Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Medival Icelandic Studies

Mediating the Other through Language:

Medieval Icelandic Sagas and the Construction of Disability Discourse

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Medieval Icelandic Studies

Katelin E. Anderson

Kt.: 221092-4659

Leiðbeinandi: Torfi H. Tulinius

September 2016

Abstract

Until recently, discussion of disability in the Icelandic saga corpus has focused largely on theoretical diagnosis and disability as a narrative function, with little attention or reference to established disability theory and scholarship. In response, this thesis evaluates how disability is constructed and represented in the sagas and explicitly engages with disability studies and a combination of literary theory and discourse analysis techniques. The main objective is to propose a framework of how medieval Icelandic sagas viewed and used disability in their social and literary narratives and to illustrate how imposing a more modern concept of disability on these texts limits scholarly discussion of the contemporary social dynamics. Given the complex nature of the saga corpus, attention is given to a representative number of instances of physical difference with emphasis on the use of language as a mediator of social perceptions of the physically different. This data offers a potential alternative model for further and broader discussion of disability and difference in the sagas without over-reliance on modern medical conceptions and terminology in order to present new possibilities and avenues for research and discussion of the role of disability in medieval Icelandic sagas and society.

Ágrip

Þar til nýlega, hefur umræða um fötlun í Íslendingasögunum aðallega beinst að fræðilegri sjúkdómsgreiningu og að fötlun sem áhrifaþátt í frásögninni. Lítill gaumur hefur verið gefinn að fötlunarfræðum sem þó njóta viðurkenningar. Til að bregðast við þessu leitast höfundur þessarar ritgerðar við að athuga hvernig fötlun er sett á svið og hugsuð í íslenskum fornsögum og byggir nálgun sína á fötlunarfræðum og aðferðum við orðræðugreiningu. Helsta markmiðið er að safna saman dæmum og sníða ramma utan um það hvernig litið var á fötlun í Íslendingasögum og hvernig hún var notuð af höfundum þeirra. Frásagnir þeirra eru í senn félagslegar og listrænar. Því var annað markmið að sýna að nútímalegar hugmyndir um fötlun skekkja umræðuna um fötlun í félagslega samhengi samtíma þessara höfunda. Ekki er unnt að gera margbreytilegum fornsögum tæmandi skil. staðinn er sjónum beint að tilteknum fjölda dæma um líkamlegan mismun sem talin geta verið dæmigerð. Einkum er hugað að því hvernig tungumálið miðlar félagslegum upplifunum á þeim sem er líkamlega öðruvísi. Þessi gögn bjóða upp á möguleika á annars konar umræðu um fötlun og fjölbreytileika í sögunum sem er bæði ítarlegri og breiðari, auk þess sem hún er að mestu leyti óháð viðhorfum læknisfræði nútimáns og hugtakaforða hennar. Þannig er reynt að bjóða upp á nýja möguleika til að rannsaka og ræða hlutverk fötlunar í íslensku miðaldasamfélagi og þeim sögum sem það ól af sér.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1: A General Introduction to Disability Studies

Icelandic saga studies, as any other literary field, has expanded to reflect a growing trend of social criticism in theoretical approaches, with scholars paying more attention to issues such as class, gender, and sexuality in the sagas themselves. Even the use of disability studies, a relatively young field of theory, has begun to emerge in relation to the sagas. Still, a disability-aware viewpoint remains vastly untapped, and what material does exist on disabilities in English-language saga scholarship largely fails to keep up with the field of disability studies. By applying modern models/conceptions of disability to the sagas, scholars impose assumptions on the texts that lead to biased, unproductive, and ahistorical interpretations of the data. On the other hand, if they focus solely on disability as a marker for supernatural Otherness, scholars risk writing difference out of the sagas and overlooking disability-as-reality, not only narrative. That said, it would be impossible to retrieve an indigenous model of disability from the sagas, and academics cannot reconstruct the intricacies of how medieval Icelanders conceived of difference/disability. Instead, I propose that by combining theories from disability studies and discourse analysis techniques, scholars can use a text-based approach to the sagas that engages with the specific language used to discuss instances of disability in the sagas to identify trends and ideologies around disability.

Scholarship centered on disability in the sagas has necessarily been influenced by the perceptions of disability in the authors' home cultures. This is not an insurmountable problem: more recent views on disability, informed by disability studies, have leaned towards models that account for difference in constructions and context. However, most scholars are familiar with and likely to apply the medical model of disability, and therefore a normative, uncritical understanding of modern disability to the sagas. The medical model of disability is a 19th century invention, one that does not mirror a construction of "disability" contemporary to the saga writers or characters, either leading to incorrect conclusions or, at the very least, ignoring potentially valuable and interesting readings of the text. The medical model developed and grew in favor in the 1800s under the influence of rationalism as medical science rapidly developed new ways to study and categorize difference, causing a development of new categories of

"normal" and "abnormal" in concord with the new idea of the statistical norm and averages.[1] Still, this conceptualization did not entirely replace earlier understandings of disability, and any shift in preference was certainly gradual and involved overlap, particularly given the continued influence of Christianity (and the associated moral model) in Western European societies.[2] More concerned with disabled people as the objects of the medical gaze, this medical model gives little thought to the personhood or experiences of disabled people, and the language of medicalization and normality associated with it reflects that.

While this model of thought still predominates the general perception of disability, disability studies has put forth new models that are much more useful to discussing disability in history. First, the social construction of disability defines the boundaries of disability by matters of access and how society is built, both in a material manner and in terms of information and education.[3] This means that disabilities have different levels of impact depending on the surrounding circumstances. For example, a wheelchair-user would be much less disenfranchised and disadvantaged if society was constructed to be entirely accessible in a wheelchair, much the same way that a contemporary person with a mild visual impairment faces no disenfranchisement or stigma of disability because glasses are easily available and socially accepted. Cultural construction of disability emphasizes the overlap of features of other models as related to the cultural context of disability, looking at how different societies view, define, and engage with disability, eschewing the idea that experiences of difficulty and difference can or should be fit into preconceived categories of "disability."[4] Because disability is so deeply impacted by its contextual factors, a disability theory viewpoint lends itself well to considerations of difference. It may be tempting to speak of "a disabled experience" in the saga context, but a shared social perception of Otherness did not necessarily mean a cohesive group experience, particularly when considering the impacts of gender, class, and other social (out)groupings.[5] To treat a disability studies perspective as narrow, or to use it with the exclusion of other theoretical lenses is an

[1] David M. Turner, *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.
[2] Ibid., 5-6.
[3] Patrick J. Devlieger, "Generating a cultural model of disability," in *the 19th Congress of the European Federation of Associations of Teachers of the Deaf (FEAPDA*), (Geneva, Switzerland, 2005), 8.
[4] Ibid., 8-10.
[5] Turner, *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England,* 8-9.

artificial imposition, given how disability theory can offer insight into the way social systems of definition and oppression overlap, define, and function in terms of one another and in relation to the societal ideal of "normal" and valued.[6] The increased use of disability studies in the field of saga studies, and medieval Scandinavian history more generally, opens new avenues of discussion and potential insights into the cultural myths and attitudes towards disability.

1.2: Medieval Models of Disability

Even recent discussion of disability in the sagas remains rooted, intentionally or otherwise, in ideologies of disability that do not view disabled people as equal actors to non-disabled people. This is, in part, due to the models of disability available to the saga creators and shapers. While the medical model in particular is still prevalent in modern society, it is definitively not contemporary to the saga-writers. They would have had the moral model(s) of disability, which largely constructed disability as a reflection of internal state-of-being and morality. The kings' sagas and bishops' sagas have vested interests in presenting their central figures in the model of Christian continental holy figures. They particularly invoke the trend of miraculous healing narratives as a marker of holiness or sainthood.[7] That said, this mode of thought does not dominate the sagas and to suggest it would be misleading. Due to the transitional and syncretistic nature of the Icelandic sagas, as well as their variety, it is impossible to apply one model to any given text. Conversely, to code disability more or less entirely as a supernatural marker of Otherness likewise isolates these texts from a reality in which disabled people existed, supernatural interactions or otherwise. Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis claims that narratives arise from exceptionality, and that difference/disability necessarily creates that opportunity; where society might stigmatize the disabled, narrative embraces the "lack" as the impetus for a story.[8] The inherently marked nature of physical difference/disability creates a necessarily symbolic, culturally-determined dimension to textual representation of disability/difference, so

[6] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2013), 334-35.
[7] Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, 128-29.
[8] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 54-55.

that any narrative depiction of disabled people encompasses both reality and aesthetic presentation.[9] The social existence of disability makes it impossible for a representation to be purely symbolic, as the social perception of disability translates to the text in ways that reinforce and reflect normative constructions of (and discomfort with) the disabled/disability.[10] By examining these narrative structures, it is possible to uncover elements of the normative narrative of disability. For a fuller, more nuanced picture, a more practical approach is to begin with the text itself and analyze what trends exist, some of which may match up with certain models of conceptualizing disability, allowing scholars to see the theoretical influences on a given saga's presentation of disability.

1.3: Language in Discussions of Disability

While scholarship rarely references the medical model explicitly, even work that does attempt to move beyond its framework continues to use the language (and the underlying ideologies) of the medical model. Lois Bragg, for example, believes that "fashions in euphemism change so rapidly that the route of least risk may well be the conservative."[11] While the framing of the language of disability as euphemistic is debatable, I acknowledge that the typical non-disability scholar is unlikely to have a background in the language of disability. That said, this stance ultimately creates more problems than it resolves. These pejorative terms are not used in isolation: They carry the context of a certain view of disability, primarily that it is shameful and worthy of ridicule. While they do have the dubious advantage of being understood, that understanding is incomplete and imprecise. To call someone "crippled," or worse, "a cripple," might suggest they have difficulty walking, but also offers tacit permission for the reader to apply their own preconceptions of disability uncritically, no matter the claims of the author to the contrary.

[9] Ato Quayson, "Aesthetic Nervousness," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2013,) 204-05.
[10] Ibid., 205.
[11] Lois Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 13.

The use of early medical model terms such as "impairment,"[12] "aberrance," and "deformity" may at times be useful and even necessary, as avoiding the language of pathology and medicalization is difficult when it is steeped in the assumptions of the medical institution.[13] Their use still implicitly encourages the writer and audience to consider ability in terms of normality (both in the colloquial sense and its originator, the statistical norm). These terms, likewise, are not weightless. They couch difference in terms of deviance, and even when that deviance is positive or ambivalent, the implications of the term and the ideology surrounding it is overwhelmingly negative. If a text describes, say, Grettir's grandfather Ǫnundr as *einfœttr*, one-footed, that is a relatively neutral and factual statement, and to instead describe him as "crippled" adds a pejorative, alienating layer of meaning that did not originally exist. Even with less outright pejorative terms, there is still an implication of distaste and dismissal that may outstrip what is actually in the original saga text. The impact is that disabled saga figures are dismissed from their context. These sorts of shortcuts also simplify circumstances that could contextualize or enhance discussions of the delicate, detailed medieval Icelandic social structure.

It should be clear by now that the current set of approaches leave much unexplored or unquestioned, with significant impacts on the understanding of the role and perception of disability in the sagas. Instead, I propose an approach that centralizes language and context along with explicit engagement with disability theory. As disability is a large and complex category, this thesis limits itself to the discussion of visible physical difference, particularly mobility and sensory disabilities, with the acknowledgement that these categories are not mutually exclusive, as disabilities can manifest across type, especially in the case of disabled people in conflict/combat.[14] Given the complexities of the discussion, I also focus on the precise language used in the text. This includes not only the terms used for specific differences, such as *haltr* used for someone with a limp, but the language used to describe the differences and

[12] "Impairment" in one sense refers to a relation to the statistical norm but in the British social model of disability is used to distinguish "an individual specificity" from the socially constructed aspects of disability. (Myriam Winance, "How speaking shapes person and world: Analysis of the performativity of discourse in the field of disability," Social Theory & Health 5, No. 3, (2007): 230). While Bragg may be using this term in the second sense, the lack of clarity makes it worthy of note.
[13] Jan Grue, "Discourse Analysis and Disability: Some Topics and Issues," *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 5 (2011): 541-42.
[14] Turner, *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England*, 4.

their circumstances. I will look at what additional description is applied, if any, or if the word in question is simply used as a descriptive phrase or maker. For further context, I intend to look at how much language is used to describe the physical difference (i.e. is it mentioned in passing, to explain something in the narrative, or is it an ongoing motif?). While it is impossible to entirely reconstruct the connotative meanings of these terms for their original audience, looking at the terms used in context can provide a clearer idea of if the term had any pejorative meaning or was used neutrally. One other aspect, especially when discussing thematic elements of literature, is to see which motifs occur alongside physical difference. Attention to language used for thematic concerns that appear in proximity to descriptions of physical difference will allow more detailed analysis of how physical difference functions as a narrative marker in the sagas. This approach to analysis is applied to five primary texts and one category of brief examples below, after which I will discuss trends in the literature and general conclusions.

