat the adaptation of Norse materials into the *Thor* films as a networked process in which different kinds of actants cooperate and compete to shape what ends up on screen. To keep that complexity tractable, I group the principal influences into three clusters: (1) Pre-texts, or the 'known story'; (2) Cultural atmosphere, or the wider climates and *imaginaries* in which production

[121] Bruno Latour, 'On Recalling ANT', keynote lecture, Lancaster University, 1997, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/resources/sociology-online-papers/papers/latour-recalling-ant.pdf> [accessed 19 November 2025].

and reception occur; and (3) Production engine, or the people, structures, and constraints that make films possible.

Cluster One: Pre-texts

The pre-texts power the narrative in the form of the myths as already told in their different versions, plus later mediations that become sources in their own right. The principal nodes in this cluster are:

- Eddic sources. The *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* exert clear, if not direct, influence. When Loki shears Sif's hair in the TV series *Loki*, the scene may have reached the script via intermediate retellings, but the idea for its inclusion comes from *Eddic* myth.[122]
- Retellings. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century popular versions of the myths created a canon of episodes and characterisations for readers and, in turn, for later creators who have used them as their source. To take one example, the comic book writer Walt Simonson has spoken of his childhood reading of H. A. Guerber.[123] The *Ragnarok* arcs from his time on the *Thor* comic become the basis for further adaptation in the film *Thor: Ragnarok*.
- Marvel Comics. Lee and Kirby's foundational work, along with later runs – especially the work of Simonson, J. Michael Straczynski, Al Ewing and Jason Aaron – are key pre-texts for the films. Odin's temper, the banishment motif, and the 'lesson in humility' framing are all Lee/Kirby signatures that the MCU re-stages.

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[122] *Loki*, season 1, episode 4, 'The Nexus Event', dir. Kate Herron (Disney+, 2021). See Chapter Four for a breakdown of this scene, and confirmation that the writers had Eddic myth in mind.
[123] Dw. Dunphy, 'The Popdose Interview: Walter Simonson (Part One: After the Gods Go to War)', *Popdose*, 28 August 2017 <https://www.popdose.com/the-popdose-interview-walter-simonson-part-one-after-the-gods-go-to-war/> [accessed 19 November 2025].

Cluster Two: Cultural atmosphere

The films are made and received inside cultural atmospheres that influence how the stories are told.

- Contemporary metanarratives. Shifting cultural values affect the development and reception of old stories. As we have seen, critics have read Thor's early thirst for retribution against the Frost Giants through a post-9/11 lens, while Waititi's response to Asgardian mythologising may be seen as his adoption of a post-colonialist lens to the story (see Chapter Three).
- The Old Norse/Viking imaginary. Operating between identifiable sources and broader cultural metanarratives is a looser, accreting 'Viking' or 'Old Norse' imaginary: a repertoire of recognisable signs and behaviours that can be used without recourse to specific medieval texts. This corresponds to Helen Young's observation that what circulates as 'the Middle Ages' in popular culture is shaped by accumulated forms of medievalism transmitted through earlier cultural representations.[124] Within this imaginary, such details function as shorthand. Thor's smashed mug and hearty cry of 'Another!' in *Thor* (2011) reads as appropriately 'Norse' because this shared cultural imaginary supplies a code of expected behaviour.

Cluster Three: Production engine

This cluster covers the creativity and craft that goes into making the best film and TV content possible, amid the structures and commercial pressures that enable and constrain the process.

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[124] Helen Young, *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015), pp. 2–3.

- Creative decisions. Writers, directors, designers, and actors have brought their own technique, taste, and talent to bear on the creation of the MCU. Loki's migration to his own series only became a possibility thanks to the popularity of the actor Tom Hiddleston in the role: an instance of a performer becoming an actant who alters network paths.
- Commercial imperatives. The necessity for movies to earn money for the studio at the box office, and the importance of toy lines to the overall profit, exert significant influence. As an example, Hela was blocked as a character in the second film, due to concerns that toy sales would not be sufficient.[125]
- MCU intertextual logic. The shared universe supplies requirements that individual films must service. As an example, the episode at the end of *Thor: Ragnarok* where Loki steals the Tesseract is not a creative choice from the director, but a move necessary to tee up the confrontation with Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*.

These clusters can in theory be examined at finer or broader levels of resolution: the Eddic sources, down to questions of edition, translation, or manuscript; individual retellings, through evidence of what their authors used as sources; the cultural imaginary, by tracing how specific visual or narrative tropes enter popular circulation; the production engine, via different drafts and shooting scripts. Additionally, these categories should not be viewed as being wholly discrete. The comics and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellings helped to create the cultural imaginary of the Old Norse or Viking imaginaries that later productions draw upon. I have placed *Wikipedia* articles on Norse myth within the cultural

[125] Robinson, Gonzales, and Edwards, *Reign of Marvel Studios*, 2023, p. 257.

atmosphere but they could equally be regarded as pre-texts. Used in this way, the model makes it possible to identify where clear pathways do exist between Old Norse sources and the twenty-first-century screen – and, just as importantly, where they do not. The methodological question that remains is how to gauge the effect of these clusters in operation. The following sections highlight two points of emphasis in Clusters One and Two.

Cluster One: Pre-texts:

We do not know exactly which texts Lee and Kirby consulted during their creation of *The Mighty Thor*. Jón Karl Helgason has summarised evidence showing that Kirby, in doing character design for the first story for *The Mighty Thor*, made use of some of his earlier work dating back to a story he worked on with Joe Simon in 1942 called *The Villain from Valhalla!* (*Adventure Comics* #75).[126] The author's point is convincing as far as it goes, but he does not consider the sources Lee and Kirby used for the many subsequent issues that required more grounding in Norse myth. The evidence for this remains fragmentary. Comic book writer and historian Mark Evanier remembers Kirby consulting a 'tattered old paperback' of myths, but he has been unable to provide further details.[127] Lee recalled reading a 'pocket book' containing versions of the myths that told him little beyond the fact that Thor had a hammer.[128] This could point towards Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* as the most likely source, but that particular text, which was indeed released in a 'pocketbook' edition, is so light on details in a 10-page section on Norse myth that it does not even

[126] Jón Karl Helgason, 'Nordic Gods and Popular Culture', in *Pre-Christian Religions of the North* II, pp. 217–30.
[127] Mark Evanier, 'Introduction', in Stan Lee and others, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 6 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).
[128] *Stan Lee Lecture*, video recording, Stan Lee Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, <https://digitalcollections.uwyo.edu/ahcpublic/StanLee/ahcav_08302_002.mp4> [accessed 5 December 2025].

mention Thor having a hammer![129] Stan Lee's brother Larry Lieber, who scripted some early stories, recalled that *Bulfinch's Mythology* was kept on hand at Marvel offices, suggesting it could have been the go-to source for company creatives.[130]

The uncertainty may matter less than it first appears. By the mid-1960s, the English-language canon of Norse myth had already been stabilised through a century of popular retellings. Certain myths – especially Baldr's death, Loki's punishment, and Ragnarǫk – recurred almost everywhere, along with a set of moral and psychological archetypes: Thor as crusading champion, Odin as Christianised All-father, Loki as the seductive but evil trickster. To assess the tradition of retellings, I therefore focus on seven representative works that helped shape modern receptions.

- Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable, or Stories of Gods and Heroes* (1855, later editions combined three volumes as *Bulfinch's Mythology*): Bulfinch's Norse material is brief, and made up of abridged versions of material in I. A. Blackwell's 1847 revision of *Northern Antiquities*, but I include it here because of its ubiquity as a reference work, including at Marvel.
- Annie Keary and Eliza Keary, *The Heroes of Asgard* (1857, and revised edn 1870): The first edition of the Kearys' book was pioneering, while the revised edition of 1870 kick-started the trend for retellings. Drawing on Thorpe's *Northern Mythology,* it set the pattern and moralising tone that many later authors followed.

[129] Hamilton, *Mythology*.
[130] Roy Thomas, 'A Conversation with Artist–Writer Larry Lieber', *Alter Ego*, 3.2 (October 1999) <https://www.twomorrows.com/alterego/articles/02lieber.html> [accessed 12 April 2025]. After making repeated inquiries, I have been unable to identify the book Evanier was referring to. I am grateful to Karen L. Green, Curator for Comics and Cartoons at Columbia University, for making requests for information on my behalf from figures with direct knowledge of Kirby's work, including Evanier himself, *Hand of Fire* author Charles Hatfield, and Paul Levitz, former president of DC Comics. Sadly, none could pinpoint the title of any books used by Kirby in his work on Thor.

- Hamilton Wright Mabie, *Norse Stories Retold from the Eddas* (1888): Drawing on Anderson, Mabie's clear prose style presents the Norse myths as both entertaining and morally instructive.[131]
- H. A. Guerber, *Myths of Northern Lands* (1895): Guerber's work is notable for drawing on many secondary sources, and for presenting the myths as part of a broader 'northern' tradition. Its wide circulation ensured that her version of the Norse myths became a standard reference.
- Padraic Colum, *The Children of Odin* (1920): As a poet, Colum gave the stories a distinctive cadence while retelling what was by now a familiar canon of tales.[132]
- Ingri d'Aulaire and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, *Norse Gods and Giants* (1967): The d'Aulaires' beautifully illustrated children's book became a mid-century classic. With bold, memorable images and vivid prose, it has remained popular to the present day.[133]
- Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths* (1980): Crossley-Holland's collection brought together scholarly rigour and accessible prose. Divided into short chapters and supported by notes that are just as readable as the stories themselves, it has influenced writers including Gaiman.[134]

One further point deserves emphasis. While each reteller aimed to present a distinctive version for a new audience, in practice they borrowed not from the Eddic texts themselves, but from earlier English-language retellings. A linguistic

[131] Hamilton Wright Mabie, *Norse Stories, Retold from the Eddas* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1882).
[132] Padraic Colum, *The Children of Odin* (New York: Macmillan, 1920)
[133] Ingri d'Aulaire and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, *Norse Gods and Giants* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). It was republished in 2023 with a glowing introduction by the author Michael Chabon.
[134] Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths* (London: Penguin, 1980)

fingerprint may serve to illustrate the point. In the story of the journey of Þórr to Jǫtunheimar, Þjálfi is described as carrying a bag of provisions. The Old Norse word in the *Prose Edda* is *nestbaggi,* literally a food bag or knapsack.[135] From the eighteenth century, English-language retellers repeatedly render this as 'wallet'. Percy chose this word in *Northern Antiquities* (1770), at a time when according to the OED 'wallet' was commonly used to mean a pack for provisions.[136] Pigott (1839), Dasent (1842), Blackwell (1847) and Thorpe (1851) all follow suit. The Keary sisters, using Thorpe as a source, likewise adopt 'wallet' in *Heroes of Asgard* (1857). Perhaps this was still a natural choice. While the OED notes that by the nineteenth century 'wallet' by now had its modern meaning of a container for foldable money, there is at least one example around this time where it is used in the older sense, in an 1858 work by William Duthie, entitled *A Tramp's Wallet*. By the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the persistence is harder to understand. Goddard (1871), Augusta Larned (1878), Helen Zimmern (1882), Annette Davey (1886), Ruth J. Pitt (1893), and Guerber (1895) all use 'wallet'. In the twentieth century, so too do Abbie Farwell Brown (1902), E. M. Wilmot-Buxton (1908), Colum (1920), Reginald Couzens (1922), Amy Cruse (1925), F. H. Lee (1938), and even post-war writers such as Hosford (1952), Nancy Wilson Ross (1959), and Roger Lancelyn Green (1960).[137] What began as a natural eighteenth-

[135] Faulkes notes no manuscript variants in this detail from Snorri's story. See Faulkes, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, pp. 38–42, chs. 45–46, p. 127; Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic–English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), s.v. 'nestbaggi'.
[136] Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), s.v. 'wallet'.
[137] Percy, *Northern Antiquities*, p. 86; Pigott, *A Manual of Scandinavian Mytho*logy, p. 129; Dasent, *The Prose or Younger Edda*, p. 57; Mallet, Paul Henri, *Northern Antiquities,* trans. by Thomas Percy, rev. by I. A. Blackwell (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), p. 436; Thorpe, *Northern Mythology vol. 1*, p. 68; Keary and Keary, *Heroes of Asgard*, p. 74; Goddard, *Wonderful Stories from Northern Lands*, p. 56; Augusta Larned, *Tales from the Norse Grandmother (The Elder Edda)* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1881), p. 260; Helen Zimmern, *Tales from the Edda* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1882), p. 48; Annette L. Davey, *Old Tales and Legends for Young People* (London: London Literary Society, 1886), p. 17; Ruth J. Pitt, *The Tragedy of the Norse Gods* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), p. 136; Guerber, *Myths of Northern Lands,* p. 71; Abbie Farwell Brown, *In the Days of Giants*

century translation choice had become, by the mid-twentieth, a telltale marker. By the time Marvel's creators encountered the myths, the material available to them had already been filtered through generations of English-language adaptations, in a body of literature that had become self-reinforcing, visible in the choice of stories and characterisation, and evident down to the level of linguistic detail.

Cluster Two: Cultural atmosphere:

To assess the *imaginary* of the Old Norse gods and the Viking Age – the cluster of circulating ideas forming the cultural understanding of the period – a similar strategy is adopted. Since it would be impossible to reconstruct every influence on writers, directors, or designers, I rely on a concise grid of cultural touchpoints that were accessible in the decade preceding *Thor* (2011).

- Douglas Adams, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* (1988).[138] In many ways a precursor to Gaiman's *American Gods* (see below), Adams's comic novel imagines the Norse gods as forgotten throwbacks, living diminished lives in the modern world.
- *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007).[139] By introducing The Asgard as a benevolent alien race led by Thor, this popular television series presented a science-fiction version of the gods.

(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), p. 67; E. M. Wilmot-Buxton, *Stories of Norse Heroes* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1908), p. 84; Colum, *The Children of Odin*, p. 111; Reginald B. Couzens, *The Stories of the Months and Days* (London: Blackie and Son Limited, 1922), p. 127; Amy Cruse, *The Book of Myths* (London: Harrap, 1925), p. 86; F. H. Lee, *The Children's Norse Tales* (London: George G. Harrap & Co, 1938), p. 28; Hosford, *Thunder of the Gods*, p. 29; Nancy Wilson Ross, *Thor's Visit to the Land of the Giants* (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 29; Roger Lancelyn Green, *The Saga of Asgard* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 59.

[138] Douglas Adams, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* (London: Heinemann, 1988).

[139] *Stargate SG-1*, created by Jonathan Glassner and Brad Wright (USA/Canada: Showtime/Sci-Fi Channel, 1997–2007).

- *DK Eyewitness: Viking* (1997).[140] This heavily illustrated reference book combined archaeology, social history, and myth in a visually compelling format. Reprinted internationally, it had a role in shaping expectations about what Viking culture looked like, including the pantheon of Norse gods.
- Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (2001). A major commercial and critical success, the novel reimagines Norse deities as surviving in the modern world. The novel, which won both the Hugo and Nebula awards, introduced the Norse gods to gritty English-language fantasy fiction.
- *Age of Mythology* (2002).[141] This real-time strategy game reached a global digital audience and presented Odin, Thor, and Loki as selectable 'major gods', influencing a generation's understanding of myth through gaming.
- *Wikipedia* (archived 2008). During pre-production on *Thor* in 2008, producer Kevin Feige and writer Craig Kyle conducted 'online-research-fuelled analyses' to compare the Marvel Comics versions of the gods with their mythological counterparts.[142] In practice, *Wikipedia* was likely their first port of call. Because *Thor* (2011) established the world-building for the MCU's Asgard, I have used the archived 2008 pages on 'Norse Mythology'. 'Odin', 'Thor', and 'Loki' as a final checkpoint.[143]

[140] James Graham-Campbell, *Eyewitness: Viking* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1994).
[141] *Age of Mythology*, developed by Ensemble Studios, published by Microsoft Game Studios (Microsoft Windows, 2002).
[142] Bennett and Terry, *The Story of Marvel Studios*, vol. 1, p. 74.
[143] Archived versions of relevant pages as they appeared on 1 January 2008: 'Norse Mythology', *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Norse_mythology&oldid=181428408>, 'Thor', *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Thor&oldid=180889398, 'Loki', *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Loki&oldid=181394087, 'Odin', *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Odin&oldid=181071451> [accessed 5 November 2025].

Taken together, these examples reflect the kinds of texts that screenwriters, designers, and audiences might reasonably have encountered and through which ideas about the Norse gods circulated in the early 2000s.

Marvelising the myths

When Arnold wrote about Marvel's relationship to Norse myth in 2011, he was referring to what was, at the time, a 50-year history of Thor as conceived, written, pencilled, inked, coloured, animated and eventually filmed as a superhero. The adventure began in 1962 when Thor was introduced as 'the most exciting super-hero of all time' in a three-part story called *The Stone Men from Saturn*, devised and plotted by Lee, with pencil drawings by Kirby and dialogue by Lieber.[144] In this first bite at giving Thor an origin story, Donald Blake, an American medical doctor with an injured leg is vacationing in Norway when he catches sight of the Stone Men, who have landed as the advance party to a full invasion force. The frightened Blake makes a cumbersome escape, only to become trapped in a cavern. After losing his walking stick, he finds an old cane and in frustration, strikes it against a boulder blocking his path. The cane transforms into the enchanted hammer Mjolnir, and in striking it, Blake becomes The Mighty Thor, complete with super-human strength, and the ability to fly. As he explains in that first appearance, 'There! I release my whirling hammer for a split-second, catching the unbreakable thong, and then -- I am pulled along after it like the tail of a rocket!!'[145]

[144] Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Larry Lieber, 'The Stone Men from Saturn', *Journey into Mystery*, no. 83 (August 1962), repr. in *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2017, Kindle edn).
[145] Ibid., p. 10.

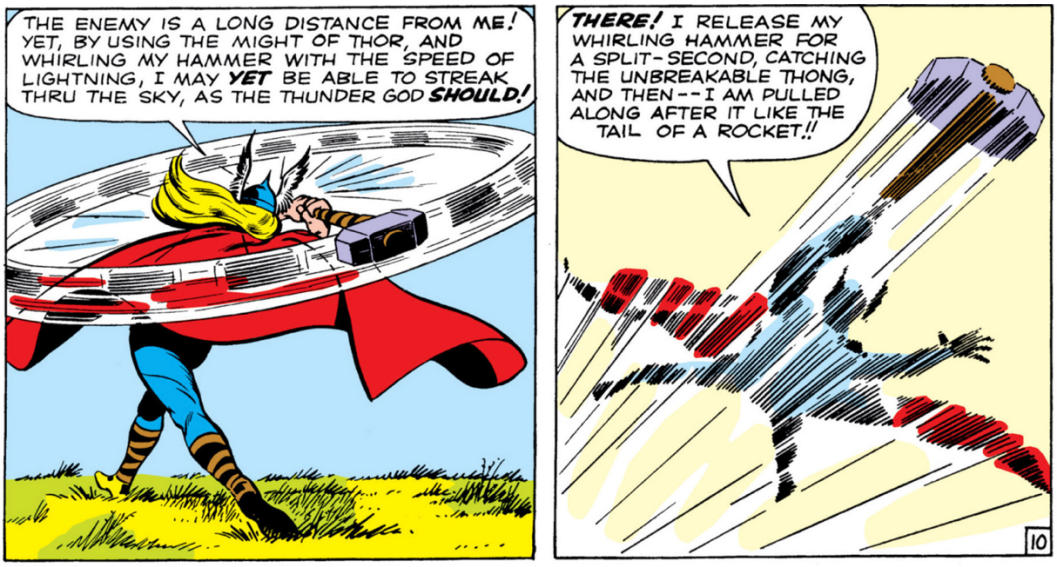


Figure 1: Thor discovers the power of flight through Mjolnir, 'Journey into Mystery' no. 83 (August 1962). © Marvel Comics. Thor is still in self-discovery mode in this early panel, testing what the hammer can do and realising, in the process, that it can carry him through the air.

He easily defeats the Stone Men and the basic set-up is in place. Blake and his alter-ego return to New York City and together help protect the locals by means medical and mythological, much to the confusion of Blake's practice nurse Jane Foster, whose unrequited love for the doctor is soon transferred to the more dynamic Thor.

Thor's key role in the Marvel world is as protector of humanity. Indeed, his power is explicitly linked with his worthiness to perform this function – as the inscription on his hammer hints: 'Whosover holds this hammer if he be worthy shall possess the power of… Thor.'[146] Since then, Thor has gone on to have this strength and dedication tested by myriad foes, including several that are familiar from Norse myth. Among these Eddic antagonists have been Loki, who in the Marvel universe was raised as his brother, only to later learn that he is, in fact, the son of the Frost Giant king Laufey; Hela, though in the films she is revealed to be Odin's daughter, rather than Loki's; and Surtur, the fire demon with the flaming sword. Others have been decidedly more earth-bound, including the New York-based super-villain

[146] Lee, Kirby, and Lieber, 'The Stone Men from Saturn'.

Zarrko the Tomorrow Man (#86), the automaton Replicus (#141) and The Rats of Central Park (#364), at a time when Thor had been transformed by Loki into a frog. In the early years of the series, Thor was also regularly enlisted to counter threats perceived from a specifically American perspective – notably, communist despots in South Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.[147] And in many of the early issues there are threats to America and the world as a whole from nuclear weapons – not a surprise, perhaps, given that the series launched only months before the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, amid escalating Cold War tensions. From 1963, Thor also appeared regularly in a new crossover title devised by Lee, *The Avengers*, as part of a team known as Earth's mightiest heroes. For the next few years he would continue to have this dual presence in his own comic book – renamed *The Mighty Thor* from issue #126, in March 1966 – and in Marvel's wider universe, where he fought shoulder-to-shoulder with Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America and others.

As noted above, a separate series called *Tales of Asgard* ran alongside the main stories for four years. Kirby saw in *Tales of Asgard* a platform to explore Asgard, at a time when the majority of Thor's adventures were on Earth.[148] Lee did not have the same depth of interest. While he would later remember researching the essentials –'Before starting the series we stuffed ourselves to the gills with Norse mythology,' he told one reader[149] – he also made it clear that the decision to co-opt Thor was more about mining an untapped source for a new character than any particular interest in the Eddic Thor.

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[147] As early as Thor's second appearance, *Journey into Mystery*, no. 84 (September 1962), he is taking on the Executioner, a Communist dictator in South America; repr. in *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).
[148] Mark Evanier, 'Introduction', in Stan Lee and others, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 6 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).
[149] Will Murray, 'Introduction', in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 9 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).

> It happened when I was a guest on a New York radio show. The interviewer kept referring to our colorful costumed cavorters as our generation's new mythology. Then, when he asked what new creation we were preparing to unleash upon the defenseless reading public, it all came together! Enter the world of myth. Come up with a god! Next came the hard part. What god would we select? I recalled studying tales of Roman gods and Greek gods, but there hadn't been much attention paid to the Norse gods, whom I felt were possibly the most dramatic of all. So, when I re-read the saga of Thor, God of Thunder, and his mighty hammer, I knew I had found our next super hero![150]

Lee's remark that these characters constituted a kind of "new mythology" is revealing, suggesting that superhero comics were beginning to take on a myth-like scope, with recurring figures and expanding narrative worlds that audiences could return to for both entertainment and meaning. Within this framework, the Norse material functioned less as a fixed source than as a point of departure. By 1967, Kirby had exhausted his source of information on the Norse myths, and *Tales of Asgard* came to an end. With Thor's mythic provenance now established, Lee, Kirby and subsequent writers and artists put increasing focus on the character's life in Asgard. Dr Blake was written out, and so was, for the time being, Foster, whose on-off relationship with Thor had met with opposition from Odin.

During the Lee-Kirby years, across the main strip and *Tales of Asgard*, writers occasionally turned to Norse myth for characters, including Balder the Brave (debut #85 1962), the Lady Sif (debut #102, 1964), and Fenris Wolf (debut #114 1965). Since then, many different authors and artists have worked on Thor's

[150] Lee, 'Introduction', *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 1.

continuing journey. Notable among them have been Simonson, who wrote and drew the strip from 1983 to 1987.[151] During this hugely popular run, Simonson created story arcs around mythic characters who had already featured, including Surtur, but also introduced figures of his own invention, including some with at least a vague connection to the myths, like Malekith, the king of the Dark Elves. The editorial practice evident in the comic books – take whatever works from the myths to suit immediate storytelling requirements – has only been extended as the character has taken on a key role as part of the MCU: a series now recognised as a success story on an epic scale, but one that had looked like a huge gamble when the company made its first foray into making movies.

From page to screen

The *Thor* movie in 2011 was the fourth feature released by Marvel Studios, which had been set up in 1996 not to make its own films, but with the much more modest goal of selling options for films based on Marvel Comics characters to major studios. Marvel's shift in strategy towards making its own films came in 2005 when company executive David Maisel drove through a deal that secured financing of $525 million from the Wall Street bank Merrill Lynch, offering as collateral the rights to 10 characters still under Marvel's control.[152] Maisel calculated that the money would be enough to finance four movies, and thus give the company four chances to prove that a Marvel superhero franchise could work. As it happens, the gamble succeeded at the first attempt. *Iron Man* (2008), directed by Jon Favreau, produced by the studio's

[151] Simonson was both writer and penciller of the strip from issue nos. 337 to 367. From no. 368, Sal Buscema took over as artist, with Simonson continuing as lead writer until no. 382. See Walter Simonson, *Thor by Walter Simonson Omnibus* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2011).
[152] Sharon Waxman, 'Marvel Wants to Flex Its Own Heroic Muscles as a Moviemaker', *The New York Times*, 18 June 2007 <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/18/business/media/18marvel.html> [accessed 20 November 2025].

young creative head Feige and starring Robert Downey Jr as the charismatic Tony Stark, proved an enormous hit, taking $585 million against a budget of $188 million.[153] That success confirmed the appetite for superhero cinema and secured the studio's future. It also attracted the attention of Disney, which acquired Marvel Entertainment for $4 billion in 2009.

By that time Marvel had already released its first follow-up, *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) and had confirmed that the studio's strategy was to construct a connected diegesis across its films. The earliest sign of this was in a post-credits scene in *Iron Man*, where Stark encounters Nick Fury, the head of the intelligence agency S.H.I.E.L.D.[154] The connections were strengthened when Downey Jr made a cameo appearance in *The Incredible Hulk*. Marvel then released *Iron Man 2* (2010), followed by *Thor* (2011) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). These paved the way for the ensemble film *The Avengers* (2012), which united the franchise's central heroes alongside Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) and Clint Barton (Hawkeye). The film grossed $1.5 billion worldwide, making it, at the time, the third highest-grossing film ever.[155] The series has continued to expand, and is now organised into phases and sagas in order to keep track of its accumulating narrative. As of December 2025, the MCU comprises thirty-seven films, including the *Thor* and *Avengers* films noted above. Together these eight films including story elements of Norse myth have earned more than $10 billion at the global box office,

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[153] Box Office Mojo, 'Iron Man' <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0371746/> [accessed 22 November 2025].
[154] S.H.I.E.L.D. is an acronym for the clumsily-named Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division of a U.S.-based non-governmental counter-terrorism intelligence agency. The acronym is so contrived that it generates an extremely meta joke. In the pilot episode of the ABC series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, the character Grant Ward is asked what Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division actually means. He replies: 'It means someone really wanted our initials to spell out SHIELD.' *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, 'Pilot', dir. Clark Gregg (Marvel Television/ABC, 2013).
[155] *Box Office Mojo*, 'Marvel's The Avengers', <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0848228/> [accessed 22 November 2025].

contributing to an overall franchise return exceeding $30 billion.[156] Both Hemsworth (Thor) and Tom Hiddleston (Loki) will reprise their roles in the next ensemble instalment, *Avengers: Doomsday*, due for release in December 2026.[157]

Thanks to the success of the early films, it was not long before executives saw the potential in extending the franchise. Marvel Entertainment began producing TV shows featuring its characters in situations inspired by the MCU in 2010, before creative control passed into the hands of Feige's Marvel Studios, which began producing series that were canonically part of the MCU for Disney+, in 2021. These series have included *Loki*, devised by Michael Waldron, who was also the show's head writer for Season 1, released in 2021. Waldron handed over creative oversight to Eric Martin in Season 2, released in 2023. The 12 episodes let the character of Loki loose within the multiverse – a means for characters to interact across time as well as in their shared diegetic space.[158] While the umbrella term for the canonical material continues to be the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the series has expanded to incorporate content of many different kinds, including movie novelisations and tie-in comic books, video games, children's books exploring individual characters including Loki, Disney theme park experiences, and an immersive mixed-reality app for Apple Vision Pro. All of these feature characters from the MCU films but they are not regarded as canon. For reference, overall story arcs for the twin sagas that will end with *Avengers: Secret Wars* in December 2027 are as follows. (For production and reception details see Appendices 1 and 2; for summaries of individual

[156] Box office totals from *Box Office Mojo*, <Marvel Cinematic Universe, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchise/fr1026510677/> [accessed 22 November 2025].
[157] Jack Dunn, 'Tom Hiddleston on Loki's Return in "Avengers: Doomsday," Says His Time in the MCU Is "Not Over Yet"', *Variety*, 9 April 2025 <https://variety.com/2025/film/news/tom-hiddleston-loki-avengers-doomsday-1236365511/> [accessed 22 November 2025].
[158] See Appendix 2 for a breakdown of MCU TV series from 2021. Thor and Loki also appear in a number of episodes of the alternate-reality animated series *What If…?*, devised by A. C. Bradley (2021–25). As these episodes have no lasting knock-on effect on the wider universe, I have not considered them here.

films in the *Thor* and *Avengers* series, plus the two seasons of the TV series *Loki*, see Appendix 3).

The Infinity Saga: Marvel gradually introduces its main heroes and antagonists as well as the S.H.I.E.L.D. security agency. From these introductions, the narrative builds towards a crisis centred around six Infinity Stones. These are particles formed at the Big Bang, and possessing awesome, cumulative power related to Space, Mind, Reality, Power, Time, and Soul. As the core Avengers team is assembled (Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hulk, Black Widow, Hawkeye), Phase 1 demonstrates the power of the Tesseract, later revealed to be a housing for the Space Stone, which attracts interest from a powerful being by the name of Thanos. Phase Two adds more Infinity Stones and more characters, chief among them Wanda Maximoff, Vision and the Guardians of the Galaxy team, led by Peter Quill and featuring Thanos's daughter Gamora. Phase Three sees the fracturing of the Avengers over the question of whether they should fall under governmental jurisdiction, with Iron Man and Cap placed on opposite sides in *Captain America: Civil War*. Meanwhile, new heroes like Doctor Strange, Ant-Man, Spider-Man, Black Panther and Captain Marvel make their MCU debuts, and Asgard is destroyed in *Thor: Ragnarok*. A two-part resolution comes in *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers*: *Endgame*. In the former, Thor fails to kill Thanos, who succeeds in destroying half of all life in the universe in a moment the MCU calls The Snap. In the latter, a successful 'time heist' sees the Avengers, including Thor, bring back those who were removed five years later in The Blip. The successful operation proves costly, however, with Black Widow, Iron Man, Vision and Gamora among those killed, while Captain America takes advantage of his return to an older timeline to live out the life he missed out on. Like Cap, Loki takes advantage of the creation of a

separate timeline to escape to a new life, while Thor takes the role of the wanderer instead of helping to build New Asgard on Earth.

The Multiverse Saga: With so many of the main characters removed, the question of who will lead the Avengers becomes a key theme, along with explorations of grief and trauma in the wake of The Blip – particularly in the TV series *WandaVision,* and later in *Black Panther 2: Wakanda* Forever. As Spider-Man refuses the call to lead, a generational shift is ongoing, with John Walker and then Sam Wilson assuming the role of Captain America, Kate Bishop becoming the new Hawkeye, and Shuri taking on the Black Panther mantle. Meanwhile, Jane Foster becomes The Mighty Thor and fights alongside Thor in *Thor: Love and Thunder*, before succumbing to cancer and entering Valhalla. As the saga progresses, Loki is unleashed on a different timeline in a two-season TV series, as he and female Loki variant Sylvie together uncover a new villain in the shape of He Who Remains/Kang. The branches of this newly discovered multiverse are explored in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness*, and *Ant-Man and the Wasp*: *Quantumania*. After giving closure to The Guardians of the Galaxy team, including an alternate-timeline Gamora, the series de-emphasises the Kang storyline, and expands the franchise by welcoming more characters from Marvel Comics, including Deadpool and various X-Men – a move made possible by Disney's acquisition of Fox Studios in 2019.[159] As the series builds towards the expected twin finales of *Avengers: Doomsday* (2026) and *Avengers: Secret Wars* (2027), the three films released in 2025 show that issues of succession (*Captain America: Brave New*

[159] The Walt Disney Company, 'Disney's Acquisition of 21st Century Fox Will Bring an Unprecedented Collection of Content and Talent to Consumers Around the World', 20 March 2019, <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/disneys-acquisition-of-21st-century-fox-will-bring-an-unprecedented-collection-of-content-and-talent-to-consumers-around-the-world/> [accessed 3 December 2025].

World), leadership (*Thunderbolts**), and sacrifice (*The Fantastic Four*: *First Steps*) continue to dominate.

Narrative style

As may perhaps be seen form the above summaries, the narrative structure of the MCU as a whole bears comparison to *entrelacement*, a technique associated with medieval French romance, and one which was employed by Tolkien.[160] This narrative form sees different storylines unfold in parallel, leading to an audience experience that means attention is continually breaking off and resuming. As in *The Lord of the Rings*, where much of the quest is divided among separate companies whose paths cross only at decisive moments, and where overall understanding of the whole plot is denied to the characters, and only evident to the reader in retrospect, the MCU presents the tales of its heroes in what could be described as *þættir,* or individual story strands, rather than self-contained sagas. This is visible in individual films, and over the story arc as a whole. Without any omniscient narrator, the Infinity Stones function as a master-plot that neither the audience, nor any single on-screen character, can fully see. The Tesseract shifts from wartime *MacGuffin*,[161] to a S.H.I.E.L.D. asset in *Captain America*, then becomes Loki's conduit to power in *The Avengers*; the sceptre is wielded without anyone realising it houses the Mind Stone; the Aether is treated as a curse rather than the Reality Stone; and Doctor Strange guards what we are told only is a time device before its importance becomes clear. Each of these items is introduced within what are at first individual strands, so that only at certain key moments do threads intertwine and the larger pattern comes into

[160] See Tom Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 90.
[161] Before its significance is revealed, it is a classic plot-driving object whose intrinsic nature matters less than the motivations it triggers. For the term *MacGuffin*, see Alfred Hitchcock, interviewed in François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, rev. edn (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), pp. 88–89.

focus. That interlaced effect is only partly a matter of design. The conclusion of the *Infinity Saga* was not fixed when the early films were made, and later entries sometimes had to retrofit earlier gestures – most explicitly when Hela in *Thor: Ragnarok* exposes the Infinity Gauntlet glimpsed in Odin's vault in *Thor* (2011) as a fake. The result is a mosaic where meaning is seen in retrospect as part of a design that was waiting to be recognised.

Chapter Two: World-building, magic, and humour

> THOR: Your ancestors called it magic and you call it science. Well, I come from a place where they are one and the same thing.
>
> – *Thor*[1]

The chapter examines the MCU's construction of its mythic worlds, and use of key themes and effects. The chapter opens with a brief prologue that sketches an alternative cinematic trajectory – what might have been had Hollywood pursued Thor earlier – and uses this hypothetical case to show how ANT will be applied in the discussions that follow. The analysis goes on to track the provenance and movement of motifs with roots in Norse tradition present in the MCU's cosmology and world-building.

Tracing adaptations: Stan Lee's *Hammer of Thor* (1981)

One thing we can be quite sure about when it comes to the messy history of Marvel, Hollywood and the Norse myths is that if the first film featuring Thor had been executed in the manner originally envisioned by Lee, the task of tracing its medieval roots would have been a lot more straightforward. Lee's original pitch for a film called *The Hammer of Thor*, outlined in an unpublished treatment written in 1981, was for a live-action re-hash of the kind of stories he and Kirby had created together in the Marvel Comics days. The outline is preserved in a slim folder in box number 66 of the Stan Lee archives at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming.[2] The document's 17 typed, double-spaced pages, plus cover sheet, are

[1] *Thor*, 01:14:05.
[2] Stan Lee, The Hammer of Thor, Stan Lee Papers, Box 66, Folder 12, 'Manuscripts by Stan Lee, ca. 1950–2009', American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

written in a style instantly recognisable from Lee's comic book writing, peppered with *ye's*, *thee's*, and the vaguely Shakespearean, *King James Bible*-infused rhythms Lee loved to use.[3] Still, perhaps only the most hard-core fans could read it and pine what might have been. In the outline, Lee imagines a tale of good vs. evil, leavened by a love story.

> For this is a saga of evil most foul, of monsters and magic who seek to shatter the fabric of the universe itself! Yea, but 'tis also a saga of love and devotion, of courage and faith which not even Hela, Goddess of death, can destroy! For, what can surpass the love of father for son, brother for brother, or godling for mortal? Come ye now to the Home of the Gods, where adventure and epic await thee. Join the mighty Thor in his awesome quest to regain the Imperial Sceptre of Power, to destroy the monstrous many-lived Mangog, to rescue the star-crossed Enchantress who hath won his heart, and to save the cosmos entire from the unthinkable threat of Ragnarok - - the day upon which both heaven and earth shall crumble and perish![4]

The pitch goes on to introduce Dr Donald Blake, who confides to his fiancée, Jane Foster that he has been suffering from disquieting dreams. The doctor is summoned out of the blue to Norway to save an Olympic athlete and after

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[3] It is notable that Lee's rationale for giving his Asgardian characters an elevated register parallels Tolkien's use of differentiated linguistic modes in *The Lord of the Rings*. As Lee put it: 'When Thor was up in Asgard visiting Odin the king, the supreme god, I had to give Odin authentic supreme-god expressions. Odin couldn't say, "Hey, Thor, knock it off, would you." He had to say things like "Cease and desist, thou base varlet." The words had to sound right. The reader had to accept them.' Tolkien makes essentially the same point in a letter to Hugh Brogan, September 1955, where he explains his use of archaism and inverted syntax in the speech of Théoden. Lee lacked Tolkien's expertise, and Tolkien would almost certainly have dismissed his efforts as 'bogus' rather than the 'genuine antique'; nevertheless, the underlying motivation is strikingly similar. See Stan Lee, 'Interview', *Oui* magazine (1977), Stan Lee Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Box 3, Folder 10: 'Interviews with Stan Lee, 1970–1989'. Compare with 'Letter 171', *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 220–22.

[4] Lee, 'Introduction', *The Hammer of Thor* (Stan Lee Papers).

successfully completing the surgery, wanders off and finds himself in a cave, where he discovers a hammer. Possessed of a feeling of destiny, Blake reaches out to grasp it and is transformed into The Mighty Thor. Lee introduces the main characters – names familiar from the Norse myths like Thor, Odin, Loki, and Hela, with additions from the imaginations of Lee and Kirby, such as The Enchantress, Mangog and Karnilla the Norn Queen. The plot revolves around the loss of the Sceptre Royal. Balder's job is to watch over it, Loki's obsession is to get his hands on it, and the wearying Odin's wish is to pass it on to one of his sons. Loki tricks Thor into believing that Odin has agreed to his request to return to Earth to see Jane and a furious All-father puts Loki in charge while he goes into the 'Odin-sleep'. Loki employs the seductive powers of the Enchantress to get the Sceptre from Balder, uses it to take the throne and orders a squad of Asgardians to Earth to take Thor into custody. Thor will not submit, returns to Asgard, with Jane by his side, and does battle with the monstrous Mangog. Jane is killed and Loki is about to suffer the same fate before Thor intervenes to rescue him. Odin awakens, realises his mistake, declares Thor shall be his heir and exiles Loki. Thor somewhat guiltily finds himself falling in love with Sif, only to discover that she and Jane were the same woman all along! The Nine Realms are at peace and Thor has sidestepped any suggestion of indifelity, but Odin still has a nagging worry about Loki and Lee ends the pitch with a clear eye on the potential of Loki still being alive, with his closing words being, 'Stand by for the sequel!'[5]

To the best of my knowledge, Lee's outline has long been forgotten, if it was ever seen outside Marvel offices at all, yet it will nevertheless feel instantly familiar to comic books fans. The origin story for Thor is essentially the original set-up, in

[5] Lee, *The Hammer of Thor*, p. 18.

combination with the retread Lee came up with as a way of writing out Dr Blake. The MacGuffin is the Imperial Scepter of Supremacy from *Journey Into Mystery* #123 in 1965, while the Enchantress and Mangog made their debuts in, respectively, issue #103 in 1964 and #154 in 1968. The plot itself is a mish-mash of elements from those early years: Odin's objection to Thor's love for Jane; Loki's tricking of Thor and habit of forming evil alliances; Thor being accused of disloyalty and banished to Earth; Odin's realisation that he had been unfair to his son. The little that remains here from Norse mythology would have been easy to account for via the kind of layering process Hutcheon has suggested. Retellers working up until the mid-twentieth century adapted the myths in popular editions for children and adults, in a line of descent we can trace back directly at least as far as Thorpe and Anderson. Lee and Kirby mined the work of these modern retellers and anthologisers for details they could introduce into the strip, and the film Lee had in mind would have given life to Kirby's fantastic drawings.

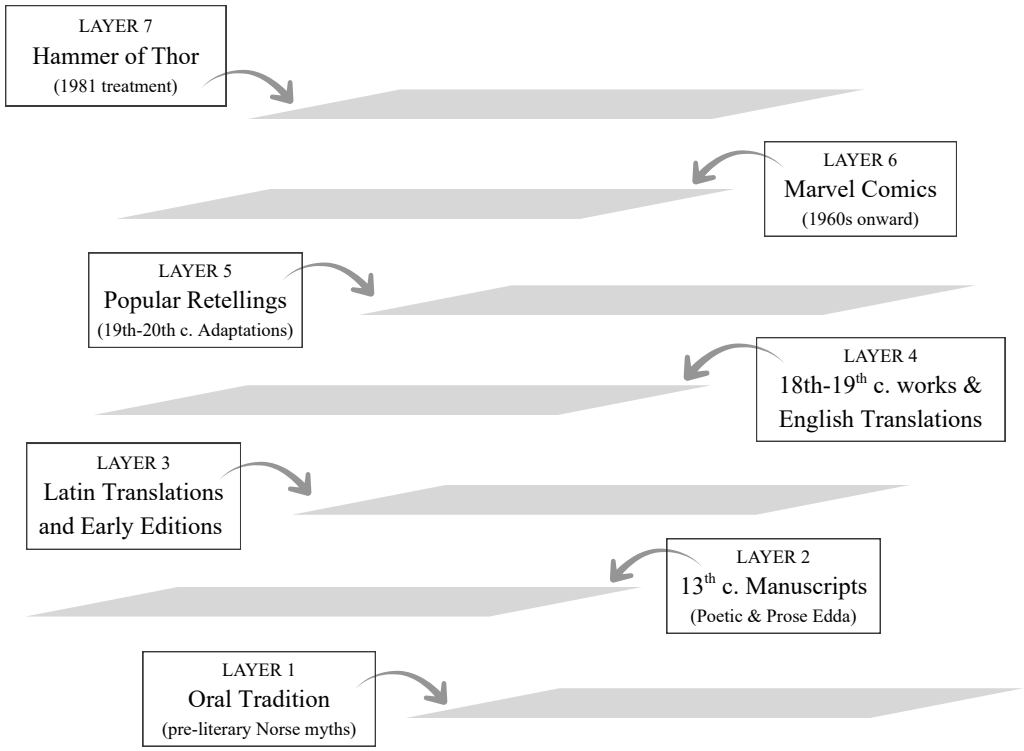


Figure 2: Hypothetical 'layered'process of adaptation.

Illustration of a simplified, hypothetical analysis of a layered model of adaptation applied to 'The Hammer of Thor' film treatment.[6]

In summary, the film (layer 7) would be an adaptation of plotlines and characters from comic books (layer 6) that, mixed in with some comic book staples and the vibrant imagination of the pair, were adaptations of the work of retellers (layer 5) that were themselves based on earlier retellings and books about the myths (roughly, level 4), that were based on earlier translations and editions (roughly level 3) of the eddic material (level 2), which captured stories that had previously existed in oral form (level 1).

[6] All diagrams created in Canva by the author.

Lee's vision for a movie was never realised and he would have to wait another three decades before Branagh's *Thor* (2011) brought his version to the big screen. As it turns out, there are plenty of similarities between Lee's outline and the film as it was produced, from the characters (impetuous Thor, guileful Loki, bad-tempered Odin) to plot points like Thor's banishment to Earth, and Odin's weariness. However, there is even more that is different, including the jettisoning of the origin story and Thor's former identity as Dr Blake; the addition of Thor's battle with the Frost Giants and Loki's discovery that he is the child of their king; the repeated attempts to provide rational explanations for the existence of Asgard and the gods in the modern world; the introduction of S.H.I.E.L.D as a shadowy security force; the appearance of other superheroes like Hawkeye; and a much more comedic tone. Beyond these obvious changes, there are multiple reasons why the analysis of the MCU's *Thor* requires a more complex framework other than a layered model of influence. Even before 2011, the character existed within a vast archive that was continually being reworked and added to, and the filmmakers had three further decades of comics on which they could draw. As noted above, *Thor* does not adapt any specific run but instead assembles a plot that feels consistent with Thor's long history: accepting the basic set-up from the 1960s, borrowing the humour developed after the Lee–Kirby era and echoing some of the visual and tonal choices of J. Michael Straczynski's relaunch of *Thor* (vol. 3, 2007–09). Later comic book creators, who in turn influenced the film makers, complicate matters further by returning to retellings of Norse myth as their own sources. We have seen that Simonson, for example, was influenced by Guerber's *Myths of Northern Lands* (1895). Simonson's Thor is, in turn, quite clearly an influence on the makers of the film – most obviously in the fact that the lead character sports a beard, which is

something no one thought to give him until Simonson.[7] Other writers leave their sources in plain sight: Al Ewing's *The Immortal Thor* (2023–25) opens with a quotation from Thorpe's 1866 translation of *Vǫluspá* (st. 33) and uses names such as Vuer and Hloriddi, forms close to heiti of Þórr that rarely, if ever, appear in modern retellings.[8] Others, by contrast, avoided specific books and drew instead on their general cultural knowledge, backed by specific checks.[9] The result is a dense, overlapping web of influences in which no single line of descent from Old Norse sources to the MCU can be isolated.

A second set of accumulating influences operates alongside this one: three further decades of mediations, adaptations, and appropriations of Norse myth in popular culture. Between 1981 and 2011, dozens of new books on Norse mythology appeared for general readers, alongside accessible translations of both *Eddas*. Public knowledge of the Viking Age was further shaped by major exhibitions, including *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* (Smithsonian, 2000–2002) and *Vikings in the British Isles* (British Museum, 2002), as well as similar displays across Europe. To these can be added the steady presence of fantasy and science fiction drawing on Norse material, and perhaps even the diffuse influence of Tolkien. The importance of

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[7] Simonson's influence on Thor in Marvel Comics was recognised when he was given an extra's role in the first *Thor* film.

[8] Al Ewing and Martín Cóccolo, *The Immortal Thor* #1 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2023). Hlórríði appears as a name for Þórr in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 2), *Hymiskviða* (sts. 4, 16, 27, 29, 37), *Lokasenna* (st. 54) and *Þrymskviða* (sts. 7, 8, 14, 31), as well as in the skaldic poems *Vellekla* and *Víkarsbálkr.* See Taggart, *How Thor Lost His Thunder*, p. 43. Vuer was perhaps taken from Véurr, which is found in *Hymiskviða* (sts. 11, 17, 21) and *Vǫluspá* (st. 54).

