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The Lion, the Dream, and the Poet: Mental Illnesses in Norway's Medieval Royal Court[1]

Christopher Crocker and Ármann Jakobsson

Few medievalists today insist that mental illnesses were invariably associated with sin and the demonic during the Middle Ages, even if such associations were rather common.[2] Yet, the perceived omnipresence of such an association has persisted in the popular imagination and in other fields relating to the health sciences.[3] The persistence of this one-dimensional view outside of medieval studies has likely played no small part in driving the development of a rich and multifaceted scholarly interest in the perceptions of mental illnesses in the Middle Ages. Though adopting broader disciplinary perspectives, the notion of a 'unified or static medieval cultural edifice' characterized much of the early research on this topic.[4] In recent decades, however, scholars have begun to explore the varying perceptions of mental illnesses in the Middle Ages in an assortment of culturally and historically specific contexts.[5] Furthermore, while the earlier work on this topic was largely understood in the context of the history of medicine, more recent research has been situated within the emerging field of 'Mad studies', which has shared a sometimes-uneasy relationship with the more well-established field of disability studies.[6] Yet, with respect to the Middle Ages, employing a disability studies framework helps to emphasize the various social, political, cultural, and economic factors that invariably contribute towards the understanding, representation, and experience of mental illnesses, which are also always historically contingent.

Using such a framework, the present study seeks to explore this topic in the context of one

[1] This article emerges from the research project "Disability before Disability" (*Fötlun fyrir tíma fötlunar)* 2017–2020, which was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund (*Rannsóknasjóður*), Grant of Excellence No. 173655–05.

[2] Jerome Kroll & Bernard Bachrach, 'Sin and Mental Illness in the Middle Ages', *Psychological Medicine* 14 (1984), 507–14.

[3] See, for example, Monica A. Joseph, *Discrimination Against the Mentally Ill*, Greenwood: Santa Barbara 2016, 21–22; Anne F. Segal, L. Thomas Winfree, Jr. & Stan Friedman, *Mental Health and Criminal Justice,* Wolters Kluwer: New York 2019, 57.

[4] Leah Ann Craig, 'The History of Madness and Mental Illness in the Middle Ages: Directions and Questions', *History Compass* 12, 9 (2014), 729–44, at 729.

[5] See Michael Walters Dols, *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society,* Clarendon: Oxford 1992; Wendy J. Turner ed., *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom,* Brill: Leiden 2010; Albrecht Classen ed., *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age,* De Gruyter: Berlin 2014; Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Susanna Niiranen eds., *Mental (Dis)Order in Later Medieval Europe,* Brill: Leiden 2014; Aleksandra Pfau, *Medieval Communities and the Mad: Narratives of Crime and Mental Illness in Late Medieval France,* Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam 2018. For a broad overview, see Craig 2014.

[6] See Peter Beresford & Jasna Russo, 'Supporting the sustainability of Mad Studies and preventing its co-option', *Disability & Society* 31 (2016), 270–74; Elizabeth Brewer, 'Coming Out Mad, Coming Out Disabled', in Elizabeth J. Donaldson ed., *Literatures of Madness: Disability Studies and Mental Health,* Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland 2018, 11–30; Ryan Thorneycroft, 'Crip Theory and Mad Studies: Intersections and Points of Departure', *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 9, 1 (2020), 91–121.

medieval Icelandic saga, namely the early thirteenth-century *Morkinskinna* – literally, 'Mouldy parchment' – which recounts the history of the kings of Norway from the early eleventh to the mid-twelfth century. The saga takes its present name from a postmedieval description of its oldest surviving manuscript witness, GKS 1009 fol. (c. 1275), but the surviving text is as an iteration of a tradition that spans several manuscripts and almost 300 years.[7] *Morkinskinna* provides a number of examples of what could today be identified as mental illnesses, three of which are examined more closely below. The first concerns an unnamed boy whose mother petitions two kings for their help. The second centres on a despondent Icelandic poet and member of King Eysteinn Magnússon's court. The third relates to the final declining years of the reign of Sigurðr 'the Crusader' (*Jórsalafari*). While these three examples differ in many ways, the present article adopts a roomy interpretive framework defying comprehensive and discrete classification such that the term mental illness broadly refers to a sustained failure to perform or experience a 'normal' use of one's mind, sense of reason, or other mental faculties due to some identified or unidentified underlying cause.[8]

In all three instances, the text naturally applies its own contemporaneous terminology, which must be closely scrutinized. Yet, rather than focusing on attempting to associate such terms with modern diagnostic categories, greater attention will be given to the reactions and responses the phenomena they refer to inspire within the saga, which include curiosity, incomprehension, fear, hopelessness, sorrow, sensitivity, attentiveness, compassion, and successful or unsuccessful attempts at treatment. In this respect, these examples may provide some insight toward commonly held perceptions of mental illnesses and their disabling effects in the medieval Nordic world. However, the scope and the specific context provided by the text cannot be overlooked. *Morkinskinna* exhibits a principal concern with royal power and its multifaceted role emanating from Norway's medieval royal court. Thus, rather than attempting to draw wide-reaching conclusions about the medieval Nordic world as a whole, the three examples discussed below will be examined in the context of the Norway's medieval royal court, focusing specifically on the saga's depiction of the relationship between Norwegian kings and their followers. Such an examination highlights how *Morkinskinna's* now anonymous Icelandic author invoked mental illnesses as narrative elements to advance some of the broader interests of their text concerning the role, duties, and the relationship between rulers and their subjects.

A dreamless boy

According to *Morkinskinna*, as well as other medieval kings' sagas, the obligations of a medieval Norwegian king were varied and included things like leading forces into battle, formulating and

[7] On the dating, authorship and manuscript preservation of *Morkinskinna*, see Ármann Jakobsson, *A Sense of Belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity, c. 1220,* Frederik Heinemann transl., University Press of Southern Denmark: Odense 2014, 23–69.