Chapter 2. Methodology

2.1: Definitions of Disability

When discussing disability in a modern, medical context, there are certain expectations and connotations carried with the perception. Key to this discussion, and why "disability" as a concept is problematic in the saga world, is its definitional scope. "Disability" covers not only physical difference, but mental and emotional, as well as chronic illness, making it a very loose category of "difference." That difference is accompanied by an implication of social disenfranchisement. In the sagas, however, there is less an overarching concept of "disability" as much as an awareness of differences that are not explicitly or linguistically linked. It is therefore easier to speak of ugliness, "aberrant" behavior, or a particular condition, such as being one-legged or blind, than it is to speak of disability. Complicating the issue further is the fact that difference/disability is often, but not always, linked to social disenfranchisement in the sagas. Carol Clover posits gender dynamics as largely defined by a one-sex/gender model where maleness and masculinity are the assumed standard rather than a system based on sexual dimorphism and a Manichean divide of gender constructs, proposing that there is a broader and more pertinent axis of social standing/enfranchisement at play.[15] While Clover's discussion of power dynamics in saga age societies centers on gender, her conclusions apply here as well. She argues that access to power weights more heavily than other (existent but not determinative) power axes: a man who is old and helpless lacks power and therefore is disenfranchised, while a woman who takes a powerful role (possibly by taking up a male-coded role, such as the family-avenger or only son) may gain access to greater social position and authority.[16] She extends this as well to ability and class, seen even in legal distinctions of dependence, so much that "this is *the* binary, the one that cuts most deeply and the one that matters: between strong and weak, powerful and powerless or disempowered, swordworthy and unswordworthy, honored and unhonored or dishonored, winners and losers."[17] I quote this in full to suggest the depth of the proposed distinction, where access and ability

[15] Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68, no. 4 (1993): 379-80.
[16] Ibid., 380.
[17] Ibid., 380.

affects perception not only in one area, but many. This dynamic underlies the treatment of "disabled" people in the sagas, where ability to act in a powerful social manner or fulfill a specific role could minimize marginalization. As with any such complex social dynamic, issues of intersectionality come into play, and class and gender particularly seem pertinent to the discussion of ability. These intersecting factors play a large part in determining who is seen as vulnerable and who is seen as strong, but also how these concepts are embodied, both in the physical perception context and in language, metaphoric or otherwise, which reflects social perceptions.[18] It is not enough to simply say that social disenfranchisement may be overcome, but to examine who is allowed to gain or retain status when disabled.

Questions of social dynamics are also important because of the way Othering plays a role in saga narratives. As will be detailed later, other scholars have examined this to some extent, emphasizing the way disability correlates with the supernatural. Sometimes, the intersection of Otherness and physical difference is taken as narrative/symbolic markedness, other times as an indication of awe of disability, and sometimes as compensatory for disability. I contend that it is rather a very specific correlation of Otherness that is neither inherently positive nor negative, but a position of liminality. A person who is physically differentiated but *not* socially disenfranchised occupies a strange societal position, especially if their difference is not a result of battle and its associated narratives. The cosmological Otherworld occupies a similar liminal space, as it can be close to or farther from the "real" world, but maintains a sense of separation, functioning as a place where the hero or protagonist (and the audience by extension) is able to wrestle with chaos and social tension in a metaphoric manner.[19] That does not mean, necessarily, that disability is a metaphor for supernatural connection, nor metonymic of it. Physical difference may correlate with supernatural experiences, but that does not mean that difference is (solely) an expression of supernatural Otherness. It seems more fitting to discuss physical difference and supernatural incidents as overlapping experiences of Otherness. The physically different saga character, especially one who retains social enfranchisement, occupies a liminal

[18] Tanya Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing Disability Differently: The Textured Life of Embodiment*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007,) 4-5.
[19] Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "The Other World in the *Fornaldarsögur* and in Folklore," in *Folklore in Old Norse – Old Norse in Folklore*, ed. Daniel Sväborg and Karen Bek-Pederson, (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014,) 24-26.

space on that ground. I would argue that occupation of liminal space allows or enables, or, in Bragg's words, marks, that character to have experiences in the parallel liminal space of the supernatural. It is a subtle but important distinction, one that may allow for a better understanding of the social perception and position of disability in the sagas.

2.2: Literature Review

Prior to analysis, more precise discussion of the ideas behind the methodology is required. I use theory from literary studies, disability studies, and discourse analysis to examine how physical disability is discussed and presented. Literary studies and discourse studies necessarily have some amount of methodological overlap, so I feel it is necessary to clarify that my literary close reading will be supplemented by attention to specific linguistic and rhetorical features as used in discourse analysis. Discourse analysis, as a sub-genre of linguistics, shifts the focus to the text and, through the use of language, access to socio-cultural or ideological constructions, features which make it ideal for crossover with other disciplines.[20] As disability studies often draws attention to the discourses that create and reinforce stigma and marginalization, it lends itself well towards discourse analysis and attention to language.[21] These will be used in extensive engagement with disability theory and secondary scholarship, something that hitherto has received little attention. While emphasizing the cultural and textual context of the examples, I will look at the language used to discuss physical difference both explicitly and implicitly. From this data, I will look for trends in presentation and reception of difference within the text. Due to the large and complex nature of the saga corpus, I narrow my focus in several ways. First, while acknowledging that the composers and compilers of manuscripts included their own biases, and that there are no purely pre- or non-Christian saga texts, I am excluding the kings' saga, bishops' sagas, and contemporary sagas, as they overtly engage with continental Christian traditions and, by

[20] Alexandra Georgakopoulou and Dionysis Goutsos, *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 4-5. There is undeniably much more to discourse analysis than can be explored here, though the methods for discursive unit analysis would be useful to those doing more detailed analysis of a specific text, incident, or phrase.
[21] Grue, "Discourse Analysis and Disability," 535.

extension, Christian discourses of disability. These should be discussed and examined, particularly given that religiously-influenced models cannot, as has been popular, be reduced down to a simple belief in divine wrath and repercussions of amorality.[22] All the same, their inclusion here might confuse the discussion. Second, I examine only instances of explicit physical difference. While discussion of mental and emotional disabilities, as well as other categories of Otherness relating to the body and mind, is important to scholarship, the scope of this MA thesis does not allow for it. It is my desire that this methodology and discussion will provide a platform for others to undertake this discussion and build on the understanding of disability and difference in saga literature in a relevant, contemporary, and respectful manner. Finally, this is not an exhaustive examination or discussion even of physical difference in the saga texts. Instead, I have aimed to pull several key examples that allow for the creation of a text-based approach that may then be applied to a broader category of texts rather than attempted to cover all possible cases.

Unsurprisingly, much of the discussion about difference/disability in the sagas has been related to mental/emotional interpretations rather than physical difference and, as such, is not included in the literature review. Still, there has been some work done on physical difference, and it is important to see where the field stands. As any analysis of language and presentation in secondary literature requires attention to context and nuance, this review focuses mainly on English-language scholarship of physical difference in the sagas. I do address Ármann Jakobsson's "Fötlun á miðöldum: svipmyndir," and Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir's ""Blindur er betri en brenndur sé": um norræna guði og skerðingar," but the non-English coverage of disability in the sagas (specifically) is sparse. All the same, more explicit discussion of the scholarship in non-English languages should be done by fluent or native speakers who are attentive to the connotations of their language of disability and the associated cultural impressions, work which I am not qualified to do. While this thesis focuses on the *narrative* of disability in the sagas, I largely restrict myself to commentary on the sagas themselves. Law texts, as well as archeological and historical studies, are used when appropriate and applicable to inform the context but remain informative rather than central to the discussion. My goal is not to prove the existence of disabled people in early Icelandic

[22] Irina Metzler. *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking About Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, C. 1100-1400,* (London: Routledge, 2006, 12-13.

society, nor to make a definitive argument for how they were treated, but to examine how they were presented in text and how, in turn, the scholarly field can more thoughtfully and respectfully engage with these works.

A review must begin with Lois Bragg's *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga,* which is the longest and most detailed text in English that discusses disability in the sagas and is therefore highly prominent in the discussion as a whole.[23] As it is intended for a somewhat more general audience, Bragg is careful to include enough detail for readers unfamiliar with disability theory, sagas, or both to have a coherent context.[24] Bragg's central argument is, in many ways, explained at the end of her first chapter. She writes "Once we begin to shed our modern biases against disability, we find that Icelandic narrative deploys motifs in clusters… and that these are motifs of markedness, not handicap. To be a great man, a god, a founder, a legend, is to be marked," and that understanding these marks of difference, alongside "motifs of sexual aberrance and foreign origin" gives the reader a greater understanding of the richness of the narrative patterns and the worldview of medieval Icelanders.[25] Overall, the approach and conclusions she draws in regards to this are interesting and helpful in interpreting the sagas. Yet, however sensitive her account attempts to be, Bragg's language gets the better of her and creates a text that tries to analyze disability without modern biases, only to retain pejorative connotations. Bragg is aware of context and thoughtful in parsing the circumstances where disability is described, some instances of which will be discussed in detail later. Her introduction includes an orientation to the social model of disability and some basic premises of disability studies, but her analysis lacks thorough engagement with disability theory or scholarship, though she includes and responds to the work of medieval Norse scholars.[26] Despite claiming that these

[23] Bragg also wrote an earlier article about representations of disability in pre-modern literature, but as it covers many of the same points, it is not addressed further here, though the citation is included for reference: Lois Bragg, "From the Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature," *Disability and Society* 12, no. 2 (1997): 165-78.
[24] Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis*, 12.
[25] Ibid., 51.
[26] Ibid., 10-11. The four main working assumptions she derives from disability studies are indeed central points, which can essentially be summed up as that constructions and applications of difference and norms vary both synchronically and diachronically and that these are affected by intersectionality, but will be present in all societies. Bragg adds one further assumption, that in some societies, "misfits" may be regarded "not with fear, scorn, or impatience… but with awe" (Ibid., 11). While it is true that perception of Otherness is nuanced and varied, her own presentation of the constructed Other, in language and tone, tends toward the dismissive and derogatory.

theories underpin her work, the absence of disability theory is readily apparent. Furthermore, rather than engage with the language used to describe physical difference, she often chooses to apply modern terms without nuance.

In her introduction, Bragg informs the reader that she uses the "ordinary English words that were in general use until the mid-twentieth century" to describe "anomalies" and those who had them.[27] Her list of examples includes a number of definitively pejorative words, such as "cripple," "madman," and "sodomy," and several words that had a pejorative origin, used in their pejorative contexts, such as "lame" and "dumb."[28] The pejorative history of these words is easily found and understood, and these words are not the accepted terminology in most disabled/mentally ill communities – explanations of why these words are actively and passively harmful also abound.[29] Her defense of the pejorative terms is that "fashions in euphemism change so rapidly that the route of least risk may well be the conservative" and that it would be absurd to describe a "fictional Swedish berserker, seen slobbering, howling, and buggering his way across the Icelandic landscape as "developmentally challenged," "speech-impaired," or least of all, "gay.""[30] Her hypothetical example is indeed absurd, as it would be incredibly unlikely for any scholar of social theory or saga studies to apply those terms to such a fictional character when the social construction of each category is so alien to the saga writers' understanding of the world or even difference. Furthermore, he still would not fit into those categories even in the modern construction. In short, the example is a strawman that misses the point of the objections to her use of pejoratives. If changeable terminology is the concern, Bragg could simply use a description of the actual difference or the language of the text. Questions of euphemism aside (debatable though they are in this context), there is a very realistic and grounded argument against choosing words with such negative histories and connotations. In choosing the pejorative terms in her interpretation, Bragg imposes a pejorative view of disability onto the text, even while making the claim that disability (or physical difference) was not necessarily viewed negatively in medieval Icelandic culture. The implications become especially difficult in a key, often-cited text in this sub-field.

[27] Ibid., 13.
[28] Ibid., 13.
[29] Deaf, it should be noted, is an accepted term of use in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing communities.
[30] Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis*, 13.

Another prominent work is "Contextualizing Old Norse-Icelandic Bodies," a 2006 conference paper presented by Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan, which looks at the shape of the body and discussions of deformity in both text and law. She argues that laws and practices around the mutilation of criminals' bodies were framed as a message to the community and that, as part of the socio-economic class structure, slaves were not considered as equally human and their "flesh was similarly subjected to different codes and reading strategies than free beings."[31] The centrality of flesh had real-life implications in cases of legal infanticide, as she discusses in depth, "without the body that could be read as humanly formed, the child could be abandoned and denied participation in the human community, in this life and the afterlife."[32] To illustrate this theme in the saga realm, Eichhorn-Mulligan turns to *Rígsþula* and analyzes the language used to describe the members of each socioeconomic family metonym, concluding that for this poem, at least, "the slave's body, with its subjectivity to disease, age, and work, is characterized by a kind of compromising, mundane corporeality, while the idealized body is one that resists fixation."[33] The premise of the article is interesting, as is the discussion of physical attractiveness as a social marker, but germane to this discussion is the way that Eichhorn-Mulligan speaks about the bodies of the *þræll*. She observes that the physical difference and unattractive forms of Þræll and his family "may be rooted in the overwork, malnutrition, and disease that were the realities of a slave's life" while the poem itself "implies that the twisted, deformed body is physiologically natural for members of a class deprived of a legal voice and valued largely for their physical labor."[34] It is an important distinction and note to make, and Eichhorn-Mulligan underlines the moral aspect of the correlation by describing the effects of overwork, malnutrition, and disease in largely medical terms that are theoretically value-neutral. This attempt to decouple the assumptions made by the "author" of the *þula* from physical realities (and, by extension, the reader's assumptions about reading the physical form) is important and necessary. However, the distance added by medical terminology is to some extent undermined by her use of phrases like

[31]Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Contextualizing Old Norse-Icelandic Bodies," in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles: Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference Durham and York. 6-12 August, 2006*, vol I, eds. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick(Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Durham University, 2006), 198-99.
[32] Ibid., 199.
[33] Ibid., 204.
[34] Ibid., 201.

