

The logo for the journal 'Mirator' features the word 'Mirator' in a stylized, red, cursive script font. The letters are elegant and flowing, with the 'M' and 'R' being particularly prominent. The text is set against a solid, light brown or tan rectangular background.

Mirator 2/20 (2021)

eISSN 1457-2362

Glossa ry - Keskiajan tutkimuksen seura / Sällskapet för medeltidsforskning /

Society for Medieval studies in Finland

<https://journal.fi/mirator>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



VERTAISARVIOITU  
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD  
PEER-REVIEWED  
[www.tsv.fi/tunnus](http://www.tsv.fi/tunnus)

Judith Higman

Nobody's *fi*l: Representations of intellectual disability in Old Norse-Icelandic literature

Judith Higman

University of Cambridge

[jfh55@cam.ac.uk](mailto:jfh55@cam.ac.uk)

To cite this article:

Judith Higman, 'Nobody's *fi*l: Representations of intellectual disability in Old Norse-Icelandic literature', *Mirator* 2/20 (2021), 73–90.

# Nobody's *fífl*: Representations of intellectual disability in Old Norse-Icelandic literature

JUDITH HIGMAN

The eponymous protagonist of the medieval *Hreiðars þáttr* provides a substantial representation of a figure long considered to be intellectually impaired. However, there are several minor characters described elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature as an ‘idiot’ (*glópr*), ‘fool’ (*fífl*) or ‘foolish, silly, or homebody’ (*heimskr*).<sup>1</sup> Further insight is provided by imitations of well-known ‘fools’, such as Gísli Súrsson impersonating Helgi in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, and Þorgils Örrabeinsstjúpr disguised as Án ‘the foolish’ (*inn heimski*) in *Flóamanna saga*.<sup>2</sup> It is unclear whether all these characters would be assigned to the same category, or indeed whether medieval Icelanders perceived intellectual impairment to be a category at all. While several characters in the corpus are given epithets referring to possible intellectual impairment, in this article I will investigate the nature of Icelandic perceptions of intellectual impairment by examining these three aforementioned characters and Þorkell Sigurðsson in *Finnboga saga ramma*. This will involve comparing the language used in the medieval Icelandic lawbook *Grágás* with the terminology employed by narrative sources in the context of the saga corpus.

People with intellectual impairments are presented very differently in narrative and legal texts during the middle ages.<sup>3</sup> The function of laws regarding people with intellectual impairments is to determine who can take responsibility for their own actions and property, and how to assign responsibility for those who cannot look after themselves. In contrast, the motivations of narrative texts are less pragmatically direct. Most sagas are primarily concerned with relating the story of a man, a family, a feud or a region (these are not mutually exclusive), and in such tales those with intellectual impairments provide useful mechanisms to advance the narrative. The gulf between legal and narrative presentations of people with intellectual impairments is emphasised in this corpus by the completely distinct manuscript traditions. There are many characters in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus who are referred to as foolish, but this selection is the basis for an initial essay.

<sup>1</sup> In the following discussion of Old Norse terminology for intellectual impairment, I have taken definitions from Richard Cleasby & Gudbrand Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary, Subsequently Revised, Enlarged and Completed by Gudbrand Vigfússon*, 2nd edn., Clarendon Press: Oxford 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson eds, ‘Flóamanna saga’, in *Harðar saga* (Íslensk fornrit 13), Hið íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1991, 307; Paul Acker transl., ‘The Saga of the People of Floi’, in Viðar Hreinsson et al. eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, 5 vols., Leifur Eiríksson Publishing: Reykjavík 1997, III: 296; Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson eds., ‘Gísla saga Súrssonar’, in *Vestfirðinga sögur* (Íslensk fornrit 6), Hið íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1943, 87–88; Martin Regal transl., ‘Gisli Súrsson’s Saga’, in Viðar Hreinsson et al. eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, 5 vols., Leifur Eiríksson Publishing: Reykjavík 1997, II: 35.

<sup>3</sup> Irina Metzler, *Fools and Idiots? Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages*, Manchester University Press: Manchester 2016, 173–75.

## Language for Intellectual Impairment in *Grágás*

The antecedent of the legal compendium we now know as *Grágás* was first written down in the winter of 1117–18.<sup>4</sup> Modern editions tend to amalgamate the two manuscripts of *Konungsbók* and *Staðarhólsbók*, both of which date from the late thirteenth century, and contain solely legal texts. *Grágás* tends to use terms referring to thought or wisdom when defining intellectual impairment, such as the words related to *vit*, meaning ‘intelligence, understanding, or reason’. A man was not intellectually competent ‘who does not know whether a trough-saddle is to face forwards or backwards on a horse, or which way he should face’.<sup>5</sup> A man also cannot be responsible for keeping a fast if he is *óvittr*: ‘mentally deficient ... if he lacked sense to’.<sup>6</sup> In neither of these examples do the *vit* terms allow for gradation. The negative description of words and phrases related to *vit*, such as the aforesaid *óvittr*, suggests that intellectually impaired people were perceived as unwhole, by assuming a base level of intellectual capacity unless clearly demonstrated otherwise.

A man was deemed, for example, intellectually capable to go to the *þing*, one of three yearly legal, social and political assemblies, if ‘he can ride full days’ journeys and bring in his own hobbled horse after baiting and find his way by himself where the route is known to him’. This clause adds that they can participate ‘if they are twelve years old or older and so wise that they can govern their words and deeds’, confirming that it refers to intellectual capacity.<sup>7</sup> Words derived from the term *hyggja*, meaning ‘to think, mean, or believe’, have a similar meaning to *vit* words. *Hyggjarni