1 Disability in Medieval Iceland

Some methodological concerns

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Introduction

Medieval medicine, including its documented practices, theoretical underpinnings, and varied traditions, has long sparked interest among scholars. However, in recent decades, the complexities of how physical, mental, and sensory differences were variously experienced, communicated, represented, and interpreted during the Middle Ages has garnered considerable attention. This more nuanced approach accompanied greater interest in medieval perceptions of the body and was informed by the adoption of a disability studies perspective fundamentally challenging the idea that embodied differences must be viewed through a predominantly or even strictly biomedical lens informed by both medieval and modern scientific knowledge. At the same time, the notion that – failing successful medical intervention – cruelty and severe social exclusion were inevitable responses to such phenomena is no longer taken for granted (Metzler 2006, 2013, Eyler 2010, Nolte *et al.* 2017, Hsy *et al.* 2020). Applying a disability studies approach emphasises the diversity of attitudes toward physical, mental, and sensory differences present during the Middle Ages including tolerance, sympathy, and empowering viewpoints. Simultaneously, it challenges one of the more pervasive ways the modern period has sought to distinguish and elevate itself above the supposed ignorant, cruel, and miserable medieval past of the popular imagination.

Following this trend, scholars of medieval and Icelandic culture and society have also shown increasing curiosity in exploring how medieval Icelanders experienced, communicated, represented, and interpreted embodied differences of a physical, mental, or sensory nature more than simply biomedical phenomena; that is, as an individual deficit requiring some kind of medical intervention and to which modern scholars can apply their own retrospective diagnosis. Following important pioneering efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s, predominantly found in the work of Edna Edith Sayers, published as Bragg (1994, 1997, 2004a, 2004b), Brynhildsvoll (1993), Overing (1999), and Lassen (2003), recent years have seen growing interest in exploring what Sexton (2010) has referred to as the “rich cultural response to the

premise of disability” in medieval Icelandic society (p. 163). Thus, a sub-field of medieval Icelandic disability studies has gradually begun to emerge. As elsewhere during the Middle Ages and still today, accounting for things like fear, cruelty, and social exclusion as well as tolerance, sympathy, and empowerment all play a vital role in gaining an understanding of disability in the context of medieval Iceland.

Reviewing and building upon recent scholarship on the topic, the present chapter explores some of the key issues scholars face when investigating disability in the context of the medieval Icelandic sagas. These include the nature of the sources, the terms they use to refer to physical, mental, and sensory differences, and the complicated relationship between texts and the culture they hail from. All these issues are also present in the other studies in this book but are explored here from a medieval standpoint.

Narrative sources

Among the abundance of surviving written material produced by Iceland’s relatively late-coming medieval literary culture, the so-called *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas about Early Icelanders) have frequently attracted the most scholarly attention with respect to disability (Jakobsson *et al.* 2020, p. 443, Crocker 2019, p. 40–41). Though these sagas likely derive from enduring cultural memories and oral traditions, saga writing in Iceland probably did not begin until the late 12th century. Primarily focusing on events taking place in or in connection with Iceland during the so-called “Saga Age,” the 9th, 10th, and early 11th centuries, but only extant in a handful of fragments from the 13th century and manuscripts from the 14th and 15th centuries, or even later, the issue of their source value is both important and intricate to consider. Issues of dating and consequently questions of whether these sagas reflect the period they purport to represent, that of the time of their writing or preservation, or perhaps all three to varying degrees, lie at the core of any investigation of how they might reflect the dominant social structures of medieval Icelandic society and the prevailing ideologies and mentalities informing them.