"skeletal disfigurement," "the body is twisted and bent at the core," and "osteoarthritis… crippled the spine."[35] Eichhorn-Mulligan seems to intend these terms to highlight the text's implicit assumption of negativity attached to difference, but the vagueness of the lines – particularly in a section attempting to distance itself from the claims the text makes about an entire social class in metonym – muddles her intention. While subtle, this illustrates how the language used to discuss disability and difference is so charged with meaning and pejoration that even the most careful of scholars can unintentionally uphold the attitude of the terms while attempting to critique them. That said, her analysis is valuable and makes the point that class and body, at least in this text, are inextricably linked and presented in an overtly negative way.

Still, more recent work on disability/physical difference in the sagas has made efforts to include reference to, at the very least, the basic principles of disability studies and movement away from the uncritical application of the medical model. Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir looks at instances of physical difference in the gods, with attention to how much (or little) it impacts them, and differences between old and young gods.[36] Ármann Jakobsson's recent "Fötlun á miðöldum: svipmyndir" looks at several examples or types of difference in the sagas, and the relations of power and helplessness to the presentation of disability as necessarily affected by the worldview of the saga writers.[37] He notes that saga presentation of disability is neither complex nor straightforward, though far from entirely unsympathetic, as people we might categorize as people with disabilities do have roles to play in the narrative.[38] However, he also speaks of heroic figures having the ability to "yfirvinna fötlun sína."[39] John P. Sexton's "Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas" likewise frames disability/difference as something that can be overcome, referencing both Qnundr tréfótr and Njáll of *Njáls saga*.[40] He speaks of it as a social construction, drawing from

[35] Ibid., 201.
[36] Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, "Blindur er betri en brenndur sé: um norræna guði og skerðingar," ed. Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson og Kristín Björnsdóttir, (Reykjavík : Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2013), 31.
[37] Ármann Jakobsson, "Fötlun á miðöldum: svipmyndir" in *Fötlun og Menning: Íslandssagan í öðru ljósi*, ed. Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson og Kristín Björnsdóttir, (Reykjavík : Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2013), 51-52.
[38] Ibid., 56.
[39] Ibid., 56. "Overcome their disabilities."
[40] John P. Sexton, "Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas," in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Joshua R. Eyler, (London and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 149-163.

several key disability studies works, such as Tom Shakespeare's "The Social Model of Disability" and Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* in addition to Bragg.[41] Yet, to speak of disability (or difference) as something that can and must be overcome to participate in the social order is troubling. Certainly one can speak of physically different people overcoming the social perception of their differences, as will be done later on, but these heroic figures do not overcome or erase their physical differences, instead adapting to them and continuing to excel. This constant reinforcement of Otherness is touched upon in Rebecca Conway's master's thesis, which looks at the use of wooden instruments in several sagas and makes some thoughtful observations about the role of wooden prosthetic legs in the sagas. She notes that each saga text notes the permanency of the condition as well as the framing of the *tréfótr* as a "tool for movement rather than a completely assimilated limb."[42] Leglessness, this suggests, is not something that can be "overcome," but that requires a continual state of navigation using a tool invariably alienated from the body.

Another recent master's thesis, Josh Wilson's "Inter-crural Relations: Abnormal representations of legs and feet in the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*," does engage with disability theory to some extent, to establish again how disability as a category is not contemporary to the sagas, as well as discussion of which models of difference were available and applicable at the time; it also pays thorough attention to the religious constructions as outlined by Irina Metzler.[43] All the same, the major focus of the thesis remains on "abnormal" legs as part of narrative and symbolism, albeit in conversation with the intratextual perception of these differences. All of these scholarly works demonstrate some amount of attention to disability theory, and perhaps a growing trend of the inclusion of physical difference as a culturally constructed part of the saga narratives. Metzler, mentioned above, is often cited from her book *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking About Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, C. 1100-1400*, which offers valuable insight into medieval constructions of disability,

[41] Ibid., 149-150. In the footnotes here, Sexton also speaks of having "resisted… softening the language" used to speak of difference in the sagas, implicitly claiming that the field of disability studies does so, which I have earlier refuted.
[42] Rebecca Conway, Stumped in the Sagas: Woodland and Wooden Tools in the Íslendingasögur." Master's thesis, (Háskóli Íslands, Reykjavík, 2015), 13.
[43] Josh Wilson. "Inter-crural Relations: Abnormal representations of legs and feet in the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*," Master's thesis, (Háskóli Íslands, Reykjavík, 2016), 13-16.

but this should not be the only engagement that saga scholars have with disability theory. There is an overwhelming tendency to focus on physical difference as solely a narrative symbol or to frame it in current perceptions of disability. The question remains as to how to practically analyze the presentation of physical difference in the sagas using as much as possible of the cultural construction present in the texts themselves while not conflating these with modern narratives around difference and disability.

Chapter 3. Analysis

3.1: *Hávamál*:

It makes sense to begin this discussion with *Hávamál,* which explicitly addresses the social perception of physical difference. *Hávamál,* one of the poems found in the Poetic Edda, is a series of verses that offer advice and wisdom, framed as counsel from Óðinn along with narrative about his own relationship to wisdom. Though the poem covers wisdom and advice in relation to a variety of topics, social relations and hospitality among them, stanza 71 of *Hávamál* is very interesting in that it deals with physical difference explicitly. Given the short length of the stanza, I quote it here in full:

> *Haltr ríðr hrossi,*
> *hjǫrð rekr* handar*vanr,*
> *daufr vegr ok dugir;*
> *blindr er betri*
> *en brenndr sé;*
> *nýtr manngi nás.*[44]

I would gloss it, very literally, with minor reordering for English syntax, as: [The] halt rides [a] horse,/ [the] handless (lit. hand-lacking) drives [the] herd,/ [the] deaf fights and may suffice/shows prowess,/ blind is better/ than burned [to] be;/ fit [to] nobody [is a] corpse. The terms used for each difference are straightforwardly descriptive. *Haltr* means to have a limp, *handarvanr* to be missing a hand, *daufr* to be deaf, and *blindr* to be blind.[45] It is possible that some of these terms carried a negative connotation, as the English cognate "halt" does (to a very limited extent, though arguably less than "lame.")[46] However, based on the surrounding context and overall theme of the stanza, I would argue that any pejoration is minimal – these words may carry a negative connotation, but it would be difficult to argue that they are slurs or project a derogatory

[44] Jónas Kristjánsson, Vésteinn Ólason, and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, eds, "Hávamál" in Íslenzk fornrit Eddukvæði Vol. 1, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 336. While textual variations provide interesting commentary, the edited editions used are sufficient for this project.
[45] *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, by Geir Zoëga (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 183; 184; 86; 59.
[46] While "halt" has largely fallen out of favor in colloquial speech, there has been discussion on how "lame," despite its generalization as a mild negative, derives its abstract meanings from the original pejorative, and that the pattern of semantic usage continues to reflect elements of the word in its disability context, regardless of intent or awareness on the part of speakers who use the newer usage colloquially (Jessi E. Aaron, "An Awkward Companion: Disability and the Semantic Landscape of English Lame," *Journal of English Linguistics* 38, no. 1 (2010): 28.) The situation may be similar with these words between Old and Modern Icelandic, but I must leave that to those more sensitive to the native context.

view of physical difference. These words are not constructed around concepts of impairment or deformity, though *handarvanr* carries a suggestion of a dichotomy of presence and absence. The stanza itself suggests that having a physical difference does not necessarily inhibit social contribution, hence the focus on what each person can or might be able to do. This is especially telling in light of Clover's theory on social disenfranchisement and power.[47]

Under such a reading, this stanza suggests that the physically different (or even physically disadvantaged) do not need to necessarily lose the entirety of their social position, as they are still able to contribute. This is underlined by the contrast to dead people twice over in the last two lines which suggest that it is better to be blind than to be burned (on a pyre), as a corpse has no fitness for anything or anyone. The repetition of the contrast and their proximity to one another emphasizes the contrast of a physically different but productive society member and a corpse, as well as the idea that to be burned and dead is the worse state of the two. The surrounding verses lend greater credence to the idea as well. The preceding stanza states that it is better to be alive than dead and that riches mean nothing to a dead man, while the following stanza says that it is better to have a son who is born late (i.e., after the death of the father) than to have no son at all, as the late son may still create a stone in his father's memory.[48] Taken together, these three stanzas have a theme of "an unfavorable situation is better than an impossible situation" or, perhaps, "a situation of little state/gain is better than no state/gain at all." Because *Hávamál* is constructed as a collection of advice, it is not a great leap to infer that these stanzas appear in reaction to common attitudes. Given the theme of "an unfavorable situation is better than an impossible situation," the appearance of physical difference/disability in this scenario suggests that it was indeed viewed as an unfavorable situation, so much so that it required contrast with death. This view of physical difference is much more reality-grounded than that of physical difference in the liminal world of other sagas: it suggests a contrast between reality (physical difference as a limiting and unfavorable situation) and narrative, where physical difference may be a mark of exceptionality or liminality. Both views would certainly influence narratives of disability in the culture, but the presence of this verse in

[47] Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 379-80.
[48] Jónas Kristjánsson, et al., ed., "Hávamál," st. 70; 72, 336.

Hávamál does suggest that there was a gap between the mythic liminality of physical difference in the sagas and physical difference in everyday life.

3.2: The Gods

The stories about gods to do with physical difference, understandably, have a very different take on the matter. When it comes to difference that we might categorize as "disability," there are four clear examples: Óðinn, Heimdallr, Hǫðr, and Týr. Óðinn and Heimdallr are best discussed in relation to one another, as their circumstances of difference are similar. Óðinn's one eye does not seem to disadvantage him in the least: he is instead associated with far-seeing and extensive knowledge. *Völuspá* tells us that Óðinn has one eye, the other placed in Mimír's well, implied to be in exchange for his far-seeing nature. The given eye is specifically described twice as "*veði Valfǫðrs*," that is, Óðinn's pledge, hence the implication of exchange.[49] Heimdallr may have made a similar exchange, again suggested by *Völuspá*, which states that his "*hljóð*" (hearing) is "*fólgit*" (past participle of *fela*) specifically under the "helgom" (holy) tree – likely Yggdrasil in this context.[50] *Fela* can mean simply "to hide/conceal," but in conjunction with a dative impersonal object (and the preposition *undir*), can also mean to give in trust or to vouch.[51] *Gylfaginning* states that Heimdallr has impressive abilities, including the need for very little sleep, superlative eyesight, and that he can hear grass growing and "*allt þat er hæra lætr*".[52] It is absurd to say that Heimdallr should be considered deaf, especially as Óðinn provides a parallel situation where actual, physical disability is not the case. Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir notes another interpretation, that *hljóð* could be taken to mean silence – that he pledges his voice for the use of the Gjallarhorn (or the horn itself) and, as such, receives supernatural awareness but cannot speak – though, as Heimdallr speaks in some texts (*Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða*, for example,) if this interpretation existed, it was not generalized through the myths.[53] It would overstate the matter entirely to consider either figure disabled, as they seemingly face neither the

[49] Jónas Kristjánsson, et al., ed., "Vǫluspá (K) ," in Íslenzk fornrit Eddukvæði Vol 1, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 297-98.
[50] Ibid., st 27, 297-98.
[51] Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 133.
[52] Anthony Faulkes, ed, "Gylfaginning," in *Edda,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 25. "And all that louder is."
[53] Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, "Blindur er betri en brenndur sé," 38-39.

stigma nor physical challenges associated with a sensory disability. Instead, both of these cases make more sense when read as instances of a representative feature (an eye or "*hljód*," which may or may not be a physical ear) are placed as collateral for or in a place that allows supernaturally superlative sensory awareness. In this situation, any missing body part is not a genuine disability, but instead physical difference as a supernatural marker. While these may at other times overlap, for these deities, that does not seem to be the case in any of the extant material.

This is apparent as well in comparison to Hǫðr, though he is also a peculiar case in some key respects. The only myth where Hǫðr features is the one where Loki causes Baldr's death, described in *Gylfaginning* and referenced in *Völuspá* and *Baldrsdraumr*.[54] Unlike Óðinn or Heimdallr, Hǫðr is explicitly described as the "*blindi áss*" in *Skáldskaparmál* and as "*blindr*" in *Gylfaginning.*[55] It is not stated in the text whether Hǫðr's blindness is congenital or otherwise acquired, and while arguments could certainly be made, the origin of his difference has little bearing on this discussion. However, while his blindness is the factor that keeps him from participating in the particular contest, throwing weapons at a seemingly invulnerable Baldr, Hǫðr does not seem to face stigma for it in the same way that humans do.[56] *Gylfaginning* says that "ærit er hann styrkr," discounting the idea that he has no physical prowess.[57] That Loki calls attention to Hǫðr's non-participation suggests that he is an otherwise active member of the society. Bragg comes to the same conclusion, pointing out that many scholars who have discussed Hǫðr's blindness, including key figures such as Dumézil and Clunies-Ross, "have misread Höd's need for auditory directions as indicative of low intelligence and general incompetence."[58] While it is true that there is little explicit information about Hǫðr, the context around him – that he is as active a participant in his society as possible and that he can be meaningfully held responsible for his part in Baldr's death – does not suggest that he is helpless or "without use." However, while Hǫðr is certainly a unique figure and has generated interesting discussion, placing that

[54] Given the vagueness of the non-*Gylfaginning* references, it is difficult to establish how widely accepted *Gylfaginning*'s version was contemporary to Snorri, especially given that neither *Vǫluspá* nor *Baldrsdraumar* refer to Hǫðr as blind. Faulkes, ed., "Gylfaginning," 45-49; Jónas Kristjánsson, et al., ed., "Vǫluspá (K)," st. 31-32, 299; Jónas Kristjánsson, et al., ed., "Baldrsdraumar," st. 7-9, 447.
[55] Anthony Faulkes, ed, "Skáldskaparmál," in *Edda* Vol 2,(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 19. Faulkes, ed., "Gylfaginning," 26.
[56] Faulkes, ed., "Gylfaginning," 45-46.
[57] Ibid., 26. "Sufficient is he in strength."
[58] Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis*, 115-16.

discussion in context is incredibly difficult. Snorri's rendition of Baldr's death reflects Snorri's later and personal biases, for one, meaning that it is already impossible to sort out which elements belonged to older versions of the story and which were added with particular purpose. Again, Bragg, though later attempting to argue that Hǫðr fits into a similar supernatural compensation paradigm as Óðinn and Heimdallr, makes a more convincing point that it is possible that Snorri was "borrowing authentic-looking details from other mythology cycles," here specifically the blind slayer motifs seen in Irish myth.[59] While it may be impossible to conclude exactly what the populations of both pre-Christian and 13th century Icelanders/Norsemen thought of Hǫðr, it is clear that it is very easy for contemporary scholars to apply contemporary biases against blind people, even when there is little, if anything, in the text to support the idea that Hǫðr is considered anything other than a contributing, full-fledged member of his community until his slaying of Baldr.