[8] This framework is modified from the one used to discuss 'madness' in Aleksandra Pfau, 'Protecting or Restraining? Madness as a Disability in Late Medieval France', in Joshua R. Eyler ed., *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations,* Palgrave: Surrey 2010, 93–104. See also Craig 2014, 731–35. Wendy Turner also offers an insightful discussion of the precision of terms associated with forms of mental incapacitation in documentary sources from medieval England in Wendy Turner, 'Defining Mental Afflictions in Medieval English Administrative Records', in Cory James Rushton ed., *Disability and Medieval Law: History, Literature, Society,* Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2012, 134–56.

administering the laws, and building or maintaining infrastructure. However, a sensitivity towards the well-being of their subjects is also a key responsibility and virtue of the kings depicted in the saga. This is evident throughout *Morkinskinna*, including during a brief episode that takes place during the short-lived shared reign of King Magnús 'the good' (*góði*) Óláfsson (c. 1024–47) and his uncle Haraldr 'the severe' (*harðráði*) Sigurðarson (c. 1015–66) during the mid-eleventh century, between 1046–47. Amid the larger tensions that pervade Magnús and Haraldr's shared reign, this episode provides a remarkable account of the role a king might and perhaps should play in recognizing and helping to alleviate mental illnesses that emerge among their followers.

The episode begins when an unnamed noblewoman seeks out King Haraldr after her son, who is also unnamed, has 'lost his memory like he was *hamstoli* (see below)'.[9] The king advises the woman to seek King Magnús' help, claiming that he will know what to do. Magnús, in turn, similarly tells her that no one is wiser than King Haraldr, and that she should seek out his advice. When she returns to Haraldr a second time he tells her that her son is

> *draumstoli* (see below), but that's not good for anyone, and it's unnatural for people not to dream, and that can cause harm. Now go to where King Magnús had bathed and let the boy drink from the basin. Then let him sing, and even if he becomes sleepy or yawns then don't let him go to sleep; and after that go to where the king had gone to bed and let the boy sleep there, and more than likely he will begin to dream.[10]

The woman follows Haraldr's advice and after her son has awoken, laughing, from a bout of sleep he tells her of a dream he has just experienced. In the dream, the two kings came before him and King Magnús said into one ear, 'Be the best you can be', while Haraldr said into the other, 'Be as studious and remember as much as you can'.[11] In the end, it is said that the boy turned out to be a 'remarkable man' (*merkiligr maðr*) and the 'treatment' (*lækning*) Haraldr provided had worked.

The term *draumstoli* – literally, 'dream-stolen' – is a *hapax legomenon*, attested only in the eponymous manuscript of *Morkinskinna* and in *Hulda* or AM 66 fol., a fourteenth-century manuscript of the same text. The meaning of the term, being unable to dream or being deprived of dreams, is clear even if its cause and relation to the boy's condition is not clearly explained. Recent research has explored the connection between brain injuries and the onset of insomnia and/or an inability to dream.[12] Yet the saga is silent on the boy's life prior to or following this brief episode, precluding

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[9] 'missti minnis sem hann væri hamstoli', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson eds., *Morkinskinna* (Íslenzk fornrit 23–24), 2 vols., Hið íslenzka fornritafélag: Reykjavík 2011, I: 147.

[10] 'draumstoli, en þat hlýðir øngum manni, ok er ekki øðli til þess at men dreymi ekki ok at þat megi hlýða. Gakk nú þar til er Magnús konungr hefir tekit laugar ok lát sveinunn súpa af handlauginni. Síðan láttu hann syngja, ok þó at hǫfga slái á hann eða geispa þá láttu hann eigi ná at sofna; en eptir þat far þú með hann þangat er konungr hefir hvílt ok lát sveininn þar sofna, ok meiri ván at honum birtisk draumr', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, I: 147.

[11] 'Ver þú sem beztr … Ver þú sem næmstr ok minngastr', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, I: 147.

[12] See J. Allan Hobson, 'Sleep and dream suppression following a lateral medullary infarct: A first-person account', *Consciousness and Cognition* 11, 3 (2002), 377–90; Matthias Bischof & Claudio L. Bassetti, 'Total dream loss: A distinct neuropsychological dysfunction after bilateral PCA stroke', *Annals of Neurology* 56, 4 (2004), 583–86.

any convincing claims that he may have experienced such an injury. His mother's description of him having lost his memory, or perhaps lost his mind (*missti minnis*), is relatively transparent and refers to severely impaired, but seemingly non-congenital mental activity. However, the meaning of the term *hamstoli*, which is more widely attested, may also be more difficult to grasp fully.

The second element of the word is the familiar *-stoli*, 'being deprived of something'. The first element, *hamr*, is also well-known and is often used to refer to the skin, usually of an animal, or more generally the shape or form of something or someone. It and other related terms, such as the verb *at hamask*, the noun *hamfar*, and the adjective *hamrammr*, are often employed in constructions referring to shape-shifting or other paranormal activities. In this instance, however, as Clive Tolley explains, the term *hamstoli* is perhaps 'meant to be taken metaphorically, indicating that a person does not look or act their normal self'.[13] Theodore Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade more specifically interpret the term here as suggesting that the boy has 'gone out of his mind' while François-Xavier Dillmann suggests it refers to a state of distress, fury, or frenzy.[14] The word may be synonymous with the term *vitstolinn* – literally, wit-stolen – which is precisely the term used in the corresponding passage in *Hulda*.[15] The boy clearly seems to be demonstrating some kind of abnormal behaviour that has a negative effect on his mood and mental faculties, including his memory. Yet, the text does not allow for a convincing explanation using modern diagnostic criteria or medical terminology. This would indeed be a futile endeavour and, of course, this is not where the saga author's interests lie.