The *Íslendingasögur* are undoubtedly the historical writing of their time, but they are clearly also infused by a narrative tradition with a strong focus on entertainment and with an aesthetic purpose. While far removed from the events depicted, they nevertheless are an attempt to portray an older age. Whether the sagas should be viewed as historical, fictional, or some combination of the two, they are first and foremost narratives. Even if a given saga succeeds, to some degree, in correctly describing the social reality it purports to represent, it also inevitably constitutes an interpretation of that same reality (Meulengracht-Sørensen 1992, p. 28). Thus, despite the “reality effect” a saga narrative might engender among its audience, the past lived reality itself cannot be assembled from such a source in a credible and comprehensive way (Jakobsson 2015, Jørgensen 1990, Barthes 1986). Yet, as

suggested above, this does not mean that the source value of the sagas with respect to the past should be dismissed outright, including, for example, the insight they can provide concerning certain prevailing ideologies and mentalities as reflected in the ways physical, mental, and sensory differences were experienced, communicated, represented, and interpreted in medieval Iceland. In addition, it must also be kept in mind that it is through language and discursive representation that scholars gain access to such insights as they become manifest in medieval saga writing (Ríkhardssdóttir 2017, p. 87–88). Being aware of these matters may seem obvious but maintaining such an awareness is particularly crucial in order to avoid projecting our own contemporary assumptions about disability onto the past.

One purpose of a historical narrative, indeed all narrative, is to construct an identity, be it personal or social (Erlingsson 1992), and the sagas are no exception in that they function as “identity machines” (Cohen 2003). As such, it is no wonder that they have been increasingly mined as social narratives that reflect attitudes toward things like class, age, and gender and, in a similar fashion, can also be mined as sources reflecting medieval attitudes and experiences relating to disability. With some notable exceptions (Bragg 1994, 1997, Wäckerlin 2006, Jakobsson 2014b, Künzler 2016, p. 259–265, p. 313–322, Wilson 2016, Lawing 2016, 2021, Crocker and Jakobsson 2021, Tirosh 2020), relatively few scholars have sought to explore sagas outside of the corpus of the so-called *Íslendingasögur* using a disability studies lens. These include hagiographic narratives, romances, legendary tales of the ancient past, stories of Norwegian kings, and historical texts concerned with Iceland’s so-called “Sturlung Age” from the early twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century. Saga narratives assigned to these categories, like those designated as *Íslendingasögur*, present corresponding issues concerning their respective source value. Yet, they are no less valuable in reflecting medieval Iceland’s dominant social structures and its prevailing ideologies and mentalities. In fact, continuing to attend to a wider assortment of medieval sagas beyond the commonly studied *Íslendingasögur* will doubtlessly help to provide a more complete picture of how physical, mental, and sensory differences were experienced, communicated, represented, and interpreted in medieval Iceland.

Terminology

One of the fundamental fallacies facing disability scholars working with the past is the teleological notion that disability in its present form always existed waiting for the present to address it properly and that it is entirely independent of the present ideas and forms of disability. Another is the notion that scholars can seek out the past vocabulary of disability as if it is scientific, clearly defined by all who use it who more or less do so in the same way. Indeed, a neat consonance between vocabulary and taxonomy is often assumed. Neither idea is true: pre-modern words are as a rule not concepts

and the absence of the later social structures of disability in the past may mean that physical, mental, and sensory differences must be addressed from a totally new standpoint. However, closely examining medieval vocabulary referring to such differences is essential and can provide an indication of how the discourse of embodied differences during that age was embedded within language and terminology.

The Modern Icelandic technical term corresponding to the adjective “disabled” is *fatlaður*, a word that is first attested in the 19th century. First, it is just a word that emerges as an analogy (literally it means “hand in a sling”) but with the advent of formal institutions of disability in the early 20th century it gradually became a technical term used in public records, such as *Hagskýrslur Íslands*, where it is translated into French as *anormaux* (abnormal). The term embraced a variety of physical, mental, and sensory differences of varying degrees and was also used as a way of putting disparate groups under one hat. In medieval Icelandic, there is no equivalent unifying word for various disabilities. In the late 15th century, a character in the legendary *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* is described as “hnýtt ok bömluð” (crooked and bent) (Jiriczek 1893, p. 5), which is the only known attestation of the term *bamlaðr* (bent), whereas *hnýtttr/knýtttr* (crooked) is a more frequent word, which was sometimes used for the 12th century King Ingí “the Hunchback” (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51 p. 331). These words do not seem to refer to any specific kind of disability but rather to various forms of bodily difference. The term *lama*, cognate to the term “lame,” is more common and also has a more general meaning as it is occasionally used as a synonym for the term *vanmegna* (powerless) (Unger 1874, p. 330).