[9] J. Michael Straczynski, reply to author query on source books on Norse myth, Patreon message, *The Joe Page*. 'No, that's not really how I work. I'm not looking to retell stories, or kind of copy-paste retellings while filing off the serial numbers. The reason people hire me is because I tend to go my own way. In terms of Norse mythology sui generis, I was deeply interested in mythology in junior high school and all through high school, in particular Norse, Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Indian, Japanese and Chinese. I read everything I could get my hands on, and a good chunk of that is still rattling around inside my head. So being already pretty well acquainted with it, my pattern was to write the stories I wanted to write, and if I bumped into a gap in knowledge, go online to search that one particular thing, get the information, and come back and keep writing.' <https://www.patreon.com/c/TheJoePage/home>. Access restricted to subscribers.

this can be seen in the way Thor and his fellow warriors are coded as Viking Age heroes, while being referred to as 'Space Vikings'. While Lee and Kirby's own sense of what constituted a Viking hero was likely shaped by the swashbuckling medievalism of *The Vikings* (1958) and the short-lived television spin-off *Tales of the Vikings* (1959–60), the creative team behind *Thor* would have been further influenced by the shaggier medievalisms of late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century cinema – films like *The 13th Warrior* (1999), *Beowulf* (2007), and *Pathfinder* (2007) – as well as, perhaps, the comic register of Terry Jones's *Erik the Viking* (1989).[10]

More significant is the emergence of the MCU's larger, interlocking mythology, which exerts a gravitational pull on each new instalment. This influence is already visible in *Thor* via the introduction of Hawkeye, the S.H.I.E.L.D. subplot surrounding the hammer, and Loki's fall/escape from the Bifrost (a scene that prepares the ground for his re-emergence as the antagonist in *The Avengers*). These plot points only make full sense within the shared cinematic universe. By contrast, a hypothetical *Hammer of Thor* film in the early 1980s would have occupied a far simpler narrative ecosystem. Superhero cinema at the time tended to tell straightforward tales of good vs. evil typified by *Superman* (1978).[11] Lee's own character breakdown for Thor reflects this simplicity:

> Thor is surely the handsomest, most heroic, most powerful, most dutiful son any doting super-God ever had. The poor guy doesn't lie, doesn't cheat,

[10] *The Vikings*, dir. Richard Fleischer (United Artists, 1958); *Tales of the Vikings* (Ziv Television Programs, 1959–60); *The 13th Warrior*, dir. John McTiernan (Touchstone Pictures, 1999); *Beowulf*, dir. Robert Zemeckis (Paramount Pictures, 2007); *Pathfinder*, dir. Marcus Nispel (20th Century Fox, 2007); *Erik the Viking*, dir. Terry Jones (Prominent Features/United International Pictures, 1989).
[11] *Superman*, dir. Richard Donner (Warner Bros., 1978).

> doesn't do drugs, and fights his fool head off for truth, justice, and the Asgardian way of life. One thing though -- he's great in the hay.[12]

Taken together, these overlapping influences – the Marvel archive and the rest of the known story, the wider Old Norse/Viking imaginary, and the growing sophistication of cinematic storytelling – create the kind of multi-directional network that makes ANT a suitable framework for the MCU's adaptations.

Authenticity markers

Having outlined the ANT-inspired framework, it is instructive to begin the analysis itself by acknowledging one type of mythic reference that the MCU uses relatively sparingly. These may be thought of as authenticity markers – features that evoke the flavour of Norse myth without necessarily transmitting much of substance. Tasked with introducing Asgard as a credible mythic realm, Branagh adopts a comparatively restrained approach in *Thor* (2011). Early in the film, Odin appears on his throne flanked by two ravens – a visual allusion to Huginn and Muninn (*Grímnismál*, st. 20; *Gylf.,* 38). Primarily, the birds serve the film as simple narrative shorthand, signalling 'Norseness' through one of its most recognisable signifiers. As it happens, they also serve a more subtle dramatic purpose. Throughout the film, whenever Odin occupies the throne, the ravens remain nearby; when Loki illegitimately takes his place, the ravens are absent. A less subtle example follows on Earth. When Thor smashes his coffee mug to the floor and shouts 'Another!', the gesture recalls popularised images of the imagined rowdiness of the *Einherjar* in Valhalla.

In terms of visual markers, the art direction of the first film cultivates what might be termed an Old Norse-adjacent aesthetic: an environment shaped by gold

[12] Lee, *Hammer of Thor*, p. 13.

surfaces, geometric architectures, and vaguely runic motifs, without committing to any historically grounded or consistent vision. This lightness of touch appears to have been a conscious design choice. As production designer Bo Welch notes, the visual world 'evolved into a minimalist architectural environment, with just a whiff of an ancient Nordic strain in the detailing, in order to ground it in Norse mythology'.[13] This balance is lost, however, in *Thor: The Dark World*, which brings a heavier hand to the use of medieval signifiers. Taylor, who came to the movie after directing several episodes of *Game of Thrones*,[14] leans into the aesthetics of a gritty, quasi-medieval world. The result is a version of Asgard that feels more densely populated with medievalist shorthand. Thus, the film features warriors training amid vaguely Romanesque architecture, golden runes drawn with geometric precision across ancient Asgardian texts, and a large-scale space funeral designed to evoke a Viking boat burial.



Figure 3: Runic symbols in 'Thor: The Dark World'

Pages from an ancient book pictured in Asgard, as Odin tells the story of the Dark Elves and the Convergence. 'Thor: The Dark World'. © Marvel Studios.

The latter sequence is striking, but it draws on modern cinematic tropes more than historical sources – especially in its use of a flaming arrow to ignite the burial, a

[13] *Thor* Production Notes (*Marvel Studios Press Kit*, 2011), p. 21.
[14] Taylor directed a total of nine episodes across Season 1 (2011) and Season 2 (2012).

flourish beloved of screenwriters.[15] In another example of a denial of difference, the film's production notes refer to the scenes of the film being in a downtown 'Medina' – a set described by Production Designer Charles Wood as 'the most historic part of the film'.[16]

Taika Waititi's *Thor: Ragnarok* largely abandons any attempt at Norse visual design. His Asgard is boldly stylised and overtly comic in tone during the court scenes, while outside the palace, Heimdall leads a resistance that unfolds in a sort of high-fantasy pastoral. He includes a few nods to mythic tradition in *Thor: Love and Thunder* – most notably the inclusion of Thor's chariot-pulling goats, Toothgnasher and Toothgrinder – but these are treated primarily as sources of comic relief. Other attempts to integrate Norse details are scattered across the series. Heimdall, for instance, is occasionally shown bearing a large horn – presumably an allusion to *Gjallarhorn*, which he is fated to blow at Ragnarǫk (*Gylf*., 51). It is visible in *Thor* and *Thor: The Dark World*, though it is never remarked upon. Both these films include scenes that gesture toward Asgardian mythic revelry, but neither attempts a culturally grounded depiction. In *The Dark World*, the main celebratory scene unfolds in the Medina, and juxtaposes two incongruous images: Fandral in a flirtatious, perhaps sexual, tableau with two women, while at the neighbouring table Volstagg entertains a group of children before echoing Thor's 'Another!' as he smashes his tankard. Much later in the overall narrative, the *Loki* TV series stages an evening of carousal in the bar of a train. Loki echoes the cry of 'Another!' as he calls

[15] It is perhaps not a coincidence that this motif – famous from *The Vikings* (1958) – is also used in *Game of Thrones*. See 'Walk of Punishment', season 3, episode 3, dir. David Benioff (HBO, 2013). At Hoster Tully's funeral, Edmure Tully fails to ignite the funeral boat with a flaming arrow, and his uncle, Ser Brynden "Blackfish" Tully, steps in to complete the ritual. On the lack of evidence for Vikings igniting ship burials with flaming arrows see Vrak Museum, 'Burned ships of the Viking Age' <https://www.vrak.se/en/news/news-2023/burned-ships-of-the-viking-age/> [accessed 5 December 2025].

[16] *Thor*: *The Dark World* Production Notes (Marvel Studios Press Kit, 2013), p. 21.

for more drink, before singing a rousing Norwegian song, 'Jeg Saler Min Ganger' designed to sound authentically Asgardian.[17] More subtly, British composer Natalie Holt uses a version of *Lokasenna* ['Loki's Quarrel'], translated into modern Icelandic, as the basis for a choral work that is heard in the Season 2 finale.[18] These examples provide atmospheric texture. Yet in other areas the films move beyond surface evocation and begin to echo the *Eddas* in ways that are structurally and thematically more significant.

Cosmology and world-building

While it would be hard to argue that the MCU's cosmology follows the *Eddas* in any systematic sense, the world-building inaugurated in Branagh's *Thor*, and largely followed throughout the series, bears more resemblance to the medieval sources than is often acknowledged.[19] From the carefully established relationship between the Æsir and humanity to the belief among the Asgardian warrior elite in an afterlife in Valhalla; from the existence of magic and the tendency to frame its use by males as

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[17] 'Lamentis', *Loki*, season 1, episode 3, dir. Kate Herron (2021). The song was adapted for the TV series by Erlend Nødtvedt and Benedicte Maurseth. For details see Liz Shannon Miller, 'Loki Showrunner Natalie Holt' interview, *Collider*, 9 July 2021 <https://collider.com/loki-music-natalie-holt-interview-theremin-episode-3-drinking-song/> [accessed 5 December 2025].

[18] Holt describes the process in an interview: 'I found this poem – this old Edda, the Lokasenna – which is in very old Norse not spoken today […] I found this Icelandic specialist who helped us use the text in the choir and recorded with these singers in Iceland and then also a giant 40-piece choir in Vienna. I felt like these constant voices were whispering to Loki and calling him to his destiny, which we finally see in Episode 6. And it feels like this big symphonic choral work, which I'm just excited for people to hear. Rachel Paige, 'Composer Natalie Holt on "Loki" Season 2', Marvel.com, 9 November 2023 <https://www.marvel.com/articles/tv-shows/loki-composer-natalie-holt-season-2> [accessed 5 December 2025].

[19] For negative commentary on the MCU's treatment of Asgard and Norse myth, see for example Julian C. Chambliss, 'If Ye Be Worthy: Thor and Identity and Idris Elba', *Medium*, 30 January 2015 <https://medium.com/@julianchambliss_33555/if-ye-be-worthy-thor-and-identity-and-idris-elba-af716e4ea3c8> [accessed 30 October 2025]. For similar arguments from pop-culture commentators, see Rob Bricken, 'Everything the MCU Gets Wrong about Thor and Asgard', *Gizmodo*, 5 November 2013 <https://www.gizmodo.com/everything-the-mcu-gets-wrong-about-thor-and-asgard> [accessed 30 October 2025]; CBR, 'Things the MCU Gets Wrong about Asgard and Thor', 28 October 2022 <https://www.cbr.com/mcu-gets-wrong-about-asgard-and-thor/> [accessed 30 October 2025]; Chris Smith, 'Things Marvel Gets Wrong about Thor's Norse Mythology', *Grunge*, 2 January 2020 <https://www.grunge.com/181730/things-marvel-gets-wrong-about-thors-norse-mythology/> [accessed 30 October 2025].

suspect or dangerous, to the foreshadowing and eventual coming of Ragnarok – the Eddic parallels are at times as striking as the departures. Some of these become clear only as the series unfolds, but Branagh quickly establishes a recognisable foundation.

The first movie opens with a prologue set on Earth. In it, the astrophysicist Jane Foster (Natalie Portman), her colleague Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgård), and intern Darcy Lewis (Kat Dennings) investigate an atmospheric anomaly in the New Mexico desert, and react in near panic as a figure falls from the sky and crashes into their vehicle.[20] As Jane leans over the stranger, she wonders aloud where he has come from. We soon find out. Odin introduces Asgard and the Norse gods via an expository narration that runs over the opening credits:

> ODIN: Once, mankind accepted a simple truth: that they were not alone in this universe. Some worlds, man believed to be home to their gods; others, they knew to fear. From a realm of cold and darkness came the Frost Giants, threatening to plunge the mortal world into a new ice age. But humanity would not face this threat alone. Our armies drove the Frost Giants back into the heart of their own world. The cost was great. In the end, their king fell, and the source of their power was taken from them. With the last great war ended, we withdrew from the other worlds and returned home, to the realm eternal, Asgard. Here we remain as a beacon of hope, shining out across the stars. And though we have fallen into man's myths and legends, it was Asgard, and its warriors, that brought peace to the universe.[21]

[20] *Thor,* 00:01:43.
[21] *Thor*, 00:03:35–00:06:35

The speech begins as a voice-over set against scenes of the Frost Giants threatening the people of Tønsberg, Norway in CE 965.[22] Odin leads an Asgardian army in humanity's defence and delivers a killing blow to their leader that is implied but not shown on screen. In contrast to this bleak panorama, the camera pans to reveal a gleaming Asgard, before shifting to reveal that Odin has, diegetically, been addressing Thor and Loki as children.

From this introduction, we learn a good deal about the role of Asgard and the gods in the MCU. Firstly, we discover that humans and Asgardians live separately but sometimes interact. Secondly, that Asgard is seen by Odin as a protective force on the side of vulnerable humans. Thirdly, that the enemies of both Asgard and humanity are Frost Giants from Jotunheim – once dangerous opponents, but now subdued. Fourthly, the gods of Asgard are now dedicated to a peaceful existence – but a peace won through battle. Odin underlines this point after the child Thor says his wish is to fight the giants. 'A good king must never seek out war,' Odin corrects him. 'But he must always be ready for it.'[23]

It is not difficult to find Eddic parallels to all of this, given that the principal contribution of Þórr for most of the Eddic chronology is in fighting giants posing threats to Miðgarðr and Ásgarðr. In *Hárbarðsljóð*, Þórr responds to Hárbarðr by recounting his recent exploits:

> "Ek var austr ok jǫtna barðak,
> brúðir bǫlvísar er til bjargs gengu;
> mikil myndi ætt jǫtna ef allir lifði –
> vætr myndi manna undir Miðgarði!"

[22] The Frost Giants, including Laufey, appear for the first time in *Journey Into Mystery no. 112* (January 1965).
[23] *Thor*, 00:17:28–00:17:45

(*Hárbarðsljóð*, st. 23)

['"I was in the east, and I fought against giants, malicious women, who roamed in the mountains; great would be the giant race if they all survived: there'd be no humans within Midgard.'"][24]

The importance of Þórr's role as protector of Ásgarðr, meanwhile, is underlined in *Þrymskviða* ['Þrymr's Poem'], when he travels to the land of the giants to retrieve his hammer after being warned by Loki about the consequences of the loss of their chief weapon: '"Þegar munu jǫtnar Ásgarð búa, nema þú þinn hamar þér um heimtir!"' (*Þrymskviða*, st. 18) ['"The giants will be settling in Asgard unless you get your hammer back."'][25] In these and other examples – starting with the slaying of Ymir by Óðinn and his brothers in the mythic past (*Gylf.,* 6–8), and Þórr's confrontations with Geirröðr and Hrungnir in the mythic present (*Gylf*., 18; *Skáldsk*. ch. 17)[26] – the relationship between gods and giants is presented as antagonistic, leading inevitably to a final battle (*Vǫluspá*, sts. 33–66; *Gylf.,* 51–53), just as it does in the MCU's *Thor: Ragnarok*.

Another point raised in the narration of Odin at the start of the film shows an even more direct link with the myths in their medieval form, and one that merits special attention. This is the revelation that in the MCU, the Asgardians, though they may once have been worshipped as gods, are not now thought to hold divine status, and 'have fallen' to be viewed by humanity as the stuff of 'myth and legend', clearly denoting a status below that of religious truth. The exact status of this relationship between the Asgardians and the people of Earth is so important to the film makers

[24] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 103.
[25] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 130.
[26] For the idea of events in the *Eddas* taking place in the mythic past, present and future, see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, pp. 237–8.

that they choose to elaborate upon it twice more in *Thor*, and again in the sequel. The first of these comes when Fandral, one of Thor's fellow warriors, warns him that taking a war party to Jotunheim will not be as easy as showing off in front of impressionable humans. 'This isn't like a journey to Earth, where you summon a little lightning and thunder and the mortals worship you as a god,' he says[27] – the implication being that in reality he is not in fact divine. Interestingly, this also establishes that the Thor of the MCU has control over storms – a power that he uses several times in the ensemble films, notably when he channels lightning via his hammer to help bring the synthetic being Vision to life in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.[28] In the Eddic material, the one clear reference to Þórr having his kind of power is in Snorri's account of his duel with Hrungnir, where the god's arrival is heralded with thunder and flashes of lightning, before he hurls Mjǫllnir at the giant (*Skáldsk.* ch. 17).[29] This episode is neatly echoed in *The Avengers*, when Loki is being flown to the helicarrier. As a freak storm causes the jet to rock, Captain America glances at Loki and asks, 'What's the matter? Scared of a little lightning?' Loki replies, with a small smile: 'I'm not overly fond of what follows.'[30] Sure enough, Thor makes a violent entrance soon after.

The second elaboration is a more explicit attempt to offer a rational explanation for the historical worship of the Asgardians. Midway through Branagh's film, as the scientists debate what could be behind the appearance of this stranger, Selvig, played by Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgård, who speaks in the film with a Scandinavian-inflected accent, produces a children's book to illustrate what he sees

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[27] *Thor*, 00:13:48.
[28] *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 01:32:20.
[29] For a discussion of the widely-held conception of Þórr primarily as a god of thunder, see Declan Taggart, *How Thor Lost His Thunder: The Changing Faces of an Old Norse God* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).
[30] *The Avengers*, 00:43:36.

as the absurdity of Thor's claims. 'He's delusional! Listen to what he's saying! Thor. Bifrost. Mjolnir. These are the stories I grew up with as a child!'[31]

The book, titled *Myths and Ledgends* (sic) *from Around the World* and attributed to the (fictitious) author Anneka Sunden, serves Branagh's dual purpose: first, to show that Norse myths have left a lasting imprint on modern culture, and second, to introduce a conversation about how Thor's sudden appearance on Earth might be explained rationally. As Selvig flips through the book, viewers glimpse chapters on 'Bifrost: The Rainbow Bridge to Asgard', 'The Origin of Thursday – Thor's Day', 'Mjolnir', and 'Loki', and see Odin, Thor and Loki with a group of Vikings kneeling reverently before them. The chapter titles – and what appears to be a highly Christianised illustration – provide a tangible link to the myths, and more specifically the popular retellings that influenced the comics.



Figure 4: Prop book of retellings in 'Thor' (2011).

Screengrab from 'Thor' (2011) featuring detail from 'Myths and Ledgends from Around the World' (sic), attributed to Anneka Sunden. © Marvel Studios.

[31] *Thor*, 01:00:46.

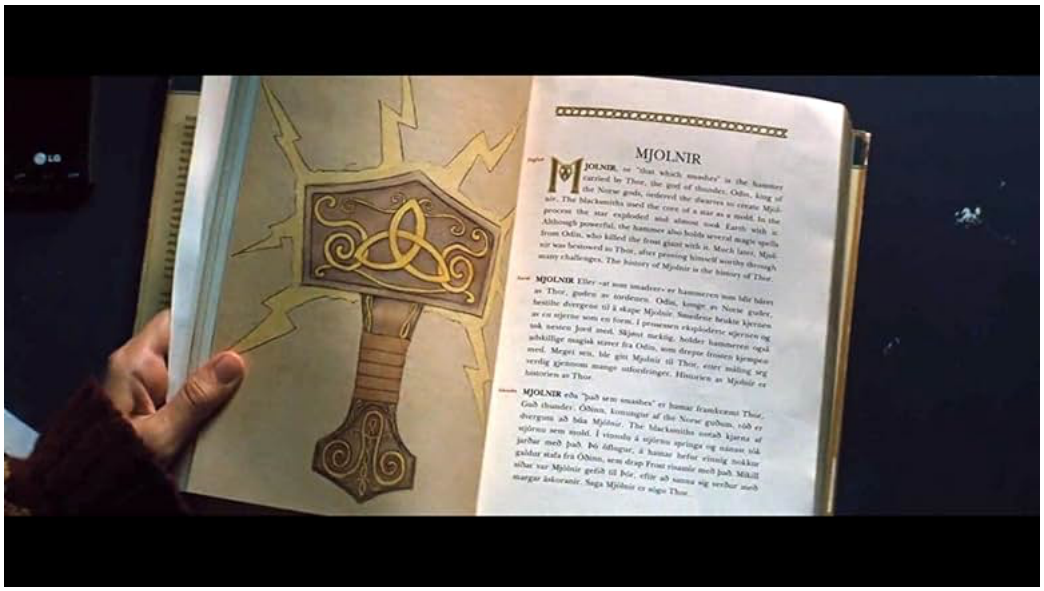


Figure 5: 'Mjolnir' pages 'Thor' (2011).

Detail from 'Myths and Ledgends from Around the World' (sic), attributed to Anneka Sunden — a prop handbook of mythic retellings created for Thor (2011). © Marvel Studios.

To explore this idea further, Branagh stages a debate between Foster and Selvig. Foster invokes Arthur C. Clarke's maxim that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,'[32] and suggests that the Bifrost might be a kind of Einstein-Rosen bridge – a wormhole – as they had initially hypothesised after observing the phenomenon in the desert. Darcy chimes in: 'A primitive culture like the Vikings might have worshipped them [the Asgardians] as deities.'[33] This line, which Foster enthusiastically endorses, highlights how closely the MCU's cosmology aligns with the euhemerising model in the *Prose Edda*. Snorri introduces his rationalising explanation in the *Prologue* (5–10) and again in *Ynglinga saga* (1–5), presenting the Æsir as human migrants from Asia who were worshipped as gods

[32] Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*, rev. edn (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 20.
[33] *Thor*, 01:01:13.

– an approach that allows him to reconcile his account of pagan divinities without contradicting Christian doctrine.

If any doubt remained about this being the preferred explanation within the MCU, it is dispelled in *Thor: The Dark World*, when Loki tells Odin he had sought to rule Earth as a benevolent god. 'But we're not gods!' Odin angrily replies. 'We're born, we live, we die, just like humans.' Loki shrugs: 'Give or take 5,000 years.'[34] This mortal status of the Asgardians is continually reinforced. Heimdall warns the war party that he cannot guarantee to rescue them if things go wrong, and it is made clear that the stakes are life and death; Fandral is seriously injured and requires life-saving medical attention back on Asgard; Thor, stripped of his powers, faces genuine peril from the Destroyer – an automaton sent by Loki to kill him. Frigga, Thor's mother, Loki's adoptive mother and wife of Odin,[35] is killed by the Dark Elves in *Thor: The Dark World*, while Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg fall to Hela in *Thor: Ragnarok*, and Heimdall and Loki are killed by Thanos (in one timeline at least) in *Avengers: Infinity War*, just after the slaughter of half of the Asgardian survivors from *Ragnarok*.

Outside Asgard, opinions on the divinity of the Asgardians is divided. In *The Avengers*, Thor is referred to as a 'demigod' and 'basically' a god by Agent Hill, prompting Captain America's dry response: 'There's only one God, ma'am. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that.'[36] It's a joke, but the point stands: while the Asgardians are extraordinarily long-lived, they are not divine and they are not immortal. It is just that, to pre-modern humanity, they appeared so advanced that they were mistaken for gods.

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[34] *Thor: The Dark World*, 00:04:55.
[35] Frigga first appeared in *Journey Into Mystery* no. *92*, May 1963. Heimdall first appeared, alongside Loki and Odin, in *Journey Into Mystery* no. *85*, October 1962.
[36] *The Avengers*, 00:44:35.

The parallel between the MCU's explanation and Snorri's account is close enough to merit consideration of its possible sources. It is curious that there is no such presentation in the early Marvel comics themselves, where the canonical line is clear: the Æsir are gods from Asgard, not mortals elevated to divine status. Don Payne, one of the film's co-writers, confirmed that the film makers were consciously making a change to Marvel canon.

> The funny thing is, this film was never meant to be a straight representation of traditional Norse mythology. It's the cinematic take on the Marvel comics' take on Norse mythology. In fact, in the reality of our movie, the Norse myths are actually based on our version of the Asgardians, after they visited ancient Norway. The Norse just got some things wrong, based on their primitive understanding of their encounters.[37]

Indeed, this was a controversial choice among fans of the comics. For example, Jason Aaron, a noted writer whose work formed the basis for the story in *Thor: Love and Thunder*, was fiercely critical of this shift.[38]

One possible source for what was, then, a bold new interpretation for Marvel lies in the long tradition of popular retellings. In earlier works such as Bulfinch's *Mythology*, the Keary sisters' *Heroes of Asgard*, and Mabie's *Norse Stories,* the gods are presented straightforwardly as divine, without gestures toward euhemerism. However, Guerber, in her widely read *Myths of Northern Lands*, does provide an

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[37] Elisabeth Rappe, 'EXCLUSIVE: Screenwriter Don Payne Talks Thor!', CHUD.com, 23 February 2011 https://chud.com/39039/exclusive-screenwriter-don-payne-talks-thor/ [accessed 5 December 2025].

[38] Karl E. H. Seigfried, 'Interview with Jason Aaron (Thor: God of Thunder), Part One', *The Norse Mythology Blog*, 5 August 2022, archived at the Internet Archive (Wayback Machine) <https://web.archive.org/web/20250804132530/https://www.norsemyth.org/2022/08/interview-with-jason-aaron-thor-god-of.html> [accessed 8 December 2025].

alternative explanation. Alongside the mythical Odin, she posits a semi-historical figure of the same name who migrated from Asia Minor into Europe (p. 43). Guerber also questions the gods' immortality in her account of the Apples of Iðunn story, explaining that 'because they sprang from a mixed race, [they] were not all immortal', and required the fruit to ward off age and decay (p. 100). Colum shows no interest in historicising the gods but later, the d'Aulaires' *Norse Gods and Giants* revives the idea by framing Odin as a one-eyed champion coming from the East (p. 10), though it quickly reverts to a more straightforwardly divine portrayal. Crossley-Holland's more scholarly *Norse Myths* does not use the euhemerised explanation himself, but, quoting E. O. G. Turville-Petre, acknowledges that both Snorri and Saxo do so (p. xxxv). In summary, although absent from many retellings, the motif recurs often enough that it is plausible that one of Marvel's screenwriters encountered it in, for example, Guerber, the d'Aulaires, or Crossley-Holland.

A similar current was present across the broader cultural atmosphere of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which increasingly depicted gods and myths through a rationalising lens – as we can see in the range of touchpoints outlined in the previous chapter. Adams's *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* imagines the Norse gods as diminished figures whose continued existence depends upon human belief. *Stargate SG-1* more directly presents the Asgard as extraterrestrials whose advanced technology inspires worship among more primitive peoples, something the first episode involving Thor explores at length.[39] *Eyewitness: Viking* is more neutral, making only brief reference to Viking Age religion, and preferring instead to define the gods by the stories told about them. Gaiman's *American Gods* makes the dependence on belief explicit once again, with Odin

[39] *Stargate SG-1*, season 1, episode 10, 'Thor's Hammer', dir. Brad Turner (Showtime, 1997).

surviving only by feeding on human attention. The *Wikipedia* entries on 'Norse Mythology', 'Odin', 'Thor', and 'Loki' (archived 2008) all describe the gods as supernatural, although the main page is also careful to explain the historicising frameworks of both Snorri and Saxo. The page notes: 'The Norse gods were mortal, and they had to eat Iðunn's golden apples in order not to age until Ragnarǫk when most of them would die' – the same point stressed by Guerber, who was likely the unacknowledged source. Taken together, these examples show how deeply the idea of 'humanised', non-divine Old Norse gods had permeated the cultural atmosphere in which *Thor* was developed.

Another potential explanation related to the cultural atmosphere deserves consideration. That is that the MCU's euhemerising impulse was driven by a kind of contemporary equivalent to the caution show by Snorri, as a way to ensure they would not offend a Christian worldview. Ultimately, however, this is unlikely to have been a major factor. It is a curiosity that Christianity is almost wholly absent from the MCU's diegetic world. The only hero for whom it retains meaning is Steve Rogers, who was trapped beneath the ice for nearly seventy years before returning as Captain America, and repeatedly described as a man out of time. His correction of Agent Hill ('There's only one God, ma'am...') was surely included for the joke rather than as a genuine counterpoint. Following the death of Peggy Carter in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Rogers and others are shown attending her church funeral, but beyond this, religion plays no part. When Earth is under threat, we never see crowds praying. After The Snap, which wipes out half the population, no survivors are shown turning to religion for comfort. Even Rogers appears to have become secularised. Near the start of *Avengers: Endgame* he is shown running a non-religious support group. Against this background, it is notable that one of the few

moments of overtly religious language in the MCU occurs not on Earth but among the Asgardians themselves. In *Thor: Ragnarok*, as Thor prepares to fight in the Grandmaster's Tournament of Champions on Sakaar, Loki interrupts him in a moment of quiet observance for his recently deceased father.

> THOR: Odin, I bid you take your place in the halls of Valhalla, where the brave shall live forever. Nor shall we mourn but rejoice…
>
> THOR and LOKI (together): … for those that have died the glorious death.[40]

Thor's invocation of Valhalla, completed by Loki in what sounds like a liturgical formula, frames him as a figure for whom ritual belief still carries meaning.

Read as part of the broader cultural atmosphere, then, the MCU's treatment of the Asgardians seems to be rooted in a more general rationalising metanarrative. A more significant contributing factor than religious sensitivity was almost certainty genre expectation, a factor I will return to in the following section. The film makers needed to ground *Thor* in science fiction rather than fantasy to ensure that the character could interact meaningfully with his fellow superheroes and the MCU's wider worlds in the Avengers ensemble film and beyond. Asgardian gods who were truly divine would have made this next to impossible.[41]

In consulting our categories of influence, then, while we cannot rule out that mediations of Eddic storytelling of some kind informed the movie, the most likely explanation for the shift in Marvel canon to remove the gods' divinity comes from Branagh's need to find an explanation that was rational enough to move it beyond the realms of pure fantasy. The exact formula arrived at happens to correspond quite neatly to Snorri's explanation – but for Branagh and the MCU, it was likely a way of

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[40] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 00:46:10.
[41] Bennett and Terry, *Story of Marvel Studios*, vol. 1, p. 96.

indicating that it is playing in the Science Fiction space.

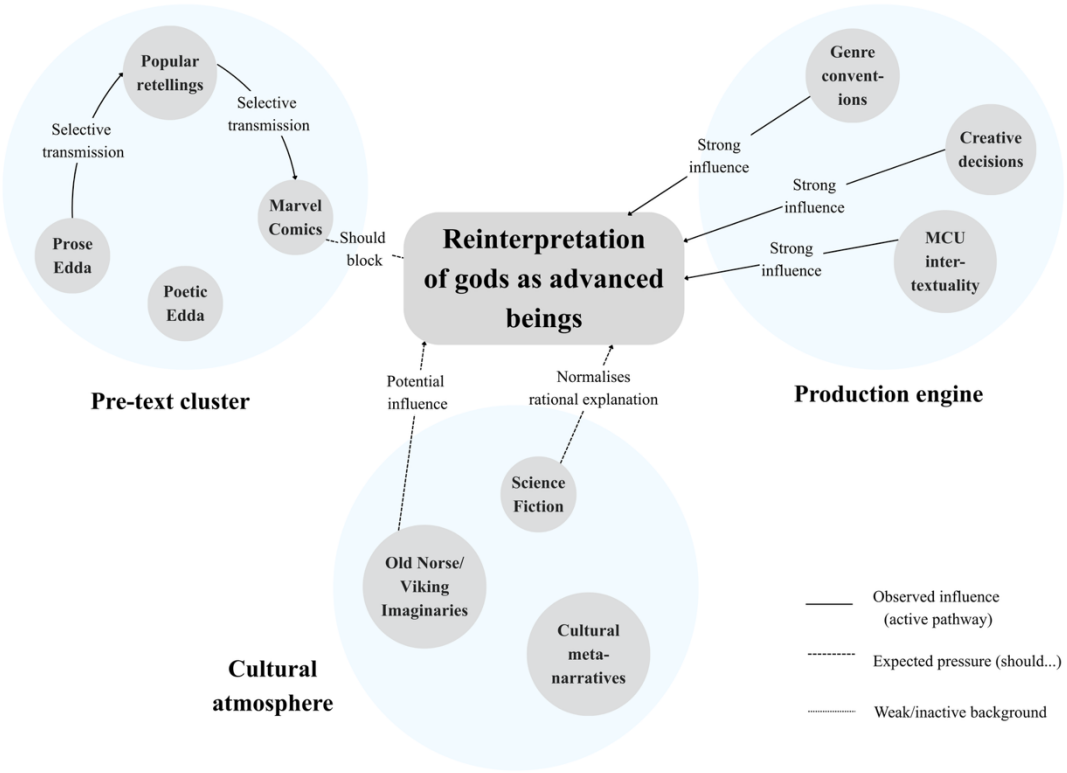


Figure 6: ANT pathway, gods as advanced beings.

Snorri's euhemerising account of the gods in the *Prose Edda* is selectively transmitted into nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular retellings, but this pathway is actively blocked at the level of Marvel Comics, where Stan Lee insisted on Thor's status as a literal god. As a result, no direct pre-textual route carries this interpretation into the MCU. Within the cultural atmosphere, rationalised divinity remains a legible possibility, supported by science-fiction conventions – seen, for example, in series such as *Star Trek*, where apparently divine figures are routinely reinterpreted as advanced beings – rather than by Norse reception itself. The reinterpretation emerges strongly from within the production engine: genre expectations, shared-universe intertextuality, and creative decisions collectively reactivate a rationalised framing of the gods, allowing them to coexist with other superheroes without asserting literal godhood.

Science meets magic

This twin grounding of the narrative world in both science and magic becomes the default position of the *Thor* strand of the MCU. A clear example occurs in the first movie when Thor, in what can best be described as 'godsplaining' mode, attempts to explain the structure of the universe to the astrophysicist Foster.

> THOR: Your ancestors called it magic and you call it science. Well, I come from a place where they are one and the same thing. My father explained it to me like this: that your world is one of the Nine Realms of the cosmos, linked to each other by the branches of Yggdrasil, the worlds tree. Now you see it every day without realising…

As he speaks, Thor sketches a branching network of connected worlds:

> THOR: The nine realms… Now there is Midgard, which is Earth. This is Alfheim, Vanaheim, Jotunheim, and Asgard. And that's where I come from.[42]

The Nine Realms, as outlined here, form part of the MCU's version of Norse cosmology, but the precise breakdown is fuzzy. In *Thor: The Dark World*, a brief shot of Jane's computer screen shows eight realms: Asgard, Alfheim, Vanaheim, Niflheim, Midgard, Muspelheim, Jotunheim, Svartalfheim, and Hel. Later, in *Avengers: Infinity War*, Thor travels to another realm, Nidavellir to have a new weapon forged, but Thor also mentions Nornheim near the start of the first film, which brings the total to ten. This inconsistency is, of course, in keeping with the *Eddas* themselves, where the number of nine realms is often invoked, for example in *Vǫluspá* (st. 2), but a single, canonical list is never provided.

[42] *Thor*, 01:14:00–01:15:01.

The *Infinity Saga* continues in this way, with Branagh and later directors taking this equivalency between science and magic as explanation enough for the existence of the fantastical. Thus, in *The Dark World*, when Jane is taken for treatment on Asgard after being infected by the Aether, she undergoes examination via a mysterious device.

> JANE: That's a quantum field generator, isn't it?
>
> ASGARDIAN HEALER: It's a soul forge.
>
> JANE: Does a soul forge transfer molecular energy from one place to another?
>
> ASGARDIAN HEALER: Yes!
>
> JANE: (whispering) Quantum field generator.[43]

Here, as elsewhere, magic and science are equated, and any distinction is blurred with just enough techno-speak to make it feel like science fiction rather than outright fantasy.

The main form of magic that we actually get to witness first-hand in the MCU is most often deployed by Loki. He first casts illusions during the battle of Jotunheim early in *Thor*, confounding the Frost Giants by projecting multiple versions of himself. Later, when he visits Earth, he appears to be with his brother in person, only for Thor to discover that he has been deceived, with the real Loki remaining safely on Asgard. In Loki's next appearance, as the villain in *The Avengers*, he tricks his brother by similar means, goading him into an attack that results in Thor taking his place in a cell onboard the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier.[44] He also enslaves the minds of Hawkeye and Selvig so that they have to work for him, though the ability to do this comes, apparently, from one of the Infinity Stones. In

[43] *Thor: The Dark World*, 00:30:04.
[44] *The Avengers*, 01:22:52.

The Dark World, he shows he can assume other guises, and force others to do so, when he takes on the form of Thor, then Captain America, before finally making Thor appear to be Sif – in a scene with perhaps a faint echo of *Þrymskviða*.[45] Loki's illusions reach their most extreme use at the end of *The Dark World*, where he fakes his own death and assumes the form of Odin, going on to rule Asgard in disguise until his deception is uncovered in *Ragnarok*. A related trick he uses in *The Dark World* is to create elaborate scenic illusions, replacing the squalor of his cell on Asgard with a more comfortable appearance and later making it seem that he has cut off Thor's hand, thus preventing him from wielding Mjolnir. His magical abilities are further expanded in *Ragnarok*, where he reads the mind of Valkyrie, accessing memories of a confrontation with Hela in Asgard's mythic past.[46] The other significant Asgardian magic-user is Frigga, who similarly possesses the ability to project illusions, and was responsible for teaching Loki as a child. In *The Dark World*, she projects herself into Loki's prison cell, and later conjures an illusion to protect Jane from Malekith. She is called 'witch' by a frustrated Malekith, but her sorcery cannot save her own life.[47]

The MCU also introduces a range of magical objects, several of which have clear counterparts in Norse mythology. Foremost is of course Mjolnir, which in the MCU explicitly has twin powers of destruction and creation. As Odin declares in *Thor*: 'So long entrusted with this mighty hammer, Mjolnir… its power has no equal – as a weapon to destroy, or as a tool to build.'[48] *Avengers: Endgame* offers an example of its positive effects when Thor uses it to restart Tony Stark's heart,

[45] *Thor: The Dark World*, 01:00:22–1:01:09.
[46] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 01:18:49–01:20:00.
[47] *Thor: The Dark World*, 00:47:20–00:48:30
[48] *Thor*, 00:09:00.

remarking in surprise, 'I had no idea if that was going to work!'[49] As noted above, he also uses it to summon the lightning that animates Vision. Likewise, Thor's replacement weapon Stormbreaker has the ability to summon the Bifrost. In *The Dark World* we also glimpse Odin's spear, Gungnir, which is able to fire blasts of energy, making it an upgrade on the weapon crafted by the dwarves in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 35).

Elsewhere, magic has strongly negative associations – at least when connected by its use with males. In *The Avengers*, Loki remarks that Odin used 'dark energy' to reopen the Bifrost.[50] Later in the series, Heimdall invokes 'dark magic' to send The Hulk to Earth after Thanos's attack in *Infinity War*: 'All-fathers... let the dark magic flow through me one last time,' he exhorts, earning an immediate and fatal reprisal from Thanos.[51] So while Frigga's magic passes without comment, the use of sorcery by Heimdall and Odin is explicitly termed 'dark', and Loki's tricks are portrayed as dishonourable – an affront to warrior virtue, particularly from Thor's perspective. A deleted scene from *Thor*, set before the coronation sequence, makes this attitude explicit, as Loki fishes for thanks from Thor for saving his life in an earlier battle:

LOKI: You're welcome.

THOR: For what?

LOKI: For saving your life.

THOR: I had it under control.

LOKI: Is that what you call it? You were surrounded by an army of Jotnar.

[49] *Avengers: Endgame*, 01:21:35.
[50] *The Avengers*, 00:45:00.
[51] *Avengers: Infinity War*, 00:05:25.

> THOR: Some do battle with swords, others with sorcery. But I prefer the weapon of a warrior.[52]

The exchange exposes Thor's dislike of magic and there is perhaps a gendered coding that underlies this. For him, magic is implicitly unmanly, an art of deception rather than strength.

Meanwhile in *The Avengers*, the Tesseract and Loki's sceptre have the ability to open portals and enslave minds, while later films lean even more heavily into this model of 'space magic'. *Ragnarok* introduces Hela's ability to conjure weapons from thin air, Thor discovers that his lightning powers derive from an inner essence, and we are introduced to the Eternal Flame, which resurrects both Fenris and an army of the dead. None of these powers are explained. Prophecy, too, is absorbed into this magical system. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* includes a scene in which Thor seeks guidance from the Norns. In the theatrical cut, the sequence is heavily truncated: Thor tells Selvig that he needs help, and together they enter a cave where Thor immerses himself in water and experiences visions of Asgard in chaos, before Heimdall appears and warns Thor that he is to blame.[53] Without context the scene is confusing but an extended scene provides crucial clarity. As the director Joss Whedon explains:

> The original scene was that he went to speak to the Norns. How it would work was, he goes into the pool, and the Norns possess him, basically. And

[52] *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, USA, 2011), deleted scene, bonus feature, Disney+ [accessed 29 December 2025].
[53] *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 01:15:54.

> Erik Selvig asks all the questions, and the Norns, speaking through Thor, give the answers.[54]

In this version, the Norns exist as distinct entities and possess knowledge of the future, but in contrast to the *Eddas*, they are not depicted as controlling it.

Love and Thunder engages magical/mythological motifs even more directly. Thor is gifted a pair of flying goats, a nod to Tanngrísnir and Tanngnjóstr from Snorri's *Gylfaginning* (21). The film also reintroduces Mjolnir, shattered by Hela but now mysteriously awoken and drawn to Jane. The hammer grants her temporary strength as she battles cancer, but this power comes at a cost: Mjolnir prevents her body from responding to chemotherapy, hastening her decline.

This is all broadly in tune with an Eddic world that is spun through with acts of enchantment, illusion, and transformation. This is most evident in the case of Loki, whose shapeshifting in the MCU has deep mythological roots. In *Skáldskaparmál* we learn of his transformation into a seal to fight Heimdall (ch. 8), and a fly to interfere with the making of Þórr's hammer (ch. 35). In *Gylfaginning* (42) he transforms into a mare to lure away the giant's stallion, and in *Frá Loka*, the prose section following *Lokasenna*, he escapes by taking the form of a salmon. Beyond personal transformation, Loki also makes use of magical artefacts. He borrows Freyja's falcon-cloak to fly to Jǫtunheimar in search of the missing hammer (*Þrymskviða*) and again in the story of the apples of abduction of Iðunn (*Skáldsk.* G56). In the latter tale he turns her into a nut – an ability found also in *The Dark World*, where, as we have seen, Loki briefly disguises Thor as Cap and Sif.[55]

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[54] *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (dir. Joss Whedon, USA, 2015), director's commentary, Disney+, 01:11:57 [accessed 29 December 2025].

[55] Loki likewise plays an integral part in the *creation* of magical objects: Snorri tells the story of him commissioning the dwarves to forge six enchanted items. I will discuss this in detail in Chapter Four.

Loki is not, however, the only Eddic figure associated with magic. In *Lokasenna* (st. 24), he mocks Óðinn for practising *seiðr,* and makes clear its association with *ergi*, or unmanliness and sexual deviance. Óðinn's magical powers are in evidence in the tale of the mead of poetry, in which he transforms into a snake to infiltrate Suttungr's hall, then into an eagle to escape, while Suttungr pursues him in the same form (*Skáldsk*., G58). Illusion magic features prominently in the story of Útgarða-Loki (*Gylf*., 44–46), where Þórr and his companions are bamboozled by the giant Skrýmir – in an episode that, as with Loki's tricks in the MCU, equates magic with deception.

As Snorri notes in *Heimskringla*, the practice of *seiðr* was considered shameful for men, but not for women. 'But this magic, when it is practised, is accompanied by such great perversion that it was not considered without shame for a man to perform it, and the skill was taught to the goddesses.'[56] The goddesses practising it include Freyja, who is said in *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 4) to have taught the Æsir this form of sorcery: 'Njǫrðr's daughter was Freyja. She was a sacrificial priestess. She was the first to teach the Æsir black magic, which was customary among the Vanir.'[57] Loki acknowledges this mockingly in *Lokasenna* (st. 32): '"Þegi þú, Freyja! Þú ert fordæða ok meini blandin mjǫk."' ['"Be silent, Freyia, you're a witch and much imbued with malice."'][58] Frigg, too, possesses magical insight. In the introduction to *Grímnismál* ['Grimnir's Sayings'] she shares Óðinn's ability to look into all worlds from the high seat Hliðskjálf, and in *Lokasenna* (st. 29), Freyja remarks that "Orløg Frigg / hygg ek ...," ['Frigg knows, I think, all fate'].[59] In the

[56] Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (trans.), 'Ynglinga saga', in *Heimskringla, vol. I: The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011), pp. 6–47 (p. 11).
[57] Ibid., p. 8.
[58] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 86.
[59] Ibid., p. 85.

Baldr myth, Frigg secures oaths from all things not to harm her son, displaying a mystical authority over the natural world (*Gylf.,* 49).

The supernatural in the *Eddas* is both destructive and restorative. Mjǫllnir is used to bless the wedding in *Þrymskviða* before it is used against the giants, and in the Útgarða-Loki episode Þórr uses the hammer to resurrect his goats after slaughtering them for food. The MCU preserves the same duality. As we have seen, Odin tells Thor that Mjolnir was meant to be 'a tool to build as well as to destroy', and the hammer later proves capable of restarting Stark's heart and helping to give life to Vision. Yet just as often its power is framed through violence and devastation: Thor wields it against the Frost Giants, the Destroyer, the Chitauri, the Marauders, the Dark Elves, Hydra and Ultron before it is shattered by Hela.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Odin's mastery of rune-magic and his association with sorcery are entirely omitted from the MCU. Runes do appear on occasion in Asgard, as we have seen, but they function more as authenticity markers. A good example is the iconic phrase from the comics spelled out on Thor's hammer, with evident care, in the elder futhark.



Figure 7: Runic inscription, Thor's hammer.

Detail from Thor's hammer as featured in 'Thor: The Dark World'.[60]

Running clockwise from the ᚹᚺᛟ sequence at the ten o'clock position in the image, the runic inscription can be read as follows (my transliteration):

Runic text:	ᚹᚺᛟᛋᛟᛖᚹᛖᚱ ᚺᛟᚱᛞᛋ ᚦᛁᛋ ᚺᚨᛗᛗᛖᚱ ᛁᚠ ᚺᛖ ᛒᛖ ᚹᛟᚱᚦᚤ ᛋᚺᚨᛚ ᛈᛟᛋᛖᛋᛋ ᚦᛖ ᛈᛟᚹᛖᚱ ᛟᚠ ᚦᛟᚱ
Transliteration:	whosoever holds þis hamer if he be worþj shal poses þe power of þor
Standard English:	whosover holds this hammer if he be worthy shall possess the power of Thor

Nevertheless, certain motifs do bring the films into genuine contact with their mythological sources, most notably Loki's shapeshifting and the power of Mjolnir itself. In both the *Eddas* and the MCU, magic can be wielded, abused, or manipulated, and it is frequently linked to deception and power. Additionally, in both worlds, suspicion often attaches to men who use it.

[60] The picture is included in Marie Javins and Stuart Moore, *The Art of Thor: The Dark World* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2017).

Magic's path to the MCU

The catch-all use of 'magic' in modern receptions of Norse myth has its own genealogy. In the nineteenth century, translators and retellers increasingly reached for the term as a way of accounting for any wonder – without concerning themselves with specific practices and powers, from the black magic of *seiðr* to *hamfarir* (travelling in changed shape), via luck, oaths, charms, and runes.[61]

Looking specifically at the retellings in our selection, plus their sources, Bulfinch mentions runes as instruments of magical effect but otherwise avoids the term. The Kearys make passing references to Draupnir as a magic ring and Skidbladnir as a magic ship. Additionally, Mabie describes the threat made by Skirnir's servant in *Skírnismál* ['Skirnir's Journey'] as being accompanied by a 'magic wand',[62] while Guerber invents an episode in which Loki enchants the mistletoe to kill Baldr, explaining that 'by magic arts [he] compelled the parasite to assume a growth and hardness hitherto unknown' (p. 188). By the early twentieth century, 'magic' had become the default shorthand for anything lacking a rational explanation. Colum invents Sindri speaking 'words of magic' (p. 37) at the forge to help in crafting his contributions to the treasures of the gods, and the mead of poetry is described outright as being magical. By the 1960s, in the d'Aulaires' *Norse Gods and Giants*, magic has become so ingrained in the vocabulary that within the first third of the book, readers encounter magic water (p. 32), magic runic letters (p. 32), a magic well (p. 38), a magic hammer and belt (p. 40), along with a magic bond that

[61] For forms of magic in Viking Age Scandinavia, with particular reference to the *Eddas*, see Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), pp. 36–39.

