

Transcript Episode 4

[start tune]

00:10 Rich

Welcome to the Wyrd Thing podcast, episode 4: 'Gender'. I'm your host this week, Rich Blackett, and with me are Suzanne and Jochem. So Jochem, would you like to start us off with this potentially spicy topic of how gender and sex and gender identity intersect with Heathenry?

00:39 Jochem

Okay, I can start, although I'm not sure how to start because this is a topic I feel very related to and I could talk about it for hours... Which we won't do today, I assume! Yeah, I think it's a very interesting topic. Because most people will assume that gender and sex are the same, or gender and physical body are the same. And for most people that will be true. However, having a trans background I can tell you that it certainly isn't the same. And, well, in that respect my life has been an interesting journey. Because I was born female-bodied and I knew something wasn't quite right. And when puberty hit it most definitely didn't feel right. Other people in their teens weren't happy either. – Of course, you all get new stuff on your body and everyone has to get used to it, and that takes a bit of time. And I think I was about 30 when I realised, hey, I am trans – I'm a guy – and then a journey started to discover: "Yeah, but what aren't I? Am I... And what is the difference between women and men and how do I want people to address me? As he, or as they, or as something else? And all that kind of questions. Which was interesting. And, yeah, I could advise everyone to think a bit more about sex, about bodies, about gender identity. And not assume gender, based on bodies and clothing and that kind of stuff. Just ask people or make it gender-neutral, so you include everyone.

03:09 Rich

I'm just going to say, obviously, I can't expect you to speak for all people who are trans or people who are, shall we say, gender-non-conforming. But I was interested perhaps to hear about your experiences as a pagan, a Heathen. And how that has... if there's any positive or negative things you've encountered along the way.

03:29 Jochem

I wasn't that much into Heathenry yet when I transitioned, so actually I can't tell. But now, what I notice is that some places are very gendered. So males have roles, females have certain roles, and most people don't think that it could be an issue. And I don't feel entirely at ease in that kind of places, because [editor: although] I do feel 'man', I don't feel the same as a cis man. So I will always be a different kind of guy. And I have really good experiences with a queer pagan camp which I go to as often as I'm able to in the UK, where they are very inclusive for all sexes, genders and sexual orientations, and that is just brilliant. There we have "people", and that's it.

05:04 Rich

I was just going to ask what Suzanne, what your thoughts were on this. I mean it's a potentially very sort of emotive, spicy subject for people – rightly or wrongly – whether they are trans or



whatever. But potentially it can be a very inclusive thing if it's worked out the right way, I would hope. What are your thoughts on that?

05:32 Suzanne

I think, yes, it can make a group very aware if they do have, if they've had gendered roles, if they've had very, even unconscious, gender roles in the past to be able to actually examine those and sit down and say right, have we, are we looking at gender stereotypes here? Are we looking at expectation that certain people will take certain roles in our ceremonies, or when we set up a campsite? Is there a split of jobs, of labour that naturally falls amongst gender lines? And then to be inclusive I think means that a group needs to sit down and look at those, unconscious gender biases, almost, and be able to examine them and pull them out into the light and make decisions based on, maybe more on the jobs that people want to do rather than the ones they might be expected to do because of somebody else's perception of that person's gender.

06:43 Rich

I think it's obviously about asking questions of people but in a respectful way, I think is perhaps what would make you feel comfortable in this situation and trying to find some root that is respectful but also positive, I think is the way forward. We talked in the prep for this episode about a big ritual that Asatru UK's doing, and I think in the rough, very rough, earliest draft of the big ritual we're planning, somebody's written, oh well, this'll be the point where the mead maidens come round; so we said, "Does it have to be maidens? Does it have to be women?" And the person writing said no. Just 'mead carriers'? Fine, no problem. Little things like that, very small, just to remove the gendered language. And I think that's positive regardless of whether there were trans or non-binary or gender-divergent people there – I think it's just better to not have it too structured. I mean there are certain groups who describe themselves as 'reconstructionists' who say that things must be very, very gendered and that the gods only see you in the gender in which you were born and all this kind of thing. But those are very small groups and I think the majority of the bigger, more inclusive groups – and it's significant that the inclusive groups are bigger and are more positive and are growing, whereas these smaller groups are not... I think that tells you everything about that. That the more these groups have become inclusive the bigger that community, the more positive that community's become.