Another word that appears in many hagiographic narratives and romances is *krypplingr* (occasionally *kryppill*, *kroppinbakr*, or even *kryppubakr*), which is usually glossed as “hunchback” and often seems to refer to precisely that condition. In some instances, however, it is probably a substitute for *bamlaðr* or *knýtttr*, such as when used as a nickname for the aforementioned King Ingí (Unger & Vigfússon 1868, p. 513–516), and thus was possibly sometimes used as a general word for disabled people. Much like its modern English cognate “cripple,” the term can be used in a derogatory way. For example, in *Hectors saga*, a late medieval romance narrative, the phrase “hverium þorpara edur kryplinngi” (every scoundrel or cripple) appears in the beginning of a duel when the hero is chiding his opponent (Loth 1962, p. 155). Yet, the word is still mostly neutral, not seeming to impart any negative value upon those it is used to describe, and usually appears in miracle narratives, such as when the Virgin Mary appears before a *krypplingr* and heals him (Unger 1871, p. 688).

Most of the other words for disabilities refer to specific conditions but are usually more common, reflecting a tendency to focus on the singularity of each physical, mental, and sensory difference rather than to generalise about disability. *Haltr* is one of the most common of these terms, referring to people who limp, which appears in a variety of medieval Icelandic

narratives, mostly in miracle stories. The same goes for terms commonly associated with sensory impairments, such as *dauf*r (deaf), *dumbr* (speechless), and *blindr* (blind), which are also most common in hagiographic literature, for example, when dealing with the miracles of the Christ. Three of these words, *halti*, *blindi*, and *daufi*, are also commonly used nicknames, which characterised the culture of the period and appear across all kinds of saga writing. Such nicknames are very often associated with physical features (Jónsson 1907, p. 161–381, Whaley 1993, p. 122–146, Willson 2008, p. 487–493, Sexton 2010) that are supposedly unusual. People are called, for example, *breiðhöfði* (broadhead), *ballhöfuð* (roundhead), *klakkhöfði* (pointyhead), *langhöfði* (longhead), *loðinhöfði* (hairyhead), *hrafnhaus* (ravenhead), *svinhöfði* (pighead), and *hesthöfði* (horsehead). All these nicknames demonstrate an interest in minute physical differences that would mostly be seen as insignificant today, and they are also indicative of a tendency to reduce people to specific bodily features. The nicknames listed above are not necessarily derogatory, apart from possibly *svinhöfði* and *hesthöfði*, which indicate that the person in question was thought to resemble a pig or a horse. None of these people would necessarily be disabled as the concept is defined in modern parlance (Cock and Skinner 2019). On the contrary, the tendency to look closely at any bodily feature might end up in more or less everyone being identified by supposedly abnormal physical characteristics.

When it comes to intellectual impairments, these are most often presented as temporary in medieval saga narratives. There are miracle stories where people with apparent mental illnesses are cured by the interference of the saint, such as when Saint Þorlákr cures a man who tried to commit suicide when in the throes of a bout of *hugarválað* (melancholy) but promptly repented (Egilsdóttir 2002, p. 264). And there are also the well-known *kolbítar* narratives in which an unpromising youngster eventually finds his way and becomes a hero. These “ashlads,” who are named such due to a tendency to laze around close to the fire, are often referred to as *afglapi*, *fífl*, *glópr*, or *fóli* by others but then go on to prove them wrong (Egilsdóttir 2005, Michelson-Ambelang 2015, p. 113–114, 151–53, Higman 2021). The narrator of a given saga will often distance themselves from such disparaging terms, which are essentially erroneous interpretations of the real powers of the unpromising youngster. This does not necessarily indicate that the society in which the sagas are composed does not believe that there are such things as *afglapar* and *fífl* but that most narratives where the words are used do not provide a good indication of how people would really fit into these categories. A further case that is interesting is that of Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga* who pretends to have lost the power of speech and yet people feel they can see that “hon var engi afglapi” (she was no fool) (Sveinsson 1934, p. 27). Essentially, Melkorka is much like the *kolbítar* in that she is not really an *afglapi*, but what is noteworthy is that her silence could evidently be interpreted as a sign of intellectual impairment. Later, of course, it turns out that