As mentioned above, *Morkinskinna* exhibits a principal concern towards the role of royal power in society and one of the saga author's primary interests throughout the narrative is 'the often-fractious relationship between kings'.[16] The brief period of Magnús and Haraldr's joint rule of Norway comes about only after the latter had threatened to invade his nephew's kingdom through an alliance with another of Magnús' rivals, Sveinn (Ástríðarson) Úlfsson (c. 1019–76) of Denmark. According to the saga, the two kings enjoy a tense period of shared rule. It is, thus, significant that when the noblewoman first seeks out Haraldr's advice he uses the opportunity to praise his counterpart's wisdom and that Magnús, in turn, does the same. The former is ultimately tasked with identifying the cause of and providing a solution for the boy's condition. The text is, however, sparing in the explanation of its cause, which can thus elicit little interpretation or scholarly analysis, and focuses primarily on the solution Haraldr devises. It might be worth noting, however, that an 'ill girl' (*kona sjúk*) appearing in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* is similarly referred to as *hamstoli* coinciding with the fact that, though bedridden, she could not sleep at night. There is no explicit mention of dreams and the cause of the girl's condition appears to be some poorly carved runes a suitor has placed under her bed. Egill, the saga's poet protagonist, eventually destroys the whale-

[13] Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse myth or magic* (FF communications 296), 2 vols., Academia Scientiarum Fennica: Helsinki 2009, I: 195.

[14] Theodore M. Andersson & Kari Ellen Gade ed. & transl., *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)* (Islandica 51), Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2000, 167; François-Xavier Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne*, Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur: Uppsala 2006, 245.

[15] Jonna Louis-Jensen ed., *Hulda: De norske kongers sagaer 1030-1155 ... efter AM 66 fol. med varianter fra Gl. kgl. saml. 1010 fol. 1* (Editiones Arnamagnæanæ Ser. A no. 11), Copenhagen (forthcoming), 143.

[16] Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 99.

bone on which the runes are carved, replaces them with runes of his own design, and her 'health' (*heil*) is soon restored.[17]

The solution King Haraldr offers to aid the *draumstoli* boy is quite different from Egill's, yet each is evocative of motifs commonly associated with hagiographical traditions. Both episodes feature several of what Siân Grønlie has labelled 'unofficial hagiographic cameos', to which the saga's medieval audience would have been well attuned.[18] Haraldr's suggestion that the boy drink from the basin in which Magnús had washed, for example, echoes the familiar hagiographical topos of the healing power of substances that have been in contact with the body of a saint. Washing waters used by Saint Gerald of Aurillac (c. 855–c. 909), Saint Margaret of Hungary (1242–70), and Saint and King Edward the Confessor (c. 1003–66), for example, were all said to have had healing powers.[19] Similarly, though with an added posthumous element, in Iceland, Saint Þorlákr's (1133–93) *beinavatn* – literally, bone-water – which refers to the water used to wash the saint's relics, was documented as having been used to cure a variety of ailments.[20] Haraldr's suggestion that the boy refrain from sleeping and to begin singing or chanting near where the king had bathed may also be reminiscent of the vigil (*vigilia*) tradition associated with healing rituals at holy shrines.[21] Perhaps implicit in this advice is an underlying suggestion that the boy had engaged in some unstated sinful behaviour or even that his body, his *hamr*, has been occupied by a demonic being or force that can only be expelled using knowledge and techniques that the kings – and perhaps only the kings – were aware of and capable of deploying. When he finally does sleep, notably precisely where Magnús had slept, he is brought again into proximity with the king's body. Furthermore, the appearance of the two kings in his dream also echoes a well-known hagiographical trope connecting the presence of saints in dreams or visions and miraculous healing.[22]

It is, furthermore, worth noting that Magnús was an illegitimate son of Saint and King Óláfr Haraldsson (c. 995–1030) while Haraldr was Óláfr's half-brother and, like his half-brother,

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[17] Sigurður Nordal ed., *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar (*Íslenzk fornrit 2), Hið íslenzka fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1933, 229–30.

[18] Siân Grønlie, *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature,* D. S. Brewer: Cambridge 2017, 20. On the possible influence of hagiographical and scriptural writing in the episode from *Egils saga,* see Grønlie 2017, 88–90.

[19] Matthew Kuefler, *The Making and Unmaking of a Saint: Hagiography and Memory in the cult of Gerald of Aurillac,* University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 2014, 20, 62–64, 95–96; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,* University of California Press: Berkeley 1987, 146, 358n147, 392n87; Elisabeth van Houts, 'Edward and Normandy', in Richard Mortimer ed., *Edward the Confessor: The Man and the Legend,* Boydell: Woodbridge 2009, 63–76, at 73.

[20] Ásdís Egilsdóttir ed., *Biskupa sögur II* (Íslenzk fornrit 16), Hið íslenzka fornritafélag: Reykjavík 2002, 263, 266–67, 277–78.

[21] See Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about physical impairment during the high Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400,* Routledge: London & New York 2006, 195, 196, 197, 201, 202.

[22] See Luciano Sangermano, 'Il «santo sognato». Esperienze oniriche e guarigioni miracolose nell'agiografia Francescana dei secoli XIII e XIV', *Quaderni storici* 112 (2003), 29–60; Stavroula Constantinou, 'The Morphology of Healing Dreams: Dream and Therapy in Byzantine Collections of Miracle Stories', in Christina Angelidi & George T. Calofonos ed., *Dreaming in Byzantium and Beyond,* Routledge: London & New York 2016, 21–34. See also Bernadine McCreesh, 'Prophetic Dreams and Visions in the Sagas of the Early Icelandic Saints', in Antonina Harbus & Russell Poole eds., V*erbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank,* University of Toronto Press: Toronto 2005, 247–68; Christopher Crocker, 'Disability and dreams in the medieval Icelandic sagas', *Saga-Book* 43 (2019), 37–58, at 46–48.

played a crucial role in advancing Christianity in Norway during the eleventh century. Yet, neither Magnús nor Haraldr were ever canonized. This brief episode nevertheless lends the two kings, who doubtlessly see themselves and want others to see them as having been anointed by God, a distinct aura of sanctity. Furthermore, their vital role in healing the boy by making use of specialized knowledge and techniques, which could seemingly be deployed only by a select few, emphasizes the degree and scope of their authority that extends into the paranormal realm and perhaps also blurs the line between hagiographical and pre-Christian traditions.[23] In fact, the episode is hardly about the unnamed mother and son at all, neither of whom are ever referred to again in the saga but who rather serve only as a narrative device. Beyond the salvaging of several hagiographical motifs, the episode provides little specific insight towards the nature of the boy's problem or its underlying cause. It is clearly more concerned with how the two kings respond when confronted by a mental illness among their followers. Neither Magnús nor Haraldr express anything like fear, incomprehension, or suspicion towards the boy or his condition nor does it invite any stigma either prior to or following Haraldr's successful treatment. The two respond as, apparently, all good leaders should. Furthermore, they do not fail to use the opportunity to praise one another, despite the tensions that pervade their shared reign, while simultaneously demonstrating their profound connections with the divine, a crucial component of kingship in the medieval Nordic world.