08:27 Jochem

Yeah, and it's what you say, it's the little things like the mead carriers. For some people it won't be necessary, but it won't hurt them either. And if you call it the 'mead maidens' then it will hurt some people because they feel excluded by this kind of language. And then I think it's just a little thing to change it, and of course it will take people some time to get used to it. Neutral language, I think in the end though benefits most of us, because it is neutral.

09:22 Rich

I mean there are more complex issues which I can't think of a quick solution for, but there will be one. Like things like, say someone's having an overnight stay in a bunk house or something like that and all the men will sleep in one room, couples will sleep in one room and women will sleep in another one. But if someone says, well I'm non-binary and this isn't very good, where do I go? And I don't know what the respectful answer to that question would be, I don't know.



09:54 Jochem

That is personal. A brilliant solution would be to have three groups – men, women and others – but that isn't always possible. And then just talk to the person in question.

10:13 Rich

I mean yes, indeed, I mean there is that, but the only question that would occur to me if that would say are we not then othering people even more by pushing them into a separate little, well, you're the non-binary people, you can all go in this other place... But as long as people are comfortable with that I think is the main thing.

10:33 Jochem

Yeah, and I think the division into men and women is I think historically based in cis straight perception. So the men can't take advantage of the women - but gay people might not feel comfortable in this division either. So it's not just about gender identity: this example is about sexual orientation as well.

11:15 Suzanne

Mmm. Or a gay man might be really really happy that he's going to be in a huge room full of other guys!

11:25 Rich

Well, possibly. But that's just, I guess you could call it logistics, really, but I think a bigger issue is, I think, the way that gender perception in larger, shall we say, Viking/pagan-adjacent community where people perceive this mythical past where men are all nine-foot guys covered in muscles, and all the women are wearing chainmail bikinis and never the twain shall meet. It sounds silly but a lot of people, even if they don't say that, that is how they perceive the past, because they watch the Vikings TV series, they see heavy metal album covers or fantasy art by Frank Frazetta, and all that, which is all great stuff - but that's not reality, but it gets muddy for some people because the actual past, the actual reality of what people wore and how they dressed was... people didn't wear chainmail bikinis for goodness' sake, it's just a matter of... That's just fantasy artists conforming to the male gaze to sell heavy metal album covers, that's what it is. But I think you get this perception, people have this perception of how they feel the past ought to be. And I think I mentioned it in a conversation we had about this that seeing people just mention very casually certain things that had been found archaeologically... This wasn't even a Heathen page, somebody mentioned, I think it was a shop, "Oh there's this article by Neil Price, he says it's possible this person in this grave might've been trans"; and all that Neil Price had said was something like, "It's possible". Literally nothing more contentious than that - and the amount of vitriol and bigotry and hate in the comments was... I was surprised at it really, because it was people who certainly weren't Heathen but followed this Viking page and liked the Viking aesthetic, and it obviously touched a very raw nerve, the thought that the past might not be as special as they want it to be in their perspective.

13:45 Jochem

It's interesting to realise that when it comes to gender identity and trans and non-binary stuff, that the West as we know is the only and one civilisation that only knows two genders. All other civilisations both now and in the past have at least three genders, or much more The Jews have six, and in India where gender identity and sexual orientation is a continuum because their



civilisation is so much different and they have twenty-two different categories, so while we think we have the normal view, in fact we are the odd one out, with only two genders. And that may be good to realise, also within Heathen communities, because most probably the Vikings can have more genders as well.