she has only been pretending but the episode indicates that an inability to speak could be seen as a sign of intellectual impairment.

Finally, the only case of a figure labelled an *afglapi* (idiot) that is not dealt with in the sagas as a simple case of misunderstanding is Helgi Ingjaldsson, a minor supporting character in *Gísla saga*. He is introduced as “*afglapi sem mestr mátti vera ok fífl*” (the greatest idiot there could be and a fool) and it is revealed that during the day he is tied to a stone and eats grass (Þórolfsson & Jónsson 1943, p. 79). Scorn is heaped on this sad boy throughout the narrative, in which he serves the function of “comic relief,” since the outlaw Gísli Súrsson imitates him in order to escape from his pursuers. Thus, the case of Helgi is a sad reminder that those like him were trapped in a social hierarchy in which they were seen as so inferior as to border on the bestial (Michelson-Ambelang 2015, p. 132–133, Jakobsson *et al.* 2020, p. 444–451, Higman 2021, p. 80–83). The description of Helgi is not precise but it is clear that he was unable to communicate. This means that the words *afglapi* and *fífl* can be used about him without the narrator stepping in and proving his detractors wrong, as they do in most other cases where these terms are bandied about.

What insights are then to be drawn from medieval disability terminology in general? It seems to be mostly functional when used in hagiographic narratives describing the healing powers of Christ and the saints of the Catholic church, including the Icelandic saints Þorlákr, Jón, and Guðmundr. The idea of a broad group of disabled people is rarely seen in Icelandic medieval narratives and it is also somewhat clear that a multitude of modern disabilities would not have been included in such a category. However, instances like Helgi Ingjaldsson’s also prove that there are cases that are thought to warrant terms – such as *afglapi*, *fífl*, *glópr*, or *fóli* – that can also be used to mock others who eventually prove themselves not to fit into these categories.

The issue of ability

The attitudes reflected toward people with physical, mental, and sensory differences in the sagas correlate well with the language used to describe them. Their treatment reveals itself in a wide array of intersectional considerations that cannot be easily pinned down in a catch-all phrase or general rule of thumb. The intricacies of transmission and relationship with history discussed above also means that it is sometimes difficult to ascertain if the scenes portrayed reflect lived experiences or literary convention; but they are nevertheless revealing in terms of social attitudes and norms, and even the most fanciful of scenes reveal possibilities of using, discussing, and negotiating embodied difference in medieval Iceland. This complexity is evident in the different opportunities awarded disabled people: while some are denied agency in their own lives, some are able to function independently or to receive assistance that allows

their will to be done. As Ronen (2018) points out, “at the basis of questions of agency is control of one’s own body” (p. 19). She has demonstrated that in the case of Old English miracles, different impairments were not seen as disabling as such. In the vast Old Norse literary world, a complex picture arises, based on generic convention (Ronen 2018, p. 25–26) as well as authorial sentiment.

In medieval saga writing, for example, as in other medieval cultures (Tovey 2010, Turner 2010, Laes 2019), when a Norwegian king’s ability to govern is hampered by disability, his *hirðmenn* (courtiers) scramble to either allow for his return to his former abilities, or alternatively to accommodate him in his new bodily circumstances. In both *Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum* and *Heimskringla*, when king Haraldr’s Sámi wife Snæfríðr dies the Norwegian sovereign continues to sit over her seemingly untarnished body for three years. His counsellor Þorleifr *spaki* (the wise) treats king Haraldr’s abnormal grief by moving Snæfríðr’s body and thus exposing her true state of decay (Einarsson 1985, p. 5–6, Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, p. 126–127, Teichert 2016). In *Heimskringla*, and even more prominently in *Morkinskinna*, when king Sigurðr *Jórsalafari* (the Pilgrim/Crusader) begins to exhibit signs of deteriorating mental health that cloud his judgement and cause him to make violent and/or unchristian choices, his courtiers similarly make efforts to temper his rage. In one case, an Iclander named Óttarr *birtingr* (trout) reproaches the king and stops him from hitting his wife and attempting to burn a precious book, while in another, a man named Erlendur (or Sigurður Sigurðarson) stops the king from drowning a man (Jakobsson and Guðjónsson 2011, p. 140–142, Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, p. 269–270, Jakobsson 2014b, Crocker and Jakobsson 2021).

In terms of non-congenital differences, injuries in battle may create a complex situation; while they embody the battle experience of a seasoned warrior and often do not prevent the warrior from continued fighting, they can also embody un-wholeness, in the eyes of society as well as the injured person themselves. In the case of *Grettis saga*’s Qnundr *tréfótr* (tree-foot), a warring Viking who has lost his leg in battle against King Haraldr hárfagri continuously displays battle prowess yet shows himself to be mentally affected by his physical circumstances, as well as with a slightly diminished status as an eligible bachelor (Jónsson 1936, p. 3–25, Sexton 2010, p. 151–157, Evans 2019, p. 87–92, Bragg 2004a, p. 240–245). But the battle injury that irks Qnundr also supplements his propensity for ingenuity in battle. In a key battle against Viking marauders, Qnundr thins out enemy forces by devising a trap. Later, when he engages in face-to-face battle with these enemies, who had previously mocked his wooden leg, the leader’s axe is stuck in Qnundr’s leg support, stalling him from battle and allowing Qnundr to deliver a blow that struck off his hand (Jónsson 1936, p. 10–12). Thus, the very thing that marks Qnundr as different is that which gives him an edge in battle. In other cases, what could be considered disabilities in modern times were in fact used in narratives as a strategic advantage in battle.

In *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, which takes place in the legendary times but concerns individuals that Icelanders would often trace their lineage to, Viking leader Ragnarr has a son dubbed Ívarr *hinn beinlaus* (the bone-less) due to a condition of his lower body where “brjósk væri þar, sem bein skyldu vera” (there was cartilage where bone should be) (Olsen 1906–08, p. 129). Ívarr is described as the wisest of Ragnarr’s sons and has attendants carry him around. In one key scene, Ívarr uses his perceived disability to his and his brothers’ advantage when the cow-god Síbilja is pitted against them by King Eysteinn of Sweden. Ívarr’s men catapult him at Síbilja, and he kills her upon impact, without himself being injured, thus weaponising his body and accomplishing a feat unachievable by someone who we might describe as able-bodied. In the romance *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* a character named Hörðr uses his hunched-back as a devastating weapon. It is, however, later disclosed that Hörðr’s hunched-back is, in fact, bags of iron hidden beneath a dwarfish-constructed jerkin (Hall *et al.* 2013). This revelation notwithstanding, this example similarly shows that there was room in the imaginations of medieval Icelanders for creative utilisation of impairments in battle.

Another narrative theme occurs when patriarchs continue to maintain their households despite what might be considered disabling circumstances. One such head of household is Þorsteinn *hvíti* (the White) from Sunnudalur in the Northeast of Iceland, who continues to attend to his duties following the sudden onset of blindness. His continued leadership is, however, contingent on the support of those around him, namely, his son Þorgils and later the brother of his son’s killers, who each assist him in maintaining his farmstead (Jóhannesson 1950). Hlenni *inn gamli* (the Old) of Eyjafjarðardalur is another example of a blind Northern leader who controls his own household and even fosters the son of local magnate Guðmundr *inn ríki* (the powerful) (Þorláksson 1880, p. 200). Hlenni’s character is further enriched with a stern sense of honour and a biting sense of humour (Tirosh 2019, p. 143–145). It is important to note, however, that Þorsteinn’s blindness is non-congenital, and it is possible that Hlenni’s was not either; a person born with blindness would perhaps face greater difficulties acquiring success and status in this society than someone who became visually impaired later in life (Crocker 2020).

Access to agency and status may be achieved by kings and Vikings with disabilities, but from an intersectional perspective it is frequently not within the reach of women, whose perhaps limited agency is further diminished. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, once Auður’s hand gets hacked off by an enemy of her husband Þórarinn, her body becomes an affront to her husband that requires vengeance while Auður herself loses her voice in the text; once her injury is sufficiently paid for with blood, Þórarinn leaves Iceland without a word on Auður’s fate (Sveinsson 1935, p. 33–60, Heiniger 2020, Lawing 2014). As mentioned above, *Laxdæla saga* describes the non-speaking and presumed non-hearing enslaved woman Melkorka, who receives little respect in her household. When it is revealed that she can, in

fact, speak and hear, her status rises; that the text reveals that she is an Irish princess shows that class and disability are considerations that go hand in hand (Bragg 2004b, Künzler 2016, p. 113–117; Wolf 2018, Tirosh 2020).

Age also comes into play in terms of disability. Metzler asserts that “old age of itself is not a disabling condition during the Middle Ages; instead, the individual physical or mental condition that characterised a person was the defining factor” (Metzler 2013, p. 153). This is further complicated by the fact that while some men like Þorsteinn hvíti and Hlenni inn gamli continue to maintain their household and status, other men are more adversely affected by the effects of aging. Egill Skallagrímsson, for example, whose eyesight and hearing diminish at old age, seems to suffer much more loss of agency in his household than the abovementioned men, suffering abuse and ridicule for his failing senses (Morcom 2018, p. 44–47, Clover 1993, Jakobsson 2005, p. 315–321, Helgadóttir Yershova 2008). Nevertheless, his place in the household is not without agency, and he still holds enough power to command enslaved people to hide his gold before he murders them (Tirosh 2020). Disabled children are of course in a very sensitive position; while there are no saga references to child exposure due to disabilities, legal evidence suffices to conclude that this was a consideration in parents’ decisions to abandon a newly born child (Lawing 2013).

Since the main characters of the sagas are frequently prominent members of society, readers might get the sense that disabilities were, in fact, no matter at all for most people and that they did not pose a significant problem in terms of their access to exercising agency over themselves and others. It is therefore imperative to recognize that intersectional considerations are the key to understanding the different access to agency that is possible for people with disabilities in the sagas. As Metzler (2006) has pointed out, in the context of disability and in general, “[p]opular notions of the medieval period as dark, barbaric, and superstitious, to name but a few stereotypes, still abound” (p. 9). While physical, mental, and sensory differences certainly posed challenges to medieval Icelanders, it is clear that a more complex understanding of who is able and whose ability is questioned emerges from the medieval Icelandic sagas.

Narrating difference

The sagas provide a great deal of material through which to explore these questions. Yet, they are not mere vehicles for ideas. As Friðriksdóttir (2013) explains, the world of a given saga narrative “is an imagined space and as such obeys the laws of literary creations” (p. 3). When applying disability studies methods to the medieval sagas, scholars need not view and interpret these narratives solely as either literary creations or reflections of social attitudes and lived experiences. Indeed, being the product of some nebulous combination of enduring cultural memories and oral traditions, on the one hand, and creative historical interpretations and reconstructions

of the past, on the other, saga narratives are particularly well-suited for the kind of hybrid methods that characterise disability studies as an academic discipline.

Like their counterparts in literary studies more broadly, scholars adopting a disability studies approach to the medieval sagas as literary creations have frequently focused on character depiction, including how physical, mental, and sensory differences are “translated into certain character traits,” and not uncommonly negative ones (Bragg 1994, p. 31–32). On the one hand, certain of the effects of aging contribute to the common saga trope of the “nasty old man,” including, for example, in *Egils saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, as discussed above. On the other hand, lasting physical injuries may just as commonly function as a sign of the hero in the sagas, acting as “proud tokens of properly reckless battle conduct” (Bragg 2004a, p. 92). This is the case, for example, in the legendary *Ásmundar saga kappabana* when the princess *Æsa* chooses *Ásmundr* over a rival suitor not despite but, at least in part, precisely because of the many scars and wounds on his arms (Detter 1891, p. 86–87, Künzler 2016, p. 259–265). Such “anomalies” are often simultaneously linked with poetic talents (Bragg 2004a, p. 193–238, Jakobsson 2014a). Yet, as John Sexton has shown, rather than providing a single definitive understanding of how such differences relate to character construction, saga narratives occasionally offer “multiple perspectives toward a right understanding of [their] meaning” without necessarily seeking resolution (Sexton 2020, p. 30, Sexton 2010, Künzler 2016).

In this way, the representation of physical, mental, and sensory differences in the sagas appear to fulfil some of the criteria of what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) referred to as “narrative prosthesis.” Beyond its function as a direct reflection of characterisation, disability in literary narratives has also traditionally acted and has been interpreted as a wider index of moral standing, “offering the other characters opportunities to demonstrate whatsoever they might do to the least of their brothers” (Bérubé 2005, p. 270, Garland-Thomson 1997, p. 9–12). This also seems to be the case for the medieval sagas, wherein, for example, certain royal figures are defined by the way they respond to and care or fail to care for the physical and mental well-being of their followers (Crocker and Jakobsson 2021). Of course, the same can be said of religious authorities, particularly in hagiographic narratives, as indicated above. Yet, in other instances, mistreatment or abuse does not always register as a moral stain on the actors involved in such behaviour. For example, the way *Gísli Súrsson* exploits the identity and vulnerability of the aforementioned *Helgi Ingjaldsson*, who is better-known by the pejorative nickname *Ingjaldsfífl*, does not seem to tarnish the image of the saga’s mostly sympathetic hero (Jakobsson *et al.* 2020, p. 456). In fact, there is no consistent moral index throughout saga writing arising from the ways other characters behave towards those who might be perceived as “the least of their brothers.”

More than simply vehicles for character description or development, embodied differences of a physical, mental, or sensory nature can also function as components of the narrative construction of the sagas. Bodies and minds that deviate sufficiently from perceived norms frequently demand a story of some kind, as they do in other or perhaps all literature (Bérubé 2005, p. 570, Davis 1995, p. 3–4; Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 6). Their appearance frequently prompts questions – either explicitly or implicitly – concerning how the person got this way, whether they were always this way and will always be this way, and whether they can somehow overcome these circumstances or somehow be “fixed” (Titchkosky 2007, p. 177–207). In hagiographic narratives, such questions, and the answers they yield are situated within a decidedly Christian framework. Yet, other narratives navigate these matters in a variety of different ways. In *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, for example, the narrative anticipates the question of how the defining physical feature of the above-mentioned Ívarr the bone-less comes about. The saga describes how Ívarr’s father, preceded by his new wife’s warning that they must wait three nights before consummating the marriage lest some harm will come to the child they will conceive, rapes Ívarr’s mother on their wedding night (Olsen 1906–08, p. 128–129). Ívarr’s “bone-less” body is depicted as a direct consequence.

Similarly, the question concerning not how she got that way but whether a nonspeaking woman named Oddný, who features in *Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts*, can somehow be “fixed” spurs her son’s first heroic feat to discover a piece of gold that provides his mother with the ability to speak (Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson 1991, p. 339–370, Bragg 2004b, p. 280–285, Jakobsson et al. 2020, p. 451–455). Conversely, in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, one of the most well-known *Íslendingasögur*, there is seemingly no way for Otkell Skarfsson to overcome his poor eyesight, which makes riding difficult for him and leads to the nefarious Skammkell offering to attend an important meeting in his place. When Skammkell lies about the advice he receives at the meeting, which should have resulted in a peaceful settlement, the feud between Otkell and Gunnarr rapidly escalates. Otkell’s poor eyesight may serve as a symbol of a lack of wisdom and his failure to see Skammkell for who he really is. More than this, however, it allows for the advancement of the saga’s plot and fuels the narrative forward, doing so again when sometime later Otkell loses control of his horse and causes an injury to Gunnarr, reigniting what had become a dormant conflict (Sveinsson 1954, p. 128–138). Later in the same saga, a man named Ámundi *inn blindi* (the blind) appears to be granted vision by God long enough to avenge the killing of his father, which similarly allows for old hostilities to flare up once again, reopening the saga’s central conflict between the Njálssons and the Sigfússons (Sveinsson 1954, p. 272–274, Walgenbach 2019). In both instances, blindness or poor vision, which is briefly overcome in the latter example, performs an important function in advancing the saga’s plot and pushing the narrative forward.

As in other literatures, in addition to sparking both “imagination and narration” (Hall 2015, p. 3–4), physical, mental, and sensory differences in the sagas also bear deeply complex relationships with the very conditions and possibilities of narrative itself. For example, apparent connections between trauma, physical injuries, or impairments inflicted through martial encounters, and the sometimes-conspicuous narrative silence surrounding the aftermath of these events provide deep insight toward the conditions of narratability in medieval saga writing (Heiniger 2020, Sexton 2010, p. 151–57). Somewhat similarly, questions concerning not only the conditions but even the possibility of narratability may be deeply entrenched in the representation, for example, of those with significant mental impairments whose capability for self-representation may be called into question. This may explain why such differences are so commonly found to be misunderstandings in the narratives in which they appear. The underlying perceptions of the mindedness or mindlessness of figures like the previously mentioned Helgi Ingjaldsson are deeply related to the possibilities of narratability, which frequently holds for modern literature as well (Bérubé 2005, p. 572–573). Such perceptions invite interesting questions in relation to the sagas’ tendency to avoid subjective positioning and to maintain an objective narrative style (Sävborg 2017, p. 112–115). On the other hand, the abovementioned *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, for example, makes remarkable use of the eponymous Þorsteinn’s blindness to confront the otherwise ocular-centric norm of medieval saga writing (Crocker 2020). More than simply a prompt to tell a story, in this instance, Þorsteinn’s sensory difference functions as a narrative device that encourages the saga’s audience to contemplate both the individual experience of blindness as well as the complex relationship between the senses and the possibilities and conditions of narrative itself.

Conclusion

Although the sagas present a number of challenges to scholars seeking to identify the precise nature of their source value, it is clear that they are incredibly rich sources concerning the ways medieval Icelanders experienced, communicated, represented, and interpreted physical, mental, and sensory differences. On a fundamental level, in terms of language and terminology, they provide vital evidence of the language used to identify such differences. However, this terminology, particularly those terms that appear to hold collective meanings, must be approached with the caveat that pre-modern words do not operate like modern concepts and the meaning of a given term can be remarkably inconsistent. Rising above the linguistic level, the sagas are no less valuable with respect to questions concerning the potentially disabling effects of embodied differences in medieval Iceland, but simple answers remain elusive. When seeking to understand disability in the context of medieval Iceland, scholars must

avoid projecting their own contemporary assumptions about disability onto the past and recognise that the perception of and values assigned to physical, mental, and sensory differences are subject to a variety of social factors. Yet, despite their source value with respect to prevailing ideas and mentalities, it is also important to keep in mind that the medieval sagas are not documentary sources but are rather literary narratives. As such, their depiction of physical, mental, and sensory differences is deeply embedded in cultural conventions concerning character construction, plot development, and the very conditions and possibilities of narrative itself.

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