[62] This is another linguistic fingerprint. Thorpe, whose *Northern Mythology* vol. 1 underlies much of the Keary sisters' *Heroes of Asgard*, renders the Old Norse "tamsvendi" from *Skírnismál* (st. 26) as 'taming wand' (p. 48), while Anderson (p. 357) interprets this more inventively as 'magic wand'. Mabie (p. 41) duly copies the term from Anderson, to be followed by many subsequent retellers.

keeps Fenrir tied up (p. 52). The progression only continues both in the book and in the general drift of retellings, as may be seen by an eye-opening statistic. While the Kearys' 1857 text contains only three instances of the word, Crossley-Holland's 1980 Norse Myths uses it, including variations such as 'magical', more than sixty times.

Given this long history of presenting enchantment as a catch-all force, Lee and Kirby could scarcely have avoided absorbing it from the retellings and handbooks available to them. The earliest explicit use of magic in Marvel's Thor appeared in *Journey into Mystery* #85 (October 1962), where Loki debuts as a sorcerer imprisoned in a tree – an echo, perhaps, of the *Gylfaginning* (49–50) episode in which Þökk (assumed to be Loki in disguise) refuses to weep for Baldr, leaving him trapped in Hel, while also recalling the wider motif – familiar from Arthurian tradition with Merlin – of the magician confined by enchantment.

By issue #88 (January 1963), Loki's powers include shapeshifting into a snake to evade Heimdall and cross the Bifrost, paralleling Óðinn's transformation in the myth of the mead of poetry. The reasons for this enthusiastic embrace of magic are not difficult to see. As Lee himself acknowledged, Thor's unmatched physical strength presented a dramaturgical problem:

> Have you ever wondered what's the toughest thing about writing these awesome Asgardian adventures? … It's trying to find villains strong enough to give the mighty God of Thunder a real battle.[63]

By introducing magic as a counterforce to pure strength, writers could neutralise Thor's advantages and create jeopardy.

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[63] Stan Lee, 'Introduction', in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 5 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).

A similar pattern holds across the wider cultural imaginary available to the MCU's filmmakers. Late-twentieth-century depictions of Norse myth and related material almost invariably rely on some form of magic or supernatural agency, even if it is not named as such. In Adams's *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* (1988), Thor transforms a fighter jet into an eagle and a check-in clerk into a Coca-Cola machine. *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007) prefers a scientific explanation, framing the 'magic' of the gods as advanced alien technology, although one humanoid race, the Cimmerians, still 'consult the runes' and wait for signs from Thor before taking major decisions.[64] The *DK Eyewitness: Vikings* guide presents mythic material descriptively, carefully avoiding any association between, say, runes and sorcery, while almost entirely avoiding references to magical belief. Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) restores overt supernaturalism. The most notable episode is in Shadow's ritual death and resurrection under Mr Wednesday's direction, where divine efficacy is shown to depend directly on belief (chs. 14–15). And in the strategy game *Age of Mythology* (2002), 'God powers' allow players to summon storms or earthquakes with no rational explanation at all. The 2008 *Wikipedia* entries reinforced this atmosphere of assumed supernaturalism, even if unevenly. The 'Norse Mythology' page offered only brief references to magic in 2008 but the 'Loki' and 'Odin' pages highlighted shape-shifting, spells, and enchanted items.

Across this cluster of texts and media, 'magic' functions as a device: a flexible means of permitting fantastical events to occur within otherwise rational worlds. The same pragmatism that shaped the use of magic in the comic books – the need to generate jeopardy for an otherwise invincible hero – governs its function in the films. From a screenwriting perspective, Thor's physical supremacy creates a

[64] *Stargate SG-1*, season 1, episode 10, 'Thor's Hammer', dir. Brad Turner (Showtime, 1997).

structural problem: without some mechanism to weaken or outmanoeuvre him, there can be little in the way of jeopardy. The use of magic supplies the solution, allowing for conflict and reversal. The Thor-Loki dynamic epitomises this. Loki's magical cunning compensates for his physical inferiority, giving him the means to humiliate and occasionally outshine his brother. It is a formula that serves the needs of the films as drama, while preserving the sibling rivalry at the emotional heart of the storytelling in the early films.

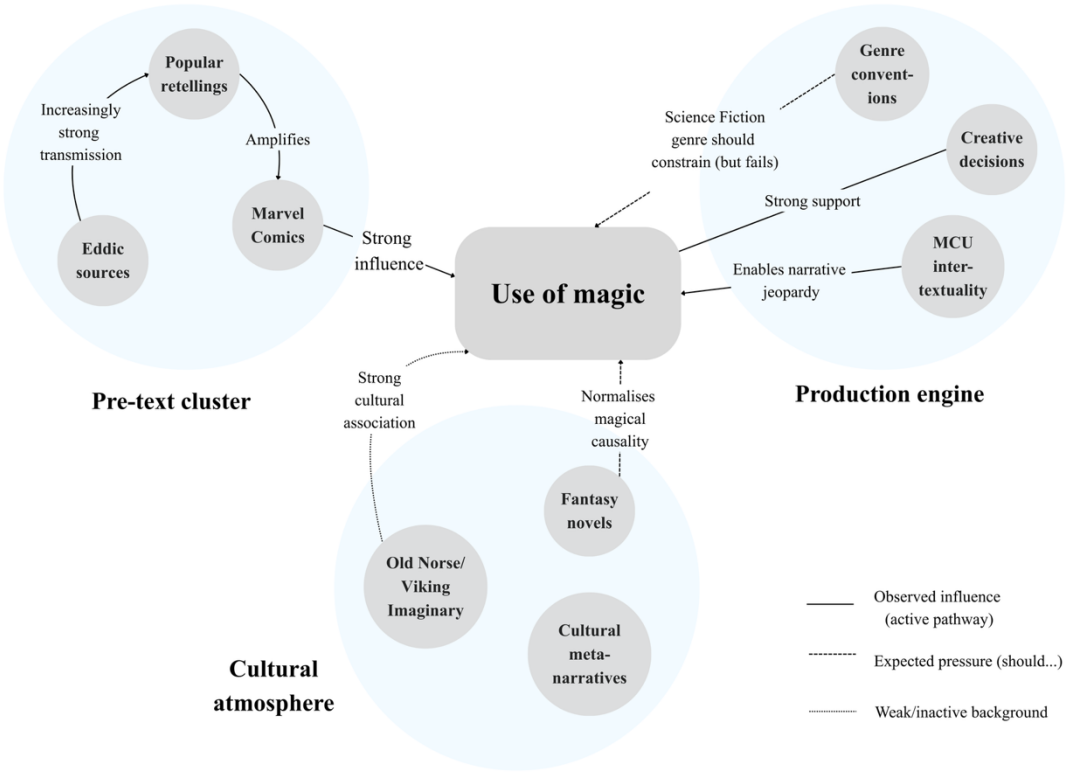


Figure 8: ANT pathway, prevelance of magic.

Unlike several other motifs examined in this study, the use of magic shows strong continuity across the clusters. Present in the Eddic material, it is consistently transmitted through popular retellings and amplified within Marvel Comics, producing a clear and active pre-textual pathway into the MCU. Within the production engine, magic serves an important structural function, providing a means of introducing jeopardy. Although science-fiction genre conventions might be expected to constrain overt magical causality, this pressure proves ineffective. Instead, creative decisions and MCU intertextuality actively enable its use. In the cultural atmosphere, magic is further normalised through long-standing

associations with Norse material and through the broader acceptance of magical causality in modern fantasy fiction.

Having examined the basic cosmology and the role of magic in the *Thor* films – and established plausible pathways for their adoption within the MCU – the chapter turns to two further aspects of world-building: the evocation of a sense of Northernness, and the use of humour. The presence of these are somewhat surprising. Branagh's decision to set a large portion of the first film in New Mexico unexpectedly becomes a means of re-creating a connectiton with the Old North at the level of mood rather than landscape. More interesting still is the role of humour. Much of the comedy operates straigthforwardly at the level of fish-out-of-water, yet it is through the comic humiliations of these scenes that the films most powerfully reconnect with the sensibilities of the medieval myths.

A sense of Northernness

One further instance of Branagh's world-building in *Thor* (2011) may seem counter-intuitive, yet it, too, reflects the indirect shaping power of Eddic material on the MCU. The quality in question is what C. S. Lewis famously called 'Northernness': the atmosphere, tone, and emotional effect he experienced on first encountering Arthur Rackham's illustrations for *Siegfried* and *The Twilight of the Gods* – part of Margaret Armour's English translation of the libretti of Wagner's *Ring*. Lewis reports that 'pure 'Northernness' engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer'.[65] Branagh locates Northernness primarily in social texture, and he finds it in the fictional New Mexico town of Puente Antiguo (and note here the equivalence of a town whose name

[65] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 33; Richard Wagner, *Siegfried* and *The Twilight of the Gods*, trans. Margaret Armour, illus. Arthur Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1924).

translates form Spanish as 'Old Bridge' with the Bifrost bridge of Asgard). The desert landscape of New Mexico looks very little like Iceland, but beyond the obvious differences in topography, the film constructs a frontier ethos that intentionally or not resonates with values from Old Norse literature. The Puente Antiguo of the film is wide-open and sparsely populated, but brings its residents together at permanent and temporary meeting points. The townspeople know one another, as we can see from the scenes in Isabela's diner and at the site where Thor's hammer has fallen to Earth. For Branagh, the diner functions as a small hall. Thor's shout of 'Another!' – smashing the coffee mug on the floor – plays out as a social infraction which requires the group to apologise for the broken cup, and make an offer of payment before they are forgiven.[66]

The film reinforces that idea of there being a social contract through Thor's interactions with Selvig. In a scene after Thor has been released from S.H.I.E.L.D. custody, Selvig takes him to the local bar and tells him that after their drink he must leave town. The frontier ethic of plain speaking and obligation comes to the fore, as each of the two sinks a large beer and 'chaser', and leads to a laugh when Thor later returns, carrying a drunk Selvig over his shoulder, explaining, 'We drank. We fought. He made his ancestors proud.'[67] The joke works in part because of the incongruous 'ancestors' line from Thor, but more importantly because the town already understands itself as a place where honour must be earned, and when necessary defended. Branagh suggests, via diegetic signage, that the place had this ethos before Thor arrived, through a local billboard hailing the town as Home of the Vikings, presumably the nickname of the High School football team. It is on screen for only a

[66] *Thor*, 00:42:29.
[67] *Thor*, 01:06:45–01:08:42; 01:11:35.

second – barely a wink to the audience – but it is a signal that Thor will be judged by his conduct in a small community where fame is made or lost by witnessed acts.

Thor's presence in Puente Antiguo is the consequence of his banishment from Asgard, and Erik's threat of a second exile sharpens the sensation that this is a testing ground. Under huge skies and in harsh conditions, the narrative orchestrates a series of public trials. This focuses first on the crater where Mjolnir has landed, which becomes a kind of ad hoc assembly-site, with the men of the town gathering to try their luck lifting the hammer, enjoying laughter and drinking ale as they do so. To a viewer familiar with Old Norse literature, the image of an immovable weapon that only the chosen hero can claim might recall the episode in *Vǫlsunga saga* where a one-eyed stranger thrusts the sword Gram into the tree Barnstokkr and declares that whoever can pull it free may keep it – a feat accomplished only by Sigmund.[68] In fact, Branagh's explicit source for the sequence was not Norse at all but Arthurian, a deliberate modernisation of the sword-in-the-stone motif.[69]

[68] *Völsunga saga*, in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), ch. 11.
[69] Thor, 00:58:11–00:59:39. Branagh calls this scene the film's 'own Arthurian moment with Excalibur'. See Kenneth Branagh, director's commentary on *Thor* (Marvel Studios, 2011).



Figure 9: Thor attempts to lift Mjolnir.

Thor tries and fails to lift Mjolnir in 'Thor' (2011). Director Kenneth Branagh has cited the Arthurian motif of drawing the sword from the stone as his prime influence. © Marvel Studios 2011.

The scene is another example of what Haydock calls the denial of difference in much medievalism for the screen.[70] Even so, the scene allows a productive analogy with what we know of Old Norse society. In the sagas, a *þing* ['assembly'] would be accompanied by games and contests held on nearby sites.[71] To that extent, the queue of would-be lifters at the crater is a recognisably Old Norse public test of strength and honour, comparable to the episode in *Grettis saga*, where Grettir lifts a great stone in a public setting, the feat becoming a lasting marker of his strength and reputation.[72]

The decisive test for Thor, though, is ethical. In order to regain the hammer, he must show that he is prepared to die protecting the townsfolk. That choice – protection of the community over the self – maps onto the values of Old Norse

[70] Haydock, *Movie Medievalism*, pp. 19–28.
[71] *Eyrbyggja saga* provides a good example: Þórólfr Mostrarskegg founds Þórsnesþing, whose site includes a *leikvǫllr* (games field), and the saga repeatedly stages competitions that confer standing. *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 111–12.
[72] Jesse L. Byock (trans.), *Grettir's Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 44.

literature as well, as seen, to choose *Grettis saga* once more, when Grettir confronts the revenant Glámr on behalf of a threatened household, despite the clear danger and the uncertain prospect of survival.[73] In *Thor*, Thor steps in front of the Destroyer to shield the people who have offered him all the hospitality they can afford. The return of his hammer is recognition of his worthiness, and of reputation being restored. Seen in this way, Branagh's New Mexico possesses more in common with medieval Iceland than first appears, with the director's construction of a world in which the hero's standing is judged by social codes, including public testing. This ethical framework also recalls that of the Western, and of films such as *Hrafninn flýgur*, in which honour, hospitality, and the defence of a community function as the primary measures of character.[74]

More naturally, we might expect to encounter this kind of Northernness through glacial palettes and skies of thin light. *Thor: The Dark World* pursues precisely that register. Director Taylor and cinematographer Kramer Morgenthau took the production to Iceland to film their version of Svartálfaheimr, which is rendered as dark, windswept and desolate.[75] This is a telling instance of an authenticity marker providing no more than a general patina of darkness and cold, without contributing narrative depth. The American Southwest can feel, in unexpected contrast, much more 'northern' than the picture-postcard landscape of Svartálfaheimr in *The Dark World*. Later films revive this intermittently. *Thor: Ragnarok* finds a different visual language for Northernness in Odin's farewell on grey Norwegian cliffs, in what will turn out to be the site of the future New Asgard.

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[73] Ibid. pp. 100–103.
[74] *Hrafninn flýgur* dir. Hrafn Gunnlaugsson (Viking Film/Svenska Filminstitutet, 1984) is an Icelandic historical film drawing on saga motifs and Western genre conventions, centred on revenge, honour, and the defence of a community.
[75] Bennett and Terry, *The Story of Marvel Studios*, vol. 1, p. 176.

When we do get to see New Asgard for the first time, in *Avengers: Endgame*, it is sketched out as a small fishing settlement, a working community at the edge of the world. However, by the time we reach *Thor: Love and Thunder*, any attempt at affecting a sense of Northernness has been abandoned. Here, the home of the gods is recast as what amounts to a kind of hyper-reality rather than a recreation of the gods' old homeland – a tourist simulacrum where visitors can swig 'real' Asgardian mead and take a ride in flying longboats that have been kitted out with safety harnesses.[76] The *Loki* series supplies a further, oblique echo, however. The Void episodes once again stage a frontier spirit of survival against the odds, where alliances are necessary. However, none of these later instances can match Branagh's Puente Antiguo, and his insight that Northernness, as a dramatic resource, can best be realised as a social environment.

The question of how Branagh came to create this does not require an exhaustive trawl through the ANT networks. The director inherits the idea from J. Michael Straczynski's influential run on *Thor* (vol. 3, 2007–09). The producers were sufficiently impressed by Straczynski's work to bring him into the film's development, and, like Simonson, give him a cameo in the film.[77] What Straczynski contributes is a small-community staging in which the divine is set against ordinary life on Earth. In Straczynski's comics, Thor rebuilds Asgard on the open plains of Oklahoma, where golden halls rise above a modest Midwestern town called Broxton,

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[76] A version of this section, additionally containing elements from Chapter Four, is included in Kevin Fylan, 'We Need to Talk about Óðinn: Taika Waititi's Subversive Handling of Norse Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe', *Neomedieval*, 24 (December 2025), pp. 61–82. A version was also presented at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, 2024. For the use of simulacra in a neomedievalist context, see Lauren S. Mayer, 'Simulacrum', in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 223–30.

[77] Hawksblueyes, 'J. Michael Straczynski Discusses Outlining the Thor Film and His Cameo in the Movie', ComicBookMovie.com (11 May 2011) https://comicbookmovie.com/thor/j-michael-straczynski-discusses-outlining-the-thor-film-and-his-cameo-in-the-movie-a37047 [accessed 5 December 2025].

and the gods interact with local farmers and shopkeepers. The effect is a version of the Old North transposed to America's rural heartland, where resilience and neighbourliness define the moral climate as much as ice and endurance, and with the Midwestern setting itself carrying traces of nineteenth-century Scandinavian immigration, subtly reinforcing the transposition of a northern ethos into an American landscape.

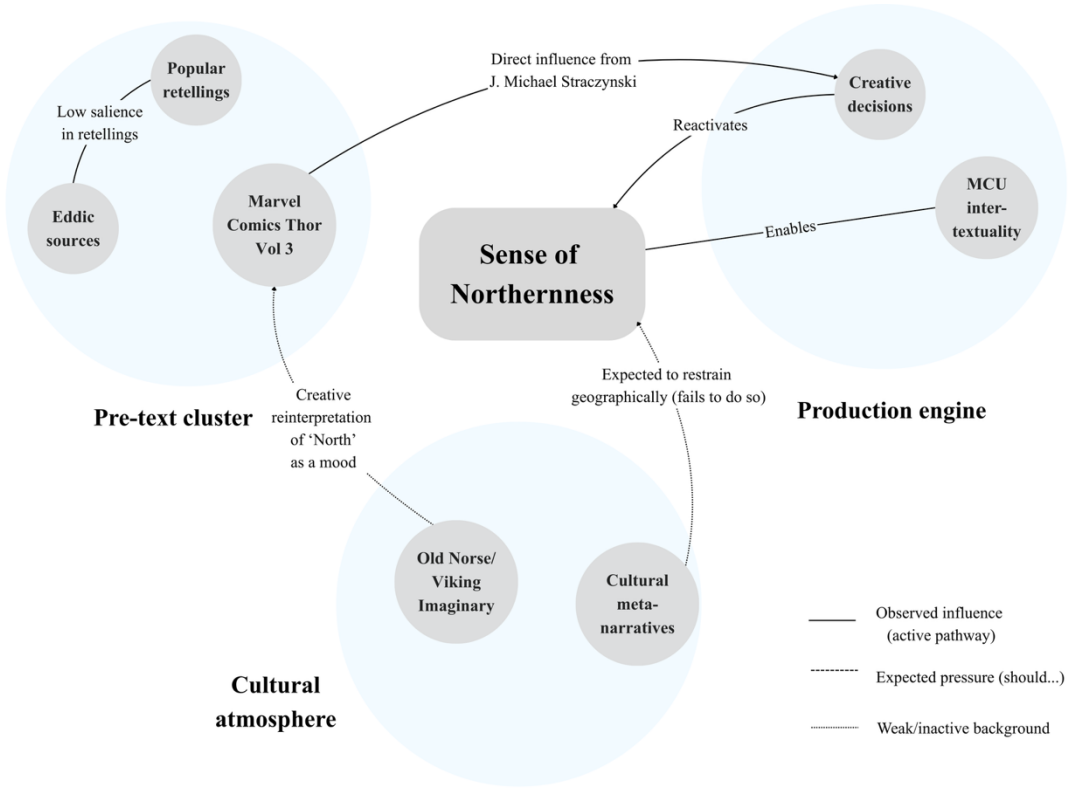


Figure 10: ANT pathways for Northernness.

While a sense of Northernness is present in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, it is rarely foregrounded in popular retellings and remains largely inactive within most Marvel comics. The motif becomes active only through a selective rearticulation in J. Michael Straczynski's *Thor* vol 3, where 'the North' is creatively reinterpreted. Straczynski's direct involvement in the film's story development creates a clear production-level pathway into the MCU, where this reimagined Northernness is relocated to New Mexico. Although cultural expectations might be expected to constrain the motif to Scandinavia or Iceland, these pressures do not operate effectively, as 'north' functions here as social code rather than a literal place.

The use of humour

Perhaps the clearest way in which the *Thor* cycle feels connected with the Eddic tradition is through the sustained use of humour, and in particular the kind of humour that undercuts or humiliates the hero. This tonal link was largely absent from the Marvel comics of the 1960s, which, for all their colour and inventiveness, tended toward a surprisingly serious narrative tone. Branagh and Waititi, in particular, recapture something of the playful, and often irreverent spirit that animates much of the Eddic material, where humour is a common thread even as the narrative moves inexorably toward Ragnarǫk. These comedic modes in the *Eddas* are varied: the burlesque comedy of *Þrymskviða* when Þórr is forced to dress as a bride; the slapstick of Loki's lashing of a goat to his testicles (*Skáldsk.*, G56); the ironic tone of Þórr's encounters at Útgarða-Loki; and the often cruel or openly humiliating exchanges of *Lokasenna*, *Skírnismál*, and *Hárbarðsljóð*. Humour is of course subjective, but it is difficult to deny that a poem such as *Þrymskviða* is primarily comic in design, even if it has been seen to operate on multiple levels, from coarse, to linguistically subtle and all the way to a kind of Bakhtian carnivalesque – as will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

All four of the main *Thor* films incorporate humour, although the tone varies greatly between them – from the fish-out-of-water scenes in *Thor*, to the somewhat forced gags inserted into *The Dark World*, and on to the slapstick of Waititi's *Ragnarok* and *Love and Thunder*. In Branagh's *Thor*, the hero's journey is marked by a series of comic humiliations that are similar in tone to the ordeal faced by the mythological Þórr in his journey to Útgarða-Loki. Following his banishment from Asgard by Odin, a Thor who has been stripped of his powers is immediately hit by the van carrying Foster and her colleagues. Shortly after, he is tasered by Darcy and

taken to hospital, where he wakes, fights the staff, and has to be subdued by a sedative administered ignominiously to his bare backside. Thor's humiliations continue to mount. He is unable to escape his hospital restraints, is then hit by the group's van a second time, and is reduced to absurdity in a pet store when he requests a horse or, failing that, any animal 'large enough to ride'.[78] Later, he fails to lift his own hammer from the ground, a moment of powerlessness that recalls the scene in Útgarða-Loki where Þórr struggles in vain to lift a cat, or to wrestle the old nurse (*Gylf.,* 44–46).

In *The Avengers* the pattern persists, though the comic tone feels a touch more cruel. Here Thor's archaic diction is repeatedly undercut by Tony Stark's modern wit. When Thor confronts Iron Man and Captain America in the forest early in the movie, Stark mocks him, calling him 'Shakespeare in the Park' and adding, 'Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?' – a line that lampoons the vaguely Shakespearean register of Thor's speech inherited from the comic book style of Lee.[79] The forest skirmish between Thor and Iron Man sees Thor's sense of superiority punctured as he fails to beat a mortal in a metal shell. Later, his sincerity makes him easy prey for Loki's manipulation. When Thor is tricked into freeing his brother, only to find himself imprisoned in the same cell, the sequence turns his nobility into comic gullibility. Perhaps the film's most quoted joke is a deadpan line of Thor's own, but the humour is unintentional. When confronted with mounting evidence of Loki's cruelty and deception, Thor springs to his defence, saying, 'He's my brother!' When Natasha points out that his brother has killed 80 people in two days', Thor replies with a quick, embarrassed addendum: 'He's adopted.'[80] As so

[78] *Thor*, 00:50:35.
[79] *The Avengers*, 00:47:25.
[80] *The Avengers*, 00:53:40.

often in the MCU, the comedy arises from the friction between the modern world and his dignity.

In *The Dark World* the tone is generally more serious, but there are moments that trade on the comic humiliation of Thor and Loki. Both characters are slapped by Jane in quick succession in an inversion of expected dynamics of gender, physical power and status. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* picks up from the previous ensemble film, and subjects Thor to a gentle form of mockery that feels more natural now that he is a settled member of the team. At the party celebrating their victory over Hydra, the team's attempts to lift Mjolnir become a public trial of worthiness. Thor's sense of superiority is threatened when Rogers budges the hammer a fraction, and elsewhere, his talk of 'revels' positions him as the odd one out in the group, but the banter is much friendlier now.

Thor: Ragnarok reprises the pattern of the first film, though with Waititi's more anarchic comedic sensibility. Again, Thor has been separated from his hammer, recalling the basic set-up of *Þrymskviða*, and becomes stranded on the junkyard planet of Sakaar, meaning he is absent when Hela threatens Asgard, recalling the basic set-up of the Master Builder story (*Gylf.,* 41), where he is likewise away fighting. He is captured by a character who, we later learn, is the last surviving Valkyrie, and she subdues him using a device that allows him to be shocked remotely, reducing his attempts to fight to comic impotence. When Thor spots that his opponent in the Grandmaster's Tournament of Champions is actually his fellow Avenger Hulk, and exclaims with delight, 'He's a friend – from work!', the line itself is another collision between the epic and the mundane.[81] The ensuing buddy comedy feel of the exchanges with Bruce Banner (Hulk's alter-ego) keeps this going, and

[81] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 00:54:00.

Waititi extends the film's knowing humour through the Asgardian theatre troupe, who restage key moments from *The Dark World* in an absurdly melodramatic style.

In *Avengers: Endgame*, we have a return to the humiliation motif as we meet Thor five years after his failure to kill Thanos in *Infinity War*. He now spends his days playing video games and is shown sporting a beer belly and wildly unkempt hair. We are invited to laugh throughout the scene when we first catch up with him, and again at his fellow Avengers' jokes, which include calling him melted ice cream and Lebowski.[82] The laughs continue when Waititi takes over the character again in *Thor: Love and Thunder*. The film opens with Thor re-joining the Guardians of the Galaxy team and unleashing such excessive destruction in battle that it becomes a self-parody – reminiscent of John Cleese's fantastically brutal Sir Lancelot in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.[83] The arrival of the two enormous, screaming goats and their deafening cries undercut every attempt at poise, and the jealous behaviour of the axe, Stormbreaker reframes a divine weapon as a sulky companion, sliding silently into shot whenever Thor waxes nostalgic about Mjolnir. The film's most elaborate episode of ritual humiliation unfolds in Omnipotence City, where Zeus presides as a parody of supreme divine authority. Thor is stripped of his clothing and compelled to stand naked before the assembled gods, a moment staged as public abasement rather than erotic spectacle. Yet Thor remains composed throughout, and the scene carefully redirects ridicule away from him. It is Zeus – indolent, self-indulgent, and seemingly enthralled by his own performance of power – who is rendered ridiculous. The humiliation thus exposes not Thor's vulnerability but the

[82] *Avengers: Endgame*, 00:51:40; 00:57:40. The latter reference is to *The Big Lebowski* (dir. by Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998), which established the bathrobe-clad, cocktail-drinking 'slacker' archetype evoked by Thor's presentation in *Avengers: Endgame.*
[83] *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, dir. Terry Jones & Terry Gilliam (Python/EMI, 1975), Swamp Castle sequence.

hollowness of Zeus's rule, turning the supposed king of the gods into the true object of mockery. The return of the Asgardian theatre troupe provides another scene of terrible acting, this time for the enjoyment of the assembled tourists to what has become a kind of tourable model village.

In the two seasons of the TV series *Loki*, some of the broadest humour comes in the time-cell sequence, which I will explore in detail in Chapter Four. Briefly, Loki is forced to relive, over and over again, a moment after he has cut off Sif's hair – an obvious re-working of the episode in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 35). Sif comes to confront him, and ends up punching him in the face and kneeing him in the groin. It is just one moment in a series which, like the films, finds comedy in bringing the divine down to earth. The TVA's intake procedure strips Loki of clothes, dignity, magic and even his own certainty that he is a living being in a matter of seconds. Self-parody peaks in the 'variant' episodes, where the series stages a carnival of Lokis – Boastful Loki, Kid Loki, Classic Loki, President Loki, Alligator Loki, and many more – so that the god is forced to witness endless patterns of self-destruction. The underground throne room scene devolves into a farce of back-stabbing coups, capped by President Loki's hand being bitten off, a moment that may faintly echo the myth of Týr losing his hand to the wolf Fenrir, framed here in comic mode.[84]

Sexually-charged humour

Arguably the most effective humour across the *Thor* and *Avengers* films arises from moments of powerlessness, confusion, awkwardness, or a combination of all three. This aligns with the humour of the *Eddas*, where Þórr is frequently the butt of jokes but rarely, if ever, a deliberate performer of comedy. Nowhere in Branagh's film is

[84] *Loki*, season 1, episode 4, 'The Nexus Event', dir. Kate Herron (Disney+, 2021).

this Eddic spirit more sharply revived than in the moments where threats to Thor's sexuality are played for humour. As Ursula Dronke notes, 'Effeminacy is the sharpest jibe to cast at any man in the society depicted in the sagas',[85] and Þórr can be seen as the ultimate *drengr*.[86] Insults directed at Thor acquire an additional power, as they combine anxieties surrounding gender, power, and control.

To situate the MCU's treatment within this longer tradition, it is worth examining in more detail the Eddic material, where comic threats to masculinity form a recurring narrative device. One of the clearest examples comes in the journey to the court of Útgarða-Loki (*Gylf.,* 44–46). Here the humiliations accumulate rapidly: Þórr seeks shelter in what turns out to be a giant's glove; fails to undo a bag of provisions; cannot strike hard enough to disturb the giant Skrýmir; and then performs dismally in a trio of tests whose macho character only heightens the embarrassment. He cannot drain a drinking horn in one, two, or at most three draughts; tries and fails to lift a cat from the ground; and unsuccessfully wrestles an elderly nurse after Skrýmir declares that Þórr would be hopeless against anyone else. After failing all three challenges – just as his companions Loki and Þjálfi fail theirs – they prepare to slip away in shame the next morning. Only then does Skrýmir reveal that all of the contests were illusions, designed to contain his destructive potential. Crucially, the fact that magic was involved in these humiliations is not quite enough to remove the stigma of failure. The decision to seek shelter in what turns out to be a giant's glove was taken *before* any magic was involved, and Loki gleefully reminds him of the humiliation in *Lokasenna* (sts. 60, 62).

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[85] Ursula Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls Saga*, Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981), p. 11.
[86] *Drengr* is a notoriously difficult term to translate. Jackson Crawford has recently suggested that it conveys something like a fusion of 'tough guy' and 'gentleman', a formulation that usefully captures its range. Jackson Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, expanded 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2025), p. liv.

Two other well-known examples add an overtly sexual dimension – one direct, and one indirect. They come in the poems *Þrymskviða* and *Lokasenna*, and while the humiliation suffered by Þórr in each case differs in tone and effect, both touch on his sense of security and worth as a man, not merely as a god. In *Þrymskviða*, after discovering that his hammer is missing, Þórr secures the loan of Freyja's feathered cloak and sends Loki to Jǫtunheimar to investigate. When Loki returns with the news that Þrymr will only return the hammer if he can marry Freyja, the goddess refuses, and the gods decide that Þórr himself must dress as a bride and go in her place. Þórr's outrage is immediate, and he makes clear why, saying that the Æsir will call him *argr* if he allows himself to be dressed in women's clothing.

> Þá kvað þat Þórr, þrúðugr áss:
> 'Mik munu Æsir argan kalla,
> ef ek bindask læt brúðar líni!
> (*Þrymskviða*, st. 17)
> ['Then said Thor, the vigorous god: "The Æsir will call me perverse, if I let you tie a bridal head-dress on me!"']

Argr is a masculine adjectival form of *ergi*, a term today often translated as 'unmanly' or 'perverse,' but which in Viking Age Scandinavia carried a more specific connotation – that of a man who could be penetrated sexually. As Folke Ström explains, this was a serious insult in Viking society – a verbal assault on a man's honour and his social identity.[88] With no alternative plan, Þórr reluctantly consents to the disguise, his comic indignity compounded by what may be a subtle

[87] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 95.
[88] Folke Ström, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), pp. 6–7.

linguistic jibe from Loki, who volunteers to accompany him as his handmaiden. While still dressed in his usual garb, Loki says that 'we two' shall go to Jǫtunheimar, but, as Richard Perkins has noted, in saying '"vit skulum aka tvau í Jǫtunheima"' ["'we two shall drive to Giant-Land"'] he uses tvau, the neuter form of 'two', a form typically used for a mixed pair.[89] Þórr's failure to react may reflect his limited appreciation of linguistic nuance – he misses obvious verbal cues in the Útgarða-Loki story – but the comment means Loki may have already called him a woman to his face, in public, and gotten away with it.

The second example of sexual humiliation I want to pick out is directed not at Þórr himself but at his wife's fidelity, and therefore his own reputation. It comes in *Lokasenna*, when Sif steps forward to serve Loki a drink and protests her blamelessness amid his taunts to the assembled goddesses – almost all framed in sexual terms. Loki responds with the insinuation that he has slept with her, and thus cuckolded Þórr.

> 'einn ek veit, svá at ek vita þikkjumk,
> hór ok af Hlórriða,
> ok var þat sá inn lævísi Loki!'
> (*Lokasenna* st. 54)
> ["'I know one – and I think I do know – a lover besides Thor, and that was the malevolent Loki."][90]

As Clunies Ross notes, the accusation that a man was unable to control access to the females in his household would have represented a direct loss of status in Old Norse

[89] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 96. Richard Perkins, 'Þrymskviða Stanza 20, and a Passage from *Víglundar saga*', *Saga-Book* XXII (1986–89), pp. 279–84, backing up a similar reading of the line by Bruce Dickins.
[90] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 90.

society.[91] The public suggestion that Loki has slept with Sif is thus a clear affront to Þórr's masculinity.

Remarkably, all three modes of Thor's humiliation that appear in the Eddic material – attacks on his strength (Útgarða-Loki), on his sexual identity (*Þrymskviða*), and on his family honour (*Lokasenna*) recur in Branagh's *Thor*. The first, and most straightforward, is the trope in which Þórr's strength is rendered ineffective through magic, illusion, or force of circumstance. This becomes the structural foundation of the film. Before Odin strips away Thor's powers and banishes him to Earth we are introduced to an arrogant god who must learn humility, and Branagh builds a sequence of comic humiliations on this premise, as we have seen – capped by his inability to lift Mjolnir from the S.H.I.E.L.D. crater.

A second, more pointed form of humiliation – a challenge to Thor's sexual identity – also surfaces when Thor and Laufey, the Frost Giant king, engage in a verbal dual. I will consider the scene as a whole in Chapter Five but for now I will concentrate on a single insult that means Thor cannot back down. The dialogue runs as follows:

> LAUFEY: Your father is a murderer and a thief! He stole what was ours, and left our world in ruins. And why have you come here? To make peace? You long for battle. You crave it. You're nothing but a boy trying to prove himself a man.
>
> THOR: Well, this 'boy' has grown tired of your mockery.
>
> LOKI: Thor, stop and think. Look around you, we're outnumbered.

[91] Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Þórr's Honour', in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. by Heiko Uecker (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994), pp. 48–76 (pp. 50; 72).

THOR: Know your place, brother.

LAUFEY: You know not what your actions would unleash.

THOR: I do.

LAUFEY: Go now, while I still allow it.

LOKI: We will accept your most gracious offer. Come on, brother.

LAUFEY: Run back home, little princess…

LOKI: Damn…[92]

Calling Thor a boy causes irritation, but does not provoke a physical reaction. The decisive provocation comes when Laufey reframes the insult as challenge to his sexuality, and Loki's muttered 'Damn' signals that this will certainly bring a response. Thor's expression changes from anger to a dangerous smile and the fight begins instantly. While Thor can swallow the implication of immaturity, the suggestion of something like *ergi* is intolerable.

An echo of this dynamic surfaces again on Earth. After being tasered and taken to hospital, Thor struggles with staff members and is finally subdued when a nurse administers a sedative.[93] Branagh stages the moment for broad comedy – Thor begins, 'You're no match for the Mighty…' before slumping mid-sentence – but one detail stands out: the injection is delivered as a form of penetration to his bare backside. The gag may be intended simply to infantilise him, but in the context of the earlier 'little princess' jibe, its effect is to recall the anxiety voiced in *Þrymskviða*: humiliation through an association with forced passivity.

The third category concerns threats to familial and sexual honour. In *Lokasenna*, as we have seen, Loki claims to have slept with Sif. In *Thor*, a similar

[92] *Thor*, 00:19:30–00:21:22.
[93] *Thor*, 00:32:26.

dynamic reappears in the final confrontation between the brothers on the Bifrost. Thor at first refuses to fight, prompting Loki to taunt him for his new-found restraint: 'What happened to you on Earth that turned you so soft? Don't tell me it was that woman. It was! Maybe when we're finished here, I'll pay her a visit myself.'[94] It is hard to read the final sentence of this dialogue as anything other than a threat of rape. Within a Viking-Age honour framework, such a threat would constitute an attack not only on a woman's bodily autonomy but on the masculine status of the man unable to protect her.

This strain of humour largely disappears in the next phase of the MCU, but Waititi revives it as playful allusion. In *Thor: Ragnarok*, the motif returns in miniature when Thor is forced to have his hair shorn, recoiling in horror as his warrior's mane is clipped away. Later, after Thor has been denied a chance of victory in the arena, Hulk's nonchalant stroll from the bath, naked, unashamed and almost literally in Thor's face, works as a visual joke and a gesture of dominance. This continues in *Thor: Love and Thunder* when Thor is summoned before Zeus in the golden Amphitheatre of Omnipotence City. Attempting to rally the gods against Gorr, he is contemptuously dismissed by Zeus, who blasts away Thor's disguise, leaving him suddenly naked before the assembled deities, who begin to laugh.[95] Like Laufey before him, Zeus seeks to undermine Thor's authority through a type of sexualised mockery. However, the gesture falls somewhat flat in comparison with Branagh's film. Where Laufey's jibe struck at Thor's insecurity, here Thor neither rages nor blushes but stands calm, appearing faintly amused. The camera lingers on

[94] *Thor*, 01:36:40.
[95] *Thor: Love and Thunder*, 00:58:54.

his physique neither to mock nor to eroticise, but to affirm this self-confidence and restraint.

How did this connection between sex and humiliation make its way from the Eddic material to the MCU? In the case of Loki's threat to 'pay a visit' to Foster, the comic books offer one potential answer. Within Marvel's mythology, Loki served as a potential sexual rival to Thor almost from his introduction. A hint of this subtext appears in Loki's first appearance in *Journey Into Mystery* #85, when Jane Foster remarks on his attractiveness: 'Loki - - ummm, a lovely name! And he seems so dashing and romantic!'[96] In the following issue he manipulates her as a proxy to reach Thor, and by #108 he has taken her hostage. Musing over her beauty, he says: 'Hmmm - - I was never aware how lovely she is - - for a mortal!'[97] The early creative team may have absorbed this triangle motif from a translation or retelling of *Lokasenna*, but it is much more likely that they were simply drawing on narrative convention: the villain threatening or coveting the hero's partner.

The presence of more direct sexual threats to Thor himself is harder to account for. Even if we discount a Freudian reading of Branagh's decision to have the sedative administered to Thor's bottom, the tinge of sexual humiliation remains unmistakable in the 'little princess' taunt. And given the socially liberal slant of twenty-first-century Hollywood – apparent elsewhere in the franchise when, for example, Loki speaks openly of his bisexuality[98] – the inclusion of a gendered, sexualised insult drawn from archaic codes of *ergi* feels jarring.

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[96] Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Larry Lieber, *Journey into Mystery*, no. 85, repr. in *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Worldwide).
[97] Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, *Journey into Mystery*, no. 108, repr. in *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 2 (New York: Marvel Worldwide).
[98] *Loki*, season 1, episode 3, 'Lamentis', dir. Kate Herron (Disney+, 2021).

To account for the MCU's reintroduction of this older motif, we must look beyond the comic books toward other possible influences. Here, equally, the popular retellings can provide no source, with every major English-language retelling from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries either omitting or sanitising this aspect of the myth. In Bulfinch's *Age of Fable*, Thor's moment of discomfort in *Þrymskviða* is reduced to a single line, with no trace of the medieval Þórr's objection or his anxiety about ridicule: 'In this emergency Loki persuaded Thor to dress himself in Freya's clothes and accompany him to Jotunheim' (p. 352). The Keary sisters' *Heroes of Asgard* omits both *Þrymskviða* and *Lokasenna* entirely, and although the 1870 expanded edition carries a brief reference to the latter (see below), it contains no description of the bridal disguise (p. 78). In Guerber, Thor makes no objection to dressing up as a bride, while the reference to Loki having sex with Sif in *Lokasenna* is rendered extremely carefully. Loki, 'uttering some base slander about Sif' (p. 206), is cut short by the sight of Thor's hammer and flees. Mabie's *Norse Stories Retold from the Eddas* allows a little more personality, having Thor protest, 'If I dress like a woman, you will jeer at me' (p. 133), but even here the threat is framed as embarrassment rather than emasculation. In the *Lokasenna* story, Loki merely curses Sif, with no sexual insult mentioned. Colum's *The Children of Odin* preserves the comic set-up more faithfully but still strips it of its sexual charge. Thor says: 'Loki, thou didst devise all this to mock me. I in a bridal dress! I with a bride's veil upon me! The Dwellers in Asgard will never cease to laugh at me' (p. 125). Once again, the anxiety here is social, not sexual. The d'Aulaires' *Norse Gods and Giants* is still more circumspect. 'Thor protested loudly, but all in vain,' it says (p. 101). In their brief version of *Lokasenna*, Thor shouts at Sif but Loki's taunts are unspecified. Only Crossley-Holland restores the line's original structure: 'You'll call me unmanly

if I put on a bridal veil' (p. 72). Yet even here the euphemism softens the insult, and the author's otherwise meticulous notes offer no insight about the weight of the accusation of *ergi*. Crossley-Holland does, however, reproduce *Lokasenna* in full, including Loki's charge of infidelity: 'You'd certainly stand alone if you were as chaste with all men as you are with most. But I think I know one who inveigled you out of your husband's arms … his name was crafty Loki' (p. 167).

Across the modern tradition of retelling, then, there is a clear pattern, with Thor's comic humiliation preserved, but its sexual dimension removed. Nowhere in these works is a term with the power of *ergi* employed, nor does any author attempt to explain its meaning. Turning to the wider pool of popular resources, the pattern is similar, with none engaging with a specific motif of sexualised humiliation. Adams's *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* and Gaiman's *American Gods* make the gods fallible, even absurd, but neither employs sexualised insult as a device. In *Stargate SG-1* no Thor-focused sexual mockery appears anywhere in the series. *DK's Eyewitness: Vikings* (1997) offers only short, neutral summaries of mythic material and avoids interpretative elaboration of this kind. The video game *Age of Mythology* (2002) grants divine powers but does not develop narrative characterisation. Even *Wikipedia* in 2008 shows no trace of this motif. The 'Thor' article at the time summarised several major myths, including Þórr's visit to Geirröðr, the confrontation in *Alvíssmál* [All-wise's Sayings] with the dwarf intent on marrying Þorr's daughter, his humiliation by illusions at Útgarða-Loki's hall, and the cross-dressing deception in *Þrymskviða*. Yet even in the last of these, there is no attempt to interpret the sexualised dimension.

Returning to the other forces that had significant influences over the films, we can discount the intertextual demands of the MCU. Producers already knew that

Thor would return in *The Avengers*,[99] but in this second outing, he is more secure in his role of hero, and the threat to his sense of masculinity is not an issue. We are left, then, with the desire of the filmmakers to make a movie that would be entertaining as possible – despite the cultural atmosphere that we might expect to have blocked its adoption. Here we begin edging towards an explanation that has interesting implications for how the stories may once have been experienced by pre-modern audiences. Branagh, trained in Shakespearean theatre, and already by this time an Oscar nominee for his acting and directing in a cinematic version of *Henry V* (1989), and for best adapted screenplay for *Hamlet* (1996), must have relished the spectacle of the mighty brought low, and of a callow hero exposed in a moment of comic vulnerability. But still, the overwhelmingly liberal sensibilities of twenty-first-century Hollywood – at least in matters of sexuality – should really have made this particular kind of joke unacceptable. As Philippa Gates observes, by the 2000s, studios were increasingly wary of equating heroism with invulnerability or heterosexual prowess.[100] Certainly, we could no longer expect an accusation of queerness to be the punchline.

The BBC's *Sherlock* (2010) pilot provides a point of comparison.[101] There, the repeated suggestion that John Watson might be gay is treated as a nagging irritation for the character, but not a threat to his masculinity. The joke remains tenable because it is accompanied by protestations of absolute acceptance from everyone involved. By contrast, when Laufey calls his enemy in *Thor* 'little princess', the humour harks back to an earlier comic register, and depends on the audience recognising the sting of emasculation. More bluntly, the joke just sounds

[99] Bennett and Terry, *Story of Marvel Studios*, vol. 1, p. 91.
[100] Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 3–5.
[101] *Sherlock*, season 1, episode 1, 'A Study in Pink', dir. Paul McGuigan (BBC One, 2010).

tone-deaf. That such a line survived the filters of a 2011 film so attuned to the liberal sensibilities that are obvious elsewhere in the MCU, not least in the *Thor* franchise where on top of Loki's bisexuality, Valkyrie and Korg are both queer coded, suggests that the creatives involved in the film just found the line dramatically irresistible.

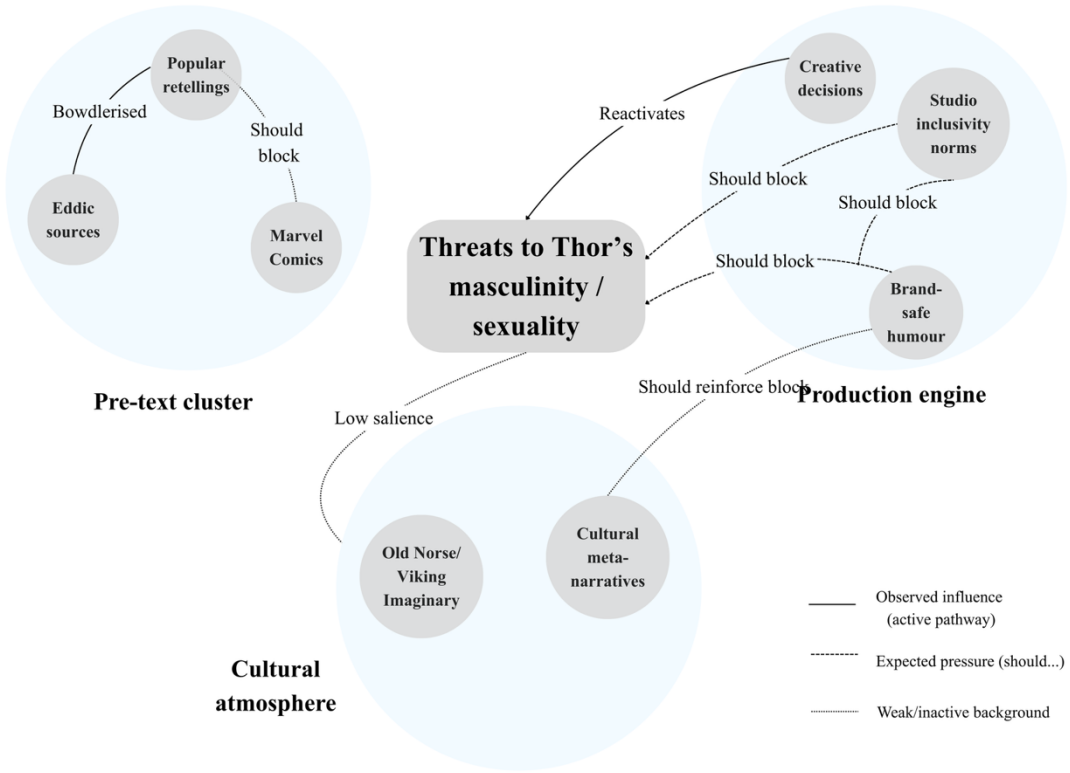


Figure 11: ANT pathway, threats to Thor's masculinity/sexuality.