Týr, lastly, is also rather ambiguous. Though he loses his arm in a violent fashion, it is not in battle but as a pledge for the Æsir's tricking of Fenrir. It is possible to read his story as one of supernatural exchange as well, where his limb is traded for a period of peace and security, but there is difference in that Týr does not gain the supernaturally enhanced ability seen with Óðinn and Heimdallr. *Gylfaginning* states twice that Fenrir would not trust the Æsir to bind him the third time until they used Týr's hand as "*veð,*" the same word for pledge as seen earlier.[60] This may, then, be an origin anecdote, much like with Qnundr tréfótr below, where it largely exists to explain prior references to Týr as one-handed, but the evidence is too thin to state for certain. It could also be read as a sacrifice, or simply a forfeit in the name of accomplishing a needed goal, but the text evades a definitive reading. The very nature of cosmological stories makes it difficult to fit these instances of physical differences into the paradigms used to describe physical difference in humans. There is, furthermore, a notable absence of goddesses with these markings or pledges, possibly reflecting the outlook of male Norse military community.[61] Even so, physical difference is present in the mythology. It is not elided or avoided as something taboo, but included, albeit largely as a marker of Otherness rather than a practical reality. While the gods may not experience physical

[59] Ibid., 112.
[60] Faulkes, ed., "Gylfaginning," 25; 28.
[61] Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, "Blindur er betri en brenndur sé." 47.

difficulties the way that disabled humans do, the texts do suggest that physical perfection is neither inherent to nor necessary for the gods.

3.3: *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*

Physical difference has a unique position in *Grettis saga*. There is a pervasive theme of loss and absence: loss of home, loss of social place, and loss of limbs. While this certainly comes up in Grettir's portion of the saga, it is sensible to start with his grandfather Qnundr, whose one-footedness and physical difference receives a comparatively large amount of attention in the text. When Qnundr receives his initial wound, a blow that takes off the leg below the knee, the text says he became at once *óvígr*, unable to fight – though this is sometimes translated as "disabled," that is only implied in a very specific, short-term meaning of the word.[62] The next time the missing leg is mentioned is for narrative purposes. First, the reader is told that Qnundr healed but walked with a *tréfótr* (lit. tree-foot) all the rest of his life, hence his nickname of Qnundr tréfótr.[63] The same sort of construction (*gekk allan síðan*/went always after) is echoed for Þorleifr kimbi of *Eyrbyggja saga*, who acquires a *tréfótr*, while a certain Þórir, of the same saga, also uses a wooden prosthetic, gaining the name Þórir viðleggr.[64] As Conway points out, the use of the verb *að ganga* rather than a verb like *að hafa* highlights the utility nature of these wooden legs, marking the prosthetic as somehow different than the usual inalienable body part, even as the use of *allr* reminds the reader that the use of a prosthetic adaption is permanent.[65] The prosthetic might not be inalienable, but the difference it marks certainly is.

While clearly part of a pattern, the story fits well within the saga molds, as anecdotes to explain unusual or remarkable epithets are quite expected, and the mention is purely descriptive, not commentary on the aberrative nature of disability. The first time Qnundr's one-leggedness is discussed in a social context is after he and Þrándr meet old wartime friends of theirs, after which Qnundr is described as very silent, and

[62] Guðni Jónsson, ed., "Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar," in *Íslenzk fornrit,* (Reykjavík : Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 2001), 6.
[63] Ibid., 6.
[64] Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds, "Eyrbyggja saga," in *Íslenzk fornrit,* Vol. IV (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1985), 130; 40.
[65] Conway, "Stumped in the Sagas," 12-13.

responds with his first verse of the saga when Þrándr asks after the cause.[66] Qnundr states that the axe-wound still affects him, and that "*þegnum þykki,/ þat 's mest, koma flestum,/ oss til ynðis missu/ einhlítt, til mín lítit.*"[67] He directly states that his peers think him less fit with his state of physical difference and that it causes him great unhappiness. Þrándr replies that Qnundr would still be considered a *rǫskr* (brave, vigorous) man wherever he went, implying that his bravery and skill in battle would weigh more heavily in others' perception of him than his injury.[68] Though Qnundr believes that his "*kvánfǫngin horft hafa vænna*,"[69] Þrándr's initial suggestion that he resolve his unsettled state through marriage and further convincing that he believes Qnundr could certainly make a good match implies that Qnundr's physical condition does not utterly dictate his place in society or his choices. Qnundr's statements imply that there is a stigma toward his condition and the phrasing "*til ynðis missu einhlítt*" gestures toward the idea that Qnundr's position and prospects are a question of performance in society and that his happiness/success is contingent upon his fitness. Þrándr's assertion that Qnundr is considered a *rǫskr* man, repeated when he is convincing Ófeigr to marry his daughter Æsa to Qnundr, not only for a one-footed man, but that he is *more* brave or vigorous than a *heilfœttr* (whole/hale-footed) man would be further reinforces the idea that it is a matter of performance.[70]

The theme continues when the pair fight *víkingar* sometime later. Once the troupe is told they are facing Qnundr tréfótr, they reply with a taunting verse to call into question his ability to move of his own volition, let alone fight and defeat them in battle.[71] During the battle, one of the men, Vígbjóðr, sinks his weapon into Qnundr's wooden leg during his attack, putting him in a position to be killed. After, Qnundr recites a verse to Vígbjóðr's corpse, saying that "*fekk enga einfœttr af þér skeinu.*"[72] This taunt goes beyond a reductive "You are a poor enough fighter that you could not even scratch a one-footed man," but instead seems to suggest something along the lines

[66] Guðni Jónsson, ed, "Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar," 9.
[67] Ibid. 9-10. Using the reordering given in the footnotes of the Íslenzk fornrit edition, I translate this very literally as: "… More thanes think little of/to me to come; that is (to) us most fit/meet for/to happiness/bliss less." That is, the thanes think him less fit for/capable of happiness or good prospects due to his lost leg.
[68] Ibid., 10.
[69] Ibid., 10. "Prospects for marriage have been better."
[70] Ibid., 10.
[71] Ibid., 11.
[72] Ibid., 12. "[The] one-footed [man] got not one slight wound/scratch from you."

of "You underestimated me on the basis of my having one leg, but that same one leggedness prevented me from taking a wound and furthermore led to your death." Once again, Qnundr's performance (specifically in battle), not the number of his legs, is the defining feature of his worth. This is emphasized twice more in the text, both times that Qnundr's one-footedness is mentioned. First, that Qnundr was such a *frækinn* (valiant, brave) man that few were equal to him, "*þótt heilir væri*." [73] Second, that he is the *fræknastr* (most valiant/brave) and *fimastr* (most agile) man to have been in Iceland, emphasizing both his worth and his exceptionality.[74] It is interesting that the word *heill* (whole, hale) is used to describe other men or their feet, yet Qnundr is never described as *ó-/úheill*, but always *einfœttr*. This creates an interesting linguistic tension, in that if Qnundr is described in opposition to *heilir*/*heilfœttir* men, he must by contrast be unhale, but is consistently referred to as *einfœttr* instead. This may be because his valor and bravery, that is, his performance and societal contribution, makes him hale, if not whole.

Ármann Jakobsson seems inclined to agree with Þrándr, arguing that Qnundr's successes allow him to overcome his disability.[75] John P. Sexton approaches this in a somewhat similar manner, opposing what he considers to be Qnundr's fears and anxieties over being lessened on account of his *tréfótr* with Þrándr's (successful) attempts to reframe Qnundr's lost leg as a mark of valor.[76] He too suggests that Qnundr, though indelibly marked by his one-footedness, "overcomes the limitations it seems to impose upon him."[77] Particularly given Sexton's emphasis on the relevance of cultural framing and interpretation, it is curious that both he and Ármann place the onus of anxiety on Qnundr, when there seems to be no reason to discount his perception that others treat him differently than before. The narrative of "overcoming," whether referring to physical or social limitations, is one that redirects focus from social stigma and barriers to the individual's responsibility and willpower, demanding a minimization of social responsibility.[78] Though Qnundr did not have access to the social model of disability, his languages posits a similar divide, suggesting that social perception, not

[73] Ibid., 23. "Though that whole/hale were."
[74] Ibid., 25-26.
[75] Ármann Jakobsson, "Fötlun á miðöldum," 57.
[76] Sexton, "Difference and Disability," 153-56, 163.
[77] Ibid., 156.
[78] Simi Linton, "Reassigning Meaning," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2006), 166-67.

his *tréfótr*, is what limits him. Implying that Qnundr limits himself contradicts the text and discounts his experiences, while simultaneously dismissing the textual acknowledgement that social perception has a concrete impact on Qnundr's experiences. This is particularly relevant as discourse impacts the people it refers to, and the choice of discourse can place people as either subject or object.[79] The fact that Qnundr must continually prove to others that he is capable and the linguistic liminality implies that, while Qnundr may physically get along rather well, the social perception of his one leg is something that requires continuous struggle. Qnundr is marked as Other and different, and must disprove the perception that he is now less fit or unfit over and over, but he is not completely disenfranchised on account of his success and ability, and ultimately succeeds rather well in life.

This contrasts with its narrative echo in Grettir, who has a very different experience than Qnundr in respect to both social enfranchisement and marks of difference. While Grettir has other experiences that mark him as different, particularly his encounter with Glámr, his leg injury parallels Qnundr's narrative most directly. As a result of cutting into cursed driftwood, distracted by his lost temper, his axe bounces off the wood and into his thigh, sticking into the bone, and though for three days it appears to be healing well, it then becomes infected and causes him great pain, so bad after two weeks that they expect Grettir to die of the wound.[80] Ultimately, Þorbjǫrn ǫngull and his men kill Grettir, who was already "kominn at bana af fótarsárinu" (come to [the point of] death of the leg wound) and cut off his hand to free his sword from his grip before cutting off his head as well, but the wound itself marks Grettir's decline and death.[81] Grettir only gains these marks of difference at the end of his life, while in an outlawed and disenfranchised state, and has no chance to live with them, let alone to prove himself a similarly doughty man as Qnundr did. It is also possible to read these external markers of difference as emblematic of Grettir finally achieving maturity and submitting to the social order and law, if only in the last moments of his life.[82] The leg wound is a narrative echo of Qnundr's own, and earlier family members' associations with legs, though the circumstances play out very differently. Narratively, then,

[79] Winance, "How speaking shapes person and world," 241.
[80] Ibid., 251-55.
[81] Ibid., 261.
[82] Torfi Tulinius, "Returning Fathers: Sagas, Novels, and the Uncanny." *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 21 (2013): 39.

Ǫnundr's experiences not only exist as a narrative theme for legs in Grettir's family, but as both parallel and contrast to Grettir's own experiences.

3.4: *Vǫlundarkviða* and *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*

Another narrative that features physical difference is *Vǫlundarkviða*. Vǫlundr's general story has variations in several other Germanic languages and *Vǫlundarkviða* may have English influence, putting it in an interesting position.[83] While it might not be as Icelandicized as other narratives, the choice of presentation is still informative. Vǫlundr's narrative is also remarkable because his physical difficulties are deliberately inflicted upon him as an attempt to render him harmless after his capture and enslavement. While Vǫlundr, the snowshoe-wearing son of a Finnish king and by virtue of his supernatural wife, is established early on as Other. It is only when Níðuðr takes him captive and Níðuðr's queen tells them to cut Vǫlundr's sinews to prevent his escape and vengeance that Vǫlundr becomes marked. The language used to describe his maiming is very straightforward. The queen counsels Níðuðr to "*Sníðið ér hann/ Sina mani*," and the prose notes immediately after that "*Svá var gǫrt at skornar váru sinar í knésfótum*," as well as that he was set upon the isolated island, as also per her suggestion.[84] In this context, the relatively value-neutral language makes sense; the focus is on attempting to limit the amount of harm Vǫlundr could create than in the injury itself. The queen cites her concern and bases her advice on the fact that Vǫlundr is angry, particularly that when he sees the sword Níðuðr has taken from him or the gold ring Níðuðr gave to Boðvildr, his eyes flash like a snake ("*ormi þeim inum frána*").[85] There may well have been humiliation attached to the act of severing Vǫlundr's sinews, but the language suggests that was not the primary motivation. The queen does not suggest they make him *haltr* or that they "ruin" or "maim" Vǫlundr – mobility impairment here is a practical goal, not a psychological game or some sort of punishment.