Speaking of sorrow

Magnús and Haraldr are not the only kings in the saga to demonstrate an awareness and sensitivity towards the individual well-being of their subjects. King Eysteinn Magnússon (c.1088–1123) is consistently characterised as demonstrating precisely this quality, which is perhaps most memorably emphasised in the *mannjafnaðr* – literally, man-measuring – that Eysteinn and his half-brother King Sigurðr 'the Crusader' (*Jórsalafari*) (c.1090–1130) engage in to compare their respective accomplishments as rulers. While the latter stresses his physical accomplishments and victories in foreign battles in the name of the Christian faith, the former highlights his efforts to solve the daily and domestic problems of his subjects, both collectively and individually. In the end, Eysteinn and his self-stated qualities come out on top as he is given the final and lengthy word of their tense exchange. This quality is on full display in a remarkable episode earlier in the saga now commonly referred to as the 'Tale of Ívarr Ingimundarson' (*Ívars þáttr Ingimundarsonar*), which, like the episode discussed above, hinges on the emergence of a mental illness among the king's followers.

The first part of the episode describes how Ívarr Ingimundarson, an Icelandic poet and member of Eysteinn's court, becomes 'greatly unhappy' (*ógleði mikla*) after he discovers that his brother Þorfinnr has travelled back to Iceland and married Oddný, the woman whom Ívarr had asked his brother to propose to on his own behalf. The king promptly notices and seeks to find out why

[23] On folk traditions concerning paranormal causes and cures of illnesses in the medieval and early modern North see, for example, Laura Stark, *The Magical Self: Body, Society and The Supernatural in Early Modern Rural Finland* (FF communications 290), Academia Scientiarum Fennica: Helsinki 2006; Alaric Hall *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, Boydell Press: Woodbridge & Rochester 2007, 96–156; Kirsi Kanerva, 'Disturbances of the Mind and Body: The Effects of the Living Dead in Medieval Iceland', in Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Susanna Niiranen eds., *Mental (Dis)Order in Later Medieval Europe,* Brill: Leiden 2014, 219–42.

the poet has become 'so joyless' (*svá ókátr*). After several failed guesses, he comes to learn that Ívarr is, in the king's own words, *hugsjúkr* – literally, mind-sick – on account of a woman back in Iceland.[24] Eysteinn offers to intercede on Ívarr's behalf, even if the woman is already married, before the poet finally reveals that the woman's husband is his own brother. The king then changes tack and offers to find another woman for Ívarr, but the poet claims that when he sees any other beautiful woman 'my sorrow grows' (*meiri minn harmr*). Eysteinn next offers Ívarr wealth and power, but to no avail. Finally, although he remarks that it is 'tiny next to what I have offered you', he tells Ívarr that he will make time each day so that the poet can come to see him and to talk to him about Oddný.[25] Eysteinn reasons that 'it is sometimes the case that one's sorrow is lessened by talking about it'.[26] The poet takes the king up on his offer and the two often spoke together. The episode closes by noting that 'Ívar's sorrow was now relieved sooner than expected, and he became happier after this, and returned to his normal self as before, entertaining and merry' and that he remained with the king thereafter.[27]

Unlike the episode concerning the unnamed *draumstoli* boy, this episode seems to provide considerable material for those who might seek a modern medical explanation for the poet's *hugsjúkr*. In this vein, Linn Getz, Anna Luise Kirkengen, Halfdan Petursson, and Johann A. Sigurdsson have suggested, for example, that Ívarr is subject to a bout of melancholia or depression and must have experienced 'allostatic overload' wherein 'his body's adaptive, life preserving systems are likely to be damaged if the stress is not resolved'.[28] Theodore Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade arrive at a perhaps less specific diagnosis, simply referring to Ívarr as grieved.[29] Kirsi Kanerva has suggested that the term *hugsjúkr*, which the king uses to describe the poet, was more generally used to refer to feelings of 'sadness, homesickness, anxiety, and a state of being downcast'.[30] In any case, though entailing less severe effects on the poet's basic mental faculties than those experienced by the nameless boy, Ívarr's condition falls within the broad interpretive framework described above in that it entails a sustained failure to perform or experience the 'normal' use of his mind or other mental faculties due to an underlying cause.

Ívarr's *hugsjúkr* clearly relates to his feelings of 'sorrow' (*harmr*) and his becoming 'joyless' (*ókatr*) and 'greatly unhappy' (*ógleði mikla*), which stem from both his brother's apparent betrayal and from losing the woman he loves. Suffering brought about by 'lovesickness' is, of course, a common motif in a variety of medieval literatures, including the medieval Icelandic sagas. It features

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[24] On the culturally and historically constructed meanings and finer nuances of the term *hugr*, see Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, 'The Head, the Heart, and the Breast: Bodily Conceptions of Emotion and Cognition in Old Norse Skaldic Poetry', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 15 (2019), 29–64, at 39–41.

[25] 'alllítils verður hjá þessum er ek hefi boðit þér', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 105.

[26] 'þat verðr stundum at mǫnnum verðr harms síns at léttara er um er rœtt', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 105.