Although the motif is present in Eddic material, it is suppressed in popular retellings and does not transmit into Marvel Comics, leaving no active pre-textual pathway into the MCU. Cultural metanarratives, transmitted and reinforced by liberal, 21st century Hollywood, should help reinforce the inclusive social norms in operation and act as a block on such humour, yet creative decisions reactivate it for comic and dramatic effect, suggesting re-emergence driven by performative pressures.

We appear, then, to have hit a block: there is no clear explanation for the return of such sexually charged insults except that the film makers felt they would make for

good drama. I will return to the question of what the implications of this might be in Chapter Five.

Chapter Three: The old gods made new

> HELA: Does no one remember me? Has no one been taught our history? Look at these lies. Goblets and garden parties? Peace treaties? Odin... proud to have it... ashamed of how he got it!
>
> – *Thor: Ragnarok*[1]

Any Hollywood screenwriter working with the literary characters inherited from Norse myth and inclined to explore questions of good and evil is likely to face a basic structural problem. On the one hand stands Loki, who is famously described by Snorri (*Gylf.*, 33) as 'fríðr ok fagr sönum, illr í skaplyndi, mjök fjölbreytinn at háttum' ['pleasing and handsome in appearance, evil in character, very capricious in behaviour'] and someone who 'hafði þá speki um fram aðra menn er slœgð heitir, ok vælar til allra hluta' ['possessed to a greater degree than others the kind of learning that is called cunning, and tricks for every purpose'].[2] Against this fount of charisma and narrative energy stands Þórr, whose introduction by Snorri (*Gylf.,* 21) simply notes that he is famous for being the 'sterkastr allra guða ok manna' ['the strongest of all gods and men'].[3] As I will argue, the medieval Þórr is far more than just a blunt instrument, with the poems and stories revealing shrewdness, tactical improvisation, and at least one occasion of verbal dexterity. Yet it is equally true that he is not written with anything like the developmental arc that contemporary cinema usually

[1] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 00:42:55.
[2] Faulkes, *Edda*, p. 26.
[3] Faulkes, *Edda*, p. 22. There is evidence that Óðinn was especially worshipped by the ruling classes, while Þórr is said to be more a god of the peasants. It is thus possible that the version of Norse myth given by Snorri, who was a powerful politician in Iceland, may be more sympathetic towards Óðinn. For a discussion of this idea, see Jens Peter Schjødt, 'The Old Norse Gods' in *The Viking World*, pp. 219–22.

requires of its protagonists. This mismatch helps to explain both the MCU's initial calibration of the character and later shifts that will be explored in this chapter.

For all the overt departures from the medieval stories in the MCU, the films do repeatedly return the characters to what Jens Peter Schjødt has called their semantic centre.[4] Schjødt's semantic centre describes functional clusters that arise inside a given discourse (Eddic poetry and prose, saga narrative, modern adaptation, etc.), whenever a mythic figure is deployed. The concept allows us to identify continuity without assuming a single, fully recoverable 'original' form. The idea is valuable in the Old Norse context, where sources are fragmentary and sometimes contradictory, because it lets us talk about a degree of consistency in how a figure works while still allowing for considerable variation. For Óðinn, Schjødt identifies the semantic centre as his pursuit of knowledge. A wholly ignorant or incurious Óðinn could exist, but such a portrayal would require explanation. For Þórr, it is strength that lies at the centre. The Útgarða-Loki episode in which he appears as weak works because it inverts expectations, before revealing the magical deception that restores his reputation. This chapter begins by reading the MCU's Thor alongside Odin, because Thor's trajectory depends on the films' diminishment of his father and the redistribution of some central functions to the son. It then turns to Odin directly to examine how a more recognisably Óðinnic presence resurfaces. Finally, it considers Loki, tracing his evolution from mischief-maker to villain to hero, and ultimately to a wholly unexpected role associated with narrative creation.

[4] For the clearest expression of this idea, see Schjødt, 'The Notions of Model, Discourse and Semantic Centre as Tools for the (Re)Construction of Old Norse Religion', *Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter*, 6 (2013), pp. 6–15.

Thor and Odin: redistributing the semantic centre

Thor's initial presentation within the MCU is as an arrogant, entitled, and largely ineffective princeling, far removed from the figure of the *Eddas* who is powerful and dependable, if also susceptible to magic and one who can be outmanoeuvred by a more verbally adept opponent. As the *Infinity Saga* develops, however, Thor acquires traits that move him closer to his Eddic profile and, at key moments, into alignment with aspects traditionally associated with Óðinn. A key reason for this shift lies in the decision to make Odin an ageing patriarch whose inertia stands in marked contrast to his Eddic presence. The screenwriters' solution is structurally neat. Functions more closely associated with Óðinn are progressively transferred to Thor, enabling the son's development into a more complex figure. This redistribution also creates space for the later reassertion of a more recognisably Óðinnic presence in a carefully engineered sequence introduced by Taika Waititi in *Thor: Ragnarok*.

In tracing these developments, it is useful to compare Thor's first appearance with the battle-hardened figure preparing to face Thanos at the climax of *Avengers: Infinity War*. In Branagh's film, Thor is introduced in immaculate ceremonial regalia as he participates in an oath of succession.

> ODIN: Do you swear to guard the Nine Realms? […] to preserve the peace? – […] to cast aside all selfish ambition and pledge yourself only to the good of all the Realms?
>
> THOR (after each question): I swear.[5]

He winks to his mother, draws an indulgent smile from Sif, and is on the point of taking over before the incursion of the Frost Giants brings a halt to the proceedings.

[5] *Thor*, 00:10:00.

Fast-forward to *Infinity War* and we find Thor drifting through space. His mother has been murdered and his father has died; his girlfriend Jane has left him; Loki and best friend Heimdall have been killed in front of him; Hela has taken out his eye and destroyed his hammer. To cap it all, Asgard has been obliterated, and not by an enemy but in an act engineered by Thor himself, as a last-resort act designed to save his people from Ragnarok. Even that has failed to shield them, however, with Thanos intercepting the evacuation ship and slaughtering half the survivors. Eventually rescued, Thor forges a new weapon and pursues vengeance, only to miscalculate at the critical moment when he hits Thanos in the chest, and takes time to savour what he thinks, wrongly, is the killing blow. 'You should have gone for the neck,' Thanos taunts him, before executing The Snap.[6] In the opening of *Avengers: Endgame*, Thor does, in fact, kill Thanos, but the victory is an empty one. With the Infinity Stones destroyed, there is no way to undo what has happened, and Thor withdraws into grief, avoidance and a carb-heavy diet while New Asgard rebuilds under a new leader, Valkyrie. Once a path emerges that means it might be possible to go back in time and retrieve the stones, Thor at first rejects the invitation to return to the Avengers, wallowing in self-pity before the lure of free beer makes him reconsider. Only in the ensuing 'time heist' and the final battle does he regain purpose. Even so, while he discovers that he is still worthy via the return of his hammer, and helps bring back those who were temporarily lost, he is not given a second chance to deliver a meaningful blow to Thanos.

Before considering Thor's arc in more detail, it is worth briefly comparing his treatment with the MCU's Odin. Under Branagh's direction, Odin is presented as an avuncular figure – prone to irascibility, but a loving husband to Frigga, and an

[6] *Avengers: Infinity War*, 02:10:57.

attentive father to Thor and Loki. He is a benevolent ruler of the Nine Realms, a champion of humanity in the war against the Frost Giants, although eager now to pass on the crown. His temper is briefly on display when Thor's ill-judged attack on the Frost Giants threatens an uneasy truce, but this is an Odin who has lost his appetite for war. When Thor calls on him to help destroy the enemy once and for all, the old king refuses, retreats, and casts Thor down to Earth to learn humility. Almost immediately, the screenwriters consign him to the Odinsleep, a device that clears him from the stage and hands the spotlight to Thor and the manoeuvring Loki. By the time of *Thor: The Dark World*, we briefly see Odin roused into military action and wielding his chief weapon, Gungnir, but he becomes increasingly irrelevant as the film goes on. By its end, he has been usurped by Loki, who has shape-shifted to take on Odin's appearance and rule in his stead. *Thor: Ragnarok* opens with Loki still in Odin's guise, living out a ludicrous fantasy on Asgard, and continues with news that the All-father is living out his days at the Shady Acres care home in New York. They eventually catch up with him on a Norwegian cliff and his final act is part warning, part confession, as his death unleashes Hela, his first-born child.

Clearly, what the film makers have done is to transfer Odin's most recognisable powers to Thor. This happens in stages. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, which occurs between the events of *The Dark World* and *Ragnarok*, Thor is plagued by hallucinations and seeks out knowledge from the Norns, eventually returning with a premonition of the end of the world. This is a conspicuously Óðinnic move, reminiscent of the episode in *Vǫluspá* when Odin asks the *Vǫlva* to speak and receives details about the fate of the world, and the poem *Baldrs draumar*, where Óðinn seeks information about the dreams that have been plaguing his son. In *Ragnarok*, the Thor of the MCU doubles down on this quest. The opening image –

the god suspended in a cage in Muspelheim, interrogating Surtur about the coming of Ragnarok – is an echo of Óðinn's ordeal of self-suspension in pursuit of wisdom, as Andrew Tobolowsky has recognised.[7] Later in the film, Thor loses an eye in combat with Hela, acquiring the most recognisable of Óðinnic signifiers.



Figure 12: Odin, after waking from his 'Odinsleep'.

Screengrab from 'Thor' (2011), showing the one-eyed Odin after waking from the 'Odinsleep'. © Marvel Studios, 2011.

[7] Andrew Tobolowsky, 'The Thor Movies and the "Available" Myth: Mythic Reinvention in Marvel Movies', in *Theology and the Marvel Universe*, ed. by Gregory Stevenson (London: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. 173–86 (pp. 175–76).



Figure 13: Thor, after losing an eye to Hela.

Screengrab from Thor: Ragnarok (2017), showing Thor with one eye following his fight with Hela. © Marvel Studios, 2017

By this time, Thor has come through the comic humiliations outlined in the previous chapter and accepted his role of protector. He does not, however, grow into true leader. By the close of *Endgame*, he has declined the throne, appointed Valkyrie to rule New Asgard in his stead, and opted instead for the path of the wanderer, although he later returns in *Thor: Love and Thunder* when the town's children are abducted by Gorr. Crucially, *Love and Thunder* concludes not with Thor reclaiming the throne, but with his assumption of a paternal role, as he takes responsibility for Gorr's daughter, Love. Leadership is thus reinterpreted, from the military command he once longed for, toward guardianship. What Thor retains from his own semantic centre is, obviously, strength, alongside a protective role manifested both in the defence of his community, whenever required, and in a tendency to seek confrontation abroad – just as the Thor of the *Eddas* is often found 'in the east'

fighting giants.[8] What he takes from Óðinn is equally clear: the pursuit of mythic knowledge and an eventual acceptance that Ragnarǫk is unavoidable, even while making every preparation for the fight ahead.

With Odin's role correspondingly reduced, as noted above, the MCU's long arc is a case of semantic drift, return and hybridisation. Thor begins as a wayward youth, reminiscent, perhaps, of Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. He is publicly humbled, and then tasked with Óðinnic trials until the traits sit naturally on him. The effect is to bring back a recognisably Eddic configuration, albeit with Thor taking over the semantic centre of Odin. This has the additional effect of clearing the ground for the claim developed in the previous section: Thor can be the butt of the joke without being stupid, and in fact, emerges as a plausible hero.

It would be natural to describe what the MCU is doing here as exactly what Jón Karl Helgason suggests – operating in a separate mythological sphere and feeling free to make any change they see fit. This would tally with a common scholarly view of Þórr as intellectually second-rate. The arguments that sustain this interpretation are familiar. In the Útgarða-Loki episode related by Snorri, Þórr is fooled by magic again and again. He cannot wake the sleeping giant despite raining down hammer blows; he fails a set of hyper-masculine trials; and he misses the linguistic cues that would have given the game away – though, in fairness, so, apparently, do his companions, Loki and Þjálfi. In *Þrymskviða*, Þórr loses his hammer, and then has to consent to dressing up as a bride in order to retrieve it. In *Hárbarðsljóð*, he is said to come off second best in a flyting, and in *Lokasenna*, he enters late and is subjected to a series of verbal humiliations by Loki, who only

[8] See for example *Harbarðsljóð*, sts. 23, 29.

desists because of physical threats he cannot afford to ignore. From such scenes the conclusion seems to follow: Þórr is bested whenever wits are required.

Some scholars have been more circumspect than others on this point. Paul Acker calls Þórr simply 'less than omniscient'; Annette Lassen describes him as 'mentally somewhat naïve'; Shippey quips that he's the type of god who 'thinks with his hammer'.[9] Eduard Pettit is blunter, describing him as 'dim-witted' in *Lokasenna*, and three times singling him out as 'slow-witted' to go with it.[10] Carol J. Clover is even more forthright, labelling him a 'mental midget' beside his opponent in *Hárbarðsljóð*.[11] Similarly, Rudolf Simek finds him 'gullible to the point of simple-mindedness', and sets up the opposition: Þórr as strong, honest, simple-minded; Loki as crafty and sly, easily duping Þórr into comic predicaments.[12] O'Donoghue pushes further. In her view, the trip to see Útgarða-Loki confirms a god who is 'rash and slow-witted'; *Þrymskviða* shows him up as a powerful buffoon, long on vigour, short on imagination and wit; *Hárbarðsljóð* demonstrates Þórr's slow-wittedness against Óðinn's superior cunning; and in *Lokasenna* he is 'utterly routed in verbal terms'. She adds a related charge from the fishing episode: Þórr's attempt to kill Jörmungandr, foiled by Hymir cutting the line, is reckless endangerment of the cosmos.[13]

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[9] Annette Lassen, 'Höðr's Blindness and the Pledging of Óðinn's Eye: The Symbolic Value of the Eyes and Blindness of Höðr, Óðinn and Þórr', in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: The 11th International Saga Conference*, ed. by G. Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), pp. 220–28 (p. 227). Paul Acker, 'Dwarf-Lore in Alvíssmál', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 213–28 (p. 213). Tom Shippey, *Heroes and Legends: The Most Influential Characters of Literature* (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2014) [DVD].
[10] Edward Pettit, *The Poetic Edda: A Dual-Language Edition* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 232, 234, 326.
[11] Carol J. Clover, 'Hárbarðsljóð as Generic Farce', *Scandinavian Studies*, 51.2 (1979), 124–45 (p. 124).
[12] Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 317–19.
[13] O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, pp. 30–38.

Not every strand of this has gone unchallenged. Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos, reading the verbal exchanges of *Hárbarðsljóð* through an analysis based on pragmatics, argue that Þórr holds his own in the poem.[14] Declan Taggart likewise defends Þórr's linguistic resourcefulness at two points. In *Lokasenna*, when Þórr enters and prefaces each of his speeches between sts. 57 and 63 with '"Þegi þú, rǫg vættr"' ['"Be silent, perverse creature"'],[15] Taggart argues that he is not merely tossing a crude sexual insult but augmenting Loki's own 'Þegi þú' formula to pointed effect. In *Alvíssmál*, Taggart reads Þórr as asserting a smart procedural claim – stating that as father he alone can authorise the match and deploying a delaying tactic to keep the dwarf talking until daybreak.[16]

Taggart makes a persuasive case, yet one that may not be necessary if the goal is to gauge Þórr's intelligence rather than simply his verbal dexterity. As we have seen, Þórr *is* sometimes bested in verbal confrontation – and I will make a case in the Coda of this thesis for his failing to see through an elaborate verbal and visual deception – but being good with words is not the same thing as being intelligent. And as it happens, there are several examples of him displaying deft problem-solving. In *Þrymskviða*, it is Þórr who asks Freyja for the use of her falcon-cloak to reach Jǫtunheimar (st. 3), and who demands an actionable report from Loki immediately on his return (st. 10) – actions that portray him as something like a smart commanding officer. He then bides his time, and at the end of the poem strikes decisively. The appetite jokes nearly give the game away, but nearly is the point. In the trip to Útgarða-Loki, yes, he misses the linguistic clues, but so does everyone

[14] Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos, 'Two Types of Verbal Dueling in Old Icelandic: The Interactional Structure of the "Senna" and the "Mannjafnaðr" in *Hárbarðsljóð*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 55.2 (1983), pp. 149–74.
[15] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 90–91.
[16] Declan Taggart, *How Thor Lost His Thunder: The Changing Faces of an Old Norse God* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 87–89.

else. Elsewhere, we see him in quick-thinking mode when he realises he can use a metal staff to break the backs of his giantess foes on the visit to Geirröðargarð (*Skáldsk*, ch. 18); and again when he lops the head off a bull to use as bait in *Hymiskviða* (sts. 18–19). In *Alvíssmál*, as Taggart argues, he wins with what resembles a smart courtroom tactic. In *Lokasenna*, it is not as if he is bested while the rest of the gods shine under Loki's attacks. What Marvel has recognised is that a character can be gulled at times – just as the Eddic version could be bamboozled by magic or out-talked – and still register as a plausible hero by being resourceful, quick-thinking, and decisive under pressure. It is true that the *Eddas* delight in staging public humiliation of Þórr, and of others, before restoring their dignity, a tendency I shall return to examine in Chapter Five. However, to infer from this a general cognitive lack is a leap that may not be fully supported by Eddic evidence.

The rediscovery of a level of practical intelligence in the Marvel films – tempered by some struggles to adjust to modern life on Earth – can be mapped through our three clusters of influence within the ANT model. The pre-texts offer limited support. By the time the *Eddas* had filtered through nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellings they had already been reshaped as a moralising force and Thor is here, at first, portrayed as Odin's capable lieutenant. The Keary sisters' *Heroes of Asgard* introduces Thor riding at Odin's right hand in a scene that reads like an illustration for a battle hymn (p. 22). In the stories that follow, the portrait becomes somewhat less dignified. When a storm blows over the encampment of the Æsir, 'Thor swung himself backwards and forwards, and threw stones in every possible direction' – displaying strength but not much in the way of judgement (p. 24). In the updated edition of 1870, the Kearys add a comment about Thor's conduct in *Þrymskviða*. Without telling the story itself, they make it clear that while killing

the giant may be just about unacceptable, murdering the 'aged, luckless sister' into the bargain constitutes behaviour that is quite beyond the pale (pp. 144–45). Other early retellings likewise forbear comment on Thor's intelligence. Bulfinch's pared-down version grants Thor scarcely any agency at all. Mabie allows him flashes of moral force – lightning flaring from deep-set eyes (pp. 45–46) – but there is nothing about his intellect. Guerber is among the very few to recount his quick-witted victory in *Alvíssmál* (pp. 64–65). Colum, by contrast, reshapes *Þrymskviða* to maximise Thor's intellectual embarrassment, having him protest, rather lamely, '…and is this, thinks thou, Loki, the only way to win back Miölnir from Thrym?' (p. 125). By the 1960s the drift is unmistakable, with Thor now being played as intellectually limited. In the d'Aulaires' retelling, we are told that, 'He struck out before thinking and his blows were not soft' (p. 40). For the first time, in our survey texts, Thor is said to rely explicitly on Loki's wits: 'Thor especially liked to have cunning Loki at his side, for Thor was not quite as quick-thinking as he was fast-acting' (p. 42). Crossley-Holland, in 1980, takes this farther, explaining in his introduction (p. xxxvi) that Thor was 'a bit slow in the uptake, but immensely strong and dependable'. He also has Loki get away with a pointed dig:

> 'In Utgard,' said Loki, 'you'll need sharp wits.' 'Sharp wits,' repeated Thor seriously. 'And yours are as blunt as your hammer,' said Loki, winking at Thor. 'Why not take me?' (p. 80).

It would have been natural, perhaps, for Marvel Comics to continue the slide towards a less-than-smart hero in *The Mighty Thor*. After all, Dr Blake, Thor's mortal alter ego, could have been used to offload thought and intellect, leaving the god as pure muscle. Instead they created a warrior who plans as well as fights,

putting strategies in place to fight both mortal enemies and his mythological opponents, usually Loki or one of his surrogates. Later writers such as Simonson and J. Michael Straczynski developed that intelligence further, recasting Thor as a thoughtful leader grappling with questions of justice and responsibility. In Simonson's take on the war with Surtur, Thor recognises that brute force cannot stop Ragnarǫk. In Straczynski's *Thor* (vol. 3) he rebuilds Asgard on Earth, negotiating with authorities and reflects on Asgard's history of violence, reconsidering whether the Æsir deserve worship. His speech may have remained vaguely archaic, in deference to the way Lee first brought the character to life, but he is never drawn as witless. This comic-book lineage ensured that when Marvel Studios came to the character, there already existed a tradition of a god who could think as well as act.

Surrounding these texts was a cultural atmosphere that helped define what counted, for the general public, as 'Norse' or 'Viking'. Here the signals were mixed. In much late-twentieth-century popular culture, Thor was a jovial oaf, his strength unaccompanied by subtlety. Adams's *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* makes him a buffoon, unable to operate in the modern world. Gaiman's *American Gods* opens after Thor's death, but has Mr Wednesday remember him as 'Good-hearted. Not bright' (p. 518). Even children's reference material reinforced this impression: the first edition of *DK Eyewitness: Viking Mythology* simply asserted, without any further explanation, that 'Thor was not very bright' (p. 52), changing that only slightly to 'not very clever' in the 2002 edition.

At the same time, however, other media saw more potential for him. In *Stargate SG-1*, Thor of the Asgard first appears in the form of a Viking warrior – calling himself 'Supreme Commander of the Viking fleet' – but this turns out to be a holographic projection. His true form, we learn later, is a small, grey alien who is

scientifically brilliant.[17] A similar corrective occurs in *Age of Mythology*. Worshippers of Thor gain bonuses to mining, construction, and armoury upgrades and his 'Dwarven Mine' god-power provides resources. *Wikipedia* in 2008 perhaps subtly reinforced this more competent image. The 'Thor' article at that time summarises a sequence of stories – his defence against Geirröðr, his cunning manipulation of Alvíss, his responses to Útgarða-Loki's illusions, and the recovery of Mjǫllnir in *Þrymskviða* – most of which involve feats of problem-solving or strategic improvisation.

The third cluster, the production engine, likely played the decisive role in delivering a smarter Thor. Big-budget films require leading characters who make decisions, learn, and change, and whose competence the audience can trust. The MCU's Thor had to evolve from impetuous prince to capable leader, via a growth arc that could sustain multiple films. This expectation of competence can be framed more precisely through film theory, although the case study I turn to comes from the horror genre. Clover's analysis of horror, and specifically slasher films, notes that the protagonist who survives and resolves the scenario functions as the film's investigating consciousness – the character whose intelligence, vigilance, and reasoning take the narrative forward.[18] Although the MCU operates in a different genre, the narrative requirement is similar, and by the time we reach *Ragnarok*, Thor occupies this role securely. As well as being the strongest Avenger, he has become the sole figure who understands what Ragnarǫk must mean. As such, it is Thor who identifies the necessary solution of unleashing Surtur to complete Asgard's

[17] *Stargate SG-1*, season 1, episode 10, 'Thor's Hammer', dir. Brad Turner (Showtime, 1997), introduces the Asgard deity Thor. It is later revealed that he serves as a strategic commander in season 2, episode 6, 'Thor's Chariot', dir. William Gereghty (Showtime, 1998).
[18] Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 44.

destruction. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson make a similar point more generally about Hollywood cinema, where action plots are organised around protagonists who formulate goals and work to overcome obstacles.[19] This points to a fundamental constraint within the Hollywood system: the 'hero' role cannot realistically be given to a character who is stupid in the way retellers, and even scholars, have sometimes described the Eddic Þórr, except perhaps where the goal of the movie is satire.

In making this switch, it may be that there is also some deliberate reframing going on as a counter to far-right appropriations of Norse myth. These types of appropriations privilege the fantasy of unreflective strength: the unbeatable strongman who solves problems by force. The MCU steadily moves in the opposite direction, making judgment the basis of leadership. From *Thor* (2011) onward, he turns away from impulsive aggression; by *Ragnarok* he chooses evacuation over a glorious last stand, forges coalitions, and wins by strategy and misdirection (unleashing Surtur). In *Love and Thunder*, he chooses fatherhood over authority, as we have seen. Even his signature power is decoupled from weapon-fetishism, with Odin's posthumous advice in *Ragnarok* reminding him that he is not god of hammers, but god of thunder.[20] Read against what Amy S. Kaufman calls 'muscular medievalism' – a mode that enjoys portraying a hyper-patriarchal, violent 'medieval' past – Hemsworth's Thor is a long way from a strongman fantasy.[21]

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[19] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction,* 7th edn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004).
[20] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 01:47:38.
[21] Amy Kaufman, 'Muscular Medievalism', *The Year's Work in Medievalism*, 31 (2016), pp. 56–66. For a similar idea in advertising, see Megan Arnott, 'Medieval Ads', Public Medievalist (31 January 2019) <https://publicmedievalist.com/medieval-ads/> [accessed 9 December 2025]. For modern appropriations of Norse material, including nationalist/right-wing usage, see Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

As with the return of sexually charged humour, we are therefore left with the requirements of creating entertaining, commercially viable drama as our best explanation for the return of Thor's intelligence, although here there is additionally some level of support from the other clusters. In both cases, the demands of performance appear to have reopened pathways that popular retellings had de-emphasised, if not, in this case, completely closed off.

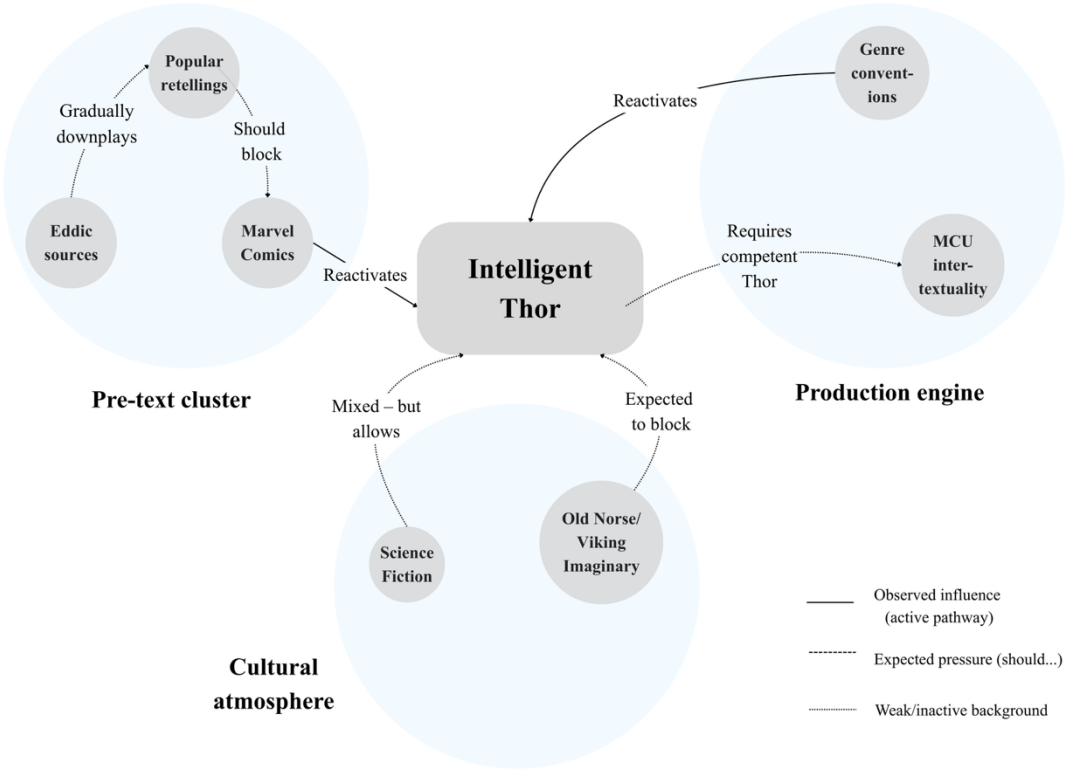


Figure 14: ANT pathway analysis, Thor's intelligence.

Although Þórr is frequently shown exercising judgment and practical intelligence in Eddic poetry and prose, this aspect of his character is progressively downplayed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century popular retellings. Marvel Comics partially reverse this drift, re-establishing Thor as a figure capable of strategic thought, thereby enabling an intelligent Thor to remain available within the pre-textual cluster. Within the cultural atmosphere, signals are mixed: popular Viking imaginaries tend to frame Thor as simple-minded and might be expected to inhibit such a portrayal, while science fiction traditions provide partial support. The decisive influence lies within the production engine, where genre conventions and MCU intertextuality require Thor to function as a competent leader and an effective

peer to the rest of the Avengers, reactivating his intelligence through narrative and performative necessity rather than straightforward textual transmission.

Odin: The waning of authority

In *Thor* (2011), as we have seen, Odin is central to the story's setup. In the opening montage and accompanying voiceover that introduce viewers to Asgard, he appears as war-leader, defeating the Frost Giants, establishing order in the Nine Realms, and providing protection to the people of Earth. When Thor's recklessness endangers that peace, Odin banishes him, strips him of his powers, and lays the enchantment on Mjolnir that will later define his son's worthiness. We also learn that, as part of his delicate game of détente with Laufey, he has taken in Loki as his adoptive son – an explanation that resembles the political logic of fosterage in saga-age Scandinavia.[22] Odin's retreat into the Odinsleep subsequently removes him from the action long enough for Thor and Loki's rivalry to play out, before his brief reappearance at the end to rescue Thor from falling, somewhat unconvincingly it must be said. In *Thor: The Dark World* his role is smaller and more reactive. He presides over Loki's punishment, provides important background knowledge, and insists on defending Asgard against the Dark Elves, but his inflexibility leaves him isolated. His refusal to heed Thor's advice casts him as an obstacle. He appears as a ruler whose authority is slipping and can no longer prevent invasion and loss. After Frigga is killed, his grief hardens into defensiveness, and by the film's close we discover that, somehow, he has been displaced by Loki's impersonation. In *Thor: Ragnarok*, he returns only briefly. Found in exile on Earth, he acknowledges his approaching death and reveals

[22] For fosterage as a system regulated by tradition and law in medieval Iceland, see Anna Hansen, 'Fosterage and Dependency in Medieval Iceland and its Significance in *Gísla saga*', in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 73–86.

the existence of his first-born, Hela, whose return will follow his passing. His death releases her and propels the narrative forward. Later, he reappears to Thor, helping him to recognise that Asgard is defined by its people, rather than its location, and that his power is not dependent on his hammer. Overall, the sensation is of a fading king whose decline necessitates his children's ascent – at least until a disruptive sequence in *Ragnarok* that uncovers Asgard's bloody past brings the MCU's Odin closer to a more unsettling Óðinn.

The Eddic Óðinn

As portrayed in the *Edda*s, Óðinn is a complex and contradictory figure. For Snorri, he is *Alföðr* [All-father], revered by and superior to the other gods regardless of their rank or power (*Gylf.,* 20). He is the son of Borr and brother to Vili and Vé. Together they create the first humans from two tree trunks found on the shore, with Óðinn's role being to endow them with breath and life (*Gylf.* 6–9).[23] He is the god of the skalds, bringing the Mead of Poetry to Ásgarðr (*Skáldsk.*, G57–58; *Hávamál*, sts. 104–110), and he is obsessively driven to acquire knowledge. To that end, he possesses two ravens who fly across the world and report to him each morning (*Gylf.,* 38; *Grímnismál*, st. 20), and he famously sacrifices one of his eyes in exchange for a drink from Mímir's well, and the gift of wisdom (*Gylf.* 15; *Vǫluspá*, st. 29). Yet this pursuit of knowledge is also marked by more morally ambiguous behaviour. In *Hávamál* (sts. 138–139), Óðinn describes sacrificing himself to himself, hanging from a tree for nine nights in an ecstatic vision to gain runic knowledge. In the same poem, he boasts of knowing magical songs, including spells that manipulate others or cause harm (sts. 146–163). He sends *valkyrjur* to select

[23] The same myth is recounted in the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá*, although Óðinn's brothers here are said to be Hoenir and Loðurr (*Vǫluspá*, sts. 17–18).

those who will die in battle and welcomes these chosen warriors to *Valhǫll* so they may fight on his behalf at Ragnarǫk (*Gylf.,* 36, 38–41, 51). He employs deception to seduce women, as we see in the Mead of Poetry story and are told elsewhere (*Hávamál*, sts. 96–102; *Skáldsk.,* G58). In *Vafþrúðnismál* ['Vafthrudnir's Sayings'], he rigs a high-stakes wisdom contest by asking an unanswerable question; in *Grímnismál*, he is captured and tortured, before inflicting a cruel act of revenge. He is also ruthless in his treatment of anyone he perceives as a threat – casting Hel down to rule the underworld, ordering the binding of Fenrir, and hurling the Midgard Serpent into the depths of the ocean in an attempt to forestall a fate he nonetheless knows cannot be averted (*Gylf*., 34). Outside the *Eddas*, there is further evidence of this side of his character. In Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, a Latin history of Denmark from the early thirteenth century, Óðinn is presented in matter-of-fact terms as a rapist.[24] One of the most vivid portraits of Óðinn is offered in the *Heimskringla* narrative, *Ynglinga saga*, also composed by Snorri (6–7). Here, we are told he is a handsome, eloquent, and charismatic leader who introduces useful skills, founds poetic tradition, and wields great political and magical power. But he is also a practitioner of the sorcery *seiðr*, said to be perverted and shameful when practised by males, and he is capable of blinding, deafening, or terrifying his enemies, causing weapons to fail, and leading warriors in berserker rage. He is the lord of ghosts, or lord of the hanged, who communicates with the dead and commands spirits.[25]

The gap between this multifaceted, often disquieting portrait and his comic-book counterpart is striking. Odin was introduced as a character in *Journey into*

[24] Hilda Ellis Davidson (ed.) and Peter Fisher (trans.), *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979), pp. 76–78.
[25] For an insightful discussion of this passage as a reflection of Óðinn's complex, morally ambivalent character, see Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn'. In *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures,* Vol. 1, edited by Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), pp. 1123–1194.

Mystery #86 in November 1962, four months after the launch of *The Mighty Thor*. As in the films, the Odin of the comics is prone to anger at his son – often because of his love for the mortal, Jane Foster, whom he regards as unworthy for his heir apparent – but he is defined by his status as protector, and is clearly written as a force for good, although one who is occasionally hoodwinked into making bad decisions by unscrupulous advisers such as the Vizier.[26] Odin strips and restores Thor's powers more than once, imposes punishments, and issues commands. As Asgard's chief god, he confronts threats (notably from Surtur and Ymir) and presides over great weapons, including Gungnir, and the Odinsword. From the 1970s into the early 1980s, he expands from the Nine Realms to a universal presence, cooperating with other 'Skyfathers' and forming part of the Council of Godheads.[27] Under Simonson (1983–87), Odin is a strategist but will enter the fight himself if he has to, and faces the Surtur crisis alongside Thor and Loki. In the 2000s–2010s, under well-regarded writers including Straczynski, Matt Fraction, Kieron Gillen, and Jason Aaron, Odin continues to clash with Thor and, in the crossover series *Fear Itself* (2011), he adopts harsh preventative measures that put him at odds with the rest of the heroes.[28]

Turning to the other key pre-texts in Cluster One of our ANT model, most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular retellings turn him into a kind of patriarchal sage. Bulfinch's *Mythology* presents Odin as a paragon of virtue, stripped of ambiguity, and with stories such as the mead of poetry and his self-sacrifice for

[26] The Vizier serves as a mystical counsellor to Odin and first appeared in *The Mighty Thor* no. 242 (December 1975), by Gerry Conway and John Buscema; reprinted in Len Wein and John Buscema, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 15 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).
[27] Mark Gruenwald and Ralph Macchio*, The Mighty Thor* no. 300; reprinted in Roy Thomas and others, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 19 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn).
[28] *Fear Itself* was a 2011 Marvel Comics crossover event written principally by Matt Fraction, running through a seven-issue core miniseries, but with numerous additional tie-ins. See Matt Fraction and Stuart Immonen, *Fear Itself* (Marvel Comics, 2011).

the runes discreetly removed. The Kearys present an Odin who 'mixed freely with the people of the countries through which he passed; shared with them toil and pleasure, war and grief... and exalted them by his example' (p. 40). Mabie similarly centres his storytelling on Odin as moral exemplar, presenting knowledge as a spiritual virtue. 'Even the gods could not be wise without struggle and toil and sacrifice,' he writes in the story of Mimir's Well (p. 16). His Asgard is 'heaven' (p. 32), and Odin decrees that 'no blood shall stain the sacred seats of the gods' (p. 105). The tone of a later school's edition of the work makes the point explicit: the Norse storytellers, Mabie writes, were 'men of our race,' who exemplify fortitude and masculine virtue, with none showing more of these qualities than Odin.[29] Guerber offers a somewhat more balanced view. Here, Odin fights beside his warriors and inspires their berserker rage. She includes both the mead of poetry and the rune-sacrifice, yet still filters these details through a Christianised morality. Odin, she writes, 'gave his people a code of laws... teaching courage, temperance, truthfulness, and contentment' (p. 45). The title of Colum's *The Children of Odin* signals the tone of his retelling: Odin as benevolent father, acting for mankind's benefit. His acquisition of the mead of poetry is altruistic, and his seduction of Gunnlöd is recast as an act of gallantry, as his kisses serve to restore her youth (p. 101). Elsewhere, he acts as voice of restraint, by preventing Thor from harming Loki and declaring that 'no Dweller in Asgard may slay another' (p. 29). The d'Aulaires complete this transformation. Their Odin sits among mortals preaching hospitality, with his words declared 'sacred', as is the gods' hall (p. 137). Odin's authority seems to prefigure the Christian God: 'When Odin came down from Yggdrasil, he was the All-Father

[29] Hamilton Wright Mabie, *Norse Stories, Retold from the Eddas* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1902), ed. by Katharine Lee Bates, p. vi.

[...] and all the other Aesir turned to him for advice just as children turn to their father' (p. 33). Only with Crossley-Holland's *Norse Myths* does a starker portrait re-emerge. 'He is a terrifying god: maybe a god to be respected, but not a god to be loved,' the author writes in the introduction (p. xxvi). Within the tales, Odin listens with loathing to Gullveig before presiding over her burning, and begins the war with the Vanir, a detail very rarely included by retellers. He sleeps with Gunnlod for three nights before abandoning her, and instigates the binding of Angrboda and the kidnapping of her monstrous children. He is riven by jealousy at Freyja's sleeping with the four dwarves in exchange for the Brísingamen necklace, and engineers the death of Vafthrudnir because of his restless need for adventure. In these retellings, the saintly veneer is thus stripped away, and Odin regains much of his old ferocity and menace. Even here, however, Odin's worst behaviour is leavened by moments of kindness, as when he decides to put the eyes of Skadi's father in the sky simply because he is of a mind to please her further.[30]

In the broader cultural imaginary in Cluster Two of the ANT model, Odin's presence has oscillated between reverence and irony. In Adams's *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*, he is old, tired, and interested only in comfort, luxuriating in linen sheets. Gaiman's *American Gods* restores the menace that Adams drains away. His Mr Wednesday is active, charismatic, manipulative – a strategist whose appetite for power recalls the violent cunning of the *Eddas*. *Stargate SG-1* captures something of this complexity too – Odin is Thor's former teacher, and once undertook research on dying Vikings as part of a larger scientific experiment – yet he never becomes a major presence in the narrative. In *Age of Mythology* he functions largely as a source of wisdom and strategic advantage, while *DK Eyewitness: Viking*

[30] See Crossley-Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths*, pp. 7, 31, 33, 46, 67, 75.

presents a limited, neutral portrait built from familiar signifiers: the one-eyed ruler of Valhalla, flanked by wolves and ravens. Like Gaiman's version, the 2008 *Wikipedia* entry emphasises the darker edge of the character: 'His role, like many of the Norse pantheon, is complex. He is a god of wisdom, war, battle and death… [and] magic, poetry, prophecy, victory and the hunt'. The page also notes his associations with 'trickery, cunning, and deception'.

The MCU's version of Odin is very much in tune with depictions in Marvel Comics and in popular retellings, but only until *Thor: Ragnarok*, when the arrival of Hela abruptly ruptures this cosy image. Hela, played by the Oscar-winning Australian actress Cate Blanchett, is the first female villain in the *Thor* films to be given narrative weight comparable to that of her male counterparts. Hela's title of 'Goddess of Death', and her nominal association with Hel, offer an obvious point of contact with Norse mythology, yet her dramatic function in the film has little in common with the Eddic Hel, one of the monstrous children of Loki, with her introduction instead functioning as a challenge to mythic authority. Under Waititi's direction, she is presented as overwhelmingly powerful but notably unsexualised, an unusual choice. As Miriam Kent has observed, female antagonists in superhero films are often subject to sexualising visual codes even when positioned as threats. Hela's authority, by contrast, is articulated almost entirely through violence.[31]

Her first act is to shock Thor by destroying his hammer, and after arriving back on Asgard she goes on to defeat the entirety of Odin's royal guard and take the throne. As she installs herself in the palace, she notices a fresco painted on the ceiling, depicting Asgard's shining, benevolent influence on the Nine Realms. Amid the panels we see Asgard as a beacon, along with a scene depicting a truce between

[31] Miriam Kent, *Women in Marvel Films* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 168–69.

Odin and Laufey, King of the Frost Giants (fig. 15). There is also a highly Christianised image of Thor and Loki lit by golden halos, their heads slightly bowed, in front of Odin and Frigga, who are on a raised platform behind them (fig. 16). We see Thor with his head bowed again, seemingly about to sip from a cup proffered by his fellow warriors Hogun and Fandral, in another pose with Christianised, sacramental overtones (fig. 17). Odin and Thor are also present in a garden party scene, as serving girls offer them grapes and apples, and a musician plays a golden harp at their feet (fig. 18).



Figure 15: Overall view of Asgard facade fresco.

Screengrab from 'Thor: Ragnarok'. © Marvel Studios 2017.



Figure 16: Facade fresco, Odin, Frigga, Thor and Loki.

Screengrab from 'Thor: Ragnarok'. © Marvel Studios 2017.



Figure 17: Facade fresco, 'Christianised' Thor.

Screengrab from 'Thor: Ragnarok'. © Marvel Studios 2017.



Figure 18: Facade fresco, Asgardian 'garden party'.

Screengrab from 'Thor: Ragnarok'. © Marvel Studios 2017.

Hela furiously destroys the fresco and makes clear the reason for her disgust:

> HELA: Does no one remember me? Has no one been taught our history? Look at these lies. Goblets and garden parties? Peace treaties? Odin... proud to have it... ashamed of how he got it.[32]

In doing so, she reveals an earlier fresco, far more sinister, that has until now been hidden. Her act of unlayering reveals a scene featuring Odin, riding his eight-legged horse Sleipnir, flanked by Hela, riding the wolf Fenris at the head of an army (fig. 19), and a multitude of slaves building the palace (fig. 20). Odin wears a horned helmet shaped very much like Hela's, and carries Gungnir as she holds aloft Mjolnir (fig. 21).

[32] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 00:42:55.



Figure 19: Concealed fresco, Odin and Hela as conquerors.

Screengrab from 'Thor: Ragnarok'. © Marvel Studios 2017.



Figure 20: Concealed fresco, the construction of Asgard.

Screengrab from 'Thor: Ragnarok'. © Marvel Studios 2017.



Figure 21: Concealed fresco depicting Hela and Odin.

Screengrab from 'Thor: Ragnarok'. © Marvel Studios 2017.

Hela continues:

> We were unstoppable. I was his weapon in the conquest that built Asgard's empire. One by one, the realms became ours. But then, simply because my ambition outgrew his, he banished me, caged me, locked me away like an animal. Before that, Asgard's warriors were honored, their bodies buried as heroes beneath this very palace.[33]

She then revives those warriors, along with Fenris, to create her own version of Odin's *Einherjar*. At the climax of the movie, when Thor returns to confront her, she is even more graphic in her description of her joint reign of terror with Odin:

> It seems our father's solution to everything was to cover it up. […] Odin and I drowned entire civilisations in blood and tears. Where do you think all this gold came from? And then one day he decided to become a benevolent king: to foster peace, to protect life, to have you.[34]

As noted in the introduction, the authorship of the movie was, as in all Marvel productions, collective, with at least four writers involved, yet it remains unmistakably personal to Waititi. A New Zealander of Russian–Jewish and Māori descent, he has confirmed that he used these scenes to interrogate inherited myths of heroism and empire. As he notes in his director's commentary, his aim was to disrupt the prevailing image of Odin as a benevolent monarch and to expose a history of imperial conquest concealed beneath Asgard's official mythology. It is worth quoting this explanation in full:

> We wanted to show that all societies have histories and Asgard is no exception. Odin and Hela used to be the great conquerors of the cosmos.

[33] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 00:43:40.
[34] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 01:41:20.

> They would go around and conquer and take over these worlds and take a lot of the resources. They came back to Asgard. That's how they built the palace. That's where all the gold came from. Through one reason or another, Odin changed his ways and realised that peace was a way better thing to strive for, but Hela was brought up on the battlefield, was basically raised as a conqueror, couldn't let that go, and wanted to keep spreading their empire, and keep conquering and keep taking worlds. One of the criticisms that Hela has about Odin is that his secrets, and the shame he felt over her and the conquering that they used to do, he would keep covering things up, like the mural – he would cover it up with the saccharine paintings with tea parties and garden parties and peace treaties whereas the real Asgard lies beneath. This is where he stored her old army, which she now brings back to life with the eternal flame.[35]

The myth of divine benevolence is thus replaced with a history of violence, concealment, and moral revision. Her revelation also restores a direct link with the Eddic Óðinn, who similarly cast Hel and Fenrir aside in a ruthless attempt at pre-emptive control. Hela is eventually destroyed along with Asgard itself, after Thor realises that there is no way to stave off Ragnarok and instead hatches a plan to set it in motion. It is true too that Odin's status is never again called into question – indeed, he is awarded the equivalent of the fantasy film industry's hagiography when he is given a voice after death, from where he is able to speak to and guide Thor.[36] But the power of Waititi's re-framing of the history of Asgard in exactly the terms he

[35] Taika Waititi, director's commentary on *Thor: Ragnarok* (Marvel Studios, 2017), Blu-ray/DVD audio commentary.
[36] Other famous examples of this trope include Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*, Mufasa in *The Lion King*, and Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*.

mentions is that it invites a reassessment of some of what has been seen in earlier films.

Viewers may recall that our only evidence for Asgard being a force for good has been the voiceovers in the previous films – both delivered by Odin himself. Interestingly, even in the first film, it is clear that this speech is only one side of the story. Branagh, while setting up Odin as the benevolent ruler, was careful to give Laufey a voice too, and when confronted by Thor in the battle of Jotunheim he shows that there is another perspective to the Æsir-Frost Giant war. Laufey shouts: 'Your father is a murderer and a thief'. This hint that Odin may be untrustworthy is reinforced when it turns out that he has been lying to Loki his whole life, leading him to believe that he was his son, when in fact he was a fosterling. Loki himself highlights this mis-match between Odin's deeds as a warrior and his claim to have taken in Loki for altruistic reasons, as he challenges his adoptive-father's version of events. 'Why? You were knee-deep in Jotun blood. Why would you take me?' [37] It's a good question, and one Odin can only answer by admitting that he took him in the hope that it would help unify their kingdoms, effectively making Loki at worst a hostage and at best a pawn. Similarly, Odin's claim in the first film that Thor was his first-born is shown to be a lie by the arrival of Hela.