15:13 Rich

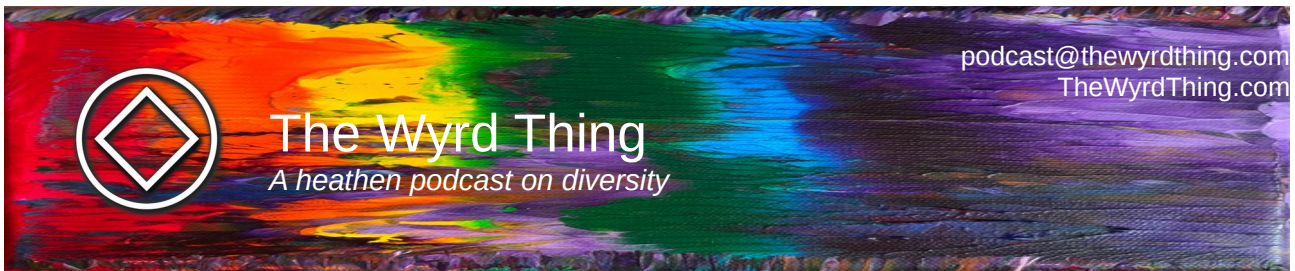
There's a... I might've mentioned this on a previous podcast... There's an article by Carol Clulow [editor: Carol Clover] called 'Regardless of Sex'. Really interesting hypothesis really, as anything then can't really be 100% proved factually; but her perception is that, or her contention or her theory, is that in the Viking era, or the evidence we have for that pre-Christian sort of period, there was no... there was only one gender. There was Man, and everything else was less. So whether you were a woman, a slave, or any other person, you were this other category. Man was the main thing, everything else you were just Not-Man. So that if a woman took up arms to become a warrior, or in any context, "Oh well, you're now a man then." In terms of their culture at that time. Now that doesn't mean trans in the way that we would understand it now, but that was the cultural interpretation of that, because Man was the thing that was important. Everything else was just this other category. Well that's a really intriguing... because as I always say, the past is weirder and more interesting than we can possibly, than we're really ready for in a lot of cases, it's fascinating. As we talked about before this, this is borne out in a very interesting saga called *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, or *Hervor's Saga*, and Maria Kvilhaug has done some really interesting work interpreting that, and a few other people as well, where this woman decides to take up arms to avenge somebody's death, and she decides "I'm going to become a warrior", and there's a very funny bit where she tries to get the sword - it's unintentionally funny - and she gets this particular magical sword called *Tyrting*, and the gender in which she's described in the saga switches from female to male when she becomes a warrior, or shield-maiden, for want of a better word. And she does all this fighting and is according to the saga a very fierce warrior, does all this great stuff, and then the character decides that, right, I've done my fighting, I've achieved my vengeance, I am now going to become a wife, I want to have children now - and then the gender switches back to female. This is not a projection or anything back in time, this is literally in the actual saga. And that's a really interesting, almost impossible... Do they mean that she changed gender, or is it how they interpret that, is she taking on a man's role? I think that's very interesting to see that as clearly as that.

18:15 Jochem

Yeah, connecting this story to what you have told before, it almost sounds like being a man or being a warrior is the same thing, so they had warriors and non-warriors.

18:35 Rich

Yep, I think that's the sense there. I mean this is a much later saga so you could argue many of the things about it, it's not like one of the old, old ones, but it's certainly very intriguing that that sort of thing happened. Absolutely. But one thing I just wanted to mention also that the more people look into things like gender identity and sexuality and things, when people think about the gods themselves, of course, are, you know people assume that they're very, very cis and what-have-you, but really, the gods, if they are actual deities, if that's your belief, then they can be both cis and trans and queer and straight all at the same time because their manifestations are unlimited really.



19:32 Jochem

Yes, and it is also interesting that a lot of deities have a male part and a female part. I know a very good example from old Egyptians like Bes and Beset, and it's the same god, or it looks like the same god, but Bes is the male and Beset is the female, or the female part, and I think we have this in Heathenry also. I think Freyr and Freya have the same tasks.

20:20 Rich

Well I mean Freyr and Freya is a complex one again because I think their names translate as Lord and Lady, so they're sort of potentially from an even older fertility cult kind of thing. Potentially, that's one theory. So it's almost as if we don't even know their real names - they're just the Lord and Lady, whoever they are. And in some traditions they're brother and sister, and married, which is, you know... I mean gods can do all kinds of stuff, so, I mean if you know anything about Greek and Roman gods that's absolutely fine...

20:55 Jochem

They could do stuff that humans can't do, indeed.

20:58 Rich

Well this is the thing, I mean... Well that's the thing, like, Odin doesn't eat food, he lives on wine. He lives on mead. He doesn't need to eat food, because he's a god and he can do that. But I think when people talk about Odin wearing women's clothes to do women's magic, to do seidr and all that kind of stuff, it's fine for Odin to do it, but in the culture of the time this was conceived as a bad thing for a man to do - but some men did do it.

21:32 Jochem

Yah, in gender-diverse communities the example of Loki is also famous. By being sometimes male, sometimes unclear, sometimes doing female stuff. Loki is a bit weird... or maybe better said different, anyway...