[27] 'bœttisk nú Ívari harms síns vánum bráðara, [ok] gladdisk hann eptir þetta, ok kømr í samt lag sem fyrr hafði verit um skemmtun hans og gleði', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 105.

[28] Linn Getz, Anna Luise Kirkengen, Halfdan Petursson & Johann A. Sigurdsson, 'The Royal road to Healing: A Bit of a Saga', *The British Medical Journal* 343 (Dec. 2011), 1312–13, at 1313.

[29] Andersson & Gade 2000, 327.

[30] Kanerva 2014, 236.

as well in many medieval medical texts deriving from Greek, Roman, and Arabic traditions and was commonly associated with humoral imbalances. Prescribed treatments could include things like bloodletting, taking baths, copulation, drinking wine, listening to music, observing gardens, running water, or other amusements, and even conversing with dear friends.[31] Evidence that humoral theory was known in the medieval Nordic world can be found in several medieval sagas and an adaptation of a medical treatise on the subject is, in fact, preserved in the early-fourteenth-century manuscript AM 544 4to or *Hauksbók*.[32] Yet, *Morkinskinna's* author shows little interest in exploring the underlying physiological or psychological aspects of Ívarr's *hugsjúkr*, and attempts to apply a definitive retrospective diagnosis drawing on modern diagnostic criteria will inevitably fall short.

As in the episode concerning the dreamless boy, the focus here is placed upon the king's remarkable and multifaceted reaction to his follower's troubles, which are apparent in the way Ívarr fails to fulfil his prescribed role as an entertaining presence in Eysteinn's court by being so miserable.[33] While initially expressing curiosity about the change that has come over Ívarr, the king also quickly demonstrates an attentiveness and sensitivity towards the poet's well-being. Starting from a position of incomprehension and uncertainty, Eysteinn's perseverance prevails and he finally uncovers what seems to be the root of Ívarr's joylessness. Yet, the king's sense of incomprehension returns when he attempts to resolve the matter by invoking his own authority, influence, power, and wealth, all to no avail. He then devises a solution which he seems to think is much less substantial than his other proposals. However, Eysteinn's offer to make time for Ívarr to discuss his problems is precisely what allows the poet to return gradually to his normal, entertaining, and joyful self. The king does not seem to fully grasp why this solution works in place of the others he had suggested, although he does express a general awareness that talking about one's problems can help to alleviate their 'sorrow' (*harmr*).

Despite the king's at least partial ignorance, the narrative itself emphasizes the importance of 'the healing powers of a respectful human relationship', crucially a relationship with one whose 'reason, integrity, and authority' the afflicted party respects.[34] Rather than drawing forth fear, scorn, suspicion, or inviting social stigma, Eysteinn responds to Ívarr's downcast mood and his inability to perform his proper role in the royal court with attentiveness and compassion. Thus, the episode maintains that a king can and perhaps even should take an active role in the care and treatment of those followers afflicted with mental illnesses. Indeed, in the medieval Icelandic sagas, the king

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[31] On lovesickness and its treatments in medieval culture, see, for example, Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and its Commentaries*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 1990; Jacalyn Duffin, *Lovers and Livers: Disease Concepts in History*, University of Toronto Press: Toronto 2005. On lovesickness in the medieval Icelandic sagas, see Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Elskhuginn Egill Skallagrímsson', Skírnir 2 (2015), 360–97.

[32] Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Humoral Theory in the Medieval North: An Old Norse Translation of *Epistula Vindiciani* in Hauksbók', *Gripla* 29 (2018), 36–66. See also Kanerva 2014, 228–33, 239–42; Lars Lönnroth, 'Kroppen som själens spegel – ett motiv i de isländska sagorna', in *Lychnos. Lärdomshistoriska samfundets ärsbok* 1963–1964, Sten Lindroth ed., Almqvist & Wiksell: Stockholm 1963, 24–61. Some, however, have questioned the extent of the influence of humoral theory on medieval saga writing. See, for example, Peter Hallberg, 'Recensioner: I. Två fakultetsoppositioner: Lars Lönnroth. Samlaren', T*idskrift för svensk litteraturhistorisk forskning* 86 (1965), 157–84.

[33] Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 179.

[34] Getz et al. 2011, 1313.

and the poet share a highly symbiotic relationship where the poet depends on the king's patronage and support, but the poet likewise plays a vital role in helping the king maintain their political and social importance.[35]

This episode, like the one concerning the dreamless boy, may provide insight about medieval understandings and attitudes towards mental illnesses, particularly when experienced by those of high enough status to find themselves within close orbit of the king. It remains unclear if those of lower social status, whose inner lives and experiences are not often remarked upon in the sagas, would be afforded the same attentiveness and compassion. However, the episode's primary function within the narrative is not to serve as a broad social commentary on public health but rather as an *exemplum*, serving to illustrate how Eysteinn fulfils this aspect of his duties in an exemplary way.[36] It begins, in fact, by telling the reader as much when the narrator unambiguously claims, 'In this part it is noted, as I am about to tell, what a glorious man King Eysteinn was, and how true a friend and how mindful he was in attending to the sorrow of his beloved followers'.[37] Although Ívarr is provided with a much richer backstory than the unnamed *draumstoli* boy, the king's journey to first discover the root of Ívarr's *hugsjúkr* and to then find a suitable treatment forms the dramatic core of the episode. Ívarr's mental illness functions as a narrative device, the primary purpose of which is to yield insight towards the institution of medieval kingship. Its emergence initiates a line of questioning through which, on the one hand, the apparent desires of a follower of the king, including women, wealth, power, or perhaps beyond everything else an intimate relationship with the king himself, are specified. On the other hand, it allows the king to express the power and resources at his command while simultaneously reiterating one of the defining qualities that characterizes Eysteinn as a ruler: namely, his consistent focus on caring for and solving the daily and domestic problems of his followers.