In another example of the powerful effect of Waititi's reframing of Odin though this post-colonialist lens, what appears to be a throwaway comment at the start of the second film, *Thor: The Dark World*, turns out, retrospectively, to carry real menace. Thor has been attempting to quell an outbreak of violence across the Nine Realms after Loki's destruction of the Bifrost had allowed off-planet marauders free rein. Praising Thor's work, Odin says: 'For the first time since the Bifrost was

[37] *Thor*, 00:40:44.

destroyed the Nine Realms are at peace. They're well reminded of our strength and you have earned their respect.'[38] Later in that second film, Odin makes his contempt for humanity quite clear, by telling Thor that he had no right to bring his girlfriend to Asgard. 'She does not belong here in Asgard any more than a goat belongs at a banquet table,' he says.[39] If that is Odin's view of humanity, a people he says he went to war to protect, we can only guess at his views of the indigenous races in the rest of the realms.

Waititi's intervention in *Thor: Ragnarok* puts him in a tradition of medievalist authors reclaiming and repurposing old stories to subvert historical narratives.[40] By exposing Odin's imperial violence – literally hidden behind a golden facade – Waititi reorients the narrative towards an acknowledgement of silenced histories, if not an actual reckoning. While he opts out of this direct challenge to Odin, Waititi succeeds in offering a counter-myth that aligns with postcolonial critiques of how empires mythologise their pasts to legitimise present power. What is striking is that, deliberately or not, previous directors Branagh and Taylor had laid a trail for the interpretation of Odin in a light that has much more in common with the Óðinn from the surviving medieval sources. Waititi began laying his own trail near the start of *Thor: Ragnarok*, with an overt piece of theatre on Asgard, where Loki (in his Odin disguise) watches on in delight as actors play out his death as a tragedy. This functions on one level as pure exposition, a device intended to remind audiences of the events of *The Dark World*, released almost five years previously. However, it also serves to give us our first clue that stories in Waititi's world may be

[38] *Thor: The Dark World*, 00:10:26.
[39] *Thor: The Dark World*, 00:30:45.
[40] Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul, 'The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe', in *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe*, ed. by Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), pp. 1–24 (p. 6).

untrustworthy. This is re-enforced when Valkyrie explains why she stopped believing in the gods as a force for good, saying: "That's what's wrong with Asgard. The throne, the secrets, the whole golden sham."[41]

As with the theme of Northernness, it is not difficult to trace just how the more menacing version of the god was reactivated in the MCU. While Marvel Comics and popular retellings tended to downplay this side of his character, the desire of Waititi to offer a post-colonial view of Asgard's history was surely decisive.

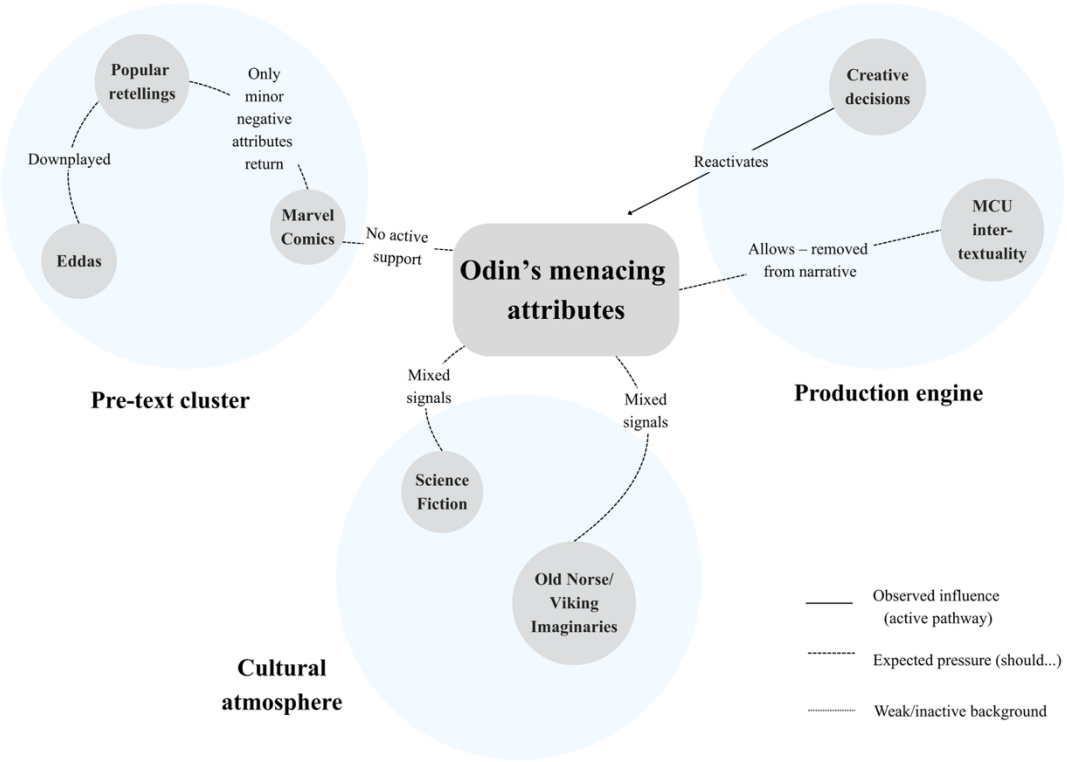


Figure 22: ANT pathway, Odin's menacing aspect.

Although Óðinn's capacity for violence, deception, and moral ambiguity is strongly attested in Eddic poetry and prose, this aspect is progressively suppressed in popular retellings and is not meaningfully activated in Marvel Comics, leaving no active pre-textual pathway into the MCU. Within the cultural atmosphere, signals are mixed: while isolated reinterpretations retain a darker Odin, popular

[41] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 01:12:50.

imaginaries favour a benign patriarch and would be expected to inhibit such a portrayal. The decisive influence lies within the production engine. Odin's removal from the ongoing narrative creates space for retrospective reinterpretation, which is actively exploited through creative decision-making by *Ragnarok* director Taika Waititi. The re-emergence of a menacing Óðinn likely reflects this deliberate intervention.

Loki: from god of mischief to god of stories

As noted at the start of this chapter, a key reason the filmmakers needed to recalibrate the Thor–Odin dynamic, and to make the hero a more fully realised character, was to make him a convincing dramatic counterpart to Loki, whose sheer force of personality in the MCU was immediately obvious from the first film, and has only been strengthened as the series has progressed. When we first meet them in *Thor*, they are equals – brothers and rivals, two princes of Asgard who could each, in theory, inherit their father's throne. Loki's realisation that this was all a lie, and he could never inherit ahead of Odin's biological son, provides the psychological motivation for his plot against Thor, but from there his story takes a number of surprising turns. Across the MCU, Loki's trajectory runs from disaffected troublemaker to arch-villain, and finally to a heroic figure portrayed with striking sympathy. This section examines how the film makers subverted the traditional Loki arc, familiar from retellings, where he generally begins as charming and/or fun and ends as evil, and gradually arrived at a version of the god whose function chimes with some of the most thoughtful criticism from the perspective of religious and mythological studies. In Marvel's hands, Loki moves beyond the stock 'trickster' role toward a figure linked to the making of stories themselves.[42]

[42] A version of this section will be published as Kevin Fylan, 'From God of Mischief to God of Stories', in *Reimagining the Middle Ages* (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2026), forthcoming. An earlier version was presented by the author at the symposium The Middle Ages in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Relevance, Reimagination, Inspiration, held in Stavanger, Norway, in 2024.

The Eddic Loki

Very little seems to be known about Loki as a god, but even as a literary figure, his past is mysterious.[43] As we have seen, Snorri describes him as evil, but attractive, cunning and tricksy with it. He is counted among the Æsir, though not quite of them, and tends to get the gods into scrapes, and, usually, out of them again (*Gylf.* 33). The reason for his uncertain status may be connected to his parentage: he is the child of a giant father, Fárbauti, and a mother, Laufey, who may have been a goddess.[44] In *Lokasenna*, we learn that Loki and Óðinn had once become blood brothers and they accuse each other of shameful deeds before Frigg intervenes to tell them to let the past live in the past (sts. 22–25). In the mythic present, Loki is the father of monsters – Fenrir the wolf, Jörmungandr the Midgard Serpent, and Hel, ruler of the underworld – along with two sons (*Gylf.* 34, 50). He is also a mother, we are told by Snorri, who recounts how Loki is blamed, unfairly perhaps, for having approved an ill-advised bargain with a mysterious builder, but saves the situation by transforming into a mare and enticing away the workman's stallion Svaðilfari, and later giving birth to the eight-legged foal Sleipnir (*Gylf.* 42). Loki is more clearly at fault when he cuts off the hair of Þórr's wife, Sif, but he makes amends by commissioning the dwarves to forge new hair – one of the six treasures of the gods (*Skáldsk.,* ch. 33). We see Loki in his occasional role as amiable companion to Þórr in Snorri's tale of the journey to see Útgarða-Loki (*Gylf.* 44–46) and he emerges with plenty of credit in *Þrymskviða*. Here, he dons Freyja's flying suit and heads off on a mission to enemy territory to find out what has happened to Þórr's missing hammer. After he returns with an ultimatum from Þrymr, he persuades Þórr to go along with the ruse

[43] As has often been observed, it appears that he is the 'god without a cult'. See Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 267–68 for a summary.
[44] John Lindow, *Norse Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

of dressing up as Freyja – even joining him in cross-dressing – and it's his quick thinking that reassures the giant when Þórr's appetite and fiery eyes threaten to give him away. He provides comic relief in another story, making the giantess Skaði laugh by tying his testicles to a goat in a memorable tug-of-war (*Skáldsk.*, G56).

Loki's darker side is never far from the surface, however, and in the tale of Þjazi (*Skáldsk.*, G56), he orchestrates the abduction of Iðunn and her youth-giving apples. Though he goes on to rescue both at considerable personal risk, it is hard to see his behaviour as heroic. Later (*Skáldsk.*, ch. 18) he betrays Þórr to the giant Geirrøðr. As the Eddic chronology accelerates, he engineers the death of Baldr, and when Hel offers to release him only if every living thing weeps for him, the old woman who refuses is presumed to be Loki in disguise (*Gylf.,* 49). At the start of *Lokasenna*, he kills a servant, before reeling off a string of insults against the gods and (mainly in sexual terms) the goddesses. After being caught by the Æsir, he is subjected to a particularly cruel torture (*Gylf.,* 50), and as Ragnarǫk unfolds he will pilot the ship carrying the army of giants into battle, and die fighting Heimdall (*Gylf.* 51). Before turning to his portrayal in the MCU, it is worth looking at what versions of Loki were available to the film makers, based on his evolution in the pre-texts cluster of the ANT model and the wider cultural atmosphere.

Loki in the retellings

Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, retellers of Norse myth delighted in being able to have fun with Loki, while still condemning him in the end. The story of Baldr's death, for which Loki is held responsible, appears in every English-language Norse myth retelling between 1857 and 1962, ensuring that his eventual moral downfall is structurally predetermined, regardless of how sympathetically he is

portrayed earlier in the narrative.[45] The Keary sisters were unusual in the early retellings by giving Loki's corruption an explicit cause. In *Heroes of Asgard,* Loki confides to Odin that he was once 'innocent and noble-purposed' like the other gods, until he came across a 'half-burnt heart of a woman', and from that moment became what you now see me' (pp. 37–38). This detail – which the Kearys took from Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* and is based on a reference in *Hyndluljóð* ['Song of Hyndla'] – provided an origin story for evil that must have appealed to writers eager to read the myths as prefiguring Christian revelation.[46] Bulfinch's version is more restrained but no less moralised. His Loki is 'of the giant race,' an interloper who forces himself into the company of the gods. That ancestry alone suffices to explain his eventual fall (p. 349). For Mabie, Loki's inner conflict is likewise innate rather than chosen. He possesses 'the mind of the gods' but 'the heart of the giants', and longs to return to Jǫtunheimar, where he truly belongs (pp. 103–04). Guerber, meanwhile, has no time for ambiguity. Her Loki is the 'archfiend' of Asgard (p. 130), and an 'arch-plotter ever on the lookout for some evil deed to perform' (pp. 65–66). She sets him in deliberate contrast to Thor, 'the embodiment of northern activity', framing Loki as idler, seducer, and corrupter: 'He represents evil in the seductive and seemingly beautiful form in which it glides about through the world' (pp. 198–99). Colum revives the Kearys' explanation with relish more than 60 years later. He reuses the 'half-burnt heart' detail, specifies that it is the heart of the witch Gulveig, and makes it the psychological centre of his story, which comes across as a moral warning against the contagion of evil. 'Oh black and direful was it in Asgard,

[45] This conclusion is based on a systematic reading of the forty-six known English-language Norse myth retellings published 1857–1962 and listed in Appendix 5.
[46] See Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, p. 31: 'Burnt up in his innermost sense (seared up in mind), Loki found a half-burnt heart of a woman; then he became false and wicked, and thence came all unhappiness on earth!' For insight into the Kearys' use of the myths within a Victorian context see Ashurst, 'Eddic Myth, Victorian Values', pp. 45–71.

the day that Loki ate the heart that the flames would not devour!' (p. 155). The d'Aulaires, like the Kearys writing explicitly for children, emphasise Loki's playful side. He is 'nimble-witted and bright, full of clever ideas, like a flickering, shining flame', and so charming that Odin himself 'was so taken with him that he asked him to be his blood brother' (p. 42). Moral order soon reasserts itself. Loki's 'slippery tongue' brings disaster (p. 69), and his wickedness, once again, is presented as being due to his race. Odin's disgust at the 'bad father' and 'worse mother' of Loki's monstrous offspring becomes justification for their destruction (p. 50). Crossley-Holland returns Loki to something closer to his Eddic self. In his introduction, he recognises Loki's structural importance: 'Without the exciting, unstable, flawed figure of Loki, there could be no change in the fixed order of things, no quickening pulse, and no Ragnarok.' Yet even here, Crossley-Holland's Loki soon darkens from 'playful' to 'cruel predator', and his outbursts at Ægir's feast are 'vicious and unbridled' (pp. xxix–xxx).

Looking across the retellings more widely, one further trait emerges that would later prove crucial to later medievalisms: Loki's utility as a go-between. Helen Zimmern, in her elegantly told *Tales from the Edda*, describes him as 'wily' but invaluable, and says he was 'generally chosen by the gods whenever they needed any mission of peculiar nicety to be executed'.[47] Rosa Hobhouse takes this insight further in *Norse Legends Retold from the Eddas*. Her narrator reflects on the downfall of 'that brilliant messenger of the gods', torn between admiration and repulsion:

[47] Helen Zimmern, *Tales from the Edda* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1882), p. 4.

> Hardly had Gangleri known, throughout the tales, whether to despise or to delight in Loki... he could not reconcile his mind to the thought of Asgard without the possibility of Loki walking into its halls.[48]

Hobhouse's version still ends in condemnation, but she allows the reader to feel an ache at his absence. Such moments of ambivalence anticipate his modern rehabilitation. While Loki must fall, these writers intuit his appeal as well as his danger, and that mixture of fascination and unease would later become the foundation of his revival in popular culture.

Loki in Marvel Comics

Loki made his *Journey Into Mystery* debut in issue #85, two months after the series had launched, and has been a recurring figure for Marvel ever since. The Loki of the early comics is squarely in the tradition of the retellings: clever, inventive, even attractive, but firmly on the side of evil. Writing decades later, Lee reflected:

> In the vast panoply of legendary menaces, surely none has ever been as totally devious and diabolical as that very same Loki, Thor's half-brother. According to the great Norse myths that have lived through the ages, Loki has primarily been known as the God of Mischief. But we at Marvel took the liberty of altering that myth a little. To us, Loki is, was and always shall be the supreme embodiment of all that is despicable and deadly in man or godling. To us, he'll always be the God of Evil! And to me personally, he'll always be one of my favorite villains.[49]

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[48] Rosa Hobhouse, *Norse Legends Retold from the Eddas* (London: J. M. Dent, 1930), p. 202.
[49] Stan Lee, 'Introduction', in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 2 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2010; Kindle edn).

Yet the promise that Loki would always remain the 'God of Evil' turned out to be a poor prediction. While he continued to play the villain across the Lee/Kirby era, later writers discovered in Loki's ambiguity the potential for reinvention. Simonson's 1980s run arguably began this shift by giving Loki more strategic intelligence and even moments of cooperation with Asgard, notably during Surtur's invasion.[50] Later writers went on to embrace his fluidity even more fully. Over time, his character splintered into multiple incarnations in the comics, including Loki: Agent of Asgard, who carries out missions on behalf of the All-Mother, a ruling triumvirate of Freyja, Idunn, and Gaea.[51]

Turning to ANT's Cluster Two, the Loki in broader cultural usage tends to be seen as a figure of intelligence and mischief. Adams chooses not to include him, but Gaiman's *American Gods* puts him close to the heart of his story. Disguised as 'Low Key Lyesmith', he operates as a hustler, manipulating both sides of the coming war between old and new gods. In *Stargate SG-1*, Loki appears as a rogue Asgard scientist conducting illicit human-cloning experiments that are ethically dubious, yet arguably motivated by a desire to preserve his species.[52] *DK Eyewitness: Viking* gives him only a brief mention in the Treasures of the Gods story, ending with his lips sewn shut, both as punishment and to keep him quiet. In *Age of Mythology*, his in-game powers lean into deception and illusion, with power to annoy opponents, emphasising a trickster profile. The 2008 *Wikipedia* entry 'Loki' highlights his shape-shifting abilities, including into female form, and chooses to foreground a

[50] Simonson, *Thor by Walter Simonson Omnibus*.
[51] For Loki incarnations, see Straczynski and Gillen, *Thor by Straczynski & Gillen Omnibus* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2024); Gillen, *Journey into Mystery*, no. 622 (New York: Marvel Comics, April 2011); Ewing, with Jason Aaron, *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, no. 1 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).
[52] *Stargate SG-1*, season 7, episode 3, Fragile Balance, dir. Peter Deluise (Showtime, 2003).

strongly negative moral profile, calling him a coward, a liar, a thief and a murderer in quick succession.

Recently, another wave of reinterpretations, for children as well as adults, has found in Loki's ambiguity a means of exploring modern anxieties. Harris's *The Gospel of Loki* and *The Testament of Loki*, and Burgess's *Loki*, all give him a first-person voice through which to justify his actions and invite moral reassessment, as noted in Chapter One. In *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (2011), Byatt's wartime 'thin child' reads about Loki with fascination, sensing in his vitality a temporary escape from fear. Norwegian-language TV series *Ragnarok* (2020–23) re-casts him as an unreliable go-between amid ecological collapse in the fictional town of Edda. In the majority of these re-imaginings, Loki is portrayed in a broadly sympathetic light, yet he remains, at best, an anti-hero: transgressive, seductive, but still at least partly responsible for the destruction to come. Much more surprising, in this sense, has been Loki's long-term story arc within the MCU.

The Loki introduced to the MCU in *Thor* shares many of the villainous traits of both his comic book predecessor, but it is striking how rarely he is actually depicted as a trickster. In his first appearance, he allows the Frost Giants access to Asgard, merely for the pleasure of disrupting Thor's coronation, manipulates his brother into attacking Jotunheim in revenge, and during the ensuing battle conjures illusions to confuse the enemy.[53] Almost immediately, however, he discovers that while he has been raised as a son, and potential heir, to Odin, he is in fact the biological child of Laufey, and this revelation, compounded by his fury at not having been told the truth, hardens him into the film's principal antagonist. 'You could have told me what I was from the beginning? Why didn't you' he asks Odin, before

[53] *Thor*, 00:10:30; 00:13:15; 00:22:30.

answering his own question. ‘Because I am the monster parents tell their children about at night?’[54]

In *Thor*, Hiddleston portrays Loki as a brooding, emotionally torn figure, while in *The Avengers*, he returns with more theatrical villainy, as he sets out to fulfil what he describes as his ‘glorious purpose’ and install himself as ruler of Earth. His evil is underscored by a scene staged in Stuttgart, Germany, where he is directly compared to Adolf Hitler.[55] And in a speech that echoes his rape threat against Jane Foster from the first film, he insults another female character in terms of sexual violence when he tries, unsuccessfully, to goad Natasha Romanoff by threatening to have her tortured and killed by her fellow Avenger and friend, Clint Barton.

> LOKI: I won’t touch Barton, not until I make him kill you … slowly, intimately, in every way he knows you fear. Then he’ll wake just long enough to see his good work, and when he screams I’ll split his skull. This is my bargain, you mewling quim.[56]

The speech displays a level of cruelty and spite that closely recalls *Lokasenna*, where his insults similarly function as deliberate acts of social and psychological violence. The jarring use of “quim” is not directly comparable, but it nevertheless evokes the coarser register of Loki’s speech in *Lokasenna*, as in his claim that Njǫrð’s mouth was used as a urinal by Hymir’s daughters (st. 34).

After his defeat in *The Avengers*, Loki is returned to Asgard and imprisoned, yet even from his cell he manages to betray the gods in *The Dark World*,[57] in a

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[54] *Thor*, 00:40:45.
[55] *The Avengers*, 00:39:20.
[56] *The Avengers*, 01:05:30.
[57] *Thor: The Dark World*, 00:38:00–00:49:01. Within this sequence, Loki betrays the Asgardians by directing Kurse ‘to the stairs on the left’, sending him toward Frigga’s chambers and leading to her death.

sequence that leads to the death of his adoptive mother, Frigga. The recognition of his own guilt in this episode marks a turning point. He assists Thor in defeating the Dark Elves, and while he takes advantage of Thor's absence to seize the throne, the tone shifts decisively in *Thor: Ragnarok*. While he continues to be portrayed as venal and self-serving, he ultimately sides with Thor, Valkyrie, and the Hulk to help save the Asgardian people. His final appearance on the main MCU timeline comes in *Avengers: Infinity War*, where he dies the kind of death Hollywood loves to give reformed bad guys – making a futile attempt to kill Thanos and being brutally overpowered in the process.

When the character is revived for the Disney+ series *Loki*, it is initially as his old, unreconstructed self. Yet once again, the MCU shows restraint in the God of Mischief stakes, despite his own repeated invocation of the title on various occasions throughout the series. We see him in this mode in only two flashbacks: one in which he is revealed to be the culprit in the modern American legend of the plane-jacker D. B. Cooper,[58] and another where he is confronted by Sif after cutting off a lock of her hair – an episode I will consider in more detail in the following chapter.[59] For most of the series, we see Loki as a kind of poacher turned gamekeeper, as he navigates the MCU's multiversal phase. After escaping the Avengers, he is captured by an agency called the Time Variance Authority (TVA) and asked to help apprehend a fugitive who turns out to be Sylvie, a female variant of himself. As the two get to know each other, Loki speaks matter-of-factly about his own bisexuality, and what he assumes is hers, as they begin to fall in love. Sylvie has been on the run since being abducted from her own timeline as a child, and together they fight their way to

[58] *Loki*, season 1, episode 1, 'Glorious Purpose', dir. by Kate Herron (Disney+, 2021).
[59] *Loki*, season 1, episode 4, 'The Nexus Event,' dir. by Kate Herron (Disney+, 2021).

the end of time, where they encounter Kang, the TVA's creator. Despite Kang's warning that his death will unleash a catastrophic multiversal war, a vengeful Sylvie proceeds to kill him. With Kang gone, the timelines proliferate uncontrollably, and Loki goes on to devote centuries, perhaps even millennia, to mastering the TVA's systems in an attempt to perfect a Time Loom that can control the timelines. Even this device proves insufficient to handle the infinite branches now forming, however, and the multiverse begins to collapse, bringing with it the slow, spaghettified death of every living thing.

By now, Loki has learned to navigate freely through time and space. Faced with catastrophe, he concludes that there is only one option: to go back and kill Sylvie before she can kill Kang, and thus reinstate the Sacred Timeline. When he confronts her, however, she remains unwavering in her belief that the timelines must be allowed to play out, despite inevitable doom. 'And who are you to say we can't die trying?' she demands. 'Who are you to decide we can't die fighting?'[60] Loki realises there is, in fact, one other solution: to use his divine powers to take over the functions of the Time Loom himself. As the series approaches its climax, Loki steps into the chaos of dying timelines and begins to gather them in his arms. Ascending a throne-like structure woven from the strands, he transforms the network into a tree-like form glowing with green energy. The symbolism is clear. Loki has become the embodiment of Yggdrasil and has taken on the role of God of Stories – a title he was originally given in the comic books.[61] Loki thus becomes not only a figure of

[60] *Loki*, season 2, episode 6, 'Glorious Purpose', dir. Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead (Disney+, 2023).
[61] While the title itself, which comes from Ewing's *Agent of Asgard*, is not mentioned in the MCU, co-director Moorhead confirmed that Loki has indeed taken on the mantle of God of Stories. Cameron Bonomolo, 'Loki Director Reveals Loki's New Key MCU Role', *ComicBook.com*, 13 November 2023, <https://comicbook.com/tv-shows/news/loki-finale-loki-mcu-god-of-stories-explained-aaron-moorhead-interview> [accessed 30 December 2025].

creation, but an enabler of narrative itself, with his final act serving to ensure people's stories can continue to unfold.



Figure 23: Loki enthroned at the centre of the timelines.

Screengrab from Loki, season 2, episode 6, 'Glorious Purpose' (Disney+, 2023). © Marvel Studios



Figure 24: Final image of Loki within a new Yggdrasil.

Screengrab from Loki, season 2, episode 6, 'Glorious Purpose' (Disney+, 2023). © Marvel Studios

A mythogenic force

To understand what the MCU has recovered, we must first return to the *Eddas* and look beyond isolated incidents to consider the role Loki plays within the mythic

system itself. Now, it would be difficult to suggest an interpretation of Loki that has not already been put forward by someone. As Wanner observes, Loki has, over time, been read as a trickster, a culture-hero, a death god, an elemental spirit of fire, water, or air, and even a spider.[62] Jerold C. Frakes, drawing on Dumézilian theory, interprets him as a figure who subverts the three mythological functions: sovereignty, force/protection, and fertility.[63] Within this framework, Loki is not evil in the moral sense found in popular retellings, but a destabilising presence required for the system to function. Wanner himself describes Loki as embodying *mētis*, a form of cunning intelligence, and sees him as a 'god of poets', whose purpose is to ensure that the myths unfold as they do.[64] Similarly, Stefanie von Schnurbein argues that Loki's function is primarily narrative and structural in nature.[65]

What is truly striking, is that in looking beyond the familiar trickster role to reimagine him as a God of Stories, Marvel have arrived at a similar conclusion, while tapping into the Eddic Loki in three important ways. Firstly, the MCU's move to associate him with creation in general is entirely fitting. As both a father and mother, Loki is a unique creative force in the *Eddas*, while his actions set in motion the forging of the six treasures of the gods. And although there is no firm philological basis for the identification, some scholars have proposed that Lóðurr, the figure who gives colour and breath to the first humans in the version of the story from *Vǫluspá* (sts. 17–18), may be another name for Loki, connecting him more directly to the myth of human origins.[66] Secondly, his role as a force of *narrative*

[62] Kevin J. Wanner, 'Cunning Intelligence in Norse Myth', *History of Religions* 48, no. 3 (2009), pp. 217–18.
[63] Jerold C. Frakes, 'Loki's Mythological Function in the Tripartite System', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 86, no. 4 (October 1987), pp. 473–86.
[64] Wanner, 'Cunning Intelligence in Norse Myth', pp. 224-25.
[65] Stefanie von Schnurbein, 'The Function of Loki in Snorri Sturluson's Edda', *History of Religions*, 40.2 (November 2000), pp. 109–124.
[66] See Rudolf Simek for a careful discussion of this point. Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), s.v. 'Lóðurr'.

creation resonates deeply with the mythological tradition, something that Byatt also intuited. She writes of Loki: 'He was the god of endings. He provided resolutions for stories – if he chose to. The endings he made often led to more problems.'[67] Wanner likewise notes that in the skaldic poem *Haustlöng*, Loki is referred to by the kenning 'sagna hrærir', which might be translated as 'mover of tales'.[68] This was his function in both *Thor* and *The Avengers*, before his transformation in *Loki* gave him complete control of the entire story. Finally, I would suggest that Marvel's principal insight is that the traditional combination of trickster and evildoer, inherited from the retellings, could never do justice to the complexity of Loki's presence. As Clunies Ross has observed, mythic interactions between the Æsir and the giants may be summed up as one of 'negative reciprocity', making all the gods trickster-like to a degree.[69] Even Baldr laughs, we are left to assume, when Fenrir is tricked and Týr pays the consequences, for as Snorri tells us (Gylf., 34), 'Þá hlógu allir nema Týr. Hann lét hönd sína.' ['Then they all laughed except for Tyr. He lost his hand.'][70]

The title God of Stories is a direct inheritance from Al Ewing's comic book run *Loki: Agent of Asgard*. We also know that Ewing is, now at least, familiar with the *Poetic Edda*, having quoted from Thorpe's 1866 translation of *Vǫluspá* in one of his most recent works, *The Immortal Thor* (see Chapter Two). We therefore have at least one possible pathway, as the following illustration shows.

[67] Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 44.
[68] Wanner, 'Cunning Intelligence in Norse Myth', p. 224.
[69] Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society. vol. 1: The Myths* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994).
[70] *Edda*, Faulkes, p. 29.

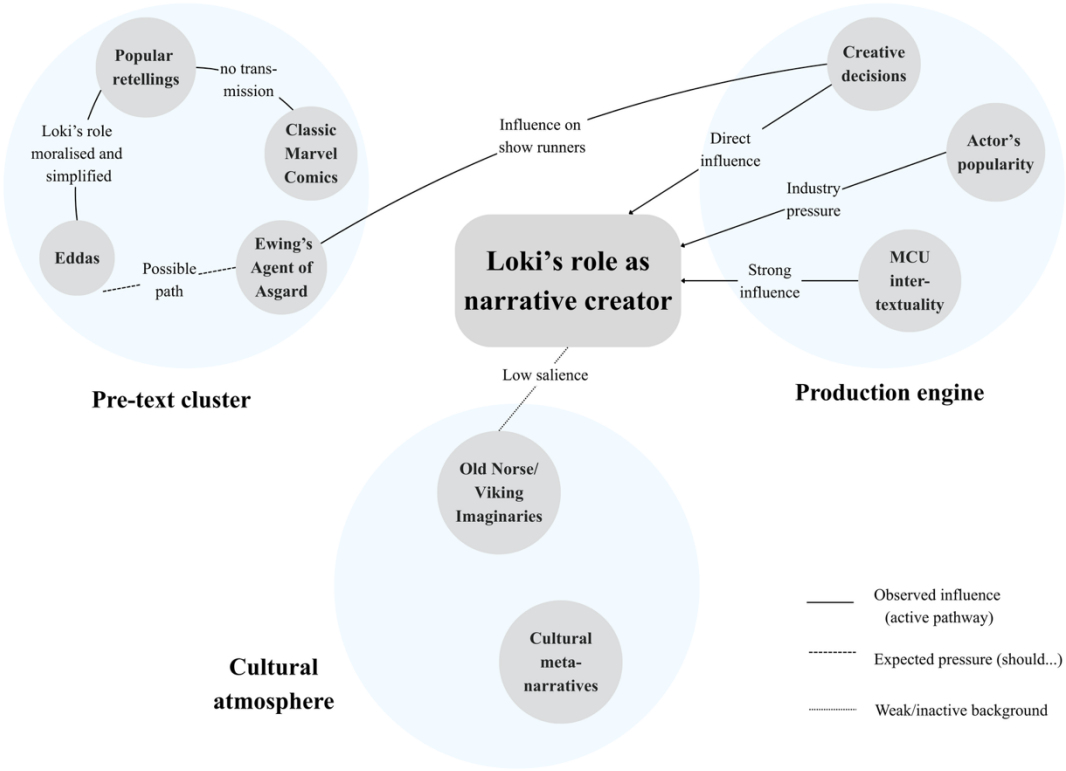


Figure 25: ANT pathway, Loki as narrative creator.

Although Loki has a strong connection with narrative within the Eddic mythic system, this role is progressively moralised and reduced in popular retellings and is not transmitted into early Marvel Comics. The narrative-creative dimension re-emerges only with Ewing's 'Loki: Agent of Asgard', providing a plausible pre-textual pathway into the MCU. Within the production engine, creative decisions and industry pressures – especially the sustained popularity of the character and performer – enable this model, culminating in Loki's transformation into a figure who sustains narrative possibility itself. The wider cultural atmosphere provides no significant pressure either to enable or to block this development.

However, whatever level of familiarity with the myths Ewing and other writers may have had, the association between Loki and narrative creation remains a significant interpretative step. It is not a connection that all scholars have drawn, and there is no evidence that anyone involved in the MCU was consciously engaging with Eddic material in a way that parallels recent academic reappraisals of the 'trickster' label. I would therefore like to introduce an alternative suggestion.

Paradoxically, it may be precisely because Marvel have looked beyond the familiar tales that they have managed to recover this deeper, more ambiguous Loki. Unfettered by the narrative constraints of the standard mythic cycle, Marvel have enjoyed over 60 years of creative freedom since Thor and Loki first appeared together in 1962. That freedom has enabled long-form character development that has gradually resurfaced traits long obscured or marginalised in popular reception. As generations of Marvel creatives have worked on the character for comic book and screen, Loki has escaped the narrow role of mischief-maker and re-emerged as a mythogenic force: one who not only disrupts stories, but brings them into being. Byatt perceived something similar, although I would shift the emphasis in her assessment slightly: Loki does not supply endings so much as the conditions under which endings become possible, making him a truly generative presence. In the MCU, this takes the form of allowing the timelines to proliferate, and people's stories to play out, even when he is told that doing so will lead to catastrophic multiversal war. And when Sylvie challenges him – 'And who are you to say we can't die trying? Who are you to decide we can't die fighting?' – this Loki variant also echoes the fatalism of the *Eddas*, where the gods prepare for Ragnarǫk knowing not that they might die, but that they certainly will. The difference is that within Marvel's mythology, you can be fairly certain someone will be along to save the day.

Reactivating mythic function

One of the staples of modern filmmaking is that characters must change. The arc – from flaw to growth, ignorance to wisdom – has become a near-universal convention of cinematic storytelling. It should be no surprise, then, that the three major figures drawn from Norse mythology into the MCU – Odin, Thor, and Loki – are all given visible trajectories of development. Thor learns to temper strength and aggression

with humility and understanding; Loki, ever fluid, transforms from evil-doer to a role of stewardship; while Odin's journey is in the opposite direction, through a decline from ruler to virtual irrelevance.

This expectation of change could scarcely be further removed from the narrative logic of the *Eddas*. Drawing on Clunies Ross's structural reading of Old Norse myth, we can say that mythic poetry is less concerned with the inner lives of its characters than with their functions within a cosmological system.[71] With little in the way of interiority or transformation, its figures are defined by their roles and what they say rather than by private thoughts and feelings. Against that background, the MCU's impulse to turn these figures into evolving characters risks pulling them far from their origins. Yet counter-intuitively, the effect is often to bring them closer to the essence of their mythic identities, especially if we can accept that Thor's development from impulsive warrior to credible hero, culminating in the loss of an eye and gaining of wisdom, completes his transformation into a composite role. Loki's long journey from god of mischief to god of stories is different in scale, but succeeds in restoring not only his essence as the boundary-crosser and go-between, but unexpectedly, as the necessary disruptor of order, making him the mover of tales. The MCU's departures from the *Eddas* may thus be seen as reactivations and not solely distortions, however fast and loose they play, and Marvel has always played, with the material. Freed from the obligation to retell any single myth, Marvel's creators have explored these figures as literary characters, shifting across genres and media. Particularly in Loki's case, that narrative freedom has produced a kind of structural rediscovery, bringing to the surface elements of the Eddic Loki that few

[71] See Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, esp. chs 1 and 3, where mythological figures are discussed as functional elements within the mythic system.

other adapters have captured. The next chapter turns to what does in fact remain of the Eddic stories themselves, exploring how fragments of Eddic story become focal points for the most significant themes of the franchise as a whole.

Chapter Four: Key Scenes, key themes

> THOR: You know, I'm 1500 years old. I've killed twice as many enemies as that. And every one of them would have rather killed me, but none succeeded. I'm only alive because fate wants me alive. Thanos is just the latest in a long line of bastards, and he'll be the latest to feel my vengeance. Fate wills it so.
>
> – *Avengers: Infinity War*[1]

As the preceding chapters have shown, the MCU shares more continuity with the Eddic world than its drastically altered plots and modern visual spectacle might suggest. Beneath the surface lies a universe suffused with magic, marked by a distinctive sense of Northernness, and animated by a humour that frequently echoes Eddic modes. Its euhemerised gods, moreover, gradually disclose traits that draw them closer to their medieval counterparts: Thor's pragmatic intelligence, Odin's latent menace, and Loki's association with acts of creation all reassert themselves over time. This chapter turns to the few occasions where the Eddas are recalled not only in cosmology or characterisation, but through recognisable fragments of plot – moments when scenes or narrative structures grounded in medieval material re-emerge within the MCU. These are not the franchise's most spectacular sequences, but they are among its most affecting – and, unexpectedly, they serve as pressure points at which the films explore the themes that define the franchise as a whole: identity, reputation, fate, sacrifice, vengeance, reputation, the price of leadership.

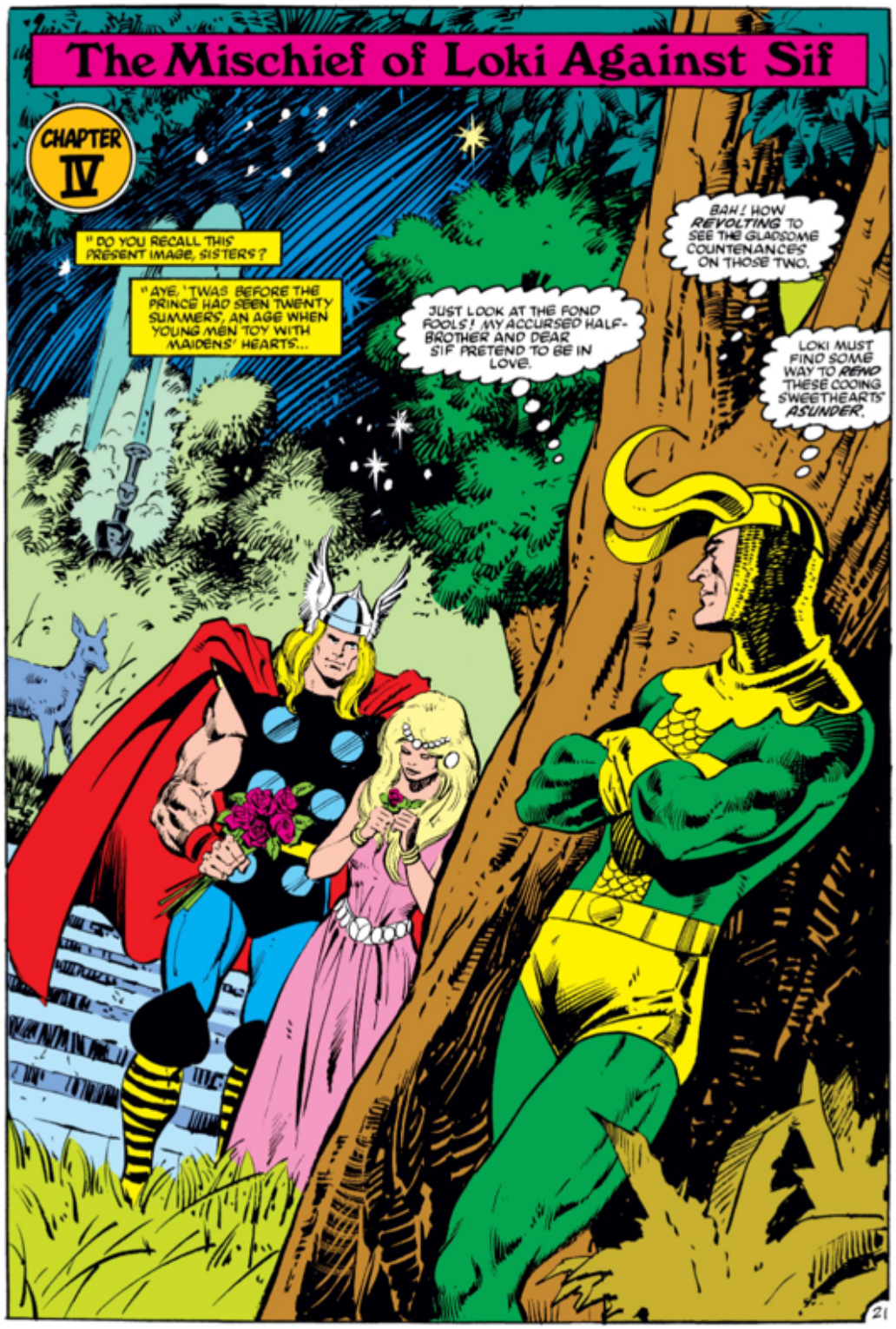
[1] *Avengers: Infinity War*, 01:12:35

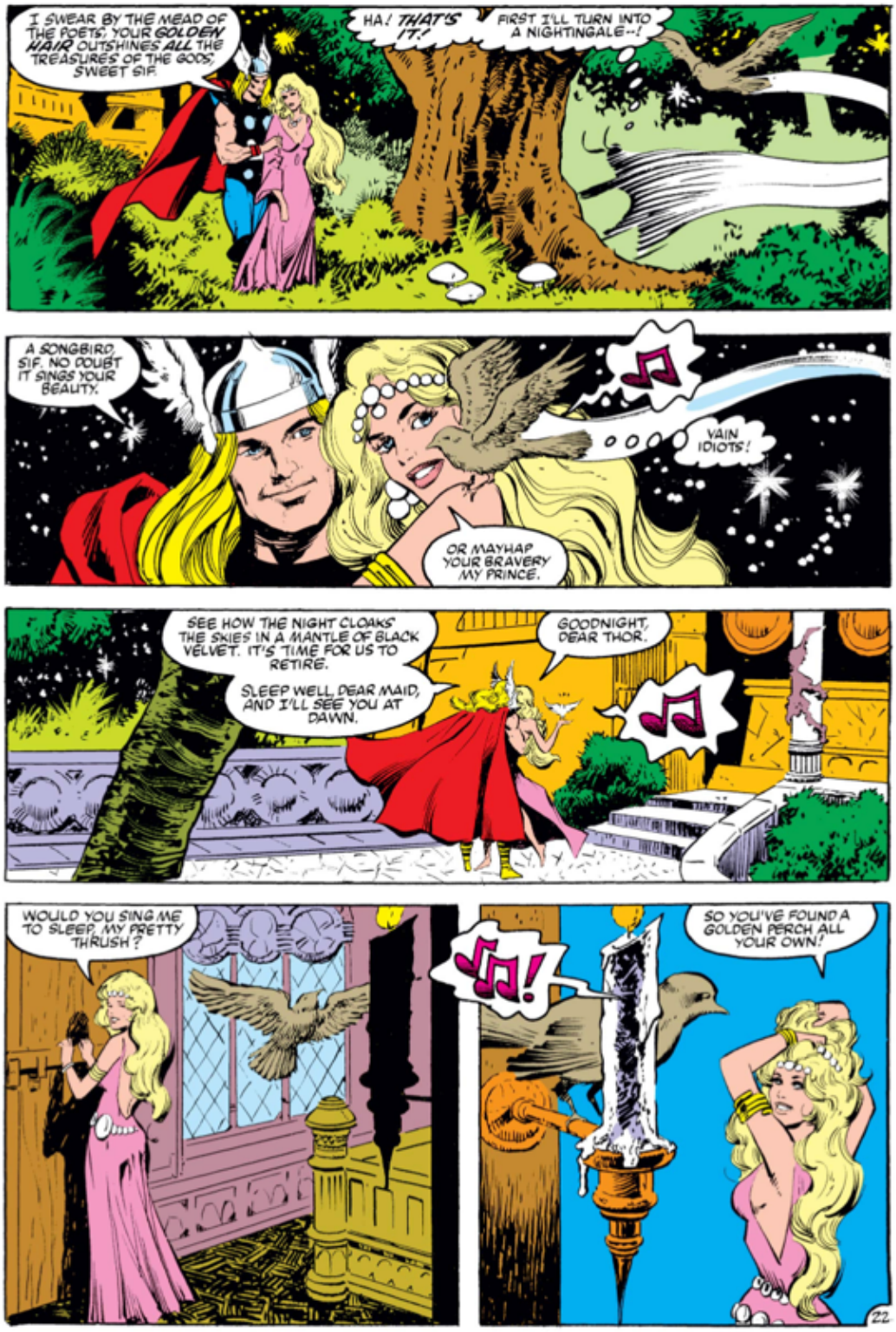
Earlier chapters used Actor–Network Theory as a diagnostic tool, tracing the pathways by which motifs travelled from medieval sources through nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellings, to the comics, and finally to the screen. Here the emphasis shifts from provenance to meaning and effect. Rather than asking how a motif arrived, the chapter asks what happens when it reappears: how it functions, how it resonates, and why fragments of Eddic narrative surface precisely at the moments when the MCU turns toward its most serious themes.

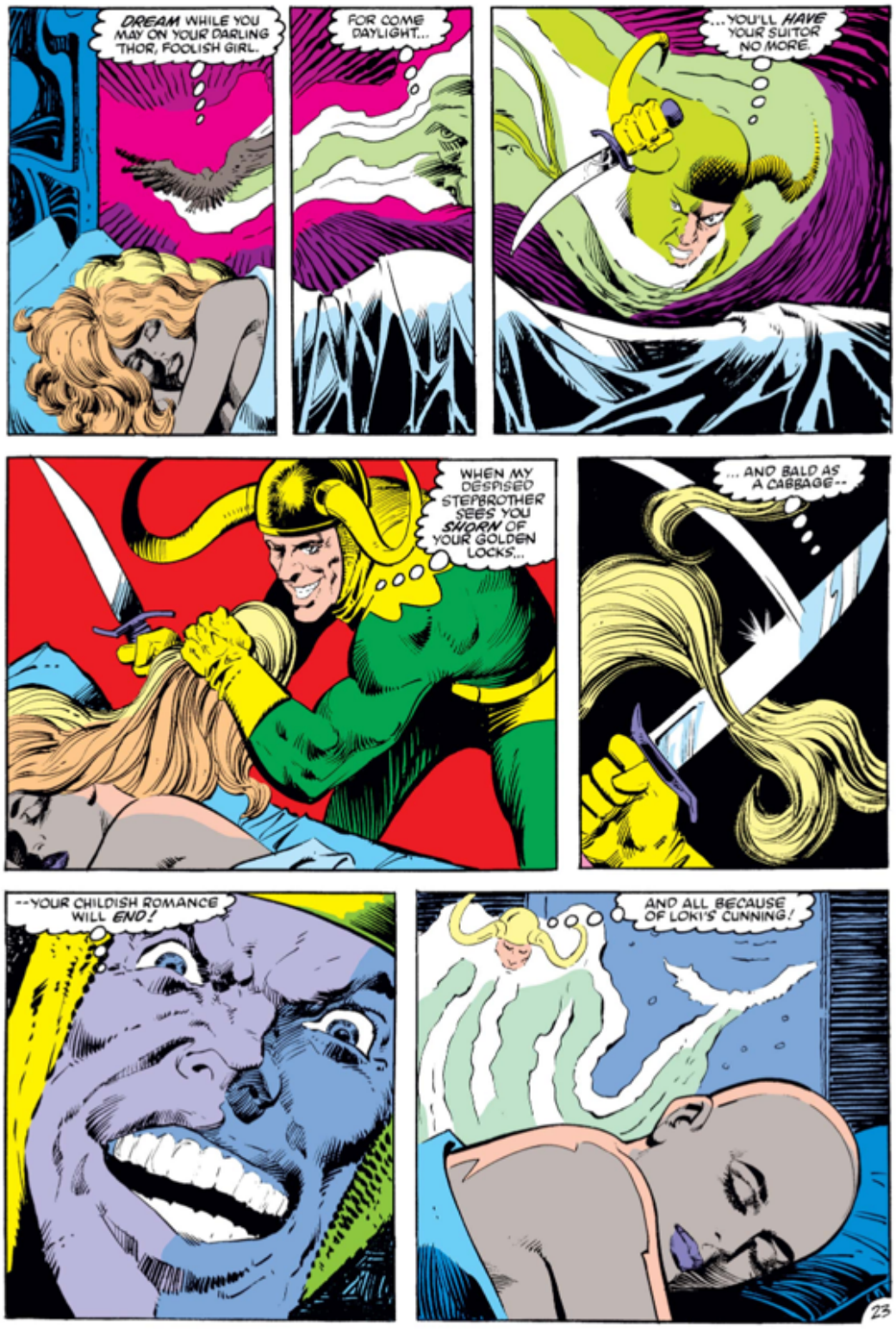
Identity: Sif's hair and Loki's time cell

The MCU's most direct adaptation of a single Eddic episode appears in the TV series *Loki*,[2] drawing on the tale told by Snorri in which Sif finds her golden hair missing and Loki, to atone for the theft, is forced to commission a replacement from the dwarves, eventually leading to the creation of the six treasures of the gods (*Skáldsk.,* ch. 35). The story has a long history in Marvel Comics. It wsa first retold in *Thor Annual* #11 (1983), where Loki transforms into a nightingale and cuts off Sif's hair as she sleeps, and has been revisited various times.[3]

[2] *Loki*, season 1, episode 4, 'The Nexus Event', dir. Kate Herron (Disney+, 2021), 00:12:15–00:14:19.
[3] Michael Waldron has confirmed that the writing team had the Eddic myth in mind: 'I think it was cool to just do a nod to actual Norse mythology and the story of Loki cutting Sif's hair, which is a real thing from the comic books and the mythology. Anytime we get to do that, that's really cool.' Michael Waldron, interview, 'Loki Writer Breaks Down the Show's Biggest Twists So Far', *CBR*, 6 July 2021 <https://www.cbr.com/loki-michael-waldron-interview/> [accessed 18 November 2025].