[83] John McKinnell, "Vǫlundarkviða: Origins and Interpretation," in *Essays on Eddic Poetry*, ed. Donata Kick and John D. Shafer, (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2014): 221-25.
[84] Jónas Kristjánsson, et al., eds, "Vǫlundarkviða" in Íslenzk fornrit Eddukvæði Vol 1, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 432. "Cut you sinews his." ; "So was done that cut were sinews in hamstring."
[85] Ibid., 432.

In *Vǫlundarkviða*, physical limitation is a challenge to Vǫlundr's vengeance and departure, and that only for a time. While the injury may mark Vǫlundr, he was already Othered, and cannot be constrained by such a physically grounding injury; even the manner of his escape, the created wings, circumvents the difficulties created by the injury entirely. The audience, and indeed, Níðuðr and his wife, do not see Vǫlundr limp away, marked by the attempts to curb him, but fly. Narratively, this calls back to the departure of Hervǫr alvitr, for whom he waited and created the string of rings that drew Níðuðr's attention in the first place. The prose introduction to the poem says that Vǫlundr's lover and the others flew (*flugu*) away to war after seven winters, a word choice which must be deliberate.[86] The three also sat initially on a strand (*á sævar strǫnd*), which is later echoed by the way the king sets Vǫlundr on a strand/island ("*í sævar stǫð*").[87] Though *Vǫlundarkviða* ends with Boðvildr speaking to her father, it is interesting to note that Vǫlundr, the only man who waited for his lover's return and then endured captivity, then flies off on wings of his own. Either way, while Vǫlundr finds his severed sinews a damage that he would avenge, it is apparently not enough of one to keep him from simply leaving, as his escape subverts their restrictions. The severing inflicted to keep him from leaving or taking his revenge ultimately keeps him from doing neither.

This creates an interesting parallel to a semi-similar circumstance in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*. During the confiscation of Hrafnkell's property following the ruling at the Þing, Sámr and his companions take knives and "*stinga raufar á hásinum*" of Hrafnkell and his men to string them up.[88] Þórgeir, one of Sámr's companions, remarks that Hrafnkell's predicament is "*makligt*, (meet, deserving)" as "*þér þykkja þetta ólíkligt, at þú mundir slíka skǫmm fá af nǫkkurum manni, sem nú er orðið*," suggesting that the vulnerability and shame of being strung upside-down through sliced tendons mirrors the vulnerability and shame of having his home routed and property confiscated.[89] Sámr then offers Hrafnkell death or humiliation in reduced estate, and proud Hrafnkell chooses to live with shame and departs. While it is quite possible that

[86] Ibid., 428.
[87] Ibid., 428; 432.
[88] Jón Jóhanesson , ed, "Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða," in *Íslenzk fornrit*, Vol. XI (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950), 120. "Cut holes on/in [their] Achilles' tendons."
[89] Ibid., 120. "You thought that unlikely, that you would such shame get of some man, as now is become."

Hrafnkell does not face the same, significant difficulties in walking that Vǫlundr does, the same question of injury-to-impair, humiliation, and vengeance arises. Hrafnkell bides his time but does eventually retake his position and property, offering Sámr the same choice offered him. More interestingly, he also denies Sámr compensation for Eyvindr's death, stating "*En eigi þykki mér meira vert dráp Eyvindar og manna hans en meizl við mik ok minna manna.*"[90] *Meizl* (or *meiðzl,* from *að meiða*) can simply mean "bodily hurts, injuries," but may carry connotations of something more serious, with "mutilation" from Cleasby and Vigfússon or "maiming, damaging," from Zöega.[91] This is the only other mention of Hrafnkell's injury in the saga, making it likely there was little, if any, permanent physical damage. Here, it is unclear whether in what proportions the injured tendons are motivated by practicality or humiliation, but the implications are similar. Like Vǫlundr, he thinks of the injury as something that ought to be avenged or compensated, on a similar level as the deaths of Eyvindr and his men. That the injury could deserve such compensation suggests that this sort of harm was considered an incredibly damaging act, whether for possibly permanently affecting a person's mobility or for the psychological/social damage incurred. On the other hand, Hrafnkell does not face seriously reduced reputation – people do not think him less capable on account of his injury. Without dismissing the reality of Hrafnkell's (former) social position, it is possible that this is because he and Vǫlundr have talents that are minimally affected by their injured legs, and their ability to contribute in those ways is so well established that there is no question of their inability to perform. As with Ǫnundr, exceptionality and capacity seem to be enough to overcome prejudices about physical difference.

3.5: *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Ragnarssona þáttr*

The figure of Ívarr inn beinlausi is a curious and much discussed one. There has been a great deal of speculation on how to read (or fit a medical diagnosis to) the description *beinlausi*, and how this might figure into the actual historical person often

[90] Ibid., 131. "But not seems to me yet/more worse deaths of Eyvindr and men his than injury/maiming with/to me and my men."
[91] *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Richard Cleasby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 422; Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 292.

identified with him. A 1957 article, for example, mentions a Dr. Hatteland's theory that Ívarr may have had "the earliest-known record of osteogenesis imperfecta" in the Nordic region.[92] However, for the sake of brevity and clarity, this discussion will focus on Ívarr the literary figure and restrict the scope of the speculation to the textual details themselves. Still, given that Ívarr is fit into a larger narrative, it would be impossible to elide scholarly discussion of narrative theme in relation to Ívarr's bonelessness. When not suggesting a medical diagnosis, speculation on why Ívarr's condition exists tends to lean towards the narrative. Torfi Tulinius proposed that Áslaug's request for Ragnarr to not consummate their marriage for three nights is an allusion to the Tobias nights, an allusion meant to confirm her nobility.[93] He further argues that Ragnarr's brutality and lack of respect for Áslaug are manifested in Ívarr's bonelessness, contextualizing Ívarr's physical difference as a narrative commentary on the sins of the father.[94] Rory McTurk also concludes that Ívarr's condition results from this same incident, though he frames it as a simple, unspecified curse, but all the same, narratively thematic.[95] The reading of a curse or other supernatural origin ties Ívarr into the supernatural elements of the narrative, and further contextualizes him in cultural narratives of familial lines and curses. However, Ívarr's role in this narrative, though somewhat different between *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Ragnarssona þáttr*, is more complex than mere narrative tool.

Ragnars saga loðbrókar is careful to indicate to the audience how they should perceive Ívarr when he is first introduced. It says that Ívarr was "*beinlauss ok sem brjósk væri þar, sem bein skyldu vera. Ok þá er hann var ungr, var hann vexti svá mikill, at engir váru hans jafningjar.*"[96] The choice of *brjósk* (cartilage) here is very specific, and does suggest a concrete physical difference rather than a metaphorical one.[97] However, it is also quickly made clear that Ívarr still excels, so much so that no one was equal with him, but more than that, he was of all men *fríðastr*, not only

[92] "Ivar The Boneless," *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 5028 (1957): 1172-173.
[93] Torfi H. Tulinius. "Merveilleux et violence contre les femmes dans les sagas islandaises," *Revue des Langues Romanes* 103, no. 1 (1999): 163-64.
[94] Ibid., 164.
[95] Rory McTurk. "Ívarr the Boneless and the Amphibious Cow," in *Islanders and Water-Dwellers: Proceedings of the Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium Held at University College Dublin 16-19 June 1996*. Eds. Patricia Lysaght et al. (Dublin: DBA Publications Limited, 1999): 191.
[96] Guðni Jónsson, ed., "Ragnars saga loðbrókar," in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950), 239. Ívarr was "boneless, and cartilage were there, as bone should be. And then when he was young, was he grown so great, that none/no-one was his equal."
[97] Zoëga, A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic, 70.

handsome, but superlatively so, and equally so the wisest.[98] Pejorative terms are not used, and there is no direct statement of inequality or derision, but the immediate emphasis on his capabilities, particularly his beauty (often equated with worth) and wisdom as not only equaling, but outstripping others, suggests two things. First, that his *beinlauss* state, his physical difference, did not inhibit his capabilities, furthering the idea that competence, especially superlative competence, could offset or negate concerns about contribution to society or taking a functional role. Second, again, that these qualities are presented so immediately and emphatically suggests that the audience would assume Ívarr's inability (steaming from physical difference) if not explicitly told otherwise. After the introduction to his brothers, the narrative returns to explain that "*lét Ívarr bera sik á stöngum, því at hann mátti eigi ganga*."[99] Here we see the presence of adaptive technology, described practically and without other comment. This description mostly seems to be present to acknowledge a practical limitation, Ívarr's inability to walk, and the solution, neatly presented to the audience in order to move the narrative along and remove further questions on the subject. I am inclined to read the straightforwardness of the inclusion as an acknowledgement that adaptation was necessary and applied where possible without much exclamation, much as we saw earlier with Qnundr, something remarkable and unique, but not excessively so.

The text then refocuses on Ívarr's role as counselor to his brothers and positions him as the one to suggest they pursue renown and glory together.[100] When they are engaged in conflict, Ívarr asks the men bearing him to bring him closer and bring him his bow, shooting and so ending the battle that seemed impossible to win.[101] It is clearly established that Ívarr, physical difference or no, is a brave and capable man, which makes it so surprising that he is reluctant to avenge the deaths of his older half-brothers. However, between Ívarr's knowledge of the role of the supernatural/magical at Hvítabær and Svíþjóð, it is possible that though he does not practice magic, he is very aware of or sensitive to it.[102] In this case, while his physical difference might not make him supernatural quite in the way of his younger brother Sigurðr ormr í auga, it places him in a liminal space that marks his access to superlative wisdom and awareness of the

[98] Guðni Jónsson, ed, "Ragnars saga loðbrókar," 239.
[99] Ibid., 239. "Ívarr had himself borne on sticks, this that/because he was not able to walk."
[100] Ibid., 239.
[101] Ibid., 240-242.
[102] Ibid., 239, 253-54.

supernatural, a theme seen elsewhere. Given the narrative themes, especially in a curse reading, Ívarr's abilities are stylistically appropriate rather than framed as strictly compensatory. After hearing his brothers' verses, he does change his mind, and ultimately is the one to speak of the necessities of the journey, though he also refers to his physical condition:

> *bera mun mik fyr bragna*
> *beinlausan fram verða,*
> *þó gatk hönd til hefnda,*
> *at hváriga nýtak.* [103]

Again, the adjective *beinlausan* is restated, as is the necessity of being carried. Interesting also is the idea that he get "*hǫnd til hefnda,/ at hváriga nýtak.*"[104] Earlier in the saga, he freely used his bow, so the idea that he can make practical use of neither of his hands, at least in this venture for vengeance, is curious. It is possible that he uses his physical condition as a metaphor for his perception of their helplessness and futility. Still, the direct contradiction of what we have seen thus far, both of Ívarr's abilities and his willingness to pursue danger, is striking.

Indeed, once they do reach the battle, his statements prove ironic. When the cow Síbilja bellows and creates disarray among the troops, it is Ívarr who fells her. It is described as *endemi*, something unparalleled, as he shoots a mighty bow carved of an elm tree, taking her down momentarily, and when that is not sufficient, has his bearers throw him at her.[105] When they throw him, it is as easy as throwing a small child, though he lands on her like a stone, so much so that "*hvert bein brotnar í henni.*"[106] While not directly related to the language of Ívarr's condition, this incident develops the reading further. In contrast to his statements about his lack of use (implied to be caused by his bonelessness), Ívarr slays the largest impediment to the army's victory singlehandedly. He shoots her with hands that are certainly of use, and then, in interesting parallel, boneless Ívarr becomes heavy enough to break the bones of the supernaturally powerful cow.[107] There is also the matter of Ragnarr's death and Ívarr's subtlety in gaining revenge, particularly interesting in that the tale makes use of the "as

[103] Ibid., 256. "Be borne will I before warriors/heroes / boneless before [them] become, / though get-I hands to avenge,/ that neither will do/can be made use of."
[104] Ibid., 256.
[105] Ibid., 259.
[106] Ibid., 259. "Whichever bones were broken in her."
[107] Ibid., 256-59.

much land as a cowhide may cover" motif, usually seen with women or goddesses (such as in *Gylfaginning*). However, as none of that material references Ívarr's physical condition, further discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis. All of this further extends the idea of Ívarr's superlative capabilities, as well as his own supernatural capacity, thematically appropriate when positioned as a coda to *Vǫlsunga saga* but curious given his marked status as Other due to his physical condition.