Tapering Towards the Rear

A final, fascinating example concerns the aforementioned King Sigurðr the Crusader who ruled Norway for twenty-seven years, twelve spent co-ruling with his half-brothers Óláfr and Eysteinn, and eight with Eysteinn alone. The beginning of Sigurðr's reign was quite auspicious when the young ruler travelled to Jerusalem on an armed pilgrimage or crusade. The trip was seen as a huge success and conveyed much distinction and prestige not only on King Sigurðr himself but on the kingdom of Norway as well. The narrative in *Morkinskinna* is, however, deeply ironic, pulling no punches in suggesting that the success of the trip was partly a public relations triumph due to King Sigurðr's ability to present himself as a much richer, more powerful, and more splendid king than

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[35] Shami Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History: Problems and Perspective* (The Northern World 54), Brill: Leiden 2011, 35–36.

[36] Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 130.

[37] 'Í þeima hlut má marka, er nú mun ek segja, hverr dýrðarmaðr Eysteinn konungr var, eða hvé mjǫk hann var vinhollr ok hugkvæmr eptir at leita við sína ástmenn hvat þeim væri at harmi', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 102.

he actually was. The saga may even imply that royal splendour is always a hoax.[38] Furthermore, the success of the journey is also juxtaposed with the narrative's remarkable portrayal of King Sigurðr's decline in his later years and the no less remarkable reactions and responses that the king's mental illness generates or, more commonly, fails to generate among his followers.

Long before his decline, after King Sigurðr has met with the emperor in Constantinople and conned the latter into treating his Norwegian counterpart as an equal, a local prophet bursts Sigurðr's bubble by issuing a sad and bestial prophecy. He claims that 'Sigurðr's fame would resemble the frame of the wild beast (i.e. lion), broad in the shoulders and tapering towards the rear; so would his kingship fare, that though at that time he was of great renown he would decline later'.[39] On the one hand, the comparison suggests that, like the king of the beasts, Sigurðr's royal splendour is unassailable. On the other hand, the lion is still a beast and likely signifies the wildness that besets King Sigurðr in his later years. *Morkinskinna* includes several anecdotes during Sigurðr's later years in which the king, often during a feast or in a great hall, suddenly begins to act in seemingly unreasonable ways. His condition is once described as 'instability' (*vanstilli*) as if he has lost his footing.[40] In the slightly younger *Heimskringla*, a text closely related to *Morkinskinna* and attributed to the thirteenth-century Icelandic historian, mythographer, poet, and politician Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), Sigurðr's condition is similarly referred to as 'displacement' (*staðleysi*). There it begins with a vision of a fish in a tub that makes the king laugh uncontrollably.[41]

Not confined to a single episode like the previous examples, at times Sigurður rolls his eyes, he is cruel, and few of his followers dare to stand up to the king's baffling and frightening behaviour. However, when rarely confronted, the king may readily acknowledge that he is 'mad' (*ærr*).[42] Sometimes, though, he reacts violently and once even begins to 'swell and puff up' (*þrútna ok bólgna*).[43] The signs of his condition are, indeed, often physical as well as psychological or emotional,

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[38] Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 71–100. On the intricacies of this aspect of the text, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Image is Everything: The Morkinskinna Account of King Sigurðr of Norway's Journey to the Holy Land', *Parergon* 30, 1 (2013), 121–40.

[39] 'svá myndi fara virðing Sigurðar konungs sem it óarga dýr er vaxit, geyst í bógunum ok aptr minna; lét at svá myndi fara hans konungdómr at þá myndi mest um þykkja vert en síðarr minna', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 99.

[40] Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 146.

[41] Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson ed., *Heimskringla* (Íslenzk fornrit 26–28), 3 vols., Hið íslenzka fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1951, III: 262. On the relationship between *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, as well as several other sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 25–33.

[42] Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 140. The theme of the powerlessness of the subjects of a deranged medieval king is well-known. See, for example, Cary James Rushton, 'The King's Stupor: Dealing with Royal Paralysis in Late Medieval England', in Wendy J. Turner ed., *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom,* Brill: Leiden 2010, 147–76; Wendy J. Turner, 'A Cure for the King means the Health of the Country: The Mental and Physical Health of Henry VI', in Wendy J. Turner ed., *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom,* Brill: Leiden 2010, 177–95.

[43] Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 150.

often leading to chaos and the bewilderment of the court.[44] Jon Geir Høyersten has retrospectively diagnosed the king with bipolar disorder, which may account for some of Sigurðr's behaviour, although this diagnosis seems to lay undue weight on his bombastic conduct during the aforementioned crusade of his teenage years.[45] In the older *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, dated to the late twelfth century, a poisonous drink is suggested to be the cause of the change that comes over Sigurðr, whereas in *Morkinskinna* no such explanation is provided.[46] As in the other examples, diagnosing the king's condition is a difficult if not impossible task given that there is no longer a living person nor even a corpse to inspect. Furthermore, the text is not specific about the king's symptoms, precisely how others make sense of them, nor about their underlying cause. As in the previous examples, interpreting the king's behaviour through a strictly or even predominantly diagnostic lens risks obscuring much of the deeper meaning generated by the saga's author use of the remarkable account of Sigurðr's later years, which is predominantly focused not on the king's condition itself but on the social disruption it causes.[47]

This is evident from a close examination of one of the five primary episodes concerning Sigurðr's disruptive behaviour, namely when he unthinkingly and without pause demands that fresh meat be served on a Friday. On this occasion, King Sigurðr is sitting amongst his noble retainers but is in a 'depressed' or 'sad state of mind' (*stirðum hug*). It is Friday and the king is asked what should be prepared for dinner. He replies: 'What but fresh meat?' (*Hvat nema slátr?*). In his seemingly impulsive and unpredictable reply, the king is so intimidating that none dare say a word against him. Instead his followers go to dinner full of fear and sorrow on account of the heretical behaviour in which they are forced to participate. The royal retainers seem more than a little sheepish, indicating the degree to which the king dominates the royal court. When warm, fresh meat is brought in, 'all were quiet and lamented the king's illness'.[48]