The Mischief of Loki Against Sif
CHAPTER IV
"DO YOU RECALL THIS PRESENT IMAGE, SISTERS?
"AYE, 'TWAS BEFORE THE PRINCE HAD SEEN TWENTY SUMMERS, AN AGE WHEN YOUNG MEN TOY WITH MAIDENS' HEARTS...
JUST LOOK AT THE FOND FOOLS! MY ACCURSED HALF-BROTHER AND DEAR SIF PRETEND TO BE IN LOVE.
BAH! HOW REVOLTING TO SEE THE GLADSOME COUNTENANCES ON THOSE TWO.
LOKI MUST FIND SOME WAY TO REND THESE COOING SWEETHEARTS ASUNDER.
21


I SWEAR BY THE MEAD OF THE POETS, YOUR GOLDEN HAIR OUTSHINES ALL THE TREASURES OF THE GODS, SWEET SIF.
HA! THAT'S IT!
FIRST I'LL TURN INTO A NIGHTINGALE--!
A SONGBIRD, SIF. NO DOUBT IT SINGS YOUR BEAUTY.
VAIN IDIOTS!
OR MAYHAP YOUR BRAVERY MY PRINCE.
SEE HOW THE NIGHT CLOAKS THE SKIES IN A MANTLE OF BLACK VELVET. IT'S TIME FOR US TO RETIRE.
SLEEP WELL, DEAR MAID, AND I'LL SEE YOU AT DAWN.
GOODNIGHT, DEAR THOR.
WOULD YOU SING ME TO SLEEP, MY PRETTY THRUSH?
SO YOU'VE FOUND A GOLDEN PERCH ALL YOUR OWN!
22


DREAM WHILE YOU MAY ON YOUR DARLING THOR, FOOLISH GIRL.
FOR COME DAYLIGHT...
...YOU'LL HAVE YOUR SUITOR NO MORE.
WHEN MY DESPISED STEPBROTHER SEES YOU SHORN OF YOUR GOLDEN LOCKS...
...AND BALD AS A CABBAGE--
--YOUR CHILDISH ROMANCE WILL END!
AND ALL BECAUSE OF LOKI'S CUNNING!
23

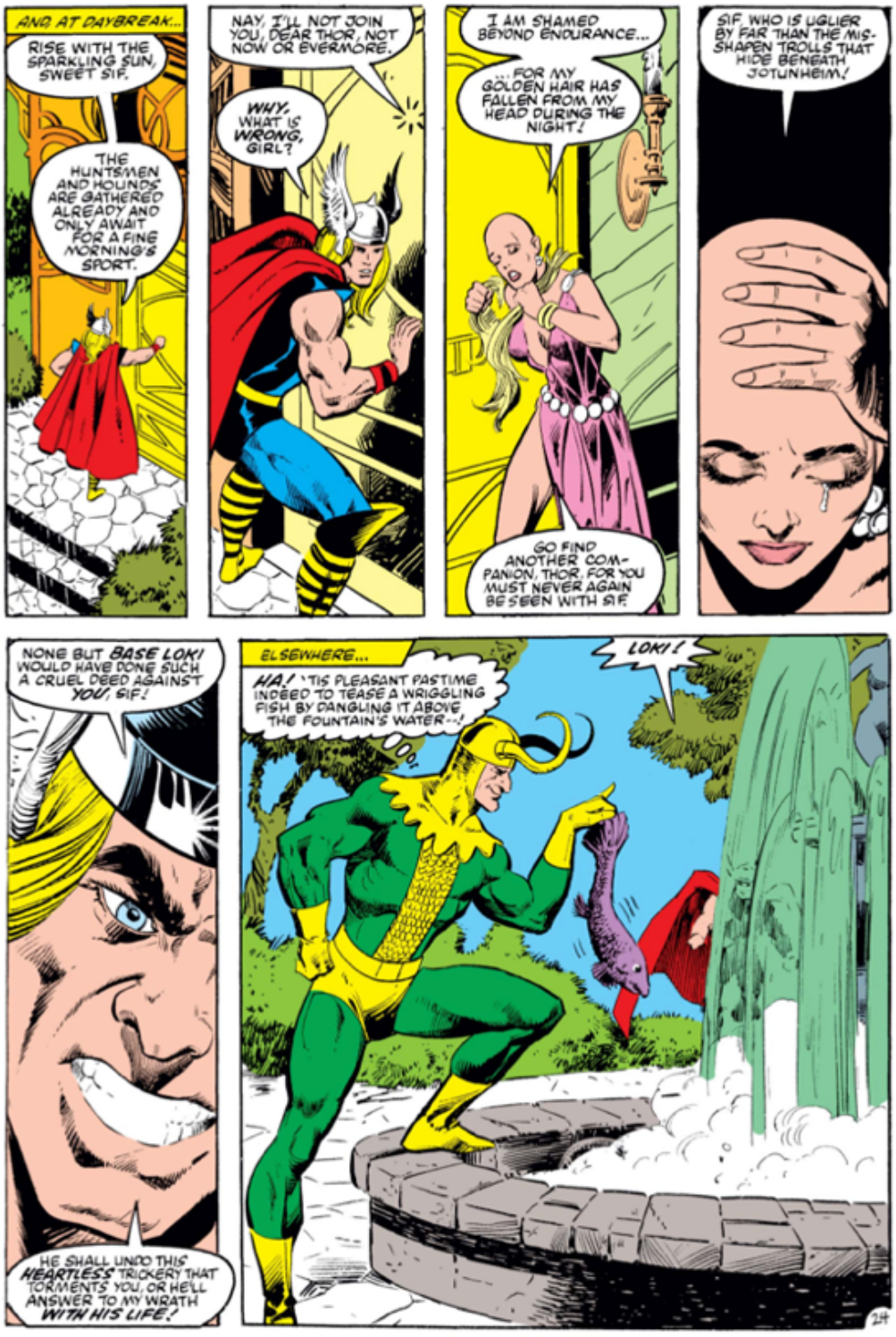


Figure 26: Four pages from Marvel Comics retelling of the theft of Sif's hair

Thor Annual #11, November 1983. '*The Saga of Thor, Chapter IV, The Mischief of Loki Against Sif'*, pp. 21-24. Written by Alan Zelenetz, drawn by Bob Hall. Copyright: Marvel Comics.[4]

[4] *Thor Annual* no. 11 (November 1983), repr. in Alan Zelenetz, Bob Hall, and Mark Bright, *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor*, vol. 22 (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Kindle edn)..

In the MCU, the episode is reimagined as a scene of psychological punishment. We never see the act itself, only its aftermath, replayed endlessly inside a 'time cell' at the headquarters of the Time Variance Authority. Trapped there, the post-New York Loki faces a looping encounter with Sif, who storms in, brandishing her shorn hair, strikes him, and declares, 'I hope you know you deserve to be alone – and you always will be.' The cell resets, and the cycle begins again. At first, Loki responds with charm and deflection – 'I went and had a nice hot bath and a glass of wine... it was just a bit of fun' – but after countless repetitions, he breaks down and confesses: 'I cut off your hair because I thought it'd be funny... I crave attention... because I'm scared of being alone.' Whether the confession is sincere or tactical, it marks the first moment of self-recognition in his story. The loop cannot be charmed away; it will end only through genuine change.

Placed beside its Eddic source, every element has been reworked. In Snorri's account, it is Þórr, not Sif, who confronts Loki, threatening that he 'mundi lemja hvert bein í honum' [would break every bone in him].[5] The piece of mischief leads to restitution, as Loki commissions the dwarves to craft the six treasures of the gods, including Mjǫllnir, in recompense, and escapes death only after having his lips sewn together. An episode that starts as a prank thus has a productive outcome, and Loki emerges as both instigator and problem-solver, as per his reputation. In the *Loki* series, by contrast, Sif's hair is dark instead of golden, the act has no creative outcome, and the punishment yields only a closed circuit of pain and repetition.

The removal of the element of creation, or renewal, reveals how fully the MCU has adopted the theme of self-defeating cycles at this stage in the timeline,

[5] Faulkes, *Edda*, p. 96.

with Loki's 'time cell' making literal the futility built into the role of god of mischief. The insight extends well beyond Loki's own story. Many of the MCU's central figures experience similar loops of self-defeating repetition. Tony Stark's wish to place a suit of armour around the world drives his compulsive reinvention of technology. Out of that obsessive quest comes the creation of Ultron, which is intended as a safeguard, but leads the Earth to a near-apocalypse. After losing his family in The Snap, Clint Barton becomes Ronin, seeking justice through carnage – a role that offers no peace and no closure, as he discovers that however many criminals he dispatches, there are always more to be fought. Following the death of Vision, a Wanda Maximoff devastated by grief constructs a utopian suburb where no one can die, but her desperate maintenance of control destroys the lives she tries to preserve.[6] Each character repeats a pattern of behaviour that provides only torment.

Here, the MCU unexpectedly mirrors the Eddic world it adapts. The Eddic Loki likewise cycles through acts of mischief and reparation until the pattern collapses with Baldr's death. Refusing to weep for Baldr, and choosing to insult the gods, Loki brings an end to the recurring pattern of behaviour noted by Snorri and quoted above – getting the gods into trouble and out of it again – and is bound in a torture that is structurally similar to the TVA's time cell. After being caught by the Æsir, he is forced to endure a horrendous, repeating punishment, as the serpent's venom drips, Sigyn catches it, she empties the bowl, it drips again, and the torment resumes until Ragnarǫk.[7] The time cell in *Loki* shows him a similar kind of mythic loop. Other gods too are caught in endless repetitions: Þórr's journeys eastward bring no lasting peace, as there are always more giants to fight, however many he

[6] *WandaVision*, created by Jac Schaeffer (Marvel Studios, Disney+, 2021).
[7] This is related in *Frá Loka*, the prose epilogue to *Lokasenna*, and in *Gylfaginning* (50).

slaughters, while Óðinn's quests for wisdom will never provide him with a way to avert the world's end. Though he tries everything he can, including the acquisition of more and more of the best fighters to join him in *Valhǫll*, Ragnarǫk cannot be thwarted. Their actions are exercises in futility within an inescapable fate.

Reputation: fight or flyte

If Loki's punishment shows how identity can be a prison, the early confrontation between Thor and Laufey in *Thor* shows how a similar sense of self can compel action, drawing a would-be king into violence the moment his status is questioned. The encounter in question, referred to in the previous chapter, functions as a condensed version of a *flyting,* a formalised contest of insults found across early Germanic traditions, in which rival speakers attempt to undermine one another's honour and establish precedence through verbal combat.[8] More specifically it is a combination of a *senna,* or insult exchange aiming to degrade the opponent through accusations, taunts, and ridicule, and, perhaps, the beginnings of a *mannjafnaðr*, a competitive 'man-comparison' in which one man asserts superiority over his opponent by elevating his own qualities or disparaging his rival's. It is worth examining the exchanges in full, which begin when Thor and his companions arrive on Jotunheim to confront Laufey, seeking answers to how Frost Giants were able to breach Asgard's defences during his aborted coronation.

> LAUFEY: You've come a long way to die, Asgardians.
>
> THOR: I am Thor Odinson!
>
> LAUFEY: We know who you are.

[8] See Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 65 for a general definition of flyting, including several examples from Germanic literature. For the differences between *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*, see Bax and Padmos, 'Two Types of Verbal Dueling', pp. 149–74.

THOR: How did your people get into Asgard?

LAUFEY: The House of Odin is full of traitors.

THOR: Do not dishonor my father's name with your lies!

LAUFEY: Your father! Your father is a murderer and a thief! He stole what was ours, and left our world in ruins. And why have you come here? To make peace? You long for battle. You crave it. You're nothing but a boy trying to prove himself a man.

THOR: Well, this 'boy' has grown tired of your mockery.

LOKI: Thor, stop and think. Look around you, we're outnumbered.

THOR: Know your place, brother.

LAUFEY: You know not what your actions would unleash.

THOR: I do.

LAUFEY: Go now, while I still allow it.

LOKI: We will accept your most gracious offer. Come on, brother.

LAUFEY: Run back home, little princess…

LOKI: Damn…[9]

The scene begins with the ritual challenge, when Laufey greets the intruders with a traditional opening provocation, saying: 'You've come a long way to die, Asgardians.' This provocation sets the stage for verbal combat and declares territorial superiority, effectively establishing Laufey as 'host'. Thor responds with an assertion of identity ('I am Thor Odinson'), a gesture designed to underline his honour and status, and one that works to establish legitimacy for the duel. Laufey's acknowledgement of Thor's identity ('We know who you are') fixes the participants

[9] *Thor*, 00:19:30–00:21:22.

as equals within the rules of contest. Bax and Padmos note that recognition of identity is a precondition for the *mannjafnaðr* phase, and Laufey's line does that work. The next sequence, started by Thor's challenge to tell him how they got into Asgard, is dominated by *senna*-style insult and accusation:

> LAUFEY: The House of Odin is full of traitors.
>
> THOR: Do not dishonor my father's name with your lies!
>
> LAUFEY: Your father is a murderer and a thief…

Here the *senna* structure applies quite closely. Each line is a proposition about the other that is rebutted or countered, while the language of 'traitor', 'murderer', and 'thief' echoes the lexical choices of many Old Norse *sennur*, which trade on this kind of slur.[10]

Laufey's long speech, which continues from, 'Your father is a murderer and a thief…' is where the *mannjafnaðr* mode briefly surfaces. Laufey reframes Thor's self-presentation as immaturity and contrasts it with his own obvious composure and territorial dominion, although this is implied rather than stated. In the definition as laid out by Bax and Padmos, what Laufey actually says is a counter-claim that converts Thor's earlier assertion of identity into evidence of inferiority. Thor's retort, 'Well, this "boy" has grown tired of your mockery,' is a weak counter-claim. It aims to reassert honour but fails to supply a deed or quality that would re-establish superiority. In Old Norse terms, he loses the exchange by threatening to abandon the verbal contest for physical escalation – much as the Eddic Þórr threatens to do in *Hárbarðsljóð* (sts. 13; 27; 47; 53). 'Run back home, little princess' serves as the

[10] For example, see *Hárbarðsljóð*, including st. 8 with its reference to 'highwaymen or horse-thieves'. Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 66. See also *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* ['A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani'], where barbs in the long flyting between Sinfjǫtli and Guðmundr include accusations of slaying kin.

terminal insult, functionally equivalent to the final blow of the *senna* – a taunt that provokes violence or exit. In this case, Loki's 'Damn…' marks the cue that the flyting has achieved its ritual goal of provoking action.

Clearly, this is not a full *flyting*, with the continued kind of back and forth, attack-and-parry, that we would expect of such an encounter in the Old Norse literary tradition. But it nevertheless follows a broadly similar pattern, and fulfils a similar kind of function. It is interesting too that once Thor has been rescued by his father and is back on Asgard, the ensuing exchange between the two also has the feel of a flyting, before Odin's words morph into performative language, as he banishes Thor.

> ODIN: That's pride and vanity that talks! Not leadership. Have you forgotten everything I've taught you? What of a warrior's patience… cunning?
>
> THOR: While you wait and be patient, the Nine Realms laugh at us! The old ways are done. You'd stand giving speeches while Asgard falls!
>
> ODIN: You're a vain, greedy, cruel boy!
>
> THOR: And you are an old man and a fool!
>
> ODIN: A fool, yes. I was a fool to think you were ready. Thor Odinson... you have disobeyed the express command of your king. Through your arrogance and stupidity, you have opened these peaceful Realms and innocent lives to the horrors of war. You are unworthy of this Realm... unworthy of your title... unworthy of the loved ones you've betrayed. I hereby take from you your powers. In the name of my father... and of his father before... I cast you out![11]

[11] *Thor*, 00:27:48–00:29:29.

This confrontation once again follows the basic structure, recontextualised as a father-and-son dispute, and it provides the film with its principal impetus, sending Thor down to Earth to learn from his mistakes. It begins with an exchange of accusations about what constitutes true manhood and leadership. Odin's opening ('That's pride and vanity that talks! Not leadership!') frames Thor's aggression as immaturity, just as Laufey did earlier. Thor's retort ('While you wait and be patient, the Nine Realms laugh at us!') is a much better riposte than his attempt at a counter-punch to Laufey. Thor's line is effectively a challenge to Odin's authority, a claim that he is the one who now possesses the military decision necessary of a king. This is a *mannjafnaðr* in miniature, each defining what kind of man, ruler, or god is superior. Odin claims wisdom and restraint, while Thor boasts of his courage and willingness to act. The insults then escalate from values to character: 'You're a vain, greedy, cruel boy!' / 'And you are an old man and a fool!' As in Eddic *flytings*, the insults are doubled and mirrored, with each side hurling a version of the same charge. Thor's insults, culminating in 'You are an old man and a fool', are, in the language of pragmatics, face-threatening acts, targeting both 'quality face' and 'relational face', given that they imply Odin is no longer capable of keeping the Nine Realms secure.[12] The fact that these taunts are made not in private, but while Loki is also present, demands action from Odin. This, in turn, moves the confrontation on from insult to performative utterance, and a speech-act that changes the course of the film for good. Odin's declaration ('I hereby take from you your powers… I cast you out!') provides the structure of a banishment formula, with its invocation of lineage ('in the name of my father and of his father before'), and the transformation of words

[12] Eric Shane Bryan, building on work from Brown and Levinson, outlines different types of face-threatening acts and their use in Old Norse literature. See Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Eric Shane Bryan, *Discourse in Old Norse Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2021).

into action. Odin thus wins the contest not through wit, or even through his status as Thor's father, but through sovereign speech.

The point here is not that the MCU has deliberately constructed a flyting, nor that these echoes are consciously introduced. A verbal contest before violence is, after all, a standard action-film device. What is striking, however, is that within this pre-fight trash talk we find clear parallels in both the types of insult and the framing of the scene that recall Eddic flyting, and that it comes at a pivotal moment in the film's development. It is precisely here that the central question of what makes a leader, and how succession should be handled, is crystalised – a question that will dominate the franchise for the remainder of the *Infinity Saga* and beyond.

Fate and the price of knowledge: the Ragnarok arc

In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Thor's brief, unsettling vision of destruction foregrounds one of the MCU's most recognisably Norse preoccupations: that knowledge, once granted, compels action, even when the outcome cannot be changed. The sequence in which he consults the Norns is not drawn directly from any Eddic source, but it functions, consciously or unconsciously, as an analogue to *Baldrs draumar* and related mythic scenes of revelation. In the poem, Óðinn rides to the underworld to wake a dead seeress, in an attempt to find out what the unsettling dreams being experienced by his son Baldr may mean. After making it past a baying hellhound, he uses magic to raise a seeress from her grave. Disguising his identity by using the name Vegtamr, he asks who Hel is preparing to accept and is told that it is Baldr. He also learns the name of his son's future killer, but gains nothing that will actually help him avert this tragedy.

Similarly, Thor's descent into the cave to encounter the Norns in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* is a ritualised act of interrogation. He seeks understanding of the

visions inflicted on him by Wanda, the Scarlet Witch – visions of apocalypse and the fall of Asgard, accompanied by an implication that it is all Thor's fault – and the Norns respond by showing him more than he can interpret. Like the medieval Óðinn, Thor approaches the unknown as a problem to be solved, apparently believing, or hoping, that knowledge will restore control. Instead, the vision gives him an image of destruction without any means to change that future. In *Age of Ultron* this knowledge functions as the impetus for a series of actions that come close to bringing an even greater catastrophe. He encourages the Avengers to forge ahead with the creation of Vision, and uses his hammer to channel the power source that makes in possible, in the belief that this synthetic being may provide a counterweight for good in the coming of what he now understands to be Ragnarǫk. The cave sequence marks the point where the franchise begins to adopt what the sagas would have recognised as a tragic stance: the idea that foreknowledge and futility coexist.

That tension is developed fully in *Thor: Ragnarok*. As noted in the previous chapter, the film opens with Thor literally suspended in a cage, making quips to camera as he awaits an audience with Surtur – a striking, if irreverent, echo of Odin's own self-hanging in *Hávamál*, where mystical knowledge is attained through ordeal (sts 138–45). Surtur tells him that Ragnarok cannot be prevented, and that it will come when the fire giant's crown is placed in the Eternal Flame. Thor's instinct is to reject the prophecy outright: he defeats Surtur, seizes the crown, and assumes that by doing so he has averted the end. The remainder of the film unfolds as a slow recognition that the vision cannot be escaped – that his efforts to prevent it are, in fact, what enable its fulfilment. The film diverges sharply from the medieval sources, of course, but this cannot entirely disguise the underlying theme. Odin's death occurs

early, leaving Thor to confront fate on his own, although he does receive some guidance from his father after his death. By the end, Loki, once a source of disruption, fights beside him, while Hela stands as a representative of the forces of chaos that must be fought, even though nothing can be done to avert an apocalyptic end. When Thor finally releases Surtur to destroy Asgard and defeat Hela, he repeats the Eddic paradox: only by enacting the end can renewal begin.

Sacrifice: beyond the personal

The next example is even less direct in its mythological lineage but possesses important emotional power. At the opening of *Avengers: Infinity War*, Thor and Loki are confronted by Thanos aboard the ruined Asgardian refugee ship, *The Statesman*. Thanos seeks the Tesseract, housing the Space Stone, that is necessary to his plan to annihilate half of all life in the universe – and tortures Thor to force Loki into giving it up. Believing the Tesseract destroyed on Asgard, Thor is ready to die alongside his brother, safe in the knowledge that Thanos cannot get his hands on it, and therefore cannot complete his plan. Loki, however, fails the test. "The Tesseract or your brother's head… I assume you have a preference," says Thanos to Loki, as he begins his torture. [13] At first Loki pretends to be eager to see Thor's death, but ultimately, he is unable to bear his brother's suffering, and shocks Thor by producing the Stone, which he had removed from Asgard before its destruction. His final gambit, to use The Hulk against Thanos, fails, and both Loki and Heimdall are killed as Thor watches on helplessly.

This scene, though not a direct reworking of any particular episode, carries an echo of one of the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*, in the stoic reasoning of

[13] Avengers: Infinity War, 00:02:51–00:03:57.

Atlakviða [‘The poem of Atli’]. There, Gunnarr refuses to reveal the location of his treasure until Atli cuts the heart from Gunnarr’s brother Hǫgni. Gunnar’s reasoning carries a brutal logic. Gunnar is entirely confident that he himself will never give up the location of the treasure, but only by ensuring Hǫgni’s death can he guarantee the secret will die with them both.[14] Gunnar’s act, at once self-destructive and self-affirming, exposes the bleak reality of the old heroic code, in which loyalty and love are subordinate to larger principles of honour, or necessity. Thor’s conviction that the Tesseract is lost makes the deaths of both himself and Loki acceptable, and he does not struggle against Thanos. In a situation where choice is foreclosed, it is a similarly stoic response to a no-win situation.

What makes the MCU’s handling of this theme unusual is its expansion of sacrifice beyond the self. As McSweeney has noted, the familiar Hollywood gesture – the hero’s offer to die for the cause he happens to be representing – almost never comes to require actual sacrifice.[15] By this point in the *Infinity Saga*, the MCU has realised that such gestures are insufficient. During the two final *Avengers* movies, the key personal choice faced by the heroes becomes whether they can endure the greater pain of allowing, or even causing, the death of a loved one to help the greater good. Thor and Loki’s scene on the Asgardian ship foreshadows three later variations on the same ordeal, all in *Infinity War*: Gamora’s insistence that Peter Quill, her boyfriend, must kill her rather than allow her capture by her father, Thanos; Wanda Maximoff’s destruction of her partner Vision, at his own urging, to keep the Mind Stone from Thanos; and Clint Barton’s futile attempt to take the place of his close friend Natasha Romanoff in making the sacrifice that is the price for obtaining the

[14] Shippey, *Laughing Shall I Die* (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 2017), p. xvii.
[15] McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble!*, p. 56.

Soul Stone. Each of these moments repeats the tragic reality of *Atlakviða*, as the only victory becomes endurance in the face of painful personal loss. By reframing this old dilemma, the MCU advances a particularly modern version of the Norse fatalism, where it is no longer enough to die bravely – one must also be prepared to let others die. This sequence also reveals how thoroughly the mythic understanding of fate has been absorbed into the MCU's narrative. When Tony Stark refuses to simply undo the events of the previous five years in *Endgame* because it would erase his daughter's existence, the same dilemma recurs in a different guise. Tony is never criticised for his action, but in my reading of the events of the film, his personal sacrifice in the final battle is heroic but insufficient. He made the wrong choice because he could not contemplate causing the loss of a loved one – only his own.

The pursuit of vengeance: forging Stormbreaker

One of the MCU's most striking encounters with myth comes in *Avengers: Infinity War*, when Thor travels to Nidavellir to have a new weapon forged to replace his shattered hammer. The sequence draws explicitly on Eddic material. Eitri, king of the dwarves, is named in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 35), where he and his brother Brokkr craft Mjǫllnir, among other treasures, after Loki wagers his head against their skill. On its own, this would perhaps be no more than an authenticity marker, but the MCU invests the encounter with far greater symbolic weight by grafting a darker story onto it, one rooted both in *Skáldskaparmál* and the Eddic poem *Vǫlundarkviða*.

When Thor finds him, Eitri is the last surviving dwarf in the Nine Realms, presiding over a forge that has been inactivated, and with his hands encased in crude metal sheaths. He explains that he helped Thanos forge the gauntlet that channels the power of the Infinity Stones in the hope of saving the 300 dwarves who lived on Nidavellir. Thanos rewarded him by slaughtering them all anyway, and mutilating

Eitri so he could never make weapons again. As Eitri explains: "'Your life is yours,' he said. 'But your hands... Your hands are mine alone.'" [16] The thematic echo of *Vǫlundarkviða* is strong. In the poem, the smith Vǫlundr is captured by Níðuðr, who cripples him by severing his hamstrings to prevent his escape. Deprived of freedom, Vǫlundr turns his artistry to vengeance. He murders Níðuðr's sons, fashions jewels from their eyes and teeth, seduces the king's daughter, and escapes in flight, laughing.[17] In both stories, the act of craftsmanship under coercion is linked with the desire for retribution. For Vǫlundr, artistry becomes the instrument of revenge, just as it does for the MCU's Eitri, although in his case it requires the agency of a third party in Thor. Eitri's act of reigniting the forge, with Thor's help, to make one final weapon restores the dignity stripped from him by Thanos and sets in motion Thor's own fruitless pursuit of vengeance. When Thor wields this new weapon Stormbreaker, he is no longer guided by duty or justice but by rage. His confrontation with Thanos is specifically framed as payback for the slaughter of his people and the deaths of his brother Loki and his friend Heimdall. 'Rage, vengeance, anger, loss, regret,' he explains. 'They're all tremendous motivators."[18] These lines herald a catastrophic choice that Thor will make when he finally gets to confront Thanos. His decision to strike Thanos in the chest – and to prolong the moment of satisfaction by, almost literally, twisting the knife – marks the culmination of a pattern that runs through both Norse and modern myth: revenge as the act that

[16] *Avengers: Infinity War*, 01:15:44–01:17:04.

[17] The story of Vǫlundr must have been in circulation centuries before the compilation of the *Poetic Edda*. The outline of the narrative appears in the Old English *Deor* (Exeter Book, tenth century); 'Welandes geweorc' ['the work of Weland'] is mentioned in *Beowulf*; and a probable pictorial representation of the legend is carved on the eighth-century Franks Casket. See Craig Williamson, (trans.), *The Complete Old English Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 520–22; John McKinnell, 'The Context of *Vǫlundarkviða*', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, pp. 195–212.

[18] *Avengers: Infinity War*, 01:12:08.

completes the circle of loss but results in nothing positive. ‘You should have gone for the head,’ Thanos tells him, and he follows that advice at the start of *Endgame*, although by now nothing he can do can erase the past. Thus, when Thor claims in *Infinity War* that he will kill Thanos because ‘fate wills it so’, his prophecy is technically correct, but his understanding of what that fate entails is tragically incomplete. The death comes too late, after the universe has already been devastated.[19] In recognisable Norse style, fate allows a kind of literal accuracy, but denies understanding or control at the level of consequence, a pattern also seen in *Hamðismál*, where the brothers succeed in avenging their sister, but only in a way that ensures their own deaths.

Reputation and life after death: ‘Welcome to Valhalla’

Thor: Love and Thunder concentrates on another aspect of identity in the permanence of reputation. In its mid-credits scene, after Jane Foster succumbs to the breast cancer she has been battling throughout the film, she steps into a radiant plain and is greeted by Heimdall, who says simply, ‘Welcome to Valhalla.’ Beneath what might appear to be a sentimental epilogue lies a powerful reactivation of one of the oldest Norse poetic tropes: the hero’s passage into Odin’s hall. The moment also restores to the MCU a tone of solemnity that echoes the scene in *Ragnarok* when Thor was interrupted by Loki as he prayed alone. As with Thor’s invocation of

[19] This too is interesting from a medievalist perspective, given that fate in Old Norse myth and saga often happens in unexpected ways, or with unexpected consequences. The most obvious example is in the story of Baldr’s death. Frigg seeks oaths from all things, but omits mistletoe, deciding that it is too young to hold to an oath, but creating a loophole that Loki exploits (*Gylf*. 49–50). In *Örvar-Odds saga*, when Örvar-Oddr is a young man, a prophecy foretells that he will die because of his horse, Faxi. Determined to escape fate, he kills Faxi and buries him deep in the ground. Many years later, Örvar-Oddr returns home. While visiting the spot, he comes upon the horse’s remains and prods the skull with his spear; a snake emerges and bites him fatally, thus fulfilling the prophecy. *Örvar-Odds saga*, ch. 31, in Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds), *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3 vols (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1943–44); available at <https://heimskringla.no/wiki/Örvar-Odds_saga> [accessed 23 April 2026].

Valhalla in the immediate aftermath of Odin's death, belief here returns in the form of ritualised speech, lending a measure of gravity to a film that was weighed down by its own heavy-handed irony.

To grasp its significance, it is worth briefly recalling how *Love and Thunder* constructs its world. The film opens amid the aftermath of The Snap and The Blip – the mass extinction and, five years later, resurrection of half the universe's life – in a society struggling to reconstitute meaning. In New Asgard, the survivors appear to have concluded that their best hope of recovery lies in rebranding themselves as a tourist destination, turning trauma into theatre for visitors who arrive by cruise ship. On the site of Odin's death, tourists are welcomed into a hyper-real model village offering 'authentic' Asgardian mead, flying longboat rides, and photo opportunities beside the shattered fragments of Mjolnir that are kept under a Perspex dome. As Korg, the film's comically unreliable narrator, recounts the 'legend of the Space Viking, AKA the God of Thunder, AKA Thor Odinson'[20] the story that unfolds may be read as a myth about myth-making: a world where no truth is uncontested and even tragedy is repackaged for entertainment. After Asgard's children have been abducted by Gorr, the troupe immediately propose the unfolding events as the basis for another evening's play. 'The people need entertainment,' the actors insist, 'particularly now, in times of crisis'.[21] Waititi thus extends the theme of theatrical artifice he introduced in *Ragnarok*, where Loki-as-Odin had watched a play celebrating his own supposedly heroic death. Once again, history is staged, and the publicly displayed versions of events cannot be trusted.

[20] *Thor: Love and Thunder*, 00:07:20.
[21] Ibid., 00:38:54

Jane Foster's storyline unfolds within this unstable world of simulacra. As she is reunited with Thor, we see that her sense of time has become confused, as she guesses that it has been 'three or four years' since they last saw each other, against Thor's certainty that it has been 'eight years, seven months, and six days'.[22] Suffering badly with the effects of the cancer and desperate for strength, she has travelled to New Asgard to see the fragments of Mjolnir. The hammer, sensing her need, reassembles itself and grants her the power of The Mighty Thor. Yet the same magic that restores her vitality also negates her chemotherapy, hastening her decline. The paradox is stark: she is granted godlike strength even as it consumes her. At the end of the film, she is offered an honourable exit from the fight, to go home and focus her remaining strength on getting well, but ultimately she chooses to aid Thor in the final battle, helping to bring back the children and restore order.

Against this backdrop of narrative instability, the film's mid-credits scene strikes a radically different tone. When Jane dies, the irony abruptly clears. The camera moves through a haze of light as she is met by Heimdall. Jane's decision to wield Mjolnir despite knowing it will kill her is a conscious embrace of fate. In this sense, she embodies the old heroic ideal that the only freedom left to mortals is to choose the manner in which they will face their inevitable death. Her welcome into Valhalla confirms that truth in a form that feels in tune with *Hávamál*:

> Deyr fé,
> deyja frændr,
> deyr sjálfr it sama;
> en orðstírr

[22] *Thor: Love and Thunder*, 00:38:04. Her confusion seems to be proof that she was among those who lost five years in The Blip.

deyr aldregi

hveim er sér góðan getr.

Deyr fé,

deyja frændr,

deyr sjálfr it sama;

ek veit einn

at aldri deyr:

dómr um dauðan hvern.

(*Hávamál* sts. 76–77)

[Cattle die, kinsmen die, the self must also die; but the glory of reputation never dies, for the man who can get himself a good one. | Cattle die, kinsmen die, the self must also die; I know one thing which never dies: the reputation of each dead man.][23]

Jane cannot avert death, but she can define what it will mean. Her final act of agency – choosing to fight, while knowing it will kill her – secures her a life after death. The Valhalla sequence thus closes a narrative otherwise devoted to exposing artifice, irony, and postmodern instability with a single gesture toward meaning and permanence. Waititi, who spent two films dismantling the gods' authority, finally decides that everything may be open to reinterpretation except death itself and the name one leaves behind.

Leadership: Loki as Yggdrasil

The finale of the second series of *Loki* sees its protagonist imprisoned once more, but this time permanently. This scene has already been examined in detail in the previous

[23] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 22–23.

chapter, but I offer one further observation here: the two episodes that bookend this chapter, consciously or not, frame the same idea in antithetical form. Whereas in the 'time cell' Loki's mischief has no consequence beyond personal humiliation, in the series finale he breaks that loop by embracing a responsibility so absolute that it demands his own erasure from the timeline itself. The transformation from the trickster who shears Sif's hair to the god who binds the branches of time together is complete.

The scene, accompanied by the haunting choral piece using verse adapted from *Lokasenna*, is not based on any single episode in Old Norse literature, but its imagery is unmistakably Eddic. As Loki ascends and gathers the dying timelines, they coalesce into a single living tree whose branches stretch through the void. In the *Eddas*, Yggdrasill is the axis of creation: the place where the gods meet each day, where the Norns dispense fate, and perhaps also the *vindga meiði* ['windswept tree'][24] on which Óðinn hangs to gain understanding of the runes. Loki sits alone, the timelines coursing through his fingers, sustaining a universe that will no longer know him. His enthronement at the heart of the world-tree converts his own acknowledged narcissism into genuine sacrifice. For a narrative arc that began in comic humiliation, the image of Loki seated among the branches of Yggdrasill provides an unexpectedly elegiac closure, gathering the chapter's recurrent concerns – identity, fate, sacrifice, reputation, and leadership – into a single act of selflessness.

This scene also marks a departure from the franchise's prevailing treatment of leadership. From the aftermath of Tony Stark's death and Steve Rogers' retirement,[25] authority is repeatedly framed in the series as an unwanted inheritance:

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[24] *Hávamál*, st. 138. Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 32.
[25] In the final days before this thesis was submitted, Marvel released a theatrical trailer for *Avengers: Doomsday* revealing that Steve Rogers will return to his role in the next instalment. See Moreau, Jordan, 'Chris Evans Returns for "Avengers: Doomsday" as Captain America With a Child, Teaser

a role assumed reluctantly and endured rather than embraced. This conception of leadership is embodied by Valkyrie. When Asgrdian survivors establish New Asgard, she becomes their de facto ruler, filling the vacuum left by Thor's retreat into grief. She appears well suited to the role – capable, composed, and later formally appointed by Thor himself – yet by *Thor: Love and Thunder* the burden of power is evident. Her wry complaint that leadership consists of 'meetings and ravenmail and meetings that could have been ravenmail'[26] encapsulates the franchise's broader suspicion of authority as a condition that constrains freedom, even when exercised well. Loki's choice in the finale might initially seem to extend this pattern, but, ultimately, I believe the effect is to transcend it. Like Valkyrie, Loki accepts responsibility when others cannot or will not. Unlike her, however, his acceptance is total and irrevocable. His enthronement at the heart of the world-tree strips leadership of all reward and reduces it to its barest form: the willingness to sustain existence at the cost of one's own presence within it. His final words in the series both echo and comment upon his earlier self-understanding. At the end of *Thor* (2011), his parting cry as he slips from the Bifrost – 'I could have done it, father! I could have done it! For you. For all of us'[27] – is a plea for validation. At the close of *Loki*, a line scripted by the actor who plays him, Tom Hiddleston and deliberately echoing the earlier version, marks a decisive shift: 'I know what I want. I know what kind of god I need to be. For you. For all of us.'[28] If Loki's transformation is a sacrifice, it is one he blithely accepts.

Confirms', *Variety*, 18 December 2025 <https://variety.com/2025/film/news/chris-evans-avengers-doomsday-teaser-captain-america-1236609054/> [accessed 21 December 2025].

[26] *Thor: Love and Thunder*, 00:48:14.

[27] *Thor*, 01:40:20.

[28] *Loki*, series 2, episode 6, 00:35:55.

The key themes played out

It is no surprise that the MCU occasionally draws on material from the *Eddas*. Thanks to the work of Kirby, and the eagerness of later writers and artists to use the myths to provide new characters and ideas, they had access to many of the stories from the Old Norse material via the filter of the comic books. MCU creatives were also happy to pull in elements of Eddic myth indirectly, from other second or third hand sources, whenever it seemed convenient. What is genuinely surprising, and even more revealing, is that those materials are used to introduce and sustain the themes that come to dominate the franchise as a whole. It would, of course, be impossible to reconstruct a single, unified Viking Age worldview, given the diversity of regions, periods, and belief practices, and the fragmentary nature of the surviving sources. Nevertheless, certain preoccupations appear consistently across the evidence available to us – from law codes and runic memorials to skaldic verse, mythic poetry, and later saga representations of earlier norms. Questions of identity and reputation formed a core part of social life, particularly in relation to leadership and the constant need for chieftains to assert and reassert their authority through bonds of loyalty and displays of competence.[29] Feud and the obligation to pursue vengeance are well-attested both before and after Christianisation.[30] Belief in fate, in the broad sense of impersonal forces shaping human lives, seems to have been deeply rooted in pre-Christian cosmology.[31] Likewise, archaeological and textual evidence points to a varied but persistent concern with the afterlife and with relationships between the

[29] On governing authority in the Viking Age, see Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, including pp. 93; 222–24.
[30] On the pursuit of vengeance, see additionally Else Mundal, 'The View of Blood Vengeance in Medieval Norwegian Sources'. *Scandinavistica Vilnensis*, 2 (2009), pp. 139–52.
[31] Catharina Raudvere, 'Popular Religion in the Viking Age', in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink, in collaboration with Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 235–43.

living and the dead.[32] While these cannot be reduced to a single set of beliefs, they represent recurring thematic concerns that would plausibly have resonated with audiences across the Viking Age and its diaspora.

These themes – identity, reputation, fate, sacrifice, vengeance, reputation, leadership – may all be seen to inform Thor's individual trajectory. At first concerned more for his reputation than the good of his people, his leadership must be earned and re-earned, before access to prophetic knowledge brings responsibility; while his turn to vengeance yields no redemption. Loki's companion arc likewise portrays his identity first as a prison of self-invention, then as a calling freely chosen, ending in stewardship that necessitates his own removal. What gives these films their unexpected mythic gravity is not merely the occasional citation of Eddic episodes but a return to the human questions that animated them. The evident appeal of those questions to global audiences suggests less that Marvel has 'rediscovered' elements of Norse myth than that the myths articulate concerns that continue to feel deeply relevant. Having traced the persistence of certain mythic patterns across centuries and media, the next step is to ask what is the significance of the return of certain motifs, and the key themes of the franchise, when they are captured in performance. The next chapter therefore returns to the most conspicuous survivor motif identified earlier and considers what its reappearance, and renewed vitality in performance, might reveal about the myths themselves.

[32] For some of the many ways this interest in death was expressed, see, for example, Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Óðinn, Warriors, and Death', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 137–51.

Chapter Five: Reappraising the myths

> Centuries ago, these tales were handed down around the fires. It's really sort of the same today, only the fire is the light of the projector.
>
> – Kevin Feige, Head of Marvel Studios[1]

This chapter revisits one of the principal survivor motifs identified in Chapter Two, using it as a case study to ask whether its renewed presence in the MCU – when elements of the myths are spoken, embodied, and staged for a popular audience – might illuminate aspects of the myths in their earlier, pre-modern form, when they must have been experienced through some form of performance, and perhaps even dramatisation. Of the many motifs traced earlier, one invites particular attention because, as Actor–Network analysis shows, it resists explanation through straightforward textual or more general cultural inheritance, while the values of twenty-first-century, socially liberal, family-oriented filmmaking would seem likely to suppress it. This is the return of sexually charged humour, most evident in *Thor* (2011) and *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022), where jokes about emasculation and gendered humiliation resurface despite the tendency of other popular adaptations to downplay them.

This line of inquiry takes its cue from Tom Shippey's *Laughing Shall I Die*, which offers an account of what he terms the 'bad sense of humour' prevalent in the literary depictions of warrior culture in Viking Age Scandinavia – a tendency to laugh at pain, suffering, and even death as a form of moral posture.[2] Extending this

[1] Kevin Feige, quoted in *Thor*, Production Notes (Marvel Studios Press Kit, 2011).
[2] Tom Shippey, *Laughing Shall I Die: Lives and Deaths of the Great Vikings* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

argument, this chapter asks whether a culture capable of laughing at death might also have laughed at sex and shame, not only in private contexts but in performance. If such humour reappears in the MCU because it remains dramatically effective – or even dramatically necessary – this may open new ways of approaching Eddic scenes whose tone and purpose remain obscure or contested, and of reconsidering apparently settled assumptions about how certain gods function as characters within these texts. A parallel idea can be found in David Watt's discussion of awkwardness in late-medieval English literature. Watt suggests that moments of discomfort or humour that continue to register with modern audiences may point to underlying structural features of a text, even where authorial intention and original reception remain inaccessible.[3] Similarly, I take as significant the fact that certain Eddic tropes – particularly those involving threats to status, sexual embarrassment, or norm-violation – continue to generate laughter or unease when placed in performance, including in the exaggerated comic register of the MCU.

To explore this, the chapter begins with two foundational questions. First, can we be confident that the Norse myths were performed – that is, spoken, sung, or enacted – before their thirteenth-century transcription, as scholars including Bertha Phillpotts, Einar Haugen, and Terry Gunnell have proposed?[4] If so, what forms might those performances have taken? Following Richard Schechner's widely employed definition, performance may be understood as existing on a continuum

[3] David Watt, *Laughter and Awkwardness in Late Medieval England* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), p. 1.
[4] See Bertha Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda and Scandinavian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920); Einar Haugen, 'The Edda as Ritual', in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 3–24.; Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995). Gunnell notes (p. 3) that the Icelandic scholar Finnur Magnusson suggested that *Skírnismál* and *Hárbarðsljóð* might have been presented dramatically. On this idea, see also Ursula Dronke, '*Skírnismál*: The Play and its Plot', in Dronke (ed. and trans.), *The Poetic Edda, vol. II: Mythological Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 386–396.

between ritual and play.[5] If the Eddic myths once occupied a position somewhere along this spectrum, combining seriousness with laughter, the coarse and sexually charged exchanges found in *Þrymskviða*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Skírnismál*, and *Lokasenna*, and elsewhere may preserve traces of a comic register that found its fullest expression only when enacted. Viewed in this way, moments of humour and humiliation would function not as incidental embellishments but as dramatic devices. The discussion that follows, both in this chapater and in the coda that follows it, uses the re-emergence of sexual humour in the MCU to consider whether, by recreating some of the conditions under which the myths once came alive in performance, contemporary adaptations may shed light on aspects of the myths in their pre-modern form, and offer new ways of reappraising them.

The myths as performance

As Gunnell has outlined, versions of at least some of the myths preserved in the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* must have existed as oral narratives before the coming of Christianity. As orally transmitted stories, they would have been experienced through performance – spoken aloud in shared space, accompanied by gesture and some degree of audience interaction – rather than as private, silent reading. Gunnell has further argued that three types of Eddic poems would likely have involved elements of dramatisation.