21:55 Rich

Well I think one of the interesting things because, when I first got into Heathenry I was a bit wary about Loki, because I was reading a lot of, say, 'less good' sort of sources or sort of interpretations... But when I saw how many, shall we say, gay, queer, gender-non-conforming people found great sort of theological solace in finding a god that, which they could see themselves in... Ah, there's a god who's like this, a god who's changeable, and mutable, and found that hugely comforting, is the word, I suppose. And I think that's one of the reasons why that's...

22:45 Suzanne

And also a god who is needed but not wanted, and taken for their skills but not the whole of them, and is cast out, is outcast but allowed in, is in Asgard but doesn't have a hall... All of this kind of being in society but not of it, can be a great resonance for LGBT people, for queer people, to be able to see reflected directly in the myth cycle somebody who is treated like they are in modern society. Maybe their experiences are mirrored directly in that, you know, Loki being abused, being insulted, but then being needed for their skills, but not actually wanted or valued.



23:38 Rich

I think also, having said that, I do know people who would be within the queer community who are devotees of Freya, who find oh, Freya's the one for me; or trans people who really, really like Odin. If only just to annoy the Odinists which is great fun. I think the gods are so diverse, and they are not just simply the god of this or a god of that, you know, whereas there are so many aspects, even if we just pick Odin, he's the god of hospitality, and wisdom and knowledge, but also madness, blindness, death and kind of all kinds of horrible things as well, and many many other things besides. So the gods are so vast in terms of their many multiple, multiple aspects, I'm reminded slightly of the way the concept of gods in Hinduism where they have multiple, multiple aspects of one particular god... I'm sure I'm describing Hindu theology appallingly there, but that's a very very Too Long Didn't Read sort of summation there.

24:51 Jochem

Hmm. Yeah, the pantheon is very diverse. And that's counts (?) every deity.

25:04 Rich

But what I was thinking of was what this means for the future in terms of Heathenry and inclusion and gender and sex identity and stuff. Are we seeing a general broader trend that's more inclusive, or, would you say in your experiences?

25:23 Jochem

I don't feel that I'm enough into Heathen communities, being a not specific pagan. I'm not sure. I can only tell that where I am aware I am involved, that they tend to be more inclusive. Because if a space is very gendered in a way that I don't like, I won't either for a long time.

26:05 Rich

What are your thoughts, Suzanne?

26:07 Suzanne

I think I'm seeing, from the groups that maybe I'm involved in, I'm seeing a general sort of society shift to having that awareness of inclusivity, of maybe saying oh yeah, we're now very much aware as a whole country almost, that not all disabilities are visible, and I think that is starting to extend into gender and gender awareness. And certainly in the last two generations we've started to have more words to be able to describe, for individuals to describe how they feel about their gender, how they want to describe that gender. The generations before me were experiencing a country where gender identity was very set, rules and roles were very set, so they didn't have the words and the language that we have now, and the generations that are younger than I am are starting to really explore that language and express it, and I think that is starting to percolate through certainly to Heathenry. We're seeing quite a big shift and exploration into queer Heathenry at the moment, and gender roles, like Price's work looking at *that* grave [editor: Bj.581 at the Birka burial site]; and I think that's kind of opened up the way for new academic studies, which then percolates through to the practice of Heathenry and an awareness of language, of gendered roles, and I'm hoping that is starting to shift, and I'm hoping it will shift for the better and people will start becoming aware of maybe roles in groups that have been gendered that they can then take



another look at and say well actually we can do this another way, and include more people because of that.

28:15 Rich

I would echo what you said there, Suzanne, in that what you say is great but also just to add to that, that the online communities I've been involved with, and not just AUK but sort of in the broader online community, the number of shall we say queer people, you know, queer, lesbian, non-binary or trans people who are pagan or Heathen online is huge, in terms of the population online. Now that might just be a sign of being online, I don't know, but certainly that bodes well for the future that if those people are there then the new communities and the new groups that are coming up, shall we say, then that's going to be really interesting to see how that evolves and what those people bring to Heathenry, and the new books and interpretations, and their contributions to the community and I look forward to that.