This sense of despair is likely exacerbated by the fact that the king's major accomplishment in life, encoded in his nickname *Jórsalafari*, was his pilgrimage to the holy land. Of course, like in every good tale, there is a twist. Just as the entire royal court is being led to sin like lambs to the slaughter, a lone courtier speaks up. This man, called Áslákr 'the Rooster' (*hani*), is small of stat-

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[44] On the physicality of Old Norse emotions see, for example, Kirsten Wolf, 'Somatic Semiotics: Emotion and the Human Face in the Sagas and *Þættir* of Icelanders', *Traditio* 69 (2014), 125–45; Christopher Crocker, 'Emotions', in Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson ed., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, Routledge: London 2017, 240–52; Sif Rikhardsdottir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts,* D. S. Brewer: Cambridge 2017, 66–67, 85–91, 109–12, 131–39, 167–70; Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir 2019. See also Kate McGrath, 'Royal Madness and the Law: The Role of Anger in Representations of Royal Authority in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Texts', in Wendy J. Turner ed., *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom*, Brill: Leiden 2010, 123–45.

[45] Jon Geir Høyersten, 'Madness in the Old Norse Society: Narratives and Ideas', *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry* 61 (2007), 324–31, at 328–30.

[46] Gustav Storm ed., *Monumenta historica Norvegiæ: Latinske Kildeskrifter til Norges Historie i Middelalderen*, A.W. Brøgger: Oslo (Kristiania) 1880, 66.

[47] The following builds upon the discussion of Sigurðr's mental illness in Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Madness of King Sigurðr: Narrating Insanity in an Old Norse Kings' Saga', in Sally Crawford & Christina Lee eds., *Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disbaility* (Studies in Early Medicine 3), Archaeopress: Oxford 2014, 29–35.

[48] 'váru allir menn hljóðir ok hǫrmuðu konungs mein', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 144.

ure and not of noble birth, but he had travelled abroad with the king. Áslákr, perhaps surprisingly mastering Socratic questioning, asks the king what reeks of warmth before him. The king responds in kind with a question of his own, prompting Áslákr to acknowledge the meat. He goes on to say that eating meat on Friday would violate the vow that Sigurðr had made when he bathed in the River Jordan with a palm branch in his hand and a crucifix on his chest. In the gospels, the Jordan occupies paramount significance due to its association with the baptism of Christ. The river itself and locations along the Jordan were also the site of many other important events in biblical history, including, for example, when the prophet Eli'sha guided the Syrian military commander Na'aman to dip his body into the river seven times in order to cure his leprosy.[49] The motif of bathing or swimming in the Jordan also appears elsewhere in *Morkinskinna* and in a number of other places in medieval saga writing, including in *Eireks saga víðförla*, *Heimskringla*, and *Orkneyinga saga*, where the river is frequently, though not exclusively, connected with religious conversion or piety.[50] Its invocation here reiterates the king's association with the holy land, but may have also served as a reminder of traditions attesting to the healing powers of its waters.

In any case, Áslákr concludes his bold intervention by stating that if a lesser man had made such a demand they would be punished and that it was strange that no one else spoke up. Sigurðr does not respond directly but neither does he begin to eat. In fact, eventually the meat is carried out untouched, is replaced by more appropriate food, and, as the meal progresses, it is said that the king began to cheer up. Later, when everyone begs Áslákr to flee, he responds that if he must be executed for stopping the noble pilgrim king from committing heretical acts, that would be a good death. Surprisingly enough, Sigurðr does not retaliate but rather summons Áslákr and asks who had encouraged him to publicly chastise his king. Áslákr claims that he had acted on his own volition and Sigurðr rewards him with three farmsteads for having guided him from evil when his more noble retainers dared not act.[51]

Only Áslákr keeps Sigurðr from committing this atrocity when the rest of his followers, who are in constant fear of what he might do next, dare not oppose him. Áslákr's actions do not, however, have a lasting effect and the same pattern is repeated in four other episodes that document the king's growing disintegration. Sigurðr's erratic behaviour continues as he cows his subjects, who seem paralysed when facing him. In several instances, only a lone brave retainer intervenes, the actions of whom the king both recognizes and even rewards. The bewilderment of the court is at the centre of the account of the king's final years and is commented on frequently as the king's shifting behaviour baffles and frightens his followers. On these occasions, all control has been lost, which leads to chaos whenever the king begins to act up. Yet, the nature of his condition is never fully explained in the saga.

That his condition is sporadic is evident from the lucid moments when the king praises those, like Áslákr, who have dared to stand up to him. He also has nothing but scorn for those fearful followers who are not willing to speak up. Áslákr's intervention, which is not a treatment per se

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[49] Kings 5:1–14.

[50] See John Douglas Shafer, *Saga-Accounts of Norse Far-Travellers,* PhD Thesis, Durham University: Durham 2009, 112–39.

[51] Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 144–45.

but does temporarily improve the king's mood, is thus even more remarkable in contrast to the inaction of the other, more noble members of the court. With the onset of King Sigurðr's mental illness, unexpected chaos descends upon a royal court that is so dependent on its head that it hardly knows how to react. Nearly all those in the orbit of the king are simultaneously beset with feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, and sorrow and are unable to prevent Sigurðr's decline into excess and rage. There is also deep unease as to how the king's mental illness will affect his spiritual well-being, since his condition threatens to lead, and in other instances actually leads, him to sin in various ways. Remarkably, this issue goes unresolved in the saga.[52] Yet, crucial to this part of the narrative are those brave followers like Áslákr who do their best to provide good advice even when the king does not wish to hear it. Risking their own well-being, they prevent him from doing more harm than necessary.