The first comprises poems composed in *ljóðaháttr* [‘song metre’ or ‘chant metre’], often presented as first-person monologues, such as *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál*, with mythic figures given direct speech. Gunnell suggests that a performer would have *become* the character during a hall performance of these

[5] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1–36.

poems, embodying a voice of divine or prophetic knowledge. Haugen reached a similar conclusion in his analysis of *Grímnismál*, imagining a performance of the poem in which a priest would enter an ecstatic state, and describing the poem as being 'like the scenario of a well-acted play'.[6] Comparable approaches can be found in the work of Simon Nygaard, who likewise treats such performances as ritualised acts of embodiment within a social setting.[7]

The second category consists of dialogic or confrontational poems – verbal duels such as *Lokasenna*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Alvíssmál*, and *Skírnismál*. Such exchanges would have required multiple voices, and perhaps multiple performers, to remain intelligible and engaging. Gunnell demonstrates that the marginal notes identifying speakers in the *Poetic Edda* in some of these dialogic poems resemble speaker indications used in dramatic manuscripts rather than theological dialogues. Their presence may suggest that medieval scribes regarded these poems as dramatic in nature.[8] The third category includes poems composed in *fornyrðislag*, such as *Þrymskviða*, which adopts a ballad-like narrative style. Although *Þrymskviða* includes direct speech, it is repeatedly framed by formulae such as 'Þá kvað …' ['Then spoke…'], foregrounding the act of narration. The experience would have been, in Gunnell's view, less immersive than the dialogic pieces but still performative, relying on gesture, and tonal shifts to animate the tale.[9]

The types of performance Gunnell and others envisage are, of course, unrecoverable, and as Clunies Ross has repeatedly cautioned, no direct record

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[6] Haugen, 'The Edda as Ritual', pp. 9–12.
[7] Simon Nygaard, 'Being Óðinn Bursson: The Creation of Social and Moral Obligation in Viking Age Warrior-Bands Through the Ritualized, Oral Performance of Poetry: The Case of Grímnismál', in *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Jakub Morawiec, Aleksandra Jochymek, and Grzegorz Bartusik (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), pp. 51–74.
[8] For the full argument, see Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, pp. 282–319.
[9] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*. See also Gunnell, 'Eddic Performance and the Origins of Drama', in *Performance and Norse Poetry*, 2016, pp. 92–113.

survives of mythological poems being performed in the Viking Age.[10] Yet, given the abundant evidence for the performance of other pre-modern Germanic poetry, it would be remarkable if Old Norse mythological verse were exempt. *Beowulf* refers to the *scop* performing narrative songs before an audience (ll. 867–74),[11] and skaldic poets are well attested delivering praise poetry at Scandinavian courts.[12] Additionally, we have what Lars Lönnroth identifies as the 'double scene' of performance embedded in several *Íslendingasögur*, where recitations appear within the narrative itself. [13] Gunnell concludes:

> There would appear to be little doubt that the dialogic poems in *ljóðaháttr* must have been presented in a dramatic fashion somewhere in western Scandinavia as late as the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. The probability is that these presentations were not carried out by a solo performer, but by at least two people working together.[14]

Beyond these theoretical reconstructions, the recurrence of recognisably dramatic situations across the myths suggests that any performance would have been structured around recognisable dramatic dynamics. Schechner identifies jeopardy and risk, tension and conflict, confrontation and contest, and the temporary disruption of hierarchy followed by resolution as among the fundamental

[10] For example, see Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), p. 102.
[11] Tom Shippey (trans.), and Leonard Neidorf (ed.), *Beowulf: Translation and Commentary* (London: Uppsala Books, 2023).
[12] Roberta Frank, 'Skaldic Poetry', in *Old Norse–Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 157–96.
[13] See for example, Lars Lönnroth, 'The Double Scene of Arrow-Oddr's Drinking Contest', in *The Academy of Odin: Selected Papers on Old Norse Literature* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2011), pp. 243–60.
[14] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, pp. 351–52.

components of drama.[15] These elements are strongly present in a number of mythological poems – including *Lokasenna*, *Þrymskviða*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Alvíssmál*, *Hymiskviða*, and *Hárbarðsljóð* – as well as in Snorri's account of Þórr's journey to Útgarða-Loki, among other stories. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, Óðinn's wisdom contest with the giant Vafþrúðnir is explicitly high-stakes: the loser must forfeit his life. In *Þrymskviða*, both the stability of Ásgarðr and Þórr's personal honour are imperilled until the hammer is recovered, as Loki warns (st. 18). The tension of *Alvíssmál* hinges on the pressure of time, as Þórr keeps the dwarf talking until dawn to ensure his destruction. *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna* dramatise verbal duels in which gods and heroes are publicly humiliated, while the Útgarða-Loki episode subjects Þórr to a series of illusory tests that challenge his status.

Interestingly, each of these stories stages the temporary collapse of order through conflict, mockery, or deception, followed by a restoration of equilibrium – a pattern that mirrors the rhythm of dramatic tension and release. The clearest instance of this kind of subversion is perhaps *Þrymskviða*, where the theft of the hammer provokes a crisis that culminates in Þórr's cross-dressing disguise and a violent resolution. Likewise, in *Alvíssmál* a dwarf claims Þórr's daughter as his bride; a ferryman gets the better of Þórr in *Hárbarðsljóð*; Óðinn himself faces possible death in *Vafþrúðnismál*; the gods of Ásgarðr are shamed by Loki's invective in *Lokasenna*; Þórr must cower before the giant Hymir at the outset of *Hymiskviða* (st. 9), while in a separate episode he is trapped beneath the giant stone leg in Snorri's account of the run-in with Hrungnir (*Skáldsk.*,17). As a general rule, order is ultimately restored, apart from *Hárbarðsljóð*, which closes ambiguously, with Þórr trudging around the

[15] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 30–33.

sound in defeat, a moment that may serve as a deliberate cliff-hanger leading into *Lokasenna* (see Coda below).

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque offers a productive lens through which to view these poems and stories. For Bakhtin, carnival is a socially licensed moment of temporary misrule, in which hierarchies are suspended, roles reversed, and 'grotesque realism' becomes a vehicle for laughter that simultaneously degrades and renews.[16] Its power lies in what he calls ambivalent laughter: mocking, yet ultimately stabilising. This type of ritualised inversion may offer a way of understanding several Eddic scenes which show the strong made ridiculous, the wise rendered vulnerable, and the divine subject to the same bodily and social pressures as the human. It is true that reconstructing the emotional responses of medieval audiences carries a clear methodological risk. Any attempt to infer the atmosphere of performance – or the feelings elicited by humour – will always feel like a backward projection.[17] Nevertheless, when similar structures recur across multiple poems, the pattern itself becomes highly suggestive. Several of the comic episodes from the *Eddas* discussed in Chapter Two could be seen as operating within this carnivalesque mode. In *Lokasenna*, Loki punctures the dignity of the gods, exposing sexual scandal and shame, failures of honour, and breaches of decorum. *Þrymskviða* presents Þórr as a god who clearly feels threatened by the prospect of sexual misrecognition. In the Útgarða-Loki episode, Þórr's physical prowess is mocked through illusions that turn trials seemingly attuned to his greatest attributes into publicly enacted failures. In

[16] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 8–10.
[17] Hans-Jürgen Diller offers a useful note of caution against this kind of projection: 'To discover such occasions we must interpret the dramatic texts themselves, and there we are always in danger of believing that our ancestors had the same prejudices as we.' Hans-Jürgen Diller, 'Laughter in Medieval English Drama: A Critique of Modernizing and Historical Analyses', *Comparative Drama*, 36.1/2 (2002), pp. 1–19 (p. 2).

each case, however, the ritual is concluded by restoration, as Loki is forced to leave, Þórr recovers his hammer, and Útgarða-Loki reveals that it was illusion that made Þórr appear so ineffectual.

As we have seen, it appears that creatives at Marvel had similar ideas. In *Thor*, Laufey uses feminising ridicule to diminish the young god's pride; in *Thor: Love and Thunder*, Waititi restages a similar comic ordeal when Zeus theatrically strips Thor naked before the assembled gods. As in the Eddic poems, this latter scene restores rather than destroys order. Thor's unflinching composure turns the laughter back on Zeus. The modern scene thus revives the idea that through mockery, the hero's dignity is tested but ultimately reaffirmed.

To gauge whether this type of humour would have resonated in a pre-Christian context in Scandinavia, it is worth pausing to consider a saga tradition that shows evidence of a tradition of public, and even performative shaming.[18] In *Njals saga*, for example, Hrútur Herjólfsson becomes the target of mockery for impotence. Later, in a striking 'double scene' of the kind identified by Lindow, the mockery is publicly compounded in dramatic terms as two boys re-enact his humiliation before a watching crowd.[19] Composed in the thirteenth century but describing events occuring between 960 and 1020, the episode offers a vivid glimpse of how sexual ridicule could function as a type of communal performance. Surviving legal sources strengthen this cultural picture. Viking-Age and medieval Icelandic law codes classify accusations of *nið* – verbal shaming, especially imputations of sexual passivity or effeminacy in males – as serious offences. As noted above, to call a man

[18] Although the sagas are literary compositions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, many would have had longer histories as oral narratives, and could be expected to retain social codes. For a discussion of social memory, see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 25.
[19] Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls Saga*, p. 10.

argr was to attack his honour in a serious way. The very fact that such insults required legal prohibition suggests their prevalence in social life.[20] This evidence suggests that public mockery of male sexual status was a recognised feature of Old Norse society. And as David Clark demonstrates, homophobic insult and gendered taunting function as ritualised, often performatively humorous, exchanges within the *Poetic Edda's* heroic poems.[21] We can thus be somewhat confident in saying that the humour of *Þrymskviða* and *Lokasenna* and other poems would have had the potential to resonate strongly with Viking-Age audiences accustomed to such exchanges. This makes it especially interesting that a tonal pattern resurfaces in the MCU's modern dramatisations. Branagh's and Waititi's scenes of sexually-charged humiliation unconsciously revive a style that was very likely a more important part of the myths than most modern adaptations allow.

Implications of the motif's re-emergence

The return of this type of humour in modern performance is a reminder to look again at the dramatic appeal of similar moments in the Eddic poems themselves. If the myths were performed, then humour – and perhaps especially public, shaming humour – would have been shaped by the dynamics of communal performance rather than (just) literary convention. A particularly revealing case comes in *Hárbarðsljóð*. Carol J. Clover reads the poem as a satire on the *senna* form: Þórr follows the conventions mechanically, while Hárbarðr, identified by most critics with Óðinn, improvises and outmanoeuvres him, exposing the thunder-god's lack of verbal

[20] For a full account, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. by John Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).
[21] David Clark, 'Heroic Homosociality and Homophobia in the Helgi Poems', in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 11–27.

sophistication.[22] In Clover's reading, the poem's comedy rests on readers being able to see that while Hárbarðr is a master of the genre, able to subvert the form at will, Þórr can only follow the conventions slavishly. When required to improvise, he flails around, unable to keep up. Clover's analysis offers an illuminating critique of the poem as text, but if we shift the frame from literary to performed, a different reading becomes possible, where the humour may not depend on an audience's awareness of genre conventions at all. In a live setting, the appeal could lie more directly in seeing Þórr made ridiculous – heckled, baited, and insulted before a laughing crowd. In that context, the poem's force would rest less on a literary appreciation of genre than on the raw pleasure of watching a heroic figure teased and lampooned. Recent criticism has found this line of reasoning productive. In 2025, Frog suggested that *Hárbarðsljóð* may have been the record of a speech-exchange between two performers, and argues that stanza 26 contains an insult charged with *ergi*. Specifically, he suggests that Hárbarðr's line "þér var í hanzka troðit" ["you were stuffed in a glove"][23] may, in performance, have been accompanied by a 'fisting' gesture – a cue that would transform a verbal slight into overt sexualised mockery.[24] This would certainly fit with the tone and style of the performance-oriented translation of *Hárbarðsljóð* I have included in Appendix 4, suggesting how such humour might have played in a live setting.[25] Caroline R. Batten argues that the most illuminating lens for reading the comic force of *Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða* is

[22] Carol J. Clover, 'Hárbarðsljóð as Generic Farce', *Scandinavian Studies*, 51.2 (1979), 124–45.
[23] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 69.
[24] Frog, 'The Performance of Hárbarðsljóð – but Isn't That Your Line?', in Ingunn Ásdísardóttir and others (eds), *Good Thoughts on Folklore and Mythology: Festschrift in Honour of Terry Gunnell*, vol. 2 (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2025), pp. 275–87. I encountered this paper in the final weeks before submitting this thesis and was encouraged to see Frog conclude that the poem can be read as a dramatic performance including jokes of what we might now call questionable taste.
[25] I have included my own translation of the poem in Appendix 4 as a test of this concept. I have not noted lines which could have been accompanied by gestures of the kind envisioned by Frog, but it is certainly possible to imagine their use in places, particularly where sexual insults seem to be implied.

precisely this carnivalesque mode – sanctioned, regenerative degradation that turns fear into laughter. In her reading, both poems stage licensed playfulness with the sacred, bringing divine bodies down to the level of food, sex, and social embarrassment in ways that relieve cultural anxiety around gender, honour, and authority. The vocabulary of sexual shame anchors this process, serving both as a comic device and social safety valve, as the opportunities for transgression are, by the end of the poems, closed down.[26]

Seen from this perspective, it is not difficult to find specific Eddic scenes that could make a kind of theatrical sense. In *Lokasenna*, for instance, the abrupt entrance of Þórr after Loki's claim to have slept with Sif (st. 54) feels like deliberate stagecraft. If we imagine Þórr just out of the audience's sight, overhearing the insult, then Loki's panicked retreat makes sharp dramatic sense. The sequence – Sif's toast (st. 53), Loki's insinuation (st. 54), Beyla's cue about the quake (st. 55), and Þórr's fourfold 'Þegi þú' (sts. 57, 59, 61, 63) – reads like a tightly choreographed scene designed to trigger an escalating response. Gunnell's performative frame helps us imagine it: a goading Loki, an advancing Þórr, rising tension in the hall, and the release as the verbal balance of power abruptly shifts. The details of the MCU's revival of this same comic tension are telling. In *Thor*, Laufey's 'little princess' insult lands publicly, not privately – it is spoken to be overheard, to test Thor's poise before his peers. In *Love and Thunder*, Zeus's theatrical stripping of Thor before the assembled gods repeats a sequence of exposure, laughter, and the eventual restoration of Thor's authority, measured against a Zeus figure who is all played out. Both moments play as carnival: a performance of witnessed shame that creates

[26] Caroline R. Batten, '*Args aðal*: Queer Carnival and Divine Deviance in *Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia,* 19, 2023, pp. 9–40. Batten memorably concludes that while the poems provide limited space for queer deviance and subversive mockery, the gods 'emerge excrement-spattered but undamaged', p. 35.

temporary loss of status. Gunnell's reading of the *ljóðaháttr* dialogues – including *Lokasenna*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and *Skírnismál* – treats them as miniature dramas whose staging would have relied on entrances, exits, gesture, and audience reaction. Recently, Harriet Soper has shown how the echoing syntax of *Lokasenna*, particularly Thor's repetition of 'Þegi þú', functions like a rhythmic refrain[27] – one that a performer could build to a climax, reinforcing the impression of a tightly stage-managed scene. Read this way, *Lokasenna* may not be (just) a literary flyting but, in addition the record of a crafted piece of comic theatre.

Many of the best-known Eddic episodes would have lent themselves naturally to similar treatment, and may perhaps also have found their most natural expression in performance. The images of Þórr putting his feet through the bottom of Hymir's boat while wrestling the Miðgarð serpent, as told in *Gylfaginning*, or hiding behind a pillar as kettles are smashed in *Hymiskviða*, are inherently slapstick. So too are the escalating sight gags of *Þrymskviða*: Þórr in bridal veil, devouring oxen, salmon, and the women's cakes while polishing off gargantuan amounts of mead; Þrymr peering nervously across the table and jumping a hall's length as he lifts his bride-to-be's veil; and the final comic reversal as Þórr seizes the hammer and restores order by force. Likewise the test in *Hymiskviða* – where Þórr smashes the cup against Hymir's skull because "'hann er harðari… kálki hverjum"' ["'that's harder than any goblet"'] (st. 30)[28] – has the structure of a physical gag.

Other poems mine lower registers of bodily humour. *Hárbarðsljóð* (st. 26) gives us Loki's taunt towards Þórr that "'hvárki þú þá þorðir fyr hræzlu þinni hnjósa né físa svá at Fjalarr heyrði'" ["'you dared in your terror neither to sneeze nor fart in

[27] Harriet Soper, 'Echoing Retorts in *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna*', *Scandinavian Studies* 94.4 (2022), pp. 475–503.
[28] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 78.

case Fialar might hear'"].[29] *Lokasenna*, in which Loki raises the same incident (st. 60), is elsewhere filled with obscene and sexual insult: Freyja accused of incest (st. 32), Njǫrðr mocked for his mouth as a piss-pot, (st. 34), Sif shamed for adultery (st. 54). *Skírnismál* uses darker language still, as Skírnir's curse on Gerðr blends menace with a grotesque set of threats that might have been experienced as cruel comedy (sts. 26–36). Similarly, Clunies Ross interprets the humiliation of Þórr beneath Hrungnir's corpse, the giant's body lying 'atop his' with a whetstone lodged in his forehead, as an image of *ergi* and shame.[30] This seems entirely convincing – and in a hall performance this mixture of domination and discomfort might have generated laughter at the hero temporarily laid low. *Rígsþula* ['List of Rig'], often treated as a serious aetiology of class origins,[31] reads very differently if imagined as a hall performance: a series of coarse vignettes about conception, appearance, and social standing that might have provoked laughter rather than being taken seriously. Other poems offer clearer examples of comedy at the expense of decorum. *Hyndluljóð* stages a flyting between Freyja and the giantess Hyndla, studded with insinuations of promiscuity. Even ostensibly solemn episodes, when viewed through a performative lens, reveal the possibility for black humour. At Baldr's funeral (*Gylf.* 49), the giantess Hyrrokkin arrives on a wolf with vipers for reins, and the gods' clumsy efforts to launch the ship and Þórr's near-assault turn the rite into a spectacle of chaos. Þórr's kick that sends the dwarf Litr into the pyre is usually read as evidence of his temper, but it might equally have played as a cruel gag.

[29] Ibid, p. 69.
[30] Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Þórr's Honour', p. 73.
[31] Most notably Georges Dumézil in 'The Rígsþula and Indo-European Social Structure', trans. by John Lindow, in *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 118–25.

To modern, acculturated audiences, such material may seem jarring or objectionable.[32] Yet that tension is precisely what makes it revealing. In a society that put value in composure and restraint, the hall may have offered a sanctioned space for transgression. The re-emergence of this register in the MCU confirms that this mode of bad taste humour for public consumption still works. The films of Branagh and Waititi, in particular, rediscover the old rhythm of humiliation and restoration; and what can appear irreverent on the surface may be unexpectedly faithful to the myths.

Additional survivor motifs

These are not the only themes that re-emerge, surprisingly, in the MCU. As argued above, if the myths were delivered as drama of some kind, it is hard to imagine a Þórr who is consistently characterised as foolish sustaining audience allegiance over repeated tellings. Everyone understands that the laughs in *Þrymskviða* are the product of the most emphatically masculine figure in the pantheon, the *drengr* par excellence, being forced into bridalwear, but no one seriously questions if this is a sign that his sexuality is up for negotiation.[33] Likewise, moments where Þórr is verbally outmanoeuvred should not necessarily be read as proofs of mental deficiency. Instead, it may be that such jokes work precisely because his baseline competence is assumed. Read performatively, the tradition points less to Clover's 'mental midget' than to a situationally intelligent hero who may sometimes fail to pick up verbal cues, but whose temporary humiliations confirm, rather than diminish, his general standing – just as in the MCU.[34] This, I think, is expertly

[32] See Diller, 'Laughter in Medieval English Drama', p. 2.
[33] Interestingly, Larrington raises the question of why nobody *does* consider whether Þórr might enjoy experimenting with a more feminine identity. Larrington, *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think*, ch. 4.
[34] Clover, '*Hárbarðsljóð* as Generic Farce', p. 125.

captured in the Netflix series *Ragnarok*, created by Adam Price, where Magne, the modern-day incarnation of Thor, is portrayed as being dyslexic but far from unintelligent.[35] While he struggles with written language, he possesses a keen practical intelligence, and an instinct for action and justice. As the audience, we recognise that this is not a contradiction.

If we accept a persistently foolish hero could not anchor a hall performance – or a modern film franchise – this may alter how we read the poems themselves. Once the dramatic dimension is restored, we can read the apparent failures of certain poems and stories as devices that reveal his endurance and composure rather than his limits. Several episodes illustrate this pattern. In *Hymiskviða*, Þórr's use of the best bull for bait, his insistence on rowing far out to sea, and his attempt to cut the line are sometimes seen as rash, yet as staged drama the sequence reads as calculated escalation toward the goal of hooking the serpent. A similar pragmatic intelligence governs the *Geirröðr* episode. Stripped of his usual weapons, Þórr accepts Gríð's gifts – belt, gloves, and staff – and deploys them inside a hostile space. In *Alvíssmál*, he resolves the situation by talk, using procedural cunning to outwit the dwarf without bloodshed. *Þrymskviða* shows his strategic thinking – dispatching Loki on a reconnaissance mission – and an acceptance of temporary humiliation to secure victory and restore balance. The performance of the role within the MCU appears to have restored the kind of intelligence that audiences usually require of their heroes: not necessarily verbal wit, but judgment, composure, and the capacity to lead.

If the MCU prompts us to reappraise Þórr as something more than a blundering strongman, it should also remind us that Óðinn and Loki, too, resist the simplifications that have accumulated around them in popular versions at least.

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[35] 'New Boy', *Ragnarok*, season 1, episode 1, dir. Mogens Hagedorn (Netflix, 2020).

Scholars have never forgotten the menacing side of Óðinn, but popular retellings have tended to domesticate him into a benevolent patriarch. Tracing the long history of how the 'taming' of such a fearsome presence as Óðinn took place would be an interesting case study in how cultures handle patriarchal figures, or even founding fathers.[36] A similar process has been mirrored in the modern instinct to cast Loki as a mere trickster, despite Loki's function in the *Eddas* being far more nuanced than that label implies. As Wanner has observed, his cunning is inseparable from creation itself: he is the one who sets stories in motion, whose disruptions make new order possible. If nothing else, Marvel's take on these characters confirms interpretative possibilities that the long moralising tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had narrowed.

But if the finding of this thesis has been that elements of myth appear to endure through performance, then before turning to a conclusion, it is fitting to attempt a more detailed, practical exploration of what that may mean. Having traced the networks that connect the *Eddas* to the MCU, the final section aims to show, in a single case, how the MCU's dramatic traits can illuminate our ideas about how an Eddic poem may have been performed. The Coda that follows therefore shifts focus towards a structural device: the act of masking and unmasking, of playing with deception and revelation. Familiar to viewers of the MCU and readers of the comics, this device has no direct Eddic analogue, yet it may help us to see how ambiguity and doubling could once have been staged before a medieval audience.

[36] A great many of the early retellings referred to above, and listed fully in Appendix 5, claim that the Norse myths are relevant in Britain or the United States because the Vikings were regarded as ancestral figures. The idea of Óðinn as a kind of founding father is therefore not as far-fetched as it might first appear. See Ashurst, 'Eddic Myth, Victorian Values' for more on this argument.

Coda: Rethinking *Hárbarðsljóð*

This closing section proposes that the MCU's repeated use of masking and unmasking – its play with deception, doubling, and revelation – offers a route toward rethinking the Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð*, and in particular the identity of the ferryman *Hárbarðr*. The claim is not that Marvel engages with the poem, but that a device deeply rooted in performance can provide a fresh lens for understanding how ambiguity might have been enacted in a medieval space: through disguise, revelation, and the confounding of expectation. The MCU offers a vivid template for this kind of doubled performance. Loki's capacity for disguise is central to the films' storytelling. As we have seen, the 'Odin' who presides at the end of *Thor: The Dark World* is revealed to be Loki in disguise. *Thor: Ragnarok* restages the device as comic spectacle, with Thor unmasking Loki before a court watching a play about his own supposed death. Through layered inversions – Loki-as-Odin watching an actor-as-Loki – the MCU supplies a model of how compounded deception can function dramatically, how audiences can delight in being fooled, or in watching others fooled, before revelation restores order. With that device in mind, I ask whether *Hárbarðsljóð* might be read as a similar act of doubled impersonation, with Loki performing Óðinn performing Hárbarðr.

Loki's Marvelous disguise

The one interpretation present-day scholars can agree on when it comes to *Hárbarðsljóð* is that the character calling himself Hárbarðr [Greybeard] who engages in a 60-stanza verbal duel with Þórr over a nameless stretch of water must be Óðinn in trademark disguise. Such certainty about Hárbarðr's identity was not always the case, however. Friedrich Wilhelm Bergmann introduced his 1872 German edition of

the poem by saying, ‘Man merkt bald, dass die hinter dem angenommenen namen Graubart versteckte person keine andere als der boshafte *Loki* ist.’[1] [‘One soon sees that behind the assumed name Greybeard lies none other than the malicious Loki.’] This opinion was echoed by scholars including Guðbrandur Vigfússon, writing in the authoritative *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, and Viktor Rydberg in his 1889 study of the poem.[2] The reason for thinking Loki might be Hárbarðr is based in part on obvious similarities between two stanzas in *Hárbarðsljóð* (sts. 26, 48) and two in *Lokasenna* (sts. 60, 54). The latter poem features Loki engaging in a scathing, invective-laden character assassination of many of the assembled gods, before a final confrontation with Þórr. Scholars at least as far back as Rydberg have noted that in both sets of parallel stanzas the essential charge, made by Hárbarðr in *Hárbarðsljóð* and Loki in *Lokasenna*, is the same: that Þórr cowered in a glove in fear of the giant Fjalarr on his way to visiting Útgarða-Loki, and that Þórr’s wife Sif has been unfaithful. Indeed, in the first of the two examples, the exact same wording is used in both poems: ‘“Ok þóttiska þú þá Þórr vera’” (*Hárbarðsljóð* st. 26/*Lokasenna* st. 60) [‘“And you didn’t then seem like Þórr”’].[3]

Despite these echoes, opinion has shifted so decisively that present-day critics, editors, translators and retellers of the myths now tend to state that Hárbarðr = Óðinn as fact rather than theory. The reasoning (though hardly anyone bothers to make the case nowadays, such is the level of consensus) is based on two substantial pieces of evidence. The first is that Óðinn going in disguise is a familiar trope in Old

[1] Friedrich Wilhelm Bergmann, *Das Graubartslied (Harbardsliod): Loki’s Spottreden auf Thôr* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1872), p. 1.
[2] Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic–English Dictionary* (London: Macmillan, 1874), p. 774; W. P. Reaves (ed. and trans.), *Viktor Rydberg’s Investigations into Germanic Mythology II*: Hárbarðsljóð [online] (2010) <http://www.germanicmythology.com/ugm2/ugm2harbardsljod.pdf> [accessed 26 June 2025].
[3] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 69; 91. Larrington makes a slight change to the word order in her translations.

Norse-Icelandic literature. We see this on multiple occasions in the *Eddas* and in a number of sagas, as well as in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*. The second factor is that the name Hárbarðr is listed in st. 49 of *Grímnismál*, as one of the many names Óðinn uses. While this appears to constitute a watertight argument, it might nevertheless be worth considering if the explanation passes a basic sense check. All that really happens in *Hárbarðsljóð,* apart from the flyting itself, is that the Hárbarðr character refuses to ferry Þórr across the sound, and thus consigns him to a longer, more arduous journey back home (sts. 56–58); and yet, we know from multiple stories that the gods rely on Þórr as the ultimate line of protection against the forces of chaos.[4] So why, as Rydberg questioned long ago, would Óðinn wish to delay the return of his 'own trusted son and assistant in the maintenance of world order?'[5] It's a good question – but the goal of this section is not to rehearse old arguments for the Loki hypothesis, or to re-examine the reasoning of critics like Felix Niedner who rebutted them.[6] Instead, I wish to posit an alternative explanation inspired by a dramatic technique from the MCU: that *Hárbarðsljóð* employs a further layer of deception, whereby Loki is pretending to be Óðinn in a Hárbarðr disguise. Further, I suggest that this is a disguise he is banking on Þórr being able to decode. While this may sound far-fetched, it could account for at least three problematic elements of the poem. Firstly, it offers a way to resolve the contradiction of why Hárbarðr sometimes sounds like Loki but goes by a name known to have been used by Óðinn. Secondly, by considering the poem as a pivotal moment in Eddic eschatology, rather than as an isolated episode, it provides a psychological motive for Hárbarðr's obduracy, and

[4] Þórr's role as the gods' principal defence against the giants is repeatedly emphasised: see, for example, *Þrymskviða* sts. 17–18; *Hárbarðsljóð* sts. 23–24; *Hymiskviða* sts. 21–24.
[5] Reaves, (ed. and trans.) *Viktor Rydberg's Investigations* 2010.
[6] Felix Niedner, *Zur Liederedda* (Berlin: R. Gaertners Verlagsbuchhandlung, Hermann Heyfelder, 1896), pp. 10–17.

thus answers the question about why he would want to delay Þórr. Thirdly, it makes sense of Þórr's repeated use of the word 'sveinn' ['lad'] to describe his adversary, something usually explained away as irony or insult, given that the name of the character would suggest an appearance that is anything but youthful.[7] Additionally, this interpretation of the poem raises intriguing ideas about the way it may have been experienced in performance, with Hárbarðr's increasingly obvious attempts to convince Þórr of his Óðinnic identity likely to have been played for laughs, before the ultimate revelation that this was, in fact, Loki, providing a startling climax.

In order to make the case for this second level of deception, I will take some time to examine the information exchanges in the poem, including the implicatures contained in several of Hárbarðr's speeches, and gauge what Óðinn, and alternatively Loki, would stand to gain from them. I then examine the use Loki makes of similar information in *Lokasenna*, before looking in more detail at what I describe as two waves of 'self'-incriminating claims made by Hárbarðr. Fundamental to this argument is an assumption which I will briefly address before continuing: that the events of *Hárbarðsljóð* can reasonably be interpreted as taking place before those of *Lokasenna* in the chronology of the Norse myths.

Hárbarðsljóð's place in the narrative cycle

It has been well established that Snorri's *Edda* and the *Poetic Edda* provide a somewhat coherent, if far from consistent, cosmological narrative, tracing a path from cosmogony to eschatology. It would be impossible to argue that every story beat from Snorri and the Eddic poets could be accurately placed along this timeline but the point stands that in each of them, the myths are recounted with a partial,

[7] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 291; Pettit, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 254.

though still recognisable, narrative diachronicity rather than as a series of unconnected incidents.[8] Some of these connections make it possible to piece together quite separate incidents in sequence. We know, for instance, that the story about the builder of the stronghold of the gods that features a trans-species, trans-sexual Loki tempting the giant's horse away from its work, and later giving birth to the eight-legged Sleipnir, must take place before the death of Baldr – not because it is mentioned earlier in *Gylfaginning* but because we learn in the latter story that Baldr's brother Hermóðr rides Sleipnir down to Hel in an attempt to bring him back (*Gylf.,* 49). We cannot be as certain that the flyting in *Hárbarðsljóð* takes place before the events of *Lokasenna*, but there is a strong suggestion that *Lokasenna* comes closer to the end of the chronology. This is evident in the prose addendum to *Lokasenna*, which reveals that after the events of the poem, Loki disguises himself as a salmon and is captured and tortured by the *Æsir*. This sense of a quickening of the timeline is likewise present in the corresponding sections of *Vǫluspá*, which moves swiftly from references to Loki's capture (sts. 34, 37) to further portents signaling Ragnarǫk's approach (starting st. 40). For the purposes of my argument, it is anyway enough that *Lokasenna*'s narrative *could* take place after that of *Hárbarðsljóð*, and I am not aware of anything in the Eddic material to refute that idea.

Consider the motive

Apart from the identification of Hárbarðr with Óðinn, there appears to be little in the way of consensus about *Hárbarðsljóð,* except perhaps that it is problematic in various ways: from where exactly it turns from *senna* to *mannjafnaðr*, through the jumble of poetic metres and lines of prose employed, to the references made by the

[8] Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes,* p. 24.

speakers to incidents we otherwise know nothing about. In her influential essay, Carol J. Clover identifies a 'hypertypical' opening to the poem in terms of form and content, followed by a breakdown into 'radical formal disharmony' that is engineered by the Hárbarðr character.[9] For Clover, Hárbarðr's subversion is evident in his frequent refusal to utter the challenge format that is established by Þórr in st. 15 – '"Hvat vanntu þá meðan, Hárbarðr?"' ['"What were you doing meanwhile, Harbard?"'][10] – and in his deviation from the expected content of his boasts, which would, in Clover's analysis of the conventions of the genre, concentrate on an opposition between the 'hard' life of the adventurer and fighter, and the 'soft' life of the slack home-dweller who enjoys food, drink, conversation and sexual relationships.[11] For Clover, then, when Þórr is thrown off his game by this subversion, and forced into uncertain sounding responses, the joke is not just on the god, but a sign that the poem has become 'a parody on the tradition of the *senna-mannjafnadr* itself',[12] presumably because the conventions of the genre, and thus also their subversion, would have been legible to receiving audiences.

Responding directly to Clover's argument, Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos conduct a pragmatical analysis of the interactions in the poem and after comparing it to other examples of the *mannjafnaðr* in *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Heimskringla* and *Hálfssaga*, conclude that Þórr deftly fends off Hárbarðr's attacks in st. 6, responds well to Hárbarðr's first boast about his sexual conquests in st. 16, and continues to hold his own comfortably to the end, winning a share of the exchanges and only narrowly losing out overall.[13] Martin Arnold, taking up the debate after a gap of

[9] Clover, '*Hárbarðsljóð* as Generic Farce', pp. 124–26.
[10] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 67.
[11] Clover, '*Hárbarðsljóð* as Generic Farce', pp. 127–29.
[12] Ibid., p. 124.
[13] Bax and Padmos, 'Two Types of Verbal Dueling', pp. 155–60.

more than 30 years, suggests that the poem turns on the second half of st. 24, when Hárbarðr says, '"Óðinn á jarla þá er í val falla, en Þórr á þræla kyn"'. ['"Odin owns the nobles who fall in battle and Thor owns the race of thralls."'][14] For Arnold, the poem can be read in socio-mythic terms as a debate about the relative popularity of the pagan gods Þórr and Óðinn around the conversion period in Scandinavia.[15]

What the approaches of Clover and Arnold have in common is their finding of an authorial intention to provide comedic entertainment to audiences able to recognise the parody of the form (Clover) or savour the irony of Hárbarðr's claim that Óðinn receives the nobles who fall in battle, at a time when the relevance of the Óðinnic cult was fading (Arnold). Building on this shared view of the poem as a work shaped by audience awareness and comic play, it becomes useful to look more closely at the exchange itself and at the roles being performed within it. One of the questions we can ask in this context is whether Hárbarðr's behaviour and speech are consistent with the Óðinn we encounter elsewhere when he appears in disguise – and, if not, whether another motive might be in play.

As noted above, Óðinn taking on other identities is a recurrent theme in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and his use of disguise is almost invariably associated with one or more of his abiding interests. I would summarise these as: (1) the pursuit of knowledge, often connected with the mythical and magical; (2) the incitement of, or otherwise involvement in, violence among nobles and warriors, in order to ensure the best fighters are with him at *Ragnarǫk*; (3) acts of sexual conquest, often involving deception and aggression, including rape; and (4) intervention on behalf of those said to be his human descendants. Óðinn's use of disguise in connection with

[14] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 69.
[15] Martin Arnold, 'Hárbarðsljóð', *Saga-Book*, XXXVIII (2014), pp. 5–26 (pp. 20–24).

the pursuit of knowledge can be seen on multiple occasions in the Eddic sources. A typical example comes in *Vafþrúðnismál*, when Óðinn, this time going by the name of Gagnráðr, stakes his life on a test of knowledge with Vafþrúðnir. Here, his final question – about the words spoken by Óðinn in the ear of Baldr at his funeral pyre – is echoed in the *Gestumblindi* section of the thirteenth century saga *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks.*[16] There are many further examples one could cite. As noted above, in *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri recounts how Óðinn obtained the mead of poetry via a complicated quest involving both disguise and shapeshifting, which adds a sexual element when he takes on the form of a young man and seduces Gunnlǫð. Óðinn goes further in a story recounted by Saxo, disguising himself as a female physician called Vekka to rape the Ruthenian princess Rinda.[17] The final Óðinnic trait in our list is an ongoing interest in his descendants. There are several examples of him appearing in disguise for this purpose in *Vǫlsunga saga* alone, helping the likes of Sigmund, Sinfjǫtli, and Sigurð.[18]

Information exchange I: what's in it for Óðinn?

If Hárbarðr is indeed Óðinn in disguise, we might reasonably expect him to display a purpose connected with one of these traits. It is therefore worth looking carefully at the exchanges in the poem to see what the Hárbarðr character stands to gain from what he learns, and what information he offers in return. By stanza number, we could summarise what Hárbarðr is told or otherwise learns as: (1) He is called 'sveinn sveina' ['lad of lads'] by the character on the other side of the water, who (3) offers him a deal: leftovers from breakfast in return for ferrying him over; (5) this character

[16] *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, ed. G. Turville-Petre, introd. Christopher Tolkien (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, repr. 2014).
[17] Ellis Davidson and Fisher, *Saxo Grammaticus* vol. 1, p. 166–68.
[18] Jackson Crawford (trans.), *The Saga of the Volsungs; with The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2017), p. xi.

believes people would be greatly affected if they were to hear that his mother was dead; (9) the character's name is Þórr; (13) Þórr will respond to Hárbarðr's insults with violence if he gets over the water; (15) Þórr is proud of the way he fought Hrungnir; (19) Þórr takes credit for killing Þjazi and throwing his eyes into the sky; (21) Þórr is disapproving of Hárbarðr's treatment of Hlébarð; (23) Þórr says he has been in the east fighting giants, including women, to protect Miðgarðr; (25) Þórr believes Hárbarðr would divide dead warriors unequally if he had the chance; (27) Þórr gets upset when taunted about his run-in with the giant Fjalarr, calls him a pervert and says he'd attack him if he could get across; (29) again in the east, Þórr says he defended a river and had a successful run-in with Svárang's sons; (33) Þórr would have helped Hárbarðr hold down the linen-white lady if he'd been there and (35) says he would not have betrayed Hárbarðr; (37) Þórr says he battled berserk women in Hlesey (39) because they were like she-wolves, and were threatening his ship, and chasing Þjálfi; (41) Þórr believes Hárbarðr set out to bring him harm by joining the army that set out from here; (43) Þórr is upset with Hárbarðr's (possibly sexual) jibes, (45) thinks it's odd that Hárbarðr refers to refer to cairns in the way he does, and (47) makes a third clear threat of violence; (49) Þórr thinks Hárbarðr is gutless and a liar for claiming Sif is having an affair; (51) Þórr calls him a pervert and (53) invites him to bring the boat over; (55) Þórr doesn't know his way home, or (57) how long it will take to get there; (59) Þórr promises to exact revenge for Hárbarðr's refusal to offer him passage if he sees him again.

Correspondingly, what Hárbarðr tells Þórr can be summarised as: (2) he calls the character on the other side of the water (unnamed at this stage) 'karl karla' ['peasant's peasant']; (4) he says Þórr's mother is dead, news that is contradicted by something he says later in the poem; (6) he says Þórr looks like a vagabond; (8) he

says Hildólfr is the owner of the ferry, and has told him he shouldn't transport robbers or horse thieves, just people he knows well; (10) he says he is called Hárbarðr and seldom conceals it; (12) he is prepared to fight to defend his life against people like Þórr; (14) he says Þórr hasn't met anyone as tough as him since Hrungnir; (16) he says he was with Fjǫlvari for five years on Algrœn where they wreaked slaughter and had all the girls they wanted, (18) including, in the case of Hárbarðr, seven sisters; (20) he says he used love spells on the witches, took them from other men, and bewitched a giant called Hlébarð; (22) he believes in a philosophy something like 'every man for himself'; (24) he says he incited war in Vallandí, and believes Óðinn owns the nobles who fall in battle, while Þórr gets the thralls; (26) he knows the story of Þórr's meeting with the giant Fjalarr and taunts him about it, accusing him of cowardice; (30) he says he was also in the east, where he consorted with a linen-white lady; (32) he says he could have used Þórr's help to hold her down, and (34) would have trusted him to do it; (38) he says fighting women is shameful; (40) he says he joined an army setting out from here; (42) he offers a taunt of an apparently sexual nature; (44) he says he learned bad (perhaps sexual) words from ancient or dead men in the woods; (46) he says he thinks of burial stones as such; (48) he claims Sif has a lover at home; (50) he insists it's true and calls Þórr slow; (52) he says he didn't think a herdsman could so confound Þórr; (54) he tells Þórr to clear off and says he won't ferry him across; (56) he says when Þórr reaches Verland he'll be met by his mother; (58) he says it's a long, difficult way home for Þórr; (60) Þórr should go where the trolls will get him.

There is perhaps one piece of information learned here that could be of some use to Óðinn. Discovering that Þórr is taking credit not only for killing Þjazi, but also for throwing his eyes into the sky, could be of some advantage, as we know that in

another version of the story, told by Snorri, it is Óðinn who is reputed to have done this. '"Svá er sagt at Óðinn gerði þat til yfirbóta við hana at hann tók augu Þjaza ok kastaði upp á himin ok gerði af stjǫrnur tvær."'(*Skáldsk.*, G56) ['"It is said that Óðinn, as compensation for her, did this: he took Thiassi's eyes and threw them up into the sky and out of them made two stars."'][19] However, even this fragment of information may have been of even more use to Loki than Óðinn, as I will argue below. Otherwise, Hárbarðr learns that Þórr is disapproving of much of what he hears – apart from the reference to holding down the linen-white girl (see below) – is quick to take offence and threaten violence, that he has done a lot of fighting in the east, and that he is surprisingly unsure of the local geography. It is hard to see this being of much value to the Óðinn we know from the *Eddas* and elsewhere. There is no mythological knowledge imparted, nothing that will lead to violence between men, and the only connection with his descendants is the confrontation with his son.

Against this, it is important to acknowledge that any attempt to provide an alternative identification for Hárbarðr must find a way past the brick wall of Hárbarðr being a stated alias for Óðinn in *Grímnismál*. As it happens, there is one other explanation that could account for this apparent paradox, and it comes straight from the imagination of MCU filmmakers: the repeated device whereby Loki takes on the guise of Óðinn for his own advantage. As we have seen, this becomes an important plot point at the very end of *The Dark World* when we learn that Loki has faked his own death and now sits on Asgard's throne as Odin in disguise. It is taken up again at the start of *Ragnarok*, when Thor returns to Asgard, after battling the giant Surtur, and finds Odin watching a dramatisation of Loki's death – a retelling that paints Loki in a suspiciously heroic light. Thor, who by now has learned not to

[19] Faulkes, *Edda*, p. 61.

trust his brother, sees through Loki's subterfuge and forces him to give up the assumed identity before the main business of the film begins. This sequence is a reminder that the unmasking of characters can be a powerful moment of drama, even when it is played, as here, for laughs, with Thor noting that nothing can stop his hammer returning to his hand – not even Loki's face, which he has positioned directly in its flight path.[20] Could a similar masking-and-unmasking device have been used in staging *Hárbarðsljóð*?

Information exchange II: the *Lokasenna* connection

Let us look once more at the information exchange from the point of view of Hárbarðr and this time try to gauge the extent to which what he learns and what he chooses to impart correspond with what we know of Loki, and how he goes on to act during *Lokasenna*. Aside from the name of his opponent, and his need for a lift across the water, Hárbarðr doesn't learn much of any significance until he makes the first of a series of serious implicatures, apparently with the idea of provoking a reaction from Þórr. The first of these comes in st. 14, with Hárbarðr's pointed reference to Þórr's encounter with Hrungnir, a story told in full by Snorri (*Skáldsk.*, ch. 17). Loki is not mentioned by Snorri as being present during this episode, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that he would have heard something about it. He may thus have been aware that Þórr had been lucky to survive the encounter, and only escaped after his infant son was able to lift a stone leg to release him. If Hárbarðr/Loki was hoping to touch a nerve he is frustrated, however, as Þórr's reply in the following stanza comes with absolute confidence:

> 'Hins viltu nú geta

[20] *Thor: Ragnarok*, 00:13:08.

er vit Hrungnir deildum,

sá inn stórúðgi jǫtunn

er ór steini var hǫfuðit á;

þó lét ek hann falla

ok fyrir hníga.'

(*Hárbarðsljóð,* st. 15)

['"'This is what you're talking about: that Hrungnir and I fought – the great-spirited giant whose head was made of stone: and yet I brought him down and made him fall before me."']

[21]

This is apparently enough for Hárbarðr to see that there is not much for him to exploit here and he quickly drops the subject. It is interesting that while Loki does not mention the episode in *Lokasenna,* Þórr himself does, saying:

'Þegi þú, rǫg vættr!

Þér skal minn þrúðhamarr,

Mjǫllnir, mál fyrnema;

hendi inni hœgri

drep ek þik Hrungnis bana,

svá at þér brotnar beina hvat!'

(*Lokasenna,* st. 61)

['"'Be silent, perverse creature, my mighty hammer Miollnir shall deprive you of speech; with my right hand I'll strike you, with Hrungnir's killer, so that every one of your bones will break.'"']

[22]

[21] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 67.
[22] Ibid., p. 91.

Again, the implication seems to be that Thor is entirely confident in the way he acquitted himself in the Hrungnir incident.

Hárbarðr has another unsuccessful attempt at provocation in st. 38 when he responds to Þórr's boast of fighting 'Brúðir berserkja' ['Berserker brides'] in the previous stanza by accusing him of dishonour, saying: '"Klæki vanntu þá, Þórr, er þú á konum barðir!'" ['"You did a shameful thing then, Þórr, when you fought with women!"'] This is a strong claim but again, Þórr replies with a robust argument as to why it was necessary (st. 39) and Hárbarðr drops the subject. Again, it should be noted, Loki does not refer to this episode in *Lokasenna*. Hárbarðr has more success in getting a rise out of Þórr in the two stanzas that *are* echoed in *Lokasenna*, with his words in sts. 26 and 48 of *Hárbarðsljóð* (see above) going beyond implicature to become fully fledged face-threatening acts. It is no surprise then that in st. 27 Þórr responds to the first accusation – that he hid cowering in a glove – by accusing his opponent of being a pervert, which, with some slight variation, is his go-to insult in both *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna*, as Clover has noted.[23] Interestingly, he also says he would send Hárbarðr to hell if he could only get over the sound – another threat that is directly echoed in *Lokasenna* in st. 63. Þórr's reply to the claim that Sif has had an affair is more muted, despite the seriousness of the accusation. He says:

> 'Mælir þú at munns ráði,
> svá at mér skyldi verst þykkja,
> halr inn hugblauði,
> hygg ek at þú ljúgir.'
> (*Hárbarðsljóð,* st. 49)

[23] Clover, 'Hárbarðsljóð as Generic Farce', p. 135.

['"'You say just what comes into your mouth, so that it seems the worst to me, coward, I think you're lying.'"'][24]

Only in his next speech does he repeat the 'pervert' insult but once again it is clear that Hárbarðr has touched a nerve, and Loki does go on to use a similar line of attack in *Lokasenna*, although this time claiming that he himself has slept with Sif (st. 54).

The other occasion when information is given that Loki will go on to use in *Lokasenna* is in st. 19, although this does not emerge from any attempt at provocation. Here, as already noted, Þórr boasts about killing the giant Þjazi before throwing his eyes into the heavens. Hárbarðr does not react at all to this in the poem itself, but we may note that this information is perhaps even more useful to Loki than it might have been to Óðinn, as it could be seen to have provided him with a line of attack he uses in *Lokasenna* (st. 50). This comes during his taunting of Skaði, when he claims it was he, Loki, who was 'fyrstr ok øfstr' ['first and last'] at the killing of Þjazi, her father. Could it be that Loki is emboldened to make this boast in front of Óðinn by the revelation in *Hárbarðsljóð* that it was actually Þórr (who is not present at the *Lokasenna* feast at this point) who threw the eyes into the sky? Perhaps there is a kind of knowing taunt towards Óðinn in Loki making this boast. 'Go on, Óðinn – contradict me if you dare!' would be the implied challenge. 'We both know you didn't do it either!'

Information exchange III: waves of frustration

I have tried to make a case that the exchange of information in the poem would have been of more use to Loki than to Óðinn – but what of the second level of deception,

[24] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 72.

and the idea that Loki might want Þórr to see through his disguise? One clue to this being Hárbarðr's goal is in the curious content of the claims Hárbarðr makes about himself. Clover sees Hárbarðr's repeated recourse to 'soft' boasts as parodying the flyting form itself, but an alternative motive for the succession of Óðinnic vices reeled off by Hárbarðr would be that Loki – using a name known to be one of Óðinn's aliases – is presenting a character assassination by (alleged) autobiography. Unfair dealings? Check! Fomenting violence? Check! Sexual violence? Check! Use of *seiðr*? Check! These would make any reasonable list of Óðinn's character traits – summed up memorably by R. I. Page as 'low cunning and self-seeking, his ability to change his shape, his propensity for disguises and false names, his recourse to treachery'.[25] But it is not just what Hárbarðr says about himself, it is when and how he says it that provides what may be seen as a dead giveaway.