Ragnarssona þáttr contains a much abbreviated version of the story, though the general plot stays relatively intact. While Ívarr's physical condition is not otherwise detailed in the prose outside his introduction as Ívarr beinlausi, Ívarr's verse to Áslaug, on the subject of obtaining vengeance for the elder brothers, is preserved as is quoted and discussed above.[108] There is very little detail on the adventures of the brothers before Ragnarr's death, though Ívarr's role in taking vengeance is covered. Interestingly, the text states that Ívarr "*átti ekki barn, því at hann var svá skapaðr, at honum fylgdi engi girnd né ást.*"[109] Very literally, this can be translated as that Ívarr "had no children, this that he was so created/designed, that he obtained not sexual desire nor love," but in practice, is more complicated to decipher. The direct correlation between his "creation" and his lack of children, desire/lust, and love is interesting, particularly given the use of *shape*, even in the sense of "being created as," rather than a direct correlation with his bonelessness or a more generic term for state-of-being or illness. The medicalization of Ívarr's being is certainly not found here. The use of *að skapa* is rather ambiguous, and could refer either to Ívarr's physical shaping or to a more metaphorical sense of creation or destiny.[110] In one interpretation of these details, part of Ívarr's physical condition is that he does not have interest in sex or romance. This is less likely to be a representation of someone who simply does not experience those desires, but rather intended to be a side-effect of his condition. It could also be that Ívarr does not attract a suitable partner due to his body, or that, in a religiously-focused reading, as a product of uncontrolled lust, Ívarr himself does not experience it. Any of these options quite possibly represents an authorial discomfort with the idea of someone "abnormal" having romantic and sexual experiences, let alone continuing a

[108] Guðni Jónsson, ed., "Þáttr af Ragnars sonum," in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950), 290, 294.
[109] Ibid., 300.
[110] Zöega, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 367; Cleasby and Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 537-38.

genetic line. Given the general terse nature of the text, the amount of detail given in this sentence and its accordance of narrative weight suggests that the writer has gone out of the way to specify beyond a simple "Ívarr died in England without children." His wealth, status, and previous exploits as a fighter do not seem to be enough to prove him capable as Ǫnundr's were, at least not in this particular narrative.

In clear contrast, Ívarr plays a prominent role in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. Though his bonelessness and its effects are explicit, he stays a superlatively excellent figure who drives much of the plot and achieves great, even extraordinary things. Yet, as much as his physical difference may mark his Otherness and may overlap with his at times supernatural nature, it is also clear that his condition has real consequences that require adaptation and adjustment. To ignore that or convert Ívarr's *beinlausan* to a simple metaphor does the text a disservice, and ignores the unique nature of Ívarr's position. Unlike the *Æsir*, he is affected by his condition beyond a simple marker of Otherness and power, but at the same time, Ívarr not only compensates for his perceived lack of capability, but proves himself to outstrip even the other heroes of the saga, his father and brothers. The fact that *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* is often positioned as a coda to *Vǫlsunga saga*, particularly a bridge between a mythic tale and the real world, may be what allows Ívarr to be simultaneously marked as supernaturally excellent and Other as well as face physical difference as a practical reality that must be taken into account.

3.6: Assorted Minor Figures

As it would be impossible to detail every mention of physical difference that could be interpreted as disability in the Old Norse canon, this final section of analysis will look at a sampling of mentions of physical difference and disability. The characters discussed here do not take a leading or significant role, as the others have. However, this presents useful data in and of itself. The way difference is handled in these mentions conveys a great deal about the perception of difference when it was *not* someone at the forefront of the narrative or otherwise exceptional. This also allows for intratextual language examination, to see if the same words and length/types of descriptions are used.

Let us begin with an excerpt from *Laxdœla saga*. In the battle that kills Kjartan, Þórólfr's arm is wounded and then treated upon their return, but "*greri hon seint ok varð honum aldregi meinlaus.*"[111] As impersonal constructions abound in Old Norse literature, it would be hasty to read too much into the use of one such construction at the moment of narrative transition between Þórólfr having a wound to the resulting chronic pain. The form *aldregi* for never, however, might be deliberate. The more common form of the adverb, *aldri*, is not used here, but a variant that preserves what Zoëga analyses as the "dat[ive] of aldr with the negative suffix –gi."[112] Cleasby and Vigfússon note that *aldregi* is rarely used, though it occurs in several other places.[113] It is possible that *aldregi* is used here to emphasize the negative suffix, and by extension, the ceaselessness of Þórólfr's pain. Likewise, the construction of "*aldregi meinlaus*," "never painless/without suffering," is informative.[114] Þórólfr's injury is characterized not by the presence of pain, as would be implied by the phrase "always painful," but by the absence of a reprieve from pain. The difference seems small, but "always painful" leaves a space of ambiguity and the possibility of intermittence, but "never painless" emphasizes, in an understated way, the enormity of the pain and therefore Þórólfr's condition. A more definitive argument and study would benefit from semantic and phrasal analysis from the entire corpus, for comparison of the usage of *aldrei* and *aldregi*, as well as positive and negative condition descriptions.

Though Þórólfr's condition merits no more than this phrase past the initial injury, it adds an awareness of consequence to the text. Alongside Kjartan's death, intended to be impactful and devastating, and Án hrísmagi's miraculous recovery, Þórólfr's injury and ceaseless pain interject a reminder of the ongoing consequence of conflict in their society. Though Þórólfr was able to keep his arm and the pain and injury are not said to be debilitating, the acknowledgement that injuries sometimes had permanent damage suggests an awareness of lingering, encumbering damage more nuanced than simple categories of hale and not-hale. While chronic pain does not exactly fit into the category described as physical difference, the treatment of the subject

[111] Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds, "Laxdœla saga," in *Íslenzk fornrit*, Vol. V (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), 154. "Healed she/it slowly and became to him never painless."
[112] Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 8.
[113] Cleasby and Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 12.
[114] Ibid., 422. They note that *meinlauss* can simply mean "harmless, inoffensive," but cite this phrase as "painless."

was significant enough to warrant inclusion, particularly in comparison to the next example, an aside from *Grettis saga*. In Ǫnundr's time, still relatively early in the saga, there is an anecdote about a dispute over the rights to a whale, in which a man hewed the leg/foot out from under ("*hjó fót undan*") Ívarr Kolbeinsson.[115] This occurrence has very little note in the whole tale and is juxtaposed in the same sentence with Ívarr's brother beating a man to death with a whalebone. There is no further mention of Ívarr or his now-missing leg. Narratively speaking, it seems likely that Ívarr's loss of leg and the man beaten to death with a whale bone were both included to highlight the absurdity of the conflict, which is itself accompanied by a rather mocking verse of poetry. However one chooses to interpret the interlude, it is clear that the saga is uninterested in minor character Ívarr Kolbeinsson, but rather in making a point about the senselessness of his lost limb or perhaps about the drama of the event. The consequences of the conflict on Ívarr are not considered here as seen above with Þórólfr and certainly not to the same degree and depth as Ǫnundr's similar trauma earlier.

Meanwhile, *Eyrbyggja saga's* Auðr presents the interesting case of an accidental injury that is integral to the plot while the character herself remains in a rather marginal position. When her husband Þórarinn gets into a fight with his neighbors over horse theft, Auðr calls together other women to cast clothing over their weapons in order to stop the fighting, losing her hand in the process. The language in the section revealing this is circuitous, delaying the revelation. Information is parceled out in short sentences, separated in the Íslenzk fornrit text by semicolons not original to the manuscript: first, that they found a hand where they fought and took it to Þórarinn, then that it was a woman's hand; Þórarinn asks where Auðr is.[116] Another sentence: he is told she is lying in bed; he goes to her and asks if she is wounded. The pacing picks up again with the next sentence, though only the first sentence is quoted here: "*Auðr bað hann ekki um þat hirða, en hann varð þó vís, at hon var handhǫggvin.*"[117] The short, indirect lines create suspension and allow the reader's suspicion to grow as Þórarinn's does. The tension elevates the incident from a dramatic, entertaining fight scene as part of the political

[115] Guðni Jónsson, ed, "Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar," 12, 30.
[116] Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds, "Eyrbyggja saga," in *Íslenzk fornrit*, Vol. IV (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1985), 36.
[117] Ibid., 36. "Auðr bade him not about that to worry, but he became aware that she was hand-struck."

landscape to one that has much higher stakes and consequences, because an innocent bystander, Þórarinn's own wife, has been significantly injured in the conflict.

While the description *handhǫgvinn* is rather straightforward, matter of fact as with the other descriptions of injury seen thus far, it is grammatically interesting. It is most likely analyzed as a past participle, rendering the description passive. Any agent involved in the loss of Auðr's hand is eliminated. It is not that someone hewed off Auðr's hand, as with Ívarr's leg above, or even that her hand was taken off, but simply that she was hand-struck. The saga is not so much interested in Auðr or her injured hand as it is in the question of who *caused* her to lose her hand. Þórarinn calls his mother to bind Auðr's wound and Auðr speaks to him without rancor in the next chapter, but the audience is given no more detail than that. As her death is not mentioned, presumably she lived and found some way to adapt, though there is nothing about her arm healing, or even causing her pain as with Þórólfr. This reinforces the idea that the saga is mostly interested in Auðr's lost hand as a narrative device. A conference paper by Sean Lawing, "Re-membering Auðr's Hand in *Eyrbyggja saga*," posits that Auðr's missing hand sets the stage for Þórarinn to resolve speculation as to his "androgynous" behavior, both in the sense that in taking vengeance "rehabilitates his public image" and that after the incident, he begins speaking poetry with confidence.[118] Each of these cases, then, borders a fine line between adding to the narrative stakes and practically grounding the saga with a sense of consequence, a much different role than physical difference plays for the heroes of the sagas.

[118] Sean Lawing, "Re-membering Auðr's Hand in *Eyrbyggja Saga*," in *Proceedings of International Medieval Congress: The Literature of Medieval Scandinavia, III: Political, Cultural, and Mythological Empires,* University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom (July 7, 2014): 1, 3.

Chapter 4. Interpretations of the Data

4.1: Difference and Social Implications

The presentation of physical difference in the sagas is clearly much more nuanced than simple awe or derision, or even just a matter of marking the Other. Physical difference, like disability more generally, was heavily contextualized by a number of factors. It would even be reductive to speak of *a* presentation of physical difference in the sagas, though there are enough examples to speak of trends, which is the goal of this section. Again, to be clear, while these sagas may reflect some elements of earlier societal beliefs, they largely reflect the *writers'* attitudes towards physical difference. That is an important factor to remember, as these beliefs would be influenced by continental and Christian thought, even as this thesis deliberately excluded texts that engaged with those traditions overtly and intentionally. That said, there are several clear trends in the presentation of physical difference in the sagas. Difference of this sort seems to present in two major trends. First, there is the implication that visible physical difference generates an assumption of incapacity, but that the saga character may overcome this perception and prove themselves capable (particularly in regards to battle), and thereby retain or regain their social position, honor, and respect. Second, there is an overlap between physical difference and supernatural connection, with physical difference either as a marker of Otherness or as an overlapping liminal state. Occasionally, these two themes may be present in the same character when the overlap makes sense. However, while both of these trends present narratively (though the first is implied to be social as well), the presentation of physical difference in the sagas shows an awareness of the ongoing difficulties and complications that people with differences faced both physically and socially, suggesting that disability/difference was not solely conceived of and used as a narrative device.

One other key factor in the presentation of physical difference is social class. The focus of the sagas tends to be, largely, members of the free or aristocratic classes, who have social cachet and status, even if only in theory or if they have been removed from their power, such as Qnundr. Consequently, discussions of the treatment of physical difference must take this into account. When looking at the examples analyzed

in the previous section, it is clear that most of them fall into this category. The Æsir, to whatever extent their physical differences may be counted as "disability," are gods, functioning in a cosmologically different realm than humans. Ǫnundr is a free man and more often than not a landholder, as well as a strong warrior. Grettir, in contrast, starts out from a similarly privileged position, but acquires his injuries when outlawed, where these differences function as narrative markers of his social decay and impending death outside of the social order. Vǫlundr is, at least in this narrative variation, the son of a Finnish king. Ívarr hinn beinlausi, likewise, is the son of Ragnarr, a king, and Áslaug, positioned in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* to be the daughter of Sigurðr Fafnisbani and Brynhildr, holding exceptional status. Even the minor, occasionally mentioned characters hold to this mold. Hrafnkell begins and ends as a *goði*, Auðr is married to a land-owning farmer, and the warriors are warriors – not *þrælar*, but free men, even if in the service of more powerful men. These narratives underrepresent household members, farmhands, or slaves who have physical differences, if at all.

