Shapeshifting and Superhero Comics:
Loki as an Agent of Gender Deconstruction

Introduction

Superhero comic books and their surrounding culture have long been a space of tension between forces that enforce heterosexual norms, and those that oppose them. Beginning in the 1930s, comic books were sold as a cheap, "lowbrow" form of mass entertainment marketed toward the working poor (De Dauw 3). From the start, comic books were scrutinized for the ways in which they challenged notions of order, respectability, and productivity promoted by the capitalist mainstream. As a marginalized artform whose commercial success did not require the respect of an upper-class society, comics had the potential to break away from certain literary and artistic norms. Despite this, appealing to a working class audience still required the replication of the dominant ideology of gender roles.

In 1954, following the moral panic caused by Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent*, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was founded as a form of self-regulation to stave off government control (De Dauw 6). To receive the official CCA stamp, each comic had to be approved by a team of child care professionals. Most retailers would not sell comics without a stamp. Among other regulations, the CCA required comic book characters to fill traditional gender roles and prohibited the depiction of "illicit sex relations" and "sexual abnormalities," which referred to non-marital sexual relations, adultery, and homosexuality (De Dauw 6-7). Censorship of homosexuality became even more explicit when the CCA rewrote its code in the 1970s, including a "Marriage and Sex" section that forbade "sex perversions or any inference to the same," a code for homosexuality (De Dauw 9).

To work around these regulations, some characters were coded as gay—such as the Marvel hero Northstar, who never dated a woman because he was "too busy with his career." After the CCA pulled back its restrictions on homosexuality in 1989, Northstar came out as Marvel's first gay hero. At the turn of the century, comic book companies such as Marvel abandoned the CCA's regulations altogether in their attempt to recover from declining comic book sales and re-secure a customer fanbase. Marvel increased the marketability of their comics by including more women and minority groups—a shift that has lasted to present day. Pivoting from the old model of censorship, Marvel is now seeking out an LGBTQ-positive audience. The same way that female superhero comics such as Wonder Woman catered to women who had increased spending power after joining the workforce during World War II, comic book companies are catering to a minority group from whom they may now profit.(De Dauw 4).

Today, superhero comics feature an increasing number of LGBTQ heroes. While these representations are by no means dominant, they have attracted a sizable audience. Since Northstar's coming out, several Marvel series have put LGBTQ characters front and center in titles such as *Young Avengers* (2013) and *Iceman* (2017-2018). Marvel proudly announces its inclusion of LGBTQ characters through special pride month issues, such as *Marvel's Voices Pride* (2021, 2022). While representations of diversity in popular media can make readers of minority groups feel seen, companies like Marvel have been accused of tokenism—a strategy by which members of minority groups fill roles historically reserved for the majority group to create an appearance of equality.[1] In these representations, the complexities of different identities are often erased as minority characters conform to the norm. Even those LGBTQ heroes with some level of complexity often exhibit homonormativity—a term coined by Lisa Duggan to describe the replication of heteronormativity within LGBTQ culture and identity, in which (white) gay

couples may adhere to values of monogamy, marriage, and the public/private split (De Dauw 92). Not only are comic book companies profiting off a marginalized group, but they are doing so through representations which tokenize queer characters and adapt non-normative identities to heteronormative constructs.

Representations of LGBTQ characters in superhero comics have been met with criticism from two opposite ends: first, those who believe the representations promote damaging stereotypes, and second, alt-right groups who oppose diversity in comics altogether. The ethos of this second group is encompassed by Comicsgate, a right-wing campaign that opposes the North American superhero comics industry's shift towards progressivism. If queer representations become too prominent or transgressive, Marvel risks losing a sizable portion of its audience. Comic book companies are engaged in a balancing act in which they must accommodate both pro- and anti-LGBTQ groups to maximize profit.

While comics can be a powerful tool for enforcing heterosexism, the qualities of the comic book medium and its surrounding culture have always exhibited potential to deviate from gender norms. As Yetta Howard observes, the figure of the geeky male "fanboy" as a representation of superhero comic book fans does not neatly correspond with dominant conceptions of masculinity—rather, the passive act of reading feminizes them (97). Even within early comics, the superhero's status as a symbol of masculine strength is often undermined by their unstable body. When a hero stretches, bursts into flames, or turns into ice, their form begins to veer away from a gendered embodiment (Fawaz and Scott 174). What makes a hero super can also alter his masculine body and signify femininity, unraveling the binary that his power is predicated upon.

The comic book medium has unique potential to transgress the gender binary it constructs. Replicated drawings of bodies across comic book panels call attention to Judith Butler's conception of gender as a performance, which produces the illusion of a stable identity through repeated presentation of gender signifiers. Furthermore, the fantasy elements of superhero comic books can metamorphize character's bodies so that they "signify and project gender in new, unique ways, potentially transcending established markers and creating new identities beyond the scope of traditional gender roles" (De Dauw 15). Despite efforts to subdue queer characters by forcing them to fit heterosexual norms, the transgressive potential of superhero comic books manifests in nonbinary shapeshifters who switch between "male" and "female" forms, calling attention to the performative nature of gender and enacting a critique.

In my analysis, I will be using the Marvel character Loki as a case study. Loki is a trickster god originating from Norse mythology, who Stan Lee adapted into Marvel Comics in the 1960s as a foil to the superhero Thor. Loki has since taken a prominent role in countless comic book series. I will be focusing on *Thor* (2007) and *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014-2015), for their depictions of Loki's gender fluidity, which adds another layer to his gender role transgression. Despite problems of representation in superhero comics, LGBTQ characters are a necessary part of breaking down the gender binary. The subversive potential of shapeshifters can take full force in a nonbinary character like Loki, whose changeable form and gender fluidity—coupled with the comic book's replication of gendered bodies across panels—deconstruct the gender binary. While gender non-conforming characters are difficult to find in mainstream superhero comics, Loki reveals the superhero comic book's ability to call attention to the construction of gender in fiction—and the world beyond.

Part 1: Representation Reproduces the Gender Binary

In the essay "The Technology of Gender," Teresa de Lauretis asserts that the representation of gender is its construction (3). Comics, like films, operate as a social technology that constructs gender through representation. By replicating bodies, comics inscribe physical features with cultural meaning. The presence or absence of gender-encoded features such as breasts, long hair, and muscles can be understood as signifiers of social power. De Lauretis argues that "gender is not a sex, a state of nature, but the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual and is predicated on the *conceptual* and rigid (structural) opposition of two biological sexes" (5). Gender is a representation of social relations. Male stands for power—which is signified in superhero comics by large muscles in comparison to the female. Female, as the subordinate gender, stands for weakness—which is signified by a small and thin frame in comparison to the male. The identities of both dominant male protector and helpless female damsel are interdependent.

The active/passive split between men and women is fundamental to comics' enforcement of gender norms. Laura Mulvey describes how this split operates in narrative films, in which the male protagonist advances the plot and the woman serves as an object of his affection. Female characters in superhero comics are frequently relegated to supporting roles that enforce patriarchal norms. Non-physical powers like sorcery exclude female heroes from combat and frame them as weaker than their male counterparts (De Dauw 16). Female passivity is also enforced through sexualization. Mulvey describes the "male gaze" by which women, filmed by and for men, are objectified. The dominantly male creatorship of superhero comics has produced representations of women through a similar male gaze. Comics sexualize female characters

through revealing clothing and stances such as the "Brokeback" pose, which bends women's backs further than anatomically possible to draw attention to their breasts (De Dauw 18).

By replicating stylized bodies across panels, issues, and series, comic books enact the Althusserian performance of gender conceptualized by Judith Butler. While this repetition can normalize gender signifiers, each panel presents an opportunity to interrupt gender performance. Because superhero comics engage with gender, they not only have the potential to reinscribe the gender binary, but also the power to challenge ideas about what stylized bodies signify.

Part 2: Adapting Non-Normative Characters to the Binary

The Threat of Shifting Bodies

The fantasy elements of superhero comics expand the possibilities of bodies' stylations. Aliens, robots, and deities can transcend normative embodiments by taking non-humanoid forms that cannot be easily gendered through markers such as breasts and musculature. Additionally, many superheroes' powers cause their bodies to change form, distorting their gender markers and disrupting their performance of gender. In an analysis of the Fantastic Four comic books, Ramzi Fawaz recognizes that what makes the heroes super also disrupts their normative performance of gender and sexuality. Although the Fantastic Four were recognized by fans as masculine role models, Mr. Fantastic's pliable and elastic body is a sign of feminine softness; the Thing's rocky body makes him androgynous; and the Human Torch's flaming body signifies the "flaming" homosexual of Cold War America (Fawaz and Scott 175). When the bodies of superheroes shift, they break away from the comic book's language of gender signifiers.

Despite the threat of shifting bodies, superhero comic books' ability to transcend the gender binary through representations of nonhumans and superhumans is suppressed as these

characters are neatly contained within gendered bodies. As Edward Avery-Natale observes in an analysis of DC comics, nonhuman and superhuman characters often fail to wholly transcend embodiment, "as even the shape-shifter ultimately shifts back to a perfected and sexed human form, and the cyborg, such as the character Cyborg in DC Comics, remains entirely and ostentatiously gendered" (99). The same is true for Mr. Fantastic and Human Torch, whose powers alter their bodies only temporarily. Comic books incorporate non-normative and shapeshifting bodies into the gender binary by reinforcing characters' "true gender" through their consistent return to an embodiment with the same, unmixed gender signifiers—upholding the performance of gender, however precariously.

If replication creates the illusion of a natural connection between gender and the body, then a character could disrupt this process by oscillating between forms with different gender markers. Shapeshifters are uniquely inclined towards this possibility. The shapeshifter's transgressive potential can be fully realized when they break from gender norms. For this reason, queer shapeshifters have the most potential to critique comic books' construction of the gender binary. The only way for comic books to transcend "degrading and oppressive myths of Western masculinity and femininity" is through the inclusion of LGBTQ characters (Avery-Natle 99).

Shapeshifters & Queerness

Shapeshifters' ability to transcend the gender binary relates them directly to LGBTQ identities, or queerness. Queer is an umbrella term for people who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender (having a gender identity that corresponds to sex assigned at birth). Analysis of shapeshifters' gender identities and sexuality is complicated by the way in which they blur the line between sex and gender. If sex is defined by biological factors (as opposed to the socially

constructed features that denote gender), shapeshifters—whose biology is changeable—cannot be assigned a single sex. Part of the shapeshifter's gender expression (or performance) is the altering of their biology, which can be done at will.

This departure from the reality of the transgender experience—transgender being an umbrella term for gender nonconforming identities outside the framework of sexuality—has been the basis of criticism against shapeshifters as representations of transgender people (Keegan 207). If shapeshifters must change their biological sex to be perceived as a different gender, this could enforce the idea that gender directly correlates with biological markers. Even still, shapeshifters' ability to deviate from a single embodiment allows them to challenge the gender binary. If gender is constructed through repeated performance, as Butler suggests, then a shapeshifter who shifts between forms with varied gender markers can construct for themself a nonbinary identity, situated outside designations of "male" and "female". Gender fluidity, a subcategory of nonbinary identity, is a non-fixed gender identity that shifts over time. A shapeshifter whose embodiment at times has primarily male gender markers, and at other times female gender markers, would assume different identities in different situations. Oscillation between male and female embodiments could expose gender's performative nature.

While gender expression does not equate to sexuality, it is worth noting that shapeshifters who present as both male and female cannot be comfortably defined as heterosexual, since heterosexuality is predicated upon a rigid male/female binary. Homosexuality, too, relies on this binary. The gender fluid shapeshifter, whose sexuality may be difficult to neatly pin down, calls attention to the way in which heterosexual norms amalgamate sexual acts into a rigid sexual identity that enforces those very norms. Shapeshifters who evade specific identity labels resist

the mechanism of enforcement, by which repeated representations naturalize certain behaviors and physical traits as expressions of inherent gender or sexual orientation.

Comics attempt to contain queer shapeshifters' threat to heterosexual norms by controlling their range of gender performance. Teddy Altman, aka Hulking, is a shapeshifting alien hybrid from Marvel Comics. Although his homosexuality has been directly referenced, he presents as strictly male. De Dauw observes that the gender binary "creates only two modes of gendered bodily identity and erases multiplicity, which Teddy's body, through its abilities, automatically generates" (95). Teddy identifies as male, but his shapeshifting abilities would allow him to transform into a woman if he chose. Confining Teddy to a male identity allows the comic book to more easily incorporate him within heterosexual constructs, as he and his more feminine partner Billy replicate the active/passive split. Only when a shapeshifting character is allowed to express gender fluidity can their transgressive potential be realized.

Part 3: Loki as an Agent of Gender Deconstruction

Origins: Norse Mythology to Stan Lee

In mythology and Marvel Comics alike, Loki functions as an agent of chaos. Loki was first introduced to Marvel Comics in Stan Lee's *Journey into Mystery* (1952) #85 as the antagonist of his adoptive brother Thor. Despite Loki's villainous role, his mischief endears him to the reader. By constantly fluctuating between categorizations of "good" and "evil," Loki calls attention to the arbitrary nature of the sign. His oscillation between opposite roles within binaries allows him to resist mechanisms of oppression which attempt to confine him to a single role.

Another key source of Loki's transgressive potential is his position as Thor's Double—the villainous Other who upholds the hero's identity. De Dauw asserts that since

superheroes are automatically connected to masculinity, the villain—as the hero's Double—must reflect femininity back on him (108). Even in his male embodiment, Loki is feminized through passive "pose and point" powers typical of female superheroes, which do not require them to join the physical battle (De Dauw 98). Though Loki's passivity is used to confirm Thor's masculine strength—as Thor's active, physical powers repeatedly triumph over Loki's sorcery—Loki's feminized role primes him as an agent of gender deconstruction. As Thor's masculinity enforces heterosexual norms, Loki's femininity subverts them.

In Norse mythology, Loki's form and sex are fluid.[2] The Loki of Marvel Comics can also shapeshift—although Stan Lee's comics fail to explore Loki's gender fluidity. While Loki does not take a female form in the early comics, he does veer away from a single gendered embodiment by shifting into various animals and using illusion magic to create duplicates of himself. These abilities hint at Loki's potential to assume varied forms that confuse constructs of gender, which rely on stable performance. Shapeshifting's threat to the gender binary becomes even more apparent in later comics when Loki takes a female embodiment, enacting her role as an agent of chaos by destabilizing gender constructs.

Lady Loki: Gender as Performance

Loki's latent ability to transcend his male embodiment is revealed in what is known as the "Lady Loki" story arc. In *Thor* (2007-2011) #5, Loki is reincarnated into the body of the Asgardian warrior Lady Sif. The series draws on both Loki's status as the God of Lies and women's association with trickery to frame Loki's female embodiment as a deception. Loki's ability to "deceive" others into believing she is female supports Butler's assertion that gender is performance. Butler uses drag as a model for their theory, arguing that all gender identities rely

on the appropriation of gender signifiers. Like a drag queen, Loki continuously appropriates gender signifiers, revealing how all gendering is a form of impersonation.

A series of three panels depicts Loki's assumption of Lady Sif's body (See Figure 1). In the first panel, Sif's form hangs above Loki. The image of this floating form includes no face or skin—the only features constituting it are long black hair, a fur cloak, and golden horns. Rather than cohering into a unified body, these elements appear as disconnected costume pieces. By breaking Lady Sif's body into the distinct gender-encoded features of hair and clothing, the image reveals that these features have no connection to an interior source of gender. In the second panel, Loki appears to pull Sif's wig-like hair over his head—like a drag queen getting dressed, assuming features that signify female. In the third panel, Loki has seamlessly merged with Sif's form. Like the male embodiments in the two previous panels, Loki's female embodiment possesses golden horns and a scowl that replicate the same devilish personality. The viewer's ability to easily recognize all forms as Loki opposes the notion of inherent difference between men and women, which the male/female binary is predicated upon.

Figure 1: *Thor* (2007-2011) #12 pg 20

Loki's variously gendered bodies destabilize the character's identity. Male and female embodiments coexist on the same page. As Blechschmidt argues, the comics medium is ideally suited to capture the incompleteness and fluidity of identity "because its images in sequence are forever presenting multiple versions of a character's 'self' without necessarily resolving the character into a single, stable whole" (110). The sequence of panels depicting Loki's

transformation imbues her female form with instability, suggesting that she could shed her female-signifying skin at any moment.

The comic book's emphasis on Loki's appropriation of gender reveals that her gender presentation is a reflection of power dynamics, rather than inherent qualities. As De Lauretis points out, "If gender representations are social positions which carry differential meanings, then for someone to be represented and to represent oneself as male or as female implies the assumption of the whole of those meaning effects" (5). As a shapeshifter, Loki's choice to take a male or female embodiment reflects a decision to assume a certain social position. Loki's male embodiment can be read as a means of attaining a more powerful social position.

Loki's use of his shapeshifting abilities to incorporate himself within a dominant group applies not only to his gender presentation, but also his race. Loki is the biological child of Laufey, the king of Jotunheim. In Stan Lee's comics, Odin kills Laufey in a battle between realms, then finds Loki in the rubble and adopts him (*Journey into Mystery* #112). While Laufey and Loki are depicted with light skin in these early comics, later series re-establish the people of Jotunheim as Frost Giants—a race of large, brutish warriors with blue skin. When Loki is adopted by Odin, his appearance is magically altered so that he has light skin like the other Asgardians. Loki's entire physical appearance is an illusion which grants him social power.

Figure 2: *Thor* (2007-2011) #12 pg 14

In *Thor* #12, Loki momentarily re-assumes a male embodiment to travel back in time and change his own origin story. This issue depicts Loki's child self in his Frost Giant form (See Figure 2). Unlike the other Frost Giants,

Loki is small and thin—characteristics that signify feminine weakness and prompt abuse from Laufey. When child Loki asks his future self why he has come, future Loki responds: "[I wish] To become the ultimate power in all creation. . . and the means to that power can never be found in the dirt beneath the huts of our people" (*Thor* #12 pg 15). Loki knows that if he remains a Frost Giant, he will always be part of a subordinate social class. The only way for him to attain power is to assimilate to the ruling class of male Asgardians.

Following future Loki's instructions, child Loki watches Odin kill Laufey, then rushes to attack in revenge—"For Odin respects only strength" (pg 16). Child Loki is knocked down, but his show of courage, loyalty, and rage convince Odin to adopt him (pg 17). Odin's valorization of masculinity as a representation of power provides insight into how Loki trades his feminized position as a small, weak Frost Giant for a more active role. Through time travel, Loki's adoption becomes a plan of his own design—a product of his own agency. His decision to present as an Asgardian, as well as his decision to present as male, are strategic choices that enable him to reap the benefits of a more powerful social position.

When Loki assumes a female body, she takes on a social position which implies weakness. Although this may seem counterproductive, Loki uses her perceived femininity as a tool to convince others that she is no longer dangerous. As she performs the role of passive female, she simultaneously subverts this construction by using her form to manipulate others. Loki admits to Hela, the Goddess of Death: "It would have proven difficult to be accepted as a new creature with the same face" (*Thor #12* pg 3). Loki uses the social implications of her female form to earn the acceptance of the other gods. Her ability to deceive others into believing she is passive calls attention to the performative nature of gender roles.

Loki's female embodiment allows her to subvert constructions of masculinity and femininity. By exaggerating "feminine" actions of subservience, Loki mocks the construction of female weakness. When Thor orders Loki to return them to Asgard, she bows and replies: "Of course. It is, after all, my desire only to serve" (*Thor* #9 pg 18). Given that hunger for power has served as Loki's primary motivation for all of her comic book history, her words are not to be taken seriously. She plays up her passive female role to mock Thor and the Asgardian patriarchy that he symbolizes. Thor may be the one issuing the command, but Loki's exaggerated performance of subservience highlights her understanding of the constructed nature of this role—and exposes the fragility of Thor's power.

Loki further subverts gender roles when she visits the Warriors Three. She tells the men to take advantage of their new freedom, continuing: "If you wish to ignore and debase the gift Thor has won for us all, that is your right, but I certainly could not do so—and still call myself a man" (*Thor #9* pg 4). Loki's perceived status as a man who has become a woman recalls the Freudian "castration threat" that Mulvey refers to in her analysis of the male gaze. By referring to the Asgardian code of "manly" honor, Loki evokes the three warriors' fear of emasculation. The insinuation that Loki, in her female embodiment, is more manly than the male warriors threatens the construction of male dominance. Her persuasion of the men to exercise their active roles and confirm their power over her is an act of manipulation that subverts her performed passivity. If the Warriors Three leave Asgard as Loki suggests, then they will be out of her way. Loki twists the active/passive split, pretending to be passive in order to be active.

The potential for Loki to revert back to her past male embodiment allows her to resist a passive role. Her ambiguous gender amplifies the castration threat, allowing her to subvert the gender roles that work to keep the threat of the female body contained. Written and drawn by

male creators, *Thor* by no means evades the male gaze. While the clothing of Loki's male form covers his entire body, Loki's female embodiment wears a bustier that calls attention to her breasts. Even still, Loki's nonbinary status complicates the male gaze, as her shifting body threatens to reveal the fragility of male dominance. There is a danger in sexualizing a female embodiment that could at any moment shift to a male embodiment, since the male form cannot be sexualized in a system where men must be the objectifiers—and not the objectified—in order to maintain their active role. Loki's female embodiment can be seen as a volatile representation of the castration threat that breaks down the dominant male / passive female binary. Either the shapeshifter's female embodiment is sexualized, and this sexualization meant to maintain heterosexual norms becomes queered and thus transgressive, or the shapeshifter's female embodiment is not sexualized and male dominance cannot be sustained.

For the most part, male characters refrain from sexualizing Loki's female form. Even Fandral the Dashing—a character frequently depicted as a womanizer—has his reservations. When Fandral first sees Loki in her female form, he remarks: "Well, well—Behold this eccentricity of nature, a vile serpent trying to plant its eggs in another's heart by using words instead of teeth" (*Thor* #9 pg 2). If Fandral were to express attraction towards Loki, this attraction would become queered and threaten his masculine strength, which depends on feminine weakness. Since Fandral cannot assert power over Loki though sexualization, he attempts to maintain his status as active male by reducing her to a monstrous "it." Fandral's use of mixed gender symbols reveals his fear of Loki's latent masculinity transforming itself into female power. The phallic nature of the serpent alludes to Loki's threat as an active male, whose social status matches Fandral's. Fandral's suggestion that Loki is "trying to plant eggs in another's heart" feminizes the male-signifying serpent. Rather than impose passivity, the

reference to the female reproduction amplifies the serpent's threat by alluding to Loki's role as a witch—the "monstrous, controlling mother who subverts masculine power" through her procreative and castrating abilities (De Dauw 115).

Attempts to objectify Loki feed into her threat as a deviant from the gender binary. While in her female form, Loki becomes an advisor to Thor's ally Balder. In a full-page image, Loki's disembodied head floats beside Balder's as she tells him the truth of his lineage—that he is Thor's brother, and is entitled to the throne (See Figure 3). The markers of Loki's femininity have been warped and erased. Her hair blends into the darkness surrounding her, so that its length cannot be determined. Her eyes are black, with no visible eyelashes. Only her large, red lips remain to signify femininity. This relatively androgynous rendering of Loki's head, detached from her body, prevents her from being sexualized. The image positions Loki not as a passive object, but an uncontained threat—an apparition that haunts Balder, manipulating him into doing her bidding.

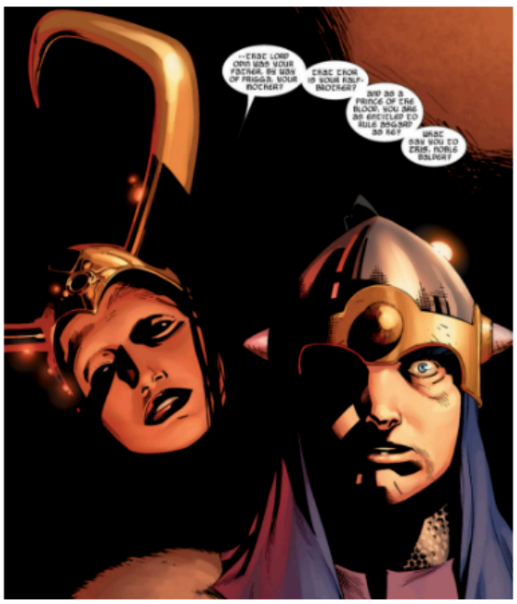

Figure 3: *Thor* (2007-2011) #9 pg 21

At several points, Loki's demystification of gender as performance is contradicted by insistence on the naturalness of her male form. After issue #601, Loki re-assumes a male embodiment for the rest of the series. Before relinquishing her female form, Loki says that the body she possesses is not rightfully hers, and she will soon restore her "*true* form" (*Thor #601* pg 19). Loki's status as the God of Lies encourages the reader to take her statement for granted. Her plan to usurp Thor proves her lack of regard for the "rightful" owners of the objects and

positions of her desire. The "truth" that Loki claims is not inherent gender, but rather a reflection of her desire for the social power represented by a male form.

Even after Loki assumes a male embodiment, the transgressiveness of her female form cannot be erased. In a full-page image of Loki's male form, he declares: "My own hands…my own heart…my own flesh… my own blood! Thus is Loki born anew! Thus is Loki *truly* beautiful!" (See Figure 4). Loki deconstructs the active male / passive female split by insisting that he is more "beautiful" in his male embodiment than his female embodiment, urging the viewer to take pleasure in his male image. By using the word "beautiful" to stand in for "powerful," Loki undermines the gender binary's reliance on feminine weakness. Loki's re-construction of femininity as strength is further demonstrated by his hands, which are curled like claws yet feature painted nails—making this signifier of femininity menacing. The snakeskin pattern of Loki's shirt indicates his ability to shed his skin and take a new form. The flesh that is "his own" is not his natural blue flesh, but an illusion—a costume. His statement that he has been "born anew" reminds the reader his ability to evade death as punishment for his gender role transgression, which is the fate of many queer comic book characters. Loki's chaotic threat to the gender binary persists across comic book series, in which he is reborn time and time again. As a representative of the gaps in gender performance that can never be closed, Loki's death is never permanent.

Figure 4: *Thor* (2007-2011) #12 pg 5

Loki as an Agent of Gender Deconstruction

Following the "Lady Loki" story arc, Loki is reborn as a child in *Journey Into Mystery* (2011-2013) and subsequently a young adult in *Young Avengers* (2013). These younger iterations of Loki introduce an innocence to the character, which counteracts his previous villainous status and contributes to his in-between position. In *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014-2015), Loki attempts to make up for his past crimes by carrying out the orders of Asgard. Gender expression plays a large role in Loki's struggle for self-definition, as he oscillates between various male and female embodiments. Loki's frequent disruption of gender performance allows him to avoid being categorized as either male or female. He undermines the power of the gender binary that works to confine him by occupying an in-between space.

Loki's rebellion against the villainous male version of himself—as depicted in previous comic book series—is not only metaphorical, but literal. The villain of *Agent of Asgard* is a future version of Loki named "King Loki." This future self resembles the past "evil" male embodiment of Loki that appears in *Thor* (2007). King Loki accepts the villainous role assigned to him, stating: "I'm not the fool who thinks he can ever be anything new. I know what I am. And I love it" (*Agent of Asgard* #5 pg 16). Rather than oppose the system that has subjected him to the role of villain, King Loki embraces this categorization. His hunger for power is so great that he goes back in time and tries to alter events so that his younger self will rule over all ten realms. King Loki tries to convince his younger self that his destiny is inescapable—that no one will ever see him as anything other than a villain, so there is no point resisting expectations.

Just as he accepts his villainous identity, King Loki accepts his designated gender. He maintains a male embodiment for the entire series, conforming to the patriarchal gender binary so that he—in his male form—may gain more power. King Loki's acceptance of gender roles

alludes to how the pressure of heteronormativity forces deviant subjects to conform. King Loki repeatedly expresses disdain for his younger self's femininity, commenting: "What a precious little girl-child I am" (*Agent of Asgard* #3 pg 2). Even though Loki's younger self presents as male in this instance, King Loki still refers to him as a "girl-child," interpreting young Loki's desire to be "good" as a sign of feminine weakness. King Loki's contempt for femininity reflects his understanding of "female" as a representation of a less powerful social position. He weaponizes gender roles so that he may rise to the top.

The younger protagonist Loki resists being forced into a villainous male identity box by switching between different gendered embodiments. In her first transformation of the series, she assumes a female form with long black hair and a skin-tight bodysuit. Her shapeshifting process is depicted by two floating heads blurred together (See Figure 5). The disembodied heads highlight the artificial connection between gender and the body. Loki's primary markers of femaleness are long hair and lipstick. By blurring the two gendered heads together, the image points out the ease with which gender signifiers can be traded in order to produce a new identity. The androgynous face suggested within the gray blur represents the gap between male and female which Loki occupies.

Figure 5: *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014-2015) #2 pg 16

Loki's shapeshifting powers interrupt her gender performance, preventing her from forming a single stable identity. One series of panels depicts Loki's male, female, and wolf-headed forms side-by-side (See Figure 6). The exact replication of Loki's body across

panels—juxtaposed with her changing face—once again points out that gender has no natural connection to the body. The inclusion of Loki's androgynous wolf-headed form further emphasizes the artificiality of gender signifiers. Additionally, all three panels are the same size, with no one form presented as more real than the others. Loki's duplicity breaks the illusion of natural gender that is produced by the comic book's replication of single-gendered bodies. While the "Lady Loki" of *Thor* (2007) refers to her female body as "stolen" and "false," the Loki of *Agent of Asgard* frequently insists: "I can turn into anything, as long as it's me" (*Agent of Asgard* #5 pg 10). These two positions call attention to the construction of gender in different ways. By referring to her body as a disguise, "Lady Loki" reveals her understanding of gender as an assemblage of cultural signifiers, which can be assumed just as easily as they can be shed. She only considers her male embodiment "true" because it is a representation of the social power that she craves. The Loki of *Agent of Asgard*, on the other hand, rejects the notion of a single truth. She recognizes and embraces the inconsistency of the self, encompassing both male and female within her identity so that she may break free from gender roles.

Figure 6: *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014-2015) #5 pg 10

In her female embodiments, Loki challenges the constructs of female passivity and male dominance. When Thor and Loki take a trip to Heven, the Queen of Angels makes Loki her commander. As the queen's "Mistress of Strategies," Loki assumes an angelic female embodiment (See Figure 7). While this form does possess the feminine signifiers of long hair and

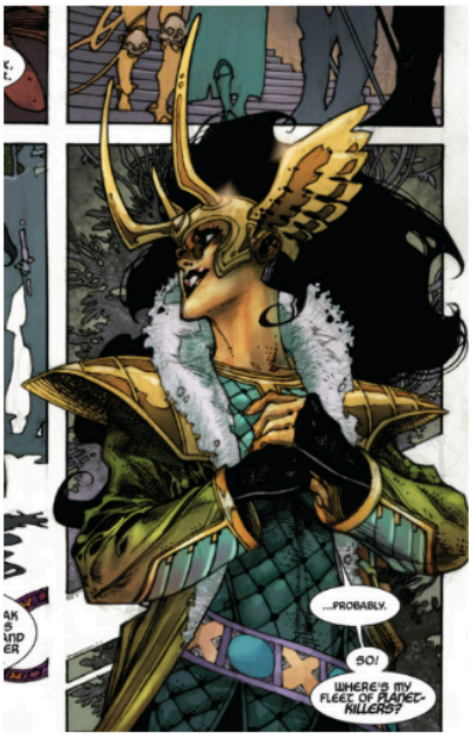

Figure 7: *Original Sin* #5.4 (2014) #5 pg 6

makeup, less emphasis is given to Loki's body shape. As opposed to skin-tight and revealing clothes, Loki retains the long green coat of her male embodiment, which gives her a bulkier outline. Her broad golden shoulder plates signify masculine strength. Loki's retention of the masculine signifiers of her male form's clothing allows her to resist sexualization and passivity. Her angelic form also avoids the trap of female monstrosity. While she is not overtly sexualized, her signifiers of strength—shoulder armor, long horns, and scales—are counterbalanced with the aesthetic beauty of rich colors and her helmet's golden wings. Her masculine signifiers become signifiers of beauty, subverting notions of male strength and female extravagance by fusing them together.

Even in his male embodiment, Loki challenges the active male / passive female split. When Thor first sees the Angels of Heven and remarks, "These are fair maidens *indeed*," Loki responds: "Well, so am I, sometimes. It doesn't mean I'm safe to talk to" (*Original Sin* #5.2 pg 7). Loki criticizes Thor for sexualizing the Angels, alluding to the danger of reducing women to objects. While sexualization typically enforces female passivity in order to confirm the male's active role, Loki's comment indicates a reversal of roles, in which a man's sexualization of women subdues him, allowing women to assume power. Loki's incorporation of male and female within his identity allows him to constantly critique the construct of female passivity.

Figure 8: *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014-2015) #16 pg 9

As the series progresses, Loki's male and female embodiments become more and more similar in appearance. Towards the end of the series, Loki is reborn again. Her new male and female forms are both taller and more rugged, with a broken horn and missing tooth. Side by side panels depict Loki in both forms as she confronts King Loki (See Figure 8). Once again, both panels are the same size, prioritizing neither form. Unlike her previous female embodiments, this Loki has short hair that signifies masculinity. Additionally, both forms possess the same non-sexualizing coat, armor, and scepter. The presentation of active female and male forms side by side disrupts the passive/active split that the gender binary relies on. Loki's mirror image forms emphasize similarity, rather than difference. As this reborn Loki faces off against King Loki, she rejects his desire to be accepted within a patriarchal society, telling him: "I mean, '*King Loki*'? Come on. Who wants to be King?" (*Agent of Asgard* #16 pg 11). Here, young Loki recognizes the oppressive nature of the patriarchal system that equates "male" with power and "female" with weakness. She refuses to conform to these designations. When Loki's mother Freyja, the Queen of Asgard, asks which side he is on, he responds: "I don't *do* sides" (*Agent of Asgard* #16 pg 14). Oscillating between gendered forms allows Loki to exist outside the gender binary and escape its oppression.

Though some comics scholars believe that superheroes who openly state their queer identity in the text allow for more realistic interpretations, Loki's avoidance of labels allows her

to avoid regulation. She escapes the trap of the token queer character. Furthermore, *Agent of Asgard* avoids conflating Loki's gender expression with sexuality, as the series does not linger on Loki's sexual orientation. Rather, the central relationship of the series is between Loki and his best friend Verity. Although other characters assume that Verity has romantic feelings for Loki, she adamantly states that they are just friends (*Agent of Asgard* #7 pg 7, #8 pg 20). This friendship helps Loki evade homonormativity, which neutralizes queer characters' threat by containing them in a monogamous romantic relationship. Rather than define himself as bisexual, Loki explains that he comes from a culture where the sexual act does not create a sexual identity (*Young Avengers* #15 pg 10). By avoiding labels for sexuality and gender, Loki can better resist heterosexual norms. He articulates this sentiment when he states: "Perhaps 'who we truly are' is a cage. One we'll never be free of if we cling so damned tight to the bars" (*Agent of Asgard* #10 pg 8). Loki recognizes that labels are part of the mechanism that relegates individuals to certain social positions, and that the only way to escape this prison is to exist between labels.

At the end of *Agent of Asgard*, Loki transcends the traditional comic book form by walking out of the panels into the white space between. He takes a marker and draws a door labeled "NEXT" (*Agent of Asgard* #17 pg 19). By deconstructing the comic book format, Loki escapes the replicated images of his villainous past self and frees himself from a single identity. This departure from traditional form reveals the comic book medium's potential to deconstruct the gender binary by embracing multiplicity, depicting unstable forms, and reinscribing gender signifiers with new meaning. In the final image of the series, Loki looks back at the reader and asks, "Would I lie to you?" (*Agent of Asgard* #17 pg 19). As a character that constantly changes positions and embodiments, Loki encourages the reader to question illusions of reality and recognize fiction's construction of gender.

Conclusion

The history of superhero comic books as enforcers of heterosexual norms illustrates De Lauretis' point that visual media representations are technologies of gender. By gendering bodies with signifiers such as exaggerated muscles, comic books create a binary that defines each character's social position. The muscular man represents strength, while the skinny woman represents weakness. Comic books naturalize the social disparity between men and women by replicating images which attribute different gender signifiers to each, enacting gender performance as theorized by Butler.

Despite their historical role as enforcers of heteronormativity, superhero comics' fantasy elements encourage deviations from gendered embodiments. Shapeshifters—especially nonbinary shapeshifters like Loki—widen the gaps in gender performance, threatening the patriarchal system that the binary upholds. Shapeshifters may reveal gender as a representation of social positions by using these positions to their advantage. Alternatively, they may deconstruct the active/passive split by extending their active male role to a female embodiment. By appropriating and relinquishing the social positions that gender represents, shapeshifters can expose the gender binary as a system of oppression.

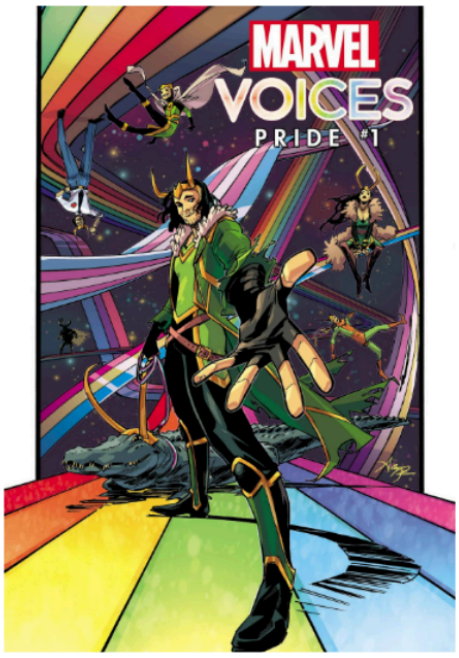

Figure 9: ***Marvel's Voices: Pride (2022)***

Shapeshifters' ability to occupy a space between male and female resists not only the comic book's reinforcement of sexism, but also LGBTQ tokenism. Loki's avoidance of identity labels makes it more difficult to market his non-normative identity to an

LGBTQ-positive audience. Though Marvel has attempted to profit off of Loki's queerness by displaying him on variant covers of *Marvel's Voices: Pride* (2022), even these representations fail to assign him a single identity label (See Figure 9). The pride flags surrounding Loki represent several broad and intersecting categories of LGBTQ identity. Beyond special Pride Month issues, Loki is not defined by her queer identity. Rather, Loki's gender fluidity informs her general struggle to break free from the rigid binaries that confine her.

Although many recent comic book series confine Loki to the same old role of male villain, the nonbinary Loki of *Agent of Asgard* was revived by *Defenders: Beyond* (2022). In this series, Loki fights once again to break free from the malicious male version of herself. She rebels against the comic book's construction of gender by switching between female, male, and androgynous forms that undermine the power of gender signifiers (See Figure 10). Loki's transgression of the gender binary is enhanced by artist Javier Rodriguez's deviation from the traditional comic book format, with limited use of panels and free-flowing images that layer and fuse together.

Figure 10: *Defenders: Beyond (2022) #5* pg 11

Unfortunately, the relatively small audience and low profile of series like *Defenders: Beyond* limit their power to challenge social norms. While screen adaptations may grant comic book stories a greater audience, the potential of films and television to challenge norms on a wider scale is counteracted by high production costs, which demand high returns. Marvel Studios limits queer representations in order to accommodate homophobic consumers. Consequences of this can be seen in the recent

television show *Loki* (2021–), which introduces a female variant of Loki only as a love interest for the male protagonist Loki—perversely confirming heterosexual norms. Companies seek to retain large audiences by framing queer identities in heterosexual constructs, or erasing them entirely.

Even still, the persistence of the Norse god of chaos in American pop-culture proves that the in-between-figure's threat to heteronormativity cannot be eliminated. Gender performance will always have gaps that need to be spoken for. In spite of narratives that attempt to subdue Loki by containing her in a male embodiment, her threat persists as she inevitably changes form and interrupts the production of gender. Series like *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and *Defenders: Beyond* open the door for more representations that utilize shapeshifters as agents of gender deconstruction, who depower gender signifiers by oscillating between forms. As powerful enforcers of gender norms, superhero comics have the potential to expose themselves as a technology of gender and deconstruct the very binary they produce.

Notes

[1] For more information on ethnic diversity, see Podoshen; De Dauw, esp. Chapter 4.

[2] For more information on Loki as a mythological figure, see Wanner.

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