After the opening *senna* section, I would describe the *mannjafnaðr* as taking the form of two waves of revelations, featuring rising levels of frustration on the part of Hárbarðr that finally boil over into personal insult. In each of the two waves, the intensity of the situation rises every time Þórr shows he still hasn't grasped who his adversary is supposed to be. This he does by calling Hárbarðr by name, which he does five times using the challenge formula, 'Hvat vanntu meðan, Hárbarðr?' (sts. 15, 19, 23, 29, 39) and twice as part of an insult containing the sexually loaded term 'ragi' ['pervert'] (sts. 27, 51). Each time he does so, Hárbarðr reacts by raising the stakes, adding another claim that makes it even more obvious that he is supposed to be Óðinn. It is worth considering them one by one.

[25] R. I. Page, *Norse Myths* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 39.

The first time Þórr calls Hárbarðr by name occurs in st. 15, and it leads to a dramatic ratcheting up of the seriousness of the subject matter from Hárbarðr, who up until now has been lobbing over harmless jibes. Hárbarðr says here:

> ‘Var ek með Fjǫlvari
> fimm vetr alla,
> í ey þeiri
> er Algrœn heitir;
> vega vér þar knáttum
> ok val fella,
> margs at freista,
> mans at kosta.’
> (*Hárbarðsljoð*, st. 16)
> [‘“I was with Fiolvar five winters long on that island called All-green; we fought there and wreaked slaughter, we tried out many things, had our choice of girls.’”][26]

Clover sees Þórr’s ‘lame’ response of, ‘“Hversu snúnuðu yðr konur yðrar?”’ [‘“How did it turn out with your women?”’][27] as a consequence of Hárbarðr’s decision not to return the challenge formula, thus exposing his opponent’s total reliance on the form.[28] An alternative explanation is that Þórr is shocked at the sudden change of tone from a figure who, just a few stanzas earlier, was making a tame joke about his trousers (st. 6), has twice been described as looking like a boy (sts. 1, 13), and is now claiming to have spent half a decade engaged in gruesome violence and sex. Hárbarðr responds in st. 18 by doubling down, elaborating on these sexual

[26] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 67.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Clover, ‘Hárbarðsljóð as Generic Farce’, p. 131.

conquests. Still Þórr does not catch on, and he refers to Hárbarðr again by name in the next stanza, making his second use of the standard formula. Hárbarðr responds by making what could be an even more obvious attempt to underline that he is really Óðinn, adding that he used magic both to seduce and to betray. He says:

> ‘Miklar manvélar
> ek hafða við myrkriður,
> þá er ek vélta þær frá verum;
> harðan jǫtun
> ek hugða Hlébarð vera,
> gaf hann mér gambantein,
> en ek vélta hann ór viti!’
> (*Hárbarðsljoð*, st. 20)
> [‘“Mighty love-spells I used on the witches, those whom I seduced from their men; a tough giant I think Hlebard was, he gave me a magic twig, and I bewitched him out of his wits.’”][29]

What is striking here is that Hárbarðr not only admits to practising *seiðr* but boasts of it, presenting sexual sorcery and deceit as a triumph. This is something the Óðinnic voice never does elsewhere: when *seiðr* is associated with Óðinn in other texts, it is either reported by others or treated as shameful and effeminate. To brag of such acts would be wholly out of keeping with his usual self-presentation. The boast therefore reads less as an Óðinnic confession than as a Loki-like provocation.

By now we have sex and violence, magic, and unfair dealings, but Þórr shows he still doesn’t get it, referring to Hárbarðr by name again in st. 23. This

[29] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 68.

causes Hárbarðr to go even further and make a statement that could hardly sound more Óðinnic, saying:

> ‘Var ek á Vallandi
> ok vígum fylgðak,
> atta ek jǫfrum,
> en aldri sættak;
> Óðinn á jarla
> þá er í val falla,
> en Þórr á þræla kyn!’
> (*Hárbarðsljoð*, st. 24)
> [‘“I was in Valland, and I followed the war, I incited the princes, never reconciled them; Odin owns the nobles who fall in battle and Thor owns the race of thralls.”’][30]

Nevertheless, Þórr demonstrates that he still thinks he’s talking to a man by the name of Hárbarðr by replying,

> ‘Ójafnt skipta
> er þú myndir með Ásum liði,
> ef þú ættir vilgi mikils vald.’
> (*Hárbarðsljoð*, st. 25)
> [‘“Unequally you’d share out warriors among the Æsir, if you had as much power as you’d like.”’][31]

[30] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 69.
[31] Ibid.

The important thing to note here, it seems to me, is the use of the conditional *myndir* [‘would’], indicating he still hasn’t understood that it is (supposed to be) Óðinn right in front of him.

At this point, the Hárbarðr character’s frustration spurs him into pure insult. As noted above, it is here in st. 26, that he accuses Þórr of cowering in the glove in ‘hræzlu ok hugbleyði’ [‘fear and cowardice’]. This is a shattering accusation to make about Þórr and it is no surprise that he responds with the *ragi* insult also noted above, and an added threat of physical violence. Hárbarðr, perhaps concerned that he has pushed Þórr too hard, immediately attempts to mollify him by saying, “‘Hvat skyldir þú um sund seilask, er sakir ro alls øngar?’” [“‘Why should you stretch over the water, since we have no dispute?”’][32] and rebooting the conversation with his re-use of the challenge formula. The two antagonists are now becalmed, but the second wave soon starts up, after Þórr cheerfully recounts his run-in with the sons of Svárang, to be followed by his standard challenge. Hárbarðr restarts what looks increasingly like a campaign to malign Óðinn in st. 30 by telling the tale of his eastern assignation with the linen-white lady and their secret meeting. This starts out tamely enough, but it sets up the extraordinary run of stanzas, 32–34, in which Hárbarðr makes it clear that he could have used Þórr’s help in holding down the girl, and Þórr responds by saying he would surely have obliged. Thus, we have rape added to the charge sheet, to be followed by a claim of something like treason. This comes when Þórr next refers to Hárbarðr by name in st. 39, and Hárbarðr responds by implying that he actually fought against Þórr, saying,

> ‘Ek vark í hernum
> er hingat gørðisk

[32] Ibid.

gnæfa gunnfana,

geir at rjóða!'

(*Hárbarðsljoð*, st. 40)

['"I was in the army, which set out here to raise battle-banners and to redden the spear."'][33]

There then follows an interlude during which Þórr gets increasingly irate, culminating in another threat of violence in st. 47, before Hárbarðr makes the second of his two face-threatening acts, with his comment in st. 48 that Sif has a lover at home. By now, it seems, Hárbarðr has given up trying to convince Þórr that he is Óðinn in disguise, and resorts instead to another insult, saying, "'Ása-Þórs hugða ek aldregi mundu glepja féhirði farar!'" ['"I never thought Asa-Thor would let a herdsman hold up his journeys."'][34] The flyting form has irretrievably broken down.

The question of why Loki would attempt to malign Óðinn in this way has at least one plausible answer – if it is safe to assume that the events of *Hárbarðsljoð* take place shortly before *Lokasenna*, and close to the final confrontation that is Ragnarǫk. If Loki was plotting to turn Þórr against Óðinn, it would be hard to think of a better way than reeling off this 'greatest hits' list of vices, while adding in a pointless barb about his mother (st. 4), as well as the two egregious insults that are echoed in *Lokasenna*. Þórr, the friend of humanity and slayer of giants who has bad experiences of both magic and the use of disguise on his trip to the court of Útgarða-Loki, would have had every reason to think badly of Óðinn based on the claims Hárbarðr makes – and the clues were all there, right down to the use of one of his known aliases. And it is, if nothing else, a kind of dry run of *Lokasenna*, when he

[33] Ibid, p. 71.
[34] Ibid. p. 72.

makes similar claims to Óðinn's face, specifically calling out his unfair treatment of men on the battlefield (st. 22), and the use of magic and disguise (st. 24). In *Lokasenna*, he cannot accuse Óðinn of sleeping with Sif, of course, because Sif herself is present. Instead, he makes the claim that he himself has slept with her – a jibe that might have been his fatal mistake, as it perfectly coincides with Þórr's return from the east. Þórr's parting words in *Hárbarðsljoð* are a final threat:

> 'Skammt mun nú mál okkat vera,
> alls þú mér skœtingu einni svarar;
> launa mun ek þér farsynjun,
> ef vit finnumk í sinn annat'
> (*Hárbarðsljoð*, st. 59)
> ['"Short will our conversation be now, since you answer me only with jeers.
> I'll reward you for refusing to ferry me, if we meet another time."']35

Indeed he will – just as soon as he confronts Loki following the events of *Lokasenna,* and goes on to capture and consign him to a brutal torture.

A final dramatic flourish?

In the scenario I have outlined above, the humour might have played out in different ways. It is possible that if an audience knew, or suspected, that a double deception was taking place, then watching Loki dropping a series of clues, and getting more and more frustrated at Þórr's inability to pick up on them, would have been funny to see, or hear, unfold. I suspect, however, that even without being in possession of this knowledge, there would have been plenty for the audience to enjoy in seeing Hárbarðr playing up to his Óðinnic identity with such relish. That Þórr just can't

35 Ibid. p. 73.

work out that Hárbarðr is supposed to be Óðinn might have given people plenty to laugh about too. It is just possible, however, that the last laugh may have been on the audience rather than Þórr, if they were a little too sure of their identification.

The *Thor* movies get two bites at the 'reveal' of Loki's true identity. As we have seen, the second time it is used, in *Thor: Ragnarok*, the moment is played for laughs. In terms of the level of surprise it generates, however, it is surpassed by the reveal that comes at the end of the previous film in the series, *The Dark World*. 'Thank you!' says a departing Thor to the man he believes to be his father, after 'Odin' has agreed to his request to refuse the throne. As Thor's footsteps echo, Loki's true identity is revealed to the audience, as he says simply, 'No… thank *you*!'[36] The moment is quietly chilling, as a character who in previous films has tried to kill Thor, inflict genocide on the Frost Giants and enslave the human race is allowed to emerge as the winner. It is purely speculative given the absence of any record of performance, but we can at least imagine something similar happening during even a modestly dramatised performance of *Hárbarðsljóð*. As Gunnell has written, any performance of the poem would have required some element of staging, perhaps including a disguise for the Hárbarðr character and even a beggarly costume for Þórr.[37] Given that all drama requires some kind of shared cultural understanding to function,[38] it is reasonable to suppose that a character dressed to look old, and wearing a hat positioned to make it impossible to see if he had one eye or two, would lull an audience into an assumption that they were seeing Óðinn. Whether the name Hárbarðr was known to them or not, this sense of familiarity would surely have been augmented with his references to war, to magic, to sex, to rape, to deception, to

[36] *Thor: The Dark World*, 01:41:28.
[37] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, p. 274.
[38] Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, pp. 225–250.

death. So imagine how powerful it would have been, at the end of a performance, with Þórr trudging off on his long walk home, for Hárbarðr to take off his hat, to give a clear view of his face for the first time, complete with two eyes, and perhaps some other indication, for example by a youthful, handsome countenance, yet one with scarred lips, that this was in fact Loki.

If it *was* Loki under such a costume all along, it could also explain the troublesome opening lines of the poem, when Þórr shouts across the water, '"Hverr er sá sveinn sveina/ er stendr fyr sundit handan?"' ['"Who is that lad of lads who stands on that side of the inlet?"'].[39] He repeats the word 'sveinn', with variation, in st. 13, calling Hárbarðr 'kǫgursveini' ['babe in arms'].[40] As noted above, one common explanation for this is that Þórr is being ironic, calling out to a character who would, presumably, be sporting the grey beard expected of his name. But what if Loki really did look, from a distance, more like a lad than someone with the stature of the father of the gods? There is no reference in the *Eddas* to Loki as looking boyish – Snorri calls him 'fríðr ok fagr' ['beautiful and fair'] (*Gylf.,* 33) which is not quite the same – but we do know that on other occasions when he is in disguise, he is associated with figures that are slight. The prose section at the end of *Lokasenna* notes that he hides in a waterfall in *laxlíki* ['the shape of a salmon'], a detail that is repeated by Snorri (*Gylf.,* 50). In *Þrymskviða*, he dons the bird costume of Freyja to fly to Jǫtunheimar, and elsewhere he changes into a flea, a fly and a seal, as well as disguising himself as a woman both in *Þrymskviða* and when he refuses to weep for Baldr (*Gylf.,* 49). Even in the master builder tale referred to above, when he transforms into a horse, we may note that the form he takes is of a mare. This is of

[39] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 65.
[40] Ibid. p. 67.

course no more than speculation, but could it be that when Loki disguises his appearance the convention is that he remains somewhat slight? In a performed version of the poem, he may have been bearded and costumed, but physically too small to pull off a convincingly Óðinnic look. That, presumably, would have made staging a performance of the poem easier, particularly if the same reciter/actor was playing the character in both *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna*.

Challenging assumptions

My speculation about the true identity of *Hárbarðr* depends on taking several leaps of faith: accepting that the events of *Hárbarðsljóð* take place in a narrative timeline before those of *Lokasenna*; that the gods, in general, act in ways that are logical, strategic and coherent within this cycle, and that Loki would attempt a double deception for a motive that seems in keeping with his conniving reputation but is nevertheless purely speculative; that the poems would have been performed before audiences in some way, and that those audiences would have responded to dramatic cues in similar ways to audiences now. But even if these are all accepted, it would be impossible to 'prove' that Hárbarðr was really Loki – a Loki determined that Þórr should see through his disguise, and hopeful, perhaps, that his reeling off of Óðinnic vices would turn the strongest of the *Æsir* against his own father. However, proving a theory was not my intent. Instead, it was to show that the MCU's use of the Norse myths as part of a sequence of filmed drama that has manifestly resonated with audiences may retrospectively help to inform our view of older versions of the myths that would also have been performed, and interrogate even some well-established assumptions. Any avid watcher of the MCU, or fan of the comic books, will tell you that with Marvel, you can never be completely sure of anyone's true identity. If nothing else, this can serve as a reminder that for audiences, an element of doubt

about what's going on can add to the enjoyment, even if literary scholars would like the debate settled once and for all.

Conclusion: The flavour of performance

The research presented in this thesis arose from a simple observation: more of the Eddic myths seemed to surface in the MCU than has generally been acknowledged in existing scholarship. These echoes lay mostly beneath the surface, to be sure, but they appeared in the world-building, in character development, and in several key thematic concerns. This prompted further questions: how could such motifs have survived without clear lines of inheritance or any known engagement with the Eddic sources, and what might their persistence reveal? To explore these questions, the research adopted a diagnostic, ANT-informed method to map possible pathways of transmission into the MCU across three interconnected fields: mythic world-building; the evolving characterisations of Óðinn, Þórr, and Loki; and the recurrence of plot fragments and thematic motifs recalling their Eddic predecessors. Where those pathways suggested influence from earlier texts or from broader cultural understandings of Norse myth, the gods, and the Viking Age, the analysis noted them. Where they remained inconclusive, the enquiry turned to creative decisions taken within the Hollywood film industry and to the structural constraints of making mass-market films and popular television in general, and the needs of the vast intertextual universe that is the MCU in particular.

This widening of the frame was necessary, as the *Thor* strand within the MCU was clearly not created with any notion of fidelity to the medieval myths, but instead followed a creative lineage beginning with Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, whose approach to adaptation was idiosyncratic in the extreme. As established in the introduction, Lee knew almost nothing of the myths; Kirby cared for the characters and the mythic atmosphere but had little interest in inherited plots; while both

understood their task to be the creation of superhero stories rather than the retelling of the *Eddas*. The films inherit this stance, along with other features of the Marvel Comics world, even as they absorb multiple additional influences and respond to powerful imperatives from Hollywood. The film makers drew on comic books, research into the stories and the Viking Age in general, and their own storytelling expertise, while absorbing influences from the accreting imaginaries of the Norse gods and the Viking world, and all while having to make the characters fit into the overarching MCU narrative. Interestingly, the analysis demonstrates not only the presence of survivor motifs but also that these elements tend to reappear precisely when the films explore their key thematic questions, including identity, reputation, revenge, sacrifice, and leadership.

Across the films, Þórr is humbled, exiled, and forced to earn – and re-earn – the right to lead. He fails, learns, fails again, and slowly grows. He is haunted by visions of Ragnarǫk, seeks wisdom while being suspended, loses an eye, bows to the inevitability of fate, returns to the fight, and is humbled yet again. He experiences profound loss, guilt, and grief, but becomes a capable hero, if not the leader his people need. That mantle passes instead to first Valkyrie, and then onto the less likely figure of Loki, whose affinity with creation – and specifically with narrative creation – sees him slough off the familiar roles of trickster and villain, and assume instead the mantle of God of Stories, the force that keeps Marvel's mythic engine running. Óðinn, meanwhile, begins as a faded presence and diminishes further, until an unexpected moment in *Thor: Ragnarok* reveals the menace previously concealed beneath the golden facade.

Threaded through all of this is humour: sometimes broad, sometimes cruel, sometimes openly sexual. Like Snorri and the Eddic poets, the MCU delights in

bringing its euhemerised gods down to earth. The laughter that must once have surrounded Þórr's cross-dressing in *Þrymskviða* resurfaces in his cinematic humiliations – awkwardness on Earth, mockery by his fellow Avengers, Loki's acid tongue and trickery, public embarrassment, and naked exposure on two occasions. These are jokes about status and tests of composure, often dependent upon the clash between Thor's mythic dignity and the modern world, but they remind us that Norse myth, in the Eddic versions we have access to, was rarely solemn. These examples, and others, show that the MCU, seemingly through its pursuit of entertainment rather than fidelity, has reignited dynamics that earlier retellings sought to sanitise and control.

The branched timeline

It may be tempting – borrowing an image from the television series *Loki* – to imagine the MCU as a branched timeline: a divergence from a line of descent running from the *Eddas* through early editors and translators, Romantic and Victorian popularisers, Wagnerian reinventions, nineteenth- and twentieth-century children's literature and handbooks, and later responses in science fiction, fantasy, visual arts, and music, considered in the introduction. The MCU, viewed in this way, would be at best an outlier, existing in its own independent sphere, to borrow again the term used by Jón Karl Helgason, and one without particular relevance to the reception history of the Norse myths. In practice, the rhizome has proved a more practical means of conceptualising the adaptive process. Rather than a single sacred timeline, the analysis has repeatedly encountered clusters of influence operating simultaneously rather than sequentially. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century retellings emerge as key nodes, shaping later understanding of the myths; Marvel Comics draw on a mixture of these sources, on genre convention, and on the creative

invention of successive generations of writers and artists, while in turn influencing both the MCU and authors such as Neil Gaiman. The MCU itself operates not as an endpoint but as one more point of convergence.

What distinguishes this model is not merely its refusal to privilege origins, but its capacity to account for selective, cross-temporal borrowing. Popular culture adaptation of old stories, including myth, rarely proceeds by straightforward reversioning of one source into a new or updated form. Comic-book writers have demonstrably drawn at different times on retellings, translations, reference works, and earlier comics; the *Thor* films, while nominally based on the Marvel Comics, likewise incorporate the range of influences outlined earlier in this introduction. The rhizome allows these influences to coexist without requiring them to be ordered or reconciled into a single genealogy. Given this pattern, it is also difficult to imagine how future adaptations could avoid the influence of the MCU, or the broader circulation of similar motifs across contemporary franchises. The MCU's ubiquity ensures that it now forms part of the cultural environment within which Norse myth is encountered. Future adapters will surely find that while they may seek to reject the MCU's take on the myths they will find it tough to ignore completely. In this sense, the MCU exemplifies the rhizome in action: not merely drawing on earlier nodes, but reshaping the conditions under which subsequent adaptations will be produced.

This shift in perspective has consequences beyond questions of influence alone. Even while operating in this non-linear way, the films and television series repeatedly return not to the surface features of the myths but to elements with deeper roots – elements that seem to endure, or recur, precisely because they are dramatically effective. If Tolkien's notion of the 'flavour of myth' refers to something more than the repetition of narrative elements, as it must, then this study

suggests that, in the case of Norse myth, that flavour may be the residue of performance: the faint trace of voices, gestures, rhythms, and audience reactions embedded in stories once told aloud and perhaps even dramatised. This idea finds an unexpected echo in Marvel Studios chief Kevin Feige's reflections, quoted above, on the lineage he feels that his storytelling has with an oral tradition.[1]

Viewed in this light, divergences from how the myths are commonly read become newly meaningful. The MCU seems to have recognised that a performed Þórr requires him to be dependable, shrewd, and quick-thinking, even if he can also be mocked and taken in by magic. Perhaps his Eddic forebear was not quite the careless oaf that many adaptations, along with some notable criticism, have made him out to be. It may be that a conflation is in operation here between facility with words and intelligence. If so, that is worth pointing out. Notable correspondences are important too. The MCU takes particular delight in subjecting its hero to sexually charged mockery that feels Eddic to its core. If this is a sign that such humour would have been effective in the context of medieval performance, it may lend further support to the idea that the myths were once dramatised. If so, we should expect a more chaotic and earthy humour beneath the textual surface: not only literary irony but jokes designed for immediate audience response. Remaining alert to interpretations shaped by this insight, as recent work by Frog and Caroline R. Batten has shown, is therefore important. The same perspective also suggests that reducing Loki to a simple trickster obscures his narrative and creative functions, and that his association with creation, as Wanner has argued, deserves continued attention.

To further test how MCU insights might illuminate Eddic material, the thesis offered a coda examining how an MCU-inflected sense of performance might help

[1] See the epigraph to the Chapter Five from Marvel Studios chief Kevin Feige.

us imagine the staging of the Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð*. The use of masking and unmasking, deception and revelation – so common in modern screen culture and especially in the MCU, and structurally similar to techniques used in Eddic poems and stories like *Grímnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and Þórr's trip to Útgarða-Loki – suggests another way of understanding how ambiguity and doubling could once have been presented before a medieval audience. The purpose was not to claim certainty but to show how performance-centered thinking can shed new light on old texts. Other such experiments might well yield further insight. This observation may be extended by returning to the discussion of Loki as god of stories. Marvel's sixty-plus years of narrative experimentation – freed from any obligation to retell the same mythic episodes – could itself be a factor in the resurfacing of deeper aspects of the Norse material. Whereas nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellings often repeated one another, constantly recycling the same old stories and gradually narrowing the imaginative field, Marvel has been required to keep its characters alive across decades, and in multiple genres. In doing so, it has pushed its versions of Thor, Odin, and Loki into ever newer situations. Counter-intuitively, perhaps, the effect has been to bring them back to versions of their characters that are unexpectedly close to their mythic counterparts. This raises the question: is this merely coincidence, or does the necessity of sustained reinvention tend to drive characters back toward the functions that made them compelling in the first place? One could imagine testing this with other traditions. If, for example, the sanitised Camelot of much twentieth-century Arthurian children's literature were taken as a starting point and its characters subjected to sixty years of continuous reworking, might they too, paradoxically, drift back, or even be pulled back, towards versions with more in common with, say, their Malorian antecedents? And if the final stage of reinterpretation were performance on

screen, might further dormant elements re-emerge? This is highly speculative, of course, but it may be that long-form, open-ended, cross-genre storytelling is unusually well suited to recovering what shorter, more conventional adaptations have set aside.

Thus, the 'so what?' of this study is not that the MCU preserves Norse myth, nor that it demonstrates hidden fidelity. Rather, it is that by pursuing entertainment rather than accuracy, the franchise has repeatedly *reactivated* the kinds of dynamics, tensions, and motifs that might once have animated the myths. These rediscoveries invite us to imagine the *Eddas*, and the MCU, as part of a performed tradition. And by observing how certain motifs survive across media and centuries, the MCU offers an unexpectedly clear vantage point from which to reconsider the Eddic material and the processes of myth-making itself.

Appendices

Appendix 1: MCU movies box office performance, critical and audience responses

Appendix 2: MCU canonical TV series

Appendix 3: Summaries of relevant MCU films and TV series

Appendix 4: *The Song of Greybreard* translated for performance

Appendix 5: The retellings, 1857-1962

Appendix 1: All MCU movies

MCU film releases in chronological order, with global box office takings in US dollars; ratings on Cinemascore (abbrv. Cscore), which polls cinemagoers after seeing the film on the opening weekend; ratings on *Rotten Tomatoes* (abbrv. R. T.), which calculates a percentage 'approval' rating based on reviews from critics:

Release year and film title	**Box Office**	**CScore**	**R.T.**
The Infinity Saga			
Phase 1			
2008: *Iron Man* (Favreau)	585.8 million	A	94
2008: *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier)	264.7 million	A–	67
2010*: Iron Man 2* (Favreau)	623.9 million	A	72
2011: *Thor* (Branagh)	**449.3 million**	**B+**	**77**
2011: *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston)	370.6 million	A–	80
2012: *The Avengers* (Whedon)	**1.52 billion**	**A+**	**91**
Phase 2			
2013: *Iron Man 3* (Black)	1.2 billion	A	80
2013: *Thor: The Dark World* (Taylor)	**644.8 million**	**A–**	**67**
2014*: Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo and Russo)	714.4 million	A	90
2014: *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn)	773.4 million	A	92
2015: *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon)	**1.41 billion**	**A**	**76**
2015: *Ant-Man (Reed)*	519.3 million	A	83
Phase 3			
2016: *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo and Russo)	1.16 billion	A	91
2016: *Doctor Strange* (Derrickson)	677.8 million	A	89
2017: *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (Gunn)	863.8 million	A	85
2017: *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts)	880.2 million	A	92
2017: *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi)	**855.3 million**	**A**	**93**

2018: *Black Panther* (Coogler)	1.3 billion	**A+**	**96**
2018: *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo and Russo)	**2.05 billion**	**A**	**85**
2018: *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (Reed)	622.7 million	A–	87
2019: *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck)	1.13 billion	A	79
2019*: Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo)	**2.8 billion**	**A+**	**94**
2019: *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (Watts)	1.13 billion	A	91
The Multiverse Saga			
Phase 4			
2021: *Black Widow* (Shortland)	379.7 million	A–	79
2021: *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (Cretton)	432.2 million	A	91
2021: *Eternals* (Zhao)	402.1 million	B	47
2021: *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts)	1.92 billion	A+	93
2022: *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi)	955.8 million	B+	73
2022: *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Waititi)	**760.9 million**	**B+**	**63**
2022: *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (Coogler)	859.2 million	A	83
Phase 5			
2023: *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (Reed)	476.1 million	B	46
2023: *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* (Gunn)	845.6 million	A	82
2023: *The Marvels* (DaCosta)	206.1 million	B	62
2024: *Deadpool & Wolverine* (Levy)	1.32 billion	A	78
2025: Captain America: Brave New World (Onah)	415.1 million	B–	46
2025: *Thunderbolts** (Schreier)	382.4 million	A–	88
Phase 6			
2025: *The Fantastic Four: First Steps* (Shakman)	445.2 million	A–	86

Sources: *The Numbers*, https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Marvel-Cinematic-Universe [Accessed 5 December 2025]; Cinemascore, www.cinemascore.com (paywall), [Accessed 5 December 2025]; Rotten Tomatoes, https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/all-marvel-cinematic-universe-movies-ranked/ [Accessed 5 December 2025].

Appendix 2: Marvel Studios-produced MCU TV series

The Marvel Studios series, including one-off Special Presentations, that tie directly into the MCU and are regarded as canon, are as follows. All are single-season series, produced for Disney+ unless otherwise stated:

Year/Title	Number of episodes
Phase 4	
2021: *Wandavision*	9
2021: *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*	9
2021: *Loki* Season 1	**6**
2021: *What If…?* Season 1	9
2021: *Hawkeye*	9
2022: *Moon Knight*	6
2022: *Ms. Marvel*	6
2022: *I Am Groot* Season 1	5
2022: *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*	6
2022: *Werewolf by Night*	1
2022: *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special*	1
Phase 5	
2023: *Secret Invasion*	6
2023: *I Am Groot* Season 2	5
2023: *Loki* Season 2	**6**
2023: *What If…?* Season 2	9
2024: *Echo* (Disney + and Hulu)	5
2024: *Agatha All Along*	9
2024: *What If…?* Season 3	8
2025: *Your Friendly Neighbourhood Spider-Man*	10
2025: *Daredevil: Born Again*	9

2025: *Ironheart*	4
2025: *Eyes of Wakanda*	4
2025: *Marvel Zombies*	4

Source: Marvel Studios, https://www.marvel.com/tv-shows [Accessed 5 December 2025].

Appendix 3: MCU plot summaries

For reference, following are my summaries of the basic plots for all the MCU films and TV series that include Thor, Loki and other characters and elements from Norse myth:

***Thor* (2011, Branagh):** Film no. 4/23 in the *Infinity Saga*. A flashback near the start of the film informs us that Asgardian forces commanded by Odin fought and defeated an army of Frost Giants to protect humanity in the year 965 in Tønsberg, Norway, and took away the source of their power. Back in the present, the arrogant young Thor is about to be anointed successor to Odin as King of the Nine Realms only for his coronation to be interrupted at the last minute when Asgard is infiltrated by Frost Giants. Thor is goaded by Loki into attacking Jotunheim in revenge and goaded again by Laufey into starting a battle. He has to be rescued by Odin, who exiles him to Earth, stripping him of his hammer (and superhuman strength) as punishment. Loki, devastated after learning he is a Frost Giant by birth, takes advantage of Odin's frailty to assume power, and plots genocide against Jotunheim. On Earth, Thor meets the astrophysicist Jane Foster, falls in love and proves himself worthy to hold the hammer once more, partly via his willingness to sacrifice his own life to protect the people from The Destroyer, sent by Loki to kill him. In a climactic confrontation on the Rainbow Bridge, Thor defeats Loki, who apparently falls to his death, despite a last-gasp intervention from the reawakened Odin.

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011, Johnston): Film no. 5/23 in the *Infinity Saga*. The film that introduces Steve Rogers as Captain America has an interesting prologue with connections to Norse myth. Nazi officer and Hydra leader Johann Schmidt tracks down an artefact known as the Tesseract to the town of Tønsberg in

German-occupied Norway in the year 1942. After identifying and destroying a decoy stone, he spots a wooden door featuring a carving of a large tree. In classic comic book style, he engages in a little light monologuing: “Yggdrasil, tree of the world, guardian of wisdom… and fate, also.” In pressing the eye of a snake – perhaps intended as a reference to Jǫrmungandr – he reveals a hidden panel, which holds the real Tesseract. Hydra, which is subsequently explained as a Nazi research division, will eventually infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D. and have to be fought by the Avengers.

***The Avengers* (2012, Whedon):** Film no. 6/23 in the *Infinity Saga*. Loki, who somehow escaped death on the Bifrost, leads an army of Chitauris provided by Thanos in an invasion of Earth, making use of the Tesseract and a mysterious sceptre: objects that will later turn out to be Infinity Stones. Thor returns to help his fellow superheroes Captain America, Iron Man, The Hulk, Black Widow and Hawkeye in the defence of the planet. Loki is duly captured and Thor takes him back to Asgard, muzzled and in chains.

***Thor: The Dark World* (2013, Taylor):** Film no. 8/23 in the *Infinity Saga*. Thor must confront Malekith, King of the Dark Elves, after Jane becomes infected by a substance known as the Aether, which we will later learn is another of the Infinity Stones. Loki, who has been imprisoned on Asgard for his wrongdoing on Earth, gives the Dark Elves information that, inadvertently, leads to the death of Frigga, his adoptive mother. Seemingly repentant, Loki teams up with Thor and they head with Jane to Svartalfheim to face Malekith and the Dark Elves, eventually defeating them in a battle in London. The film ends with Odin praising Thor for his actions, and granting his request to refuse the crown, only for the audience to learn that Loki has used magic to take over Odin’s identity.

***Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015, Whedon):** Film no. 11/23 in the *Infinity Saga*. Thor teams up with the Avengers on a mission to recover the Infinity Stone in Loki's sceptre. The Earth comes under threat again, however, after Tony Stark's hubris – and a little help from Thor's hammer – sees him uses the stone to give life to Ultron, an AI creation that goes rogue. After receiving a disturbing vision from Wanda Maximoff, Thor goes in search of answers at the Water of Sight, the home of the Norns, and leaves convinced that finding the Infinity Stones is now essential to avoid catastrophe. Thor helps the Avengers destroy Ultron in another climactic battle, and leaves Earth to embark upon his quest. Loki does not feature.

***Thor: Ragnarok* (2017, Waititi):** Film no. 17/23 in the *Infinity Saga*. The film opens with Thor seeking information from Surtur, and Loki enjoying life ruling Asgard in the guise of Odin. Thor and Loki track down Odin in Tønsberg, where he reveals that he is dying, and warns his two sons that he has another child, Hela, who will be freed upon his death. Hela easily destroys Thor's hammer in their first confrontation, and he and Loki both find themselves transported to an isolated planet. Thor teams up with The Hulk and the last surviving Valkyrie to escape, and they return to Asgard, where Hela has installed herself as ruler, with help from a revived army of *Einherjar* and the giant wolf, Fenris. Eventually, Loki joins Thor's 'Revengers' in a battle with Hela and Fenris. Thor realises they cannot match her power and so unleashes Surtur to cause Ragnarok instead of trying to prevent it, and he is able to lead the surviving Asgardians from the planet on a spaceship. Before Asgard burns, Loki secretly steals and brings with him the Tesseract, one of the Infinity Stones.

***Avengers: Infinity War* (2018, Russo and Russo):** Film no. 19/23 in the *Infinity Saga*. The Asgardian refugee ship is attacked by Thanos, the mad Titan whose goal is to obtain all the Infinity Stones in order to destroy half of all life, something he

believes will restore balance to the universe. Loki is killed trying to stop him, as is Heimdall, after they are forced to give up the Tesseract, but Hulk gets to Earth to warn the Avengers. Thor survives the attack from Thanos and heads to Nidavellir to have a new weapon, Stormbreaker, forged by Eitri, King of the Dwarves. With his new axe in hand, Thor joins the Avengers in the fight but misses his one chance to kill Thanos when he plunges Stormbreaker into the Titan's chest and lingers over his moment of revenge. Thanos, who has killed Vision to add the final Infinity Stone to his dwarf-made gauntlet, takes advantage of this hesitation and taunts Thor by saying, 'You should have gone for the head.' Thanos duly snaps his fingers, and half of all sentient life in the universe, including many of the Avengers, turns to dust.

Avengers: Endgame **(2019, Russo and Russo):** Film no. 22/23 in the *Infinity Saga*. Thor gets a second chance to kill Thanos and this time doesn't miss, but it is a hollow victory: the Infinity Stones have been destroyed and he can't do anything to change what has happened. Devastated, Thor shirks his leadership responsibilities in New Asgard, the colony on Earth where his fellow survivors have settled, and opts for a life playing video games and drinking beer. The return of Ant-Man from the Quantum Realm leads to another opportunity to acquire the stones and a re-energised Thor rejoins the Avengers as they embark on a 'time heist'. On his mission to the past, Thor meets his mother, Frigg, who reassures him of his worth – an assessment that is confirmed when he is reunited with his hammer. Loki takes advantage of some of the chaos caused by the time heist to escape on a new timeline. Thor joins the Avengers in the final battle with Thanos and reacts with approval when Captain America is also deemed worthy to wield Mjolnir. The people who disappeared are restored, and the Thanos of the past is definitively thwarted, albeit at the cost of the deaths of Tony, Natasha and several others.

Loki Season 1 **(2021, six-part season, created by Michael Waldron):** Loki has escaped following the events of *Avengers: Endgame* but is immediately captured by the Time Variance Authority for breaching the 'sacred timeline'. A TVA operative called Mobius enlists Loki to help find a dangerous being who goes by the name of Sylvie, who turns out to be a Loki variant. Sylvie is convinced that the TVA is a force for evil and must be destroyed. Loki and Sylvie are exiled to the Void, where they meet many other Loki variants. Eventually, the two make their way to the end of time to confront He Who Remains, aka Kang, the TVA's creator. Sylvie kills him, despite his warning that this will unleash a multiversal war with catastrophic consequences. The season ends with the timelines spiralling out of control.

Thor: Love and Thunder **(2021, directed by Taika Waititi):** Film no. 6 in the *Multiverse Saga;* film no. 29 in the MCU. Thor has chosen the path of the wanderer and joined the Guardians of the Galaxy, passing on leadership responsibility to Valkyrie. He heads back to New Asgard when he learns from Sif that Gorr is seeking to kill all gods with the Necrosword. Thor joins forces with his estranged girlfriend Jane Foster, who is battling stage four breast cancer and has become a super-hero herself, going by the name of The Mighty Thor, after being deemed worthy to wield a re-constituted Mjolnir. Even their combined powers cannot stop Gorr abducting the town's children, however. Thor leads Jane, Valkyrie and Korg, his fellow 'Revenger' from *Thor: Ragnarok*, to Omnipotent City where they attempt to enlist help from the gods, only for Zeus to refuse their request. Thor confronts Gorr in the Shadow Realm and persuades him to choose love over revenge, and wish for the return of his dead daughter rather than the destruction of all gods. Jane sacrifices her health to help Thor and her reward for dying a hero's death is a place in Valhalla, where she is welcomed by Heimdall.

***Loki Season 2* (2022, six-part TV series, with Eric Martin as head writer).** With the TVA seemingly now in an altered reality, Loki and Mobius are engaged in an unwinnable battle to stabilise the rapidly expanding multiverse, while Sylvie enjoys her new-found freedom on Earth. Loki and Mobius track down Victor Timely, an early variant of He Who Remains in late 19th century Chicago, where he makes a living as an inventor, and enlist the help of the author of the TVA guidebook, Ouroboros. Over the course of the season, Loki learns to travel in time and space but despite trying for what appear to be centuries, and possibly millennia, there appears to be no technical solution that will contain the proliferating timelines. He is eventually forced to decide whether to accept that He Who Remains was right all along, and re-enforce the TVA's ruthless destruction of branched timelines, or come out on the side of free will, despite the multiversal war that will ensue. In the end, though, he finds another solution, using his power to become God of Stories and take his place at the heart of a new Yggdrasil he has created for himself.

Appendix 4: *The Song of Greybeard*

Following is my English rendering of the Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð,*[1] intended for two-handed performance. As some lines in the translation open with one or more unstressed syllables (anacrusis), I have added **bolding** to indicate where the emphasis in the first half of the line should fall.

The Song of Greybread

Thor came from the east and reached a certain sound. On the other side was a ferryman, with his boat. Thor called out:

[1] **Who's** that boy of boys out there, who stands across the fjord?

[2] ***Who's*** *the peasant's peasant calling – from the far seaboard?*

[3] **Ferry** me across the bay – I'll offer you a deal…
I've **got** a basket on my back, you'll find no better meal!
I **had** my fill before I left – I did some proper damage!
There's **herring**, and some oatmeal too – I've had all I can manage!

[4] *That's* ***quite*** *a boast for breakfast deeds – but you don't have a clue*
I've ***heard*** *back home your mother's dead – that's bitter news for you!*

[5] **What** you said right there about my mum and how she's snuffed it?
Everyone would find this awful news if they could trust it…

[6] *It's* ***not*** *like you're a gentleman, possessing three farm–houses*
A ***wand****erer, bare-legg-ed too – you're hardly wearing trousers!*

[1] While the translation is mine, where the sense of the Old Norse was unclear, I consulted other English translations, most notably Jackson Crawford's video walkthrough of *Hárbarðsljóð*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYKiqKU6KHw> [accessed October 3 2025], and Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*.

[7] Then **steer** the little boat to me, I'll show you in to moor
And **anyway,** who owns the ship you keep there by the shore?

[8] *A **wise** man, name of War-wolf, from the Sound of Good Advice*
*I'm **not** to ferry horse-thieves or plain crooks for any price*
***Good** men get a ride as well as those that I know well*
*You **want** to make a crossing? Then your name you'd better yell!*

[9] I'd **tell** you what they call me, even if I was a baddie
Meili was my brother, yes, and Odin is my daddy!
To **Magni** I'm a father, with the **gods** my strength is famed
It's **only** Thor you're messing with; now you, how are ***you*** named?

[10] ***Greybeard** is my name – you know I hide it only rarely…*

[11] …Why **hide** your name at all, unless you're said to act unfairly?

[12] ***Even** if I was unfair, I'd still protect my person*
*From **such** a one as you, unless my dying day was certain*

[13] For **those** harsh words I'd cross and show you just how matters lie
But **for** a nothing kid like you, I'll keep my knackers dry!

[14] *Well, **here** I'll stand, awaiting, just in case you cross the sound*
*You **haven't** faced a harder man since Hrungnir met the ground!*

[15] You **want** to speak of that now? Proud old Hrungnir and our fight?
I **dropped** that stony-headed giant – **went** out like a light!
That's what I was up to, now it's your turn to relate,
What was Greybeard doing meanwhile? Give it to me straight!

[16] ***I** was there with Fjolvar on an island called All-green*
*We **stayed** for five long winters and we left the grimmest scene!*

*The **battle**field awash with all the bodies put to slaughter*
*And **after**wards we had our pick of every wife and daughter!*

[17] **How** did it turn out with all these women on your mission…?

[18] *…We **had** some lively lasses when they showed no opposition*
*And **clever** women, too, if they were nice, we fooled around*
*From **sand** they'd wind a rope and with their backs they dug the ground!*
*I **proved** myself the better man – the shrewdest of the tricksters*
*Had **all** the mind and joy of a whole pack of seven sisters*
***That's** what I was doing, now it's your turn to relate,*
***What** did Thor get up to meanwhile? Give it to me straight!*

[19] I **killed** the giant Thiazi, and Allvaldi's son's two eyes
I **hurled** with all my might until they reached the shining skies
My **greatest** works still stand there for the whole world to perceive
But **tell** me Greybeard, all this time, just what did you achieve?

[20] *A **coaxing** of the girls I managed, with these murky riders*
***That** was when I lured them off, away from their providers*
*A **hardened** giant Hlebard handed me a magic stick*
*And **in** return I drove him from his mind using a trick*

[21] **With** an evil mind you paid him back through acts like these…

[22] *…An **oak** can only thrive by what it scrapes from other trees!*
*It's **each** man for himself in all our dealings, have no doubt*
*But **in** the mean time fill me in on what you were about!*

[23] **I** was in the east again, and fighting giant women:
Brides so full of evil who were to the mountain driven
The **family** of giants would be huge if all had thrived
There'd **hardly** be a human left in Midgard still alive!
That's what I was up to, now it's your turn to relate,

What was Greybeard doing meanwhile? Give it to me straight!

[24] ***In*** *a place called Corpse Land where I followed every feud,*
Stirred *up all the princes and for peace I never sued.*
For ***when*** *the battle's over and they're readying the halls*
Odin *gets the noblemen and Thor just gets the thralls*

[25] You'd **deal** the dead unfairly if you got to make the calls…

[26] *…Well,* ***Thor*** *may have the strength, but he just doesn't have the balls!*
Stuffed *inside a giant's glove so cowardly and scared*
*A****fraid*** *to take a sneeze or even fart in case Fjal heard!*

[27] You **fucking** arsehole, Greybeard, I would knock you to the ground
And **send** you down to Hel if I could get across the sound

[28] *Why* ***bother*** *crossing water when we've no real trouble brewing?*
Tell *me something more about whatever you were doing!*

[29] **I** was in the east again, the river there to shield
Svarang's sons attacked me, but they found I'll never yield!
They **pelted** me with stones, but I was equal to that trial
They **begged** me then for peace – but what were you doing meanwhile?

[30] ***I*** *was in the east and with a special woman treating*
A ***girl*** *of linen-whiteness, and we had a secret meeting*
The ***bright****-gold girl was gladdened – gave me pleasurable feelings…*

[31] …It **sounds** like with this woman you had profitable dealings!

[32] *I* ***could*** *have used your help in holding down the girl in linen…*

[33] …And **if** I could have been there, then my help I would have given!

[34] *I'd have **trusted** you to do it, just as long as you were true…*

[35] …I'm **not** a heel-biter, like a worn out springtime shoe!

[36] *But **what** were you about...?*

[37] …Berserker **women** I did raid
They'd **done** some dreadful things, entire peoples they'd betrayed

[38] ***Fighting** all those women, that was cowardly of Thor…*

[39]…But **these** were more like she-wolves, not real women any more!
They **smashed** my boat to pieces, it was beached up near the bay
At**tacked** with iron clubs, Thjalfi had to run away!
But **what** was Greybeard doing…?

[40] *...I was with the army here!*
***Readying** the banners and then reddening the spears!*

[41] You **want** to speak of that now? Setting out to do us harm…

[42]*...I'll pay you back by giving you a ring right on your arm!*
*You **know** the kind I mean, the sort that's used in arbitration*
*By **those** who seek a special kind of reconciliation…*

[43] **How** did you unearth a way of talking that's so vile?
I **never** heard of anyone who speaks in such a style

[44] *I **learned** it from the ancient men who dwell now with the trees…*

[45] …It's **odd** to talk about the cairns with words as strange as these

[46] ***That's** the way I talk of them…*

[47] … your wordplay's pretty slick
I'd **wade** across the bay and change your humour just as quick!
You're **sure** to change your tune as soon as I get out my hammer
With **just** a blow from Mjöllnir, like a wolf we'll hear you yammer!

[48] ***Sif*** *has got a lover, it's with him you should be messing*
Test *your strength on that guy in your bed, that's much more pressing*

[49] I **think** you say whatever comes to mind to make me cross
But **coward** that you are, I think you're talking utter dross

[50] ***No*** *… I speak the truth, it's just that you're too slow up here!*
You'd come a whole lot sooner if you had the proper gear!

[51] **Greybeard** you're a pervert, and you only slow me more…!

[52] *…I* ***never*** *thought a herdsman could confound the mighty Thor!*

[53] **My** advice to you, is row your boat right now, good lad
It's **time** to stop the talking – come and take on Magni's dad!

[54] ***You*** *shall have no passage, get away now from the bay…*

[55] …If **you** won't take me over, then at least show me the way

[56] *A* ***small*** *thing to say no to, but a lengthy way to go*
It's ***one*** *stretch to the tree stump and another to the stone*
Hold *the left-hand way until you reach the Verland road*
Fjorgin *will embrace her son, and show her kinsman home*

[57] **While** the sun's still shining, will I make it back for sure?

[58] ***Yes****, with toil and misery – the sun will cause a thaw*

[59] I've **little** time to talk now, since you treat me with disdain
But **let** me promise this much, if we ever meet again
De**nying** me the ferry means your payback is my goal…

[60] *... Oh **go** now, where the trolls await to swallow you up whole!*

Appendix 5: The Retellings

Following are first known publication details for known English-language retellings, published from 1857–1962. This expands substantially on partial listings available elsewhere – notably the *Germanic Mythology* website, which provides an incomplete and not always accurate overview, but nevertheless provided a useful starting point I am happy to acknowledge.[1] In the total of 46 retellings below I include one work not published as a standalone book in Emma Sophia Buchheim's 'Stories from the Edda', which was published as part of a work entitled *The Land of Enchantment*, but is a fairly substantial retelling in its own right. Conversely, I count the two dramatic works by the pseudonymous Ha Rollo, the second published posthumously, as one retelling.

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Thor: The Dark World, dir. Alan Taylor (USA, 2013)

Thor: Ragnarok, dir. Taika Waititi (USA, 2017)

Thor: Love and Thunder, dir. Taika Waititi (USA, 2022)

The Avengers, dir. Joss Whedon (USA, 2012)

Avengers: Age of Ultron, dir. Joss Whedon (USA, 2015)

Avengers: Infinity War, dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (USA, 2018)

Avengers: Endgame, dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (USA, 2019)

Loki, Marvel Studios (USA, Disney+, 2021–23)

‘Glorious Purpose’, *Loki*, season 1, episode 1, dir. Kate Herron (Marvel Studios, USA, Disney+, 2021)

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Hrafninn flýgur [When the Raven Flies], dir. by Hrafn Gunnlaugsson (Viking Film/ Svenska Filminstitutet 1984)

Monty Python and the Holy Grail, dir. by Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam (UK, 1975)

Pathfinder, dir. by Marcus Nispel (USA, 2007)

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The Northman, dir. Robert Eggers (USA, 2022)

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