This brings us back to Eichhorn-Mulligan's conference paper on *Rígsþula*, specifically the idea that, for the *þrælar*, "deformity" is expected, and, in that case, the excessive description of it "relegates them to a powerless social periphery where they are physical objects to be stared at and… derisively ridiculed."[119] It is an attitude that does not necessarily apply to all texts, though the sagas do not overflow with examples of lower-status people whose exceptionality takes precedence over their physical difference, let alone grants them (or at least correlates to) access to the liminal world of the supernatural and power. This is not to indicate that lower-status people did not have physical difference – as Eichhorn-Mulligan again points out, their lifestyles predisposed them to such conditions – but rather that the representation of physical difference in sagas is not primarily driven by realism or mirroring the presence of physical difference in day-to-day society. The sagas are concerned with powerful people and genealogy, as sagas of different genres (particularly the contemporary sagas, family sagas, and *fornaldarsögur*) all arguably engage with internal conflict and the political and social tensions between Iceland and Norway at the time.[120] Further, the intertextual interaction

[119] Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Contextualizing Old Norse-Icelandic Bodies," 202.
[120] Torfi H. Tulinius, "The Matter of the North: fiction and uncertain identities in thirteenth-century Iceland," in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000), 248-49.

between these sagas, such as *Vǫlsunga saga*'s juxtaposition with *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, can create narrative parallels and tensions, rendering the genres and texts synchronic in terms of social positionality.[121]

This interpretation of the texts means that discussions of family and heritage are not dry, diachronic matters of status, but that all sagas which touch on descent and genealogy (whether of the historical record or mythic connection nature) reflect on the writers' contemporary social milieus. As such, these sagas present powerful people who have access and recourse to methods of proving themselves capable and, when suitable for the narrative, must do so. Ívarr hinn beinlausi may well have had the best counsel known to anyone and a brilliant mind for tactics and strategy, but he also had the social and economic resources for the accommodations to show those talents. Therefore, while physical difference proved a societal hurdle, class was a driving factor of early Icelandic society and certainly dominates the discussion. This does not mean that the realities of lower-status people with physical differences were entirely disconnected from the presentation of physical difference in the sagas, or that some of these observations are not applicable, but that the saga's preference for representing people in power reflects in their presentation of difference as well. Where and how disability is included in narrative as excludable, includable, or included for the sole purpose of direct exclusion suggests where boundaries around its appearance in social narrative lies.[122]

That the sagas focus largely on people in power does not preclude conclusions about the role of physical difference in society. In fact, the centrality of social class does a great deal to inform the nuances of social position and access to social cachet. I earlier posited that the perception of physical difference, and more specifically the people who have them, operated as a function of social capability. This hypothesis was reflected in the examples above. In *Grettis saga*, Ǫnundr's struggle is largely one of identity and position, in relation to both his loss of property in Norway and of his leg in battle. These losses parallel one another, creating a narrative centered on the construction of identity in the face of new circumstances. In the case of his leg specifically, Ǫnundr perceives that his peers have lost respect for him, thinking him incapable of the feats that made him well known, but these same feats, enumerated by his friend Þrándr, and his

[121] Ibid., 248-49.
[122] Tanya Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing Disability Differently: The Textured Life of Embodiment*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007,) 5-6.

continuing capability to succeed, gain Qnundr great renown and access to money and generational continuance through marriage. Grettir, who squanders his social position and is physically marked as Other only when outlawed and outside the social order, cannot navigate in the same way. *Hávamál* also addresses this idea, as the entirety of stanza 71 contends that those with physical differences are not disabled from participating in society, but that their contributions are still worth more than their deaths. Ívarr hinn beinlausi is not explicitly concerned that he will be dismissed on account of his bonelessness, but the text's juxtaposition of his physically different form with his exceptional skills and attractiveness, both in counsel and combat, suggests the idea. In fact, the saga is careful to establish his capabilities before introducing his more overtly exceptional supernatural characteristics.

For minor characters, this is less of an issue: the audience is not told whether Ívarr Kolbeinsson obtains a prosthetic leg, though the loss of his limb follows only chapters after Qnundr's own, and Auðr's handlessness seems to matter little outside its impact on her husband and his reputation. For heroes and protagonists, social enfranchisement must be established. Capability is therefore explicitly tied to social enfranchisement. Those who are capable may remain functional members of the social group, with the implicit caveat that disenfranchisement lurks if they lose the ability to perform normality. Think here of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, where the eponymous hero goes in to speak to the *jarl* Eiríkr Hákonarson with an injured and painful foot. When he learns this, the *jarl* comments that Gunnlaugr does not limp because of it, to which Gunnlaugr replies that "*Eigi skal haltr ganga, meðan báðir fœtr eru jafnlangir.*"[123] This is, of course, a small example based upon a temporary injury, but the concept remains. The Icelandic saga hero must appear and function as a whole or hale man, and under that circumstance, physical difference may even be taken as a mark of exceptionality. Even if it never comes to pass, the threat of being unable to present a front of normality persists, placing even the most secure of physically different characters in a precarious position.

[123] Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, ed., "Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu," in Íslensk fornrit, vol. III (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2001), 68-69. "Not shall I halt go, while both legs are evenly long."

The elevated social position of most of these figures allows for the creation of a liminal space where physical difference is not automatically followed by social disenfranchisement, so that the physically different may contingently retain exceptional social status. Because their social classes were highly valued, the sagas (and possibly medieval Icelandic society, by extension) had to allow room in the social margins for provisional circumvention of social disenfranchisement. That is to say, social class seems to weigh more heavily than physical difference alone, though the physically different from elevated classes had to constantly navigate and prove themselves against social stigma based on difference or perceived inability. While the sagas do not show examples of such disenfranchisement, the framing of physical difference as something that must be continually countered with capability and/or exceptional performance attests to a broader mentality of such a paradigm. Such formulations indicate that while physical difference did not automatically result in social disenfranchisement, the correlation between the two was strong enough that the audience and saga characters themselves must at least ask if a physically different saga character was disenfranchised. The answer seems to lie on a spectrum of capacity (or exceptionality), one that is largely if not entirely informed by the dominating concerns of social class and status within the Icelandic saga texts.

4.2: Difference, the Supernatural, and Liminal Space

In many ways, this unique social position creates a liminal space for physical difference that correlates to the supernatural, though not every character with some manner of physical difference is also tied to the supernatural. Despite the abundance of the supernatural in *Grettis saga*, Ǫnundr and his *tréfótr* neither encounter nor cross into a cosmological Otherworld, seemingly having his narrative hands full with the tension between being Norwegian and being Icelandic. There is nothing magical about the slow healing of Þórólfr's hand in *Laxdœla saga* even though this happens in the same chapter as Án *hrísmagi*'s miraculous/supernatural recovery. Likewise, there are those who encounter the supernatural without having a capacity-questioning physical difference themselves, such as *Vǫlsunga saga*'s Sigurðr.

With that disclaimer, there are a number of figures who fall into both categories. Ívarr hinn beinlausi is one notable example. From the beginning, he is marked as Other: his bonelessness and unique method of comportment are noted immediately, and then juxtaposed with his exceptional skills and appearance. It is interesting that Ívarr proves his skills in his first successful campaign before the narrative allows his more overt supernatural tendencies to manifest in his uncanny knowledge of he and his brothers' opponents and then, finally, his battle with and defeat of the magical cow, Síbilja. Either the narrative delays the supernatural element of Ívarr's nature in order to build tension, allowing the audience to accumulate suspicion about the extent of his exceptionality, or the narrative wants Ívarr to be taken on his own merits, demonstrating his cunning and prowess to the audience before the supernatural elements are fully introduced. In either case, the saga does not wish Ívarr to immediately be identified as *supernaturally* Other, though he is certainly marked by his physical difference, which highlights his exceptional ability. There are also two instances discussed above where the order is reversed. Hrafnkell's association with the supernatural, mainly his pact with Freyr and the strange horse Freyfaxi, comes at the beginning of the story and disappears after the death of the horse and Hrafnkell's deposition, coincidentally when his tendons are bored through. Vǫlundr, likewise, is associated with the supernatural Other from the start of the tale by nature of his heritage, skills, and wife, and Níðuðr also refers to him as "vís álfa," suggesting a connection to the strange and supernatural *álfr*, literal or metaphoric.[124] Vǫlundr's exceptional skill is what leads Níðuðr to capture him and cut his tendons, though the supernatural connections remain in his case.

The correlation between physical difference and the supernatural cannot with confidence be said to be causational. Rather, the connection lies in that they are both considered liminal states, and therefore are narratively inclined to overlap. If physical difference allows *provisional* access to the social order, as speculated in the previous section, it is necessarily a liminal space, heightened by the pervasive awareness of loss (physical, as with a missing limb, or esoteric, as with normative performance or social inclusion). Disability, or variable bodies in general, may be metonymic for uncertainty and disruption in narrative, much in the same way that Otherworld narratives can

[124] Jónas Kristjánsson, et al., eds, "Vǫlundarkviða," 435.

function as metonymic for societal struggles of order and chaos.[125] In parallel, certain women (usually those with status) could, in particular circumstances, take on a masculine presentation and role, largely for the sake of avenging her family if she had no brothers, temporarily allowing her a doorway into parts of the social order otherwise inaccessible to her.[126] Interestingly, these stories also often had supernatural elements, such as seen with Hervǫr of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, Brynhildr of *Vǫlsunga saga*, and the mythological Skaði, providing a possible parallel to the sort of liminal overlap discussed here.[127] Yet these supernatural stories are neither transactional nor overtly/solely compensational. It is worth noting that while Ívarr's extraordinary mind allows him to excel "despite" his physical condition, the story is not framed as Ívarr's mind compensating for his body, particularly when he is able to shoot his bow so readily. Likewise, there are not examples of sagas taking place "in the real world" that have the same sort of transactional pledges as seen with Óðinn and arguably Heimdallr, even those that have supernatural elements. It is not necessarily that Otherness drives people to the margin. If someone is already removed from certain cultural restraints by being liminal in one way, such as in regards to a physical difference, they may be more likely to slip into other liminal spaces, such as accessing the supernatural Other.

I propose because it seems overly simplistic and incorrect to argue that physical difference exists only in the sagas as a narrative marker for supernatural Otherness. As the connection between the two is not causational, and the language often (if not always) indicates an awareness of actual limitation (physically and in social perception) that would be unlikely if the difference was only a narrative tool. There are some cases in which physical difference does mark supernatural Otherness, of course. Elg-Fróði of *Hrólfs saga kraka* is marked by his supernaturally altered legs, and their specific, animal Otherness is clearly not meant to represent a natural physical difference, while the specific site of the legs as different may have carried equal cultural marking and symbolism that, in combination, lead to his superlative ability.[128] In these cases, the expression of physical difference is not so much a representation of a realistic congenital condition as much as a direct manifestation of a supernaturally Other origin

[125] Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis,* 48-49.
[126] Clover, "Maiden Warriors," 39-40.
[127] Ibid., 38-43.
[128] Wilson, "Inter-crural Relations," 55-57.

or influence. It is interesting that this markedness occurs only in the legs, which may have been considered indecent to expose or fixate on, given the absence of imagery and discussion in the literature.[129] Because these cases are distinctly designated as supernatural (expressed physically), conflating them with instances and representations of more realistic conditions without supernatural origins creates a false, if convenient, paradigm. That the supernatural is connected to physical difference is undeniable, but it seems much more accurate to discuss this connection in terms of liminality than to dismiss the nuance and complexity of the role of physical difference in the saga narratives.

4.3: Physical Realities of Difference and the Sagas

This brings us to the last theme in the above examples, which is a deep-rooted practicality and realism. The emphasis on rational realism in current Western culture may incline scholars to relegate physical difference to the supernatural realm if it seems connected to a cosmologically Other space. However, the sagas show a world in which the supernatural and the history of the natural world coexist, and where the gap between mythic and rational can and should be closed, hence the common juxtaposition of texts like *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. So, even when the saga itself moves in the realm of the supernatural, the social and physical issues retain a practical grounding. Qnundr must wrestle, and not just the once, with the perception that he is lesser now that he has his wooden leg, no matter how easily he can turn overturn that assumption. Vǫlundr creates wings to escape. He must because he cannot repair the damage to his legs. Þórólfr lives, but his arm is never without pain. Even Hǫðr, who may not be entirely excluded or stigmatized, cannot participate in every activity on account of his blindness, and that reality is exploited in order to cause Baldr's death. The other Æsir, who have no apparent consequences of their physical differences, which do not inconvenience them, are the exceptions that, by their inhuman nature, prove the rule. *Hávamál*'s practical insistence that "*blindr er betri/ en brenndr sé*" seems to be the prevailing attitude.[130]

[129] Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Contextualizing Old Norse-Icelandic Bodies," 202.
[130] Jónas Kristjánsson, et al., eds, "Hávamál," 336.

While the figures with physical differences tend to be exceptional in one or more ways, often tied to the supernatural or acting as heroic figures, it does not necessarily release them from the realities of having some practical difficulties. At the same time, there are men like Þórólfr and Ívarr Kolbeinsson, whose hewn off limbs exist to heighten the dramatic stakes of battles. While these battles are dramatic, cinematic to whichever extent the term applies, they are also a reminder that life-altering lost limbs and painful injuries were a risk in conflict, a reality for the people of the sagas as well as at least some of the saga-audience. Auðr's injury, the result of attempting to stop a conflict, is a reminder that innocents attempting to break up socially disruptive quarrels could be seriously injured in them as well. This, of course, is to say nothing of those with even less social position and protection, who are all too often unspoken in the sagas. Still, while these sagas do not depict everyone, there is a pervasive awareness of injuries and physical differences as part of the reality of the world, beyond or co-existing with simple narrative tropes. This complexity may keep difference from appearing solely as a device for characterization and social metaphor, critiqued as narrative prosthesis, but the elements of social metonymy show it could be used as such, especially in the cases of unexceptional, otherwise marginal saga characters.[131] The themes seen in these examples, that physical difference and social enfranchisement had to be navigated, that the supernatural was connected to but did not predict or dictate physical difference, and that the sagas retain a practical grounding regarding difference, present an interesting starting point for deeper discussions of physical difference and disability more widely in the sagas. However, themes and examples do not entail an approach or a method.

[131] Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 56-57.