Interestingly, near the end of his life, Sigurðr even states that he feels sorry for his subjects for 'having a mad king rule over you'.[53] Yet, he is still confident that his successors, though not similarly afflicted, will be even worse, which actually turns out to be the case. This strange sense of self-awareness renders the narrative even more poignant: King Sigurðr is not completely unaware of the suffering his behaviour is causing, which only added to his own anguish, especially during his more lucid moments. Yet, perhaps still drawing benefits not only from his authority but also from the divine favour he had earned for himself and his kingdom during his younger years, Sigurðr is not fully incapacitated by his mental illness during his difficult final years. This leaves the question of whether his condition could be interpreted as a curse or a partial blessing open to interpretation.[54] In any case, Sigurðr dies at the age of forty, not an advanced age but still as the third oldest King of Norway between 1035 and 1177. His death leaves Norway in continued political turmoil, seeming to fulfil his own prophecy, as his inheritors fight for the throne until King Sverrir (c. 1145–1202), the purported grand-son of King Sigurðr's half-brother Haraldr Gilli (c. 1100–36), captures the throne.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that the aforementioned *Heimskringla*, which used *Morkinskinna* as a source, makes do with only a single anecdote illustrating Sigurðr's mental illness and, thus, perhaps downplays his decline. Conversely, in its account of the king's final years, in the two other examples discussed above, and in several other places in the narrative, *Morkinskinna* seems to reveal a unique interest in certain aspects of what Susan Sontag referred to as the 'the night-side of life'.[55] Yet, even though it features historical figures, the saga is not a documentary source. It is a literary narrative that draws on oral and literary traditions to elaborate upon historical events and figures while simultaneously incorporating imaginative elements. Like other medieval sagas, it represents 'history as

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[52] Cf. Giovanna Salvucci, *Death, Afterlife and Politics in Medieval Norway: The Thanatology of Kings in the Old Norse Synoptic Histories of Norway, 1035–1161,* Müller: Saarbrücken 2010, 111–12.

[53] 'at hafa œran konung yfir yðr', Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, II: 149.

[54] See Beth Tovey, 'Kingly impairments in Anglo-Saxon literature: God's curse and God's blessing', in Joshua R. Eyler ed., *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations,* Palgrave: Surrey 2010, 135–48.

[55] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor,* Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York 1978, 3.

it was done in 13th-century Iceland, based on tradition with a great deal of creative input by the historiographer'.[56]

As such, using *Morkinskinna* or any other saga to impose modern diagnostic categories upon historical figures like Sigurðr, the poet Ívarr, or even the less assuredly historical *draumstoli* boy belies the nature and source value of the text. In fact, the saga's representation of mental illnesses does not welcome close comparison with modern medical understandings of these phenomena, not only on account of cultural or social differences, but because of the nature of the text itself, which is not medical in its register. Moreover, a preoccupation with the idea that the proper diagnosis will somehow help to 'solve the text' precludes more important interpretive questions about how such phenomena function with the narrative.[57] Although employing specific terminology warranting close examination, the saga's author mostly managed to resist strict labels and represented such conditions not as purely biomedical but also as social phenomena and made use of them as narrative devices.[58]

It goes without saying that members of the society about and in which *Morkinskinna* was written and received experienced and likely recognized something like what are presently referred to as mental illnesses. The substance of and responses to those experiences were likely very different from our own owing to myriad social and cultural factors. Yet, the three examples discussed above demonstrate the specific disabling effects of such phenomena within the context of Norway's medieval royal court. The *draumstoli* boy, for example, is only able to fulfill his potential and become a 'remarkable man' following the intervention of the two kings without which he would presumably remain socially dependent and stuck in a permanently underdeveloped state. Ívarr's ability to properly participate and perform his role in Eysteinn's court is similarly compromised and only restored after the king fully understands the situation and devises a solution to help the despondent poet. Rather than removing Ívarr from the court, the king devises a reasonable accommodation, making time to discuss Ívarr's problems, that allows the poet to perform the essential duties – to be entertaining and merry – required of him. In Sigurðr's case, the king's condition has clear deleterious effects on his ability to perform his social role. There is, however, also the added ambiguity of which disability is greater, that of the unbalanced king or that of the impotent court, which cannot function properly without him. Adopting a disability studies approach and examining these three episodes on their own terms provides crucial insight toward what such phenomena meant and the ensuing disabling effects they produced within the cultural, historical, and social context provided by the narrative in which they appear.

Still, the three examples discussed above are not of primary interest as an accurate reflection of specific experiences or even of broader social attitudes given, for example, that these episodes concern only a small and elite slice of medieval Nordic society. Rather, these episodes demonstrate

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[56] Ármann Jakobsson, 'King Arthur and the Kennedy Assassination: The Allure and Absence of Truth in the Icelandic sagas', *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 22 (2015), 12–25, at 21.

[57] Michael Bérubé, *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read*, New York University Press: New York 2016, 20, 27, 130.

[58] Greg Eghigian, 'Introduction', in Greg Eghigian ed., *From Madness to Mental Health: Psychiatric Disorder and its Treatment in Western Civilization,* Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick 2010, 1–5. See also Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London 1987, 38–39.

how *Morkinskinna's* author invoked mental illnesses to extend their investigation of some of the issues that are central to the saga as a whole, including 'the nature of royal power, the relationship between kings and subjects and their duties towards the king'.[59] In the two earlier examples, rather than fear, suspicion, and perhaps subsequently social exclusion or harmful stigma, the kings were afforded an opportunity to exercise their royal power and to restore order or normality, each in their own exemplary way. In the final example, however, the arrangement is reversed, and the saga depicts a royal court that has descended into chaos and fear. Few of Sigurðr's followers dare to intervene at the risk of offending the king and bringing further harm upon themselves. Yet, the narrative itself assumes a stance sympathetic both to the suffering of the king and to those who feel powerless to help him. Moreover, while clearly less potent than those methods employed by their royal counterparts in the earlier examples, a few brave retainers, such as Áslákr, are able to pluck up the courage and to provide some relief to both the court and its king, for which they may be amply rewarded. All three episodes revolve around the crucial relationship shared between the central figure of the king and his followers. In the face of a mental illness among his followers, a good king shows deep concern, providing the necessary compassion and care. Yet, the king himself is not immune to such ailments, which places similar demands upon his loyal followers. Although their concern and compassion may run deep, their care can hardly be as effective as that of the king, God's representative on earth.

[59] Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 344.