29:16 Jochem

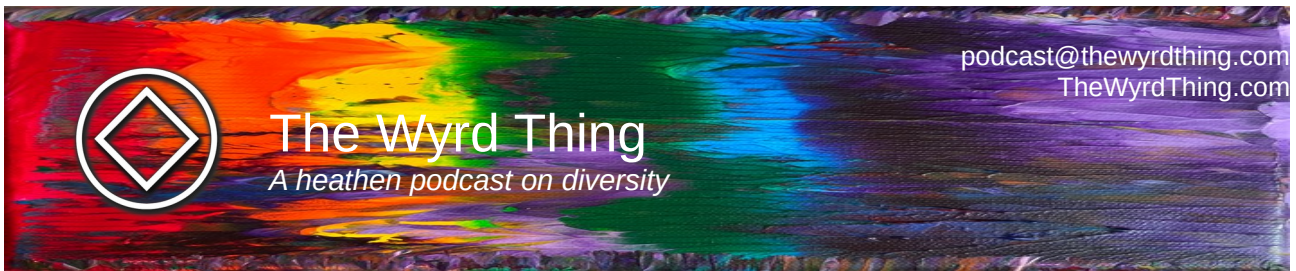
A good example I like to share is in the queer pagan camp that I mentioned before, when we have on the first day the introductions, we not only share our name, but also the preferred pronoun. And I think that is a nice thing to do, if the group isn't too large, obviously. I mean if you have a hundred people then it may take too much time, but in smaller groups I think that's a really nice thing to do so people can tell the group how they would like to be addressed. And what I also see more often with, in larger groups are people wearing name tags that they write also their preferred pronoun. And I think this is just a little example how to make Heathenry more inclusive for non-binary and trans people, and not to forget intersex people.

30:37 Rich

Yes. I think also I think we have to think that this is a diverse community of individuals and hopefully when these people come together, and that is very much what it's about, this community, that when people with different identities can come together with a common cause of this Heathenry, then fantastic things can be achieved, whether it's ritually, or raising money, or building things, or creating something, or creating a sort of group identity, that can be super positive. That's what I've seen, that's what I've seen, when people are included and there's that sense of inclusion is there, and you can feel in the air, when it goes on, and everybody's happy to be there, that's incredible to witness, really.

31:28 Jochem

Oh yes, it is. For example last week I went to my physiotherapist, and I told them about my experiences of transition. How different I am perceived by society now I am male, or at least perceived as male. And she was astonished about the difference, how people react to a woman and how they react to a man. And most people don't know this, because they are a man their entire life, or a woman their entire life. I have been both now, or at least perceived as both, so I know this difference, and that is unique knowledge to trans people or intersex people or non-binary people. And like you say I think it's adding to the experience of the Heathen community if we are able to share this kind of experiences, and therefore this unique knowledge, and that would benefit the entire community.



33:01 Rich

Definitely, definitely. This is what it's all about, building this diverse, I mean I've used this slightly flippant phrase in our sort of non-podcast chats, the "Rubik's cube of humanity", the multiple different colours and different arrangements... I don't mean that in a derogatory sense, but when all those different groups of people can come together and find a common cause or find a way to coexist then that's great, I think that is fantastic, where we can see those things, I've seen that at events that we've talked about with Frigga in previous podcasts. I think it's just a fantastic thing to witness, as I'm slowly moving to the older generation, because of my age and seeing the younger generation come up and I'm reminded of, there was one of the first big Heathen events I went to, and there was a couple I got chatting to, these two gay women, and we got on very well and we had this long conversation about sci-fi and books and stuff; and I was telling my daughter, my very young daughter at the time, I said you know, these two women who are in love and they're going to get married, and tried to explain in a nice way, and she didn't even care. She was said well yeah, obviously - and? She was bored by the conversation. Wasn't even "Oh that's weird", or "That's strange," it was just well, yeah? And? So? Here's me trying to be the super-woke dad, and she was like, "Yeah, and?" Didn't even care. Which is a nice thing, and I think that's the way it should be. It shouldn't matter. You shouldn't have to explain. So that was a nice thing, I think it bodes well for the future, perhaps.

34:49 Jochem

It would be great if that would be the general reaction, I think.

34:57 Rich

So I think on that note, I'd like to wrap up this week's podcast, and say thank you to our co-hosts, Suzanne and Jochem, and hopefully you'll join us again next time on The Wyrd Thing podcast.

35:15 Frigga

You can find us on thewyrdthing.com, and on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) at TheWyrdThing.

[end tune]