Chapter 5. Conclusions

5.1: A Method for Analyzing Disability in the Sagas

On the surface it may seem as though the methods used above have little to do with a cohesive strategy for engaging with the text. However, they can be combined into a strategy that allows us to examine the representation of physical difference in the sagas without compromising our academic integrity by defaulting to simple but inaccurate narratives around disability. As we cannot access with complete confidence native perception of disability at the time of saga writing, it is incumbent upon us to forgo hasty assumptions or convenient oversimplifications. Under the circumstances, it makes the most sense to prioritize the text itself. With focus on the language used to discuss physical difference, it becomes much easier to identify patterns and themes that are not immediately evident to modern biases. As should be clear, focusing on the text does not only mean looking at the individual words. Certainly that is an important part of the process and allows for detailed analysis of how saga authors wish to discuss physical difference. Engagement with individual words highlights the connotations of the terminology used as well as which aspects of difference (e.g. physical, social, or practical) are emphasized. Still, it is necessary to engage as well with the context of these descriptions and to compare them with one another, both within and between texts. This creates a possibility for examining broader themes of presentation within the saga canon. We are then able to see the different ways in which physical difference/disability is used on a thematic and a narrative level as well as how it may reflect contemporary social perspectives on these same topics. Of course, it is important not to overstate the results this approach may allow. The goal is not to reconstruct the ideology of the original saga audience, but instead to attempt to avoid pitfalls of applying more modern gestalts of disability, such as the medical model or a compensatory model, thereby limiting or skewing interpretations of the text towards ones which feel more comfortable but may be less accurate. As saga studies as a field struggles to include more balanced views of gender, sexuality, and class in their interpretations, in order to push back against antiquated and biased ideologies, it is a vital to include more nuanced understandings of physical difference and disability more generally as well. Accepting pejoratives or purely narrative understandings of disability

and not looking beyond these gives little – if any – credit to the writers and creators of the sagas. None of this is to argue that the societies of the medieval north had "better" or more advanced understandings of physical difference than do modern day societies. It is point out that to reduce their understanding to merely being derogative does not accurately reflect what we see in the texts themselves. On the contrary, the depiction of physical difference in these stories sheds light on a greater system of understanding power and social access.

The approach proposed here places a large amount of emphasis on the role of closely reading the text and the context surrounding it, and of equal importance, the inclusion of principles of disability studies. While contemporary disability studies include awareness of social, medical, and political factors not present in the saga texts, there is a wealth of material that should be taken into account. This means not only speaking of disability, but explicitly and comprehensively engaging with the work and theory of disability scholars. Of primary importance is decoupling ingrained prejudices about the negative and limiting nature of disability, as well as the thought that it is inherently tragic or, in the case of narrative, restricted entirely to symbolism. By starting from a place that values the presence of physical difference in the text, a disability studies aware perspective creates the space for new interpretations. Unfortunately, the historical remove means that scholars cannot definitively analyze how physical difference, or disability more generally, was culturally constructed. At the same time, it is true that this sort of approach can identify some measure of social response to and perception of these differences.

Moreover, an awareness of disability studies demands, at least in part, an understanding of medical, social, and cultural conceptions of disability. With even a small background in this area, we as scholars have no defense for baldly applying modern conceptions where they do not belong and must engage thoughtfully with the source text itself. Not only does this lead to a clearer understanding of the perception of physical difference in the saga texts, it also helps to grow the wider field and to promote an academic awareness of the complexities and nuances of understandings of difference and disability in history and literature. Haphazard application of the medical or moral models of disability or the derived pejoratives has heretofore limited our understanding

of the role that physical difference plays narratively, and possibly also socially, in the world of the sagas.

It is not my intention to discount the vital work that has already been done in this area. With so little focus on the nature of physical difference or disability, every step towards more inclusion and greater understanding is necessary and worthy of celebration. However, it is very easy to fall into the trap of a limited scope, one that restricts understanding of physical difference to the outmoded medical model of disability, to exclusively a narrative device, or to one that writes pejorative negativity over the nuances and details of the representative text. As discussed previously, there are issues of language and terminology that academics must contend with. Hopefully, it has been shown here that the easiest way to discuss these issues is to use value-neutral language or the language from the text, in order not to obscure the connotations of the original wording. It is true that due to the constant pejoration of the language of disability, the terms in vogue change relatively rapidly. The best approach seems to be to research and use the language considered appropriate at the time, and to trust that future readers will understand the use of language in accordance with the preferences of the contemporary disabled community and the reasoning behind those terms. While the goal of any scholarly work is to move towards new and nuanced interpretations, we must also keep in mind the implications and realities of the world at large, as well as any real people our interpretations reflect upon.

Though the scope of this thesis was by necessity narrow, it has ideally established the outline of an approach for discussing the framing and presentation of disability in the sagas. The method itself is very simple. As seen above, it focuses on the language used in an instance or instances of physical difference in the text, analyzing it not only on a denotative level but also in the broader context of the social landscape, as well as to similar representation both intra- and intertextually. Tools from discourse analysis as well as literary analysis prove useful in creating an interpretation of a particular scenario or theme, as does reference to disability scholarship. To increase the accuracy of further work in this area, it would be highly beneficial to consult a searchable saga corpus similar to the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), for example. Such a searchable corpus would allow for the comparison of specific words and phrases and their contexts, both for intertextual discussion and for

collating instances of a particular search term. The potential to collect and sort data would be useful in both literary-focused studies such as this and more narrowly-focused linguistic work. As there are already efforts to digitalize and create saga concordances, a searchable corpus would fit into work already being done and would be a fantastic asset to the field. Ultimately, this sort of analysis should prove useful in identifying major themes in representations of medieval Icelandic society and their discourse of physical difference and disability. Though the major focus of this thesis was on *physical* difference, the same principles can and should be applied to other instances of what we would consider disability.

5.2: Themes for Further Investigation

As noted in the introduction, medieval Icelandic society, and Old Norse societies at large did not have an overarching concept of disability, but rather a complicated understanding of difference and its relation to social standing and disenfranchisement, compounded by connections with the supernatural Other. Still, this sort of analysis may be helpful in drawing primary conclusions about the Old Norse/Icelandic understanding of conditions and situations that we would broadly group under the term disability. Some possible directions to take this approach may be examinations of mental illness, learning disabilities, and chronic injuries, pain, or illnesses. The same attention to language and detail will hopefully reveal more about how saga writers perceived these conditions, without the complicating factor of a general disability grouping as in the modern day. With any luck, more work in this vein will increase awareness of the role difference/disability plays in the medieval Icelandic/Norse social structures as well as current narratives of disability. In addition to the attempt to provide a template for analysis, this thesis aims to illustrate how it can be useful in identifying themes and motifs of difference in the saga texts. What became clear was that while there are consistent themes that often overlapped, there was a good deal of nuance and subtlety as to the presentation of physical difference in the chosen texts. Three major threads in the use of difference narratives emerged. Perhaps the most dominant thread was that of the social aspect of difference, particularly the idea that such a difference was linked to precarious social standing and potential loss of respect that had to be overcome by

competence, particularly martial competence. Another thread, the one most often discussed in isolation from practical realities of physical difference, was the overlap of physical difference and supernatural Otherness, or arguably difference as a marker of Otherness. Finally, although this theme was more subtle than the others and possibly not as prevalent, was the physical and practical grounding of physical difference. The saga creators and saga writers' implicit and explicit acknowledgement in the text of the difficulties of living with these conditions as seen in both the themes previously discussed, whether congenitally acquired or obtained in the course of daily life, suggests their awareness of the presence and nuances of disability and difference in their society. Even when difference was not central to the story, its inclusion is enough to suggest its presence in day-to-day life, although public perception may have aligned with the *Hávamál* stanza's central tenant: existence with an undesirable situation is better than non-existence.

Although the writers did not write with the aim of explaining their cultural understanding and perception of disability/difference, the way they wrote about it conveys a good deal about the way they and their audience thought of it. Even though these conclusions do little to develop an infallible understanding of how these conditions were viewed at the time, they do suggest that the flat application of models of disability which view disabled people as worthless, helpless, and automatically disenfranchised do not reflect the complicated social realities of medieval Iceland and the surrounding areas. But the fact that representations of physical difference in the sagas tend to center on land-owning or otherwise socially advantaged free men implies a level of intersectionality in which perception of physically different people was also heavily tied to gender and class at the very least, particularly the latter. If this is the case, there are interesting implications of difference/disability in discussions of social order, class, and access to cultural systems. While the majority of this discussion has been centered firmly in the realm of literature, there is no doubt that the same approach is useful and necessary for other focuses in the broader field of medieval Norse and saga studies. It is my hope that this thesis will provide and serve as a model for possible methods going forward for the inclusion of disability in discussions of the history, culture, and literature of the medieval North.

Bibliography

Aaron, Jessi E. “An Awkward Companion: Disability and the Semantic Landscape of English Lame.” *Journal of English Linguistics* 38, no. 1 (March 2010): 25-55.

Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir. “The Other World in the *Fornaldarsögur* and in Folklore.” In *Folklore in Old Norse – Old Norse in Folklore*. Edited by Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pederson, 14-40. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014.

Ármann Jakobsson. “Fötlun á miðöldum: svipmyndir.” In *Fötlun og Menning: Íslandssagan í öðru ljósi.* Edited by Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson og Kristín Björnsdóttir. Reykjavík : Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2013: 51-69.

Bragg, Lois. “From the Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature.” In *Disability and Society* 12, No. 2 (July 1997): 165-78.

Bragg, Lois. *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga.* Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004.

Clover, Carol J. “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.”*Speculum* 68, No. 2 (April 1993): 363-87.

Clover, Carol. “Maiden Warriors and Other Sons.” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85, No. 1 (1986): 35-49.

Conway, Rebecca. “Stumped in the Sagas: Woodland and Wooden Tools in the Íslendingasögur,” Master’s thesis. Háskóli Íslands, Reykjavík. September 2015. Skemman (1946/22708).

Devlieger, Patrick J. “Generating a cultural model of disability.” In *the 19th Congress of the European Federation of Associations of Teachers of the Deaf (FEAPDA*). 1-15. Geneva, Switzerland, 2005.

Eichhorn-Mulligan, Amy C. “Contextualizing Old Norse-Icelandic Bodies.” In *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles: Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference Durham and York. 6-12 August, 2006*. Edited by John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata

Kick. Vol. 1. Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Durham University, 2006.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds. "Eyrbyggja saga." In *Íslenzk fornrit*. Vol. IV. 1-191. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1985.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds. "Laxdœla saga." In *Íslenzk fornrit*. Vol. V. 1-248. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934.

Faulkes, Anthony, ed. "Gylfaginning." In *Edda* Vol. 1, 7-55. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Faulkes, Anthony, ed. "Skáldskaparmál." In *Edda* Vol. 2, 7-55. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Garland-Thompson, Rosemary. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." In *The Disability Studies Reader*. 4th Edition. Edited by Lennard J. Davis, 333-353. New York, NY: Rutledge, 2013.

Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Richard Cleasby. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957.

Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar." In *Íslenzk fornrit*. Vol. VII. 1-290. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 2001.

Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Ragnars saga loðbrókar" and "Ragnarssona þáttr" In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Vol. I. 219 – 285. Reykjavík : Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950.

Guðni Jónsson and Sigurður Nordal, ed. "Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu." In *Íslensk fornrit*, Vol. III. 49-107. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2001.

"Ivar The Boneless." *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 5028 (1957): 1172-173.

Jón Jóhanesson, ed. "Hrafnskels saga Freysgoða." In *Íslenzk fornrit*. Vol. XI. 95-133. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950.

Jónas Kristjánsson, Vésteinn Ólason, and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, eds. *Íslenzk fornrit* Eddukvæði Vol. 1. 138-168. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014.

Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir. “Blindur er betri en brenndur sé: um norræna guði og skerðingar.” In *Fötlun og Menning: Íslandssagan í öðru ljósi.* Edited by Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson og Kristín Björnsdóttir. Reykjavík : Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2013: 27-49.

Lawing, Sean. “Re-membering Auðr’s Hand in *Eyrbyggja Saga*.” In *Proceedings of International Medieval Congress: The Literature of Medieval Scandinavia, III: Political, Cultural, and Mythological Empires,* University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom. July 7, 2014.

Linton, Simi. “Reassigning Meaning.” In *The Disability Studies Reader*. 2nd edition. Edited by Lennard J. Davis, 161-72. New York, NY: Rutledge, 2006.

McKinnell, John. "Vǫlundarkviða: Origins and Interpretation." In *Essays on Eddic Poetry*. Edited by Kick Donata and Shafer, John D. 221-48. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2014.

McTurk, Rory. “Ívarr the Boneless and the Amphibious Cow.” In *Islanders and Water-Dwellers: Proceedings of the Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium Held at University College Dublin 16-19 June 1996*. Edited by Patricia Lysaght, Séamas Ó Catháin, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin. Dublin: DBA Publications Limited, 1999: 189-204.

Metzler, Irina. *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking About Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, C. 1100-1400*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Winance, Myriam. “How speaking shapes person and world: Analysis of the performativity of discourse in the field of disability.” In *Social Theory & Health 5,* No. 3 (2007): 228-244.

Quayson, Ato. “Aesthetic Nervousness.” In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, 202-#. New York, NY: Rutledge, 2013.

Sexton, John P. “Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas.” In *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*. 149-163. Edited by Joshua R. Eyler. London and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010.

Titchkosky, Tanya. *Reading and Writing Disability Differently: The Textured Life of Embodiment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Torfi H. Tulinius. “Merveilleux et violence contre les femmes dans les sagas islandaises.” *Revue des Langues Romanes* 103, no. 1 (1999): 153-174.

Torfi H. Tulinius. “The Matter of the North: fiction and uncertain identities in thirteenth-century Iceland,” in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000: 242-65.

Torfi Tulinius. “Returning Fathers: Sagas, Novels, and the Uncanny.” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 21. (2013): 18-39.

Turner, David M. *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Wilson, Josh. “Inter-crural Relations: Abnormal representations of legs and feet in the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*.” Master’s thesis. Háskóli Íslands, Reykjavík. May 2016. Skemman (1946/24085).

Zoëga, Geir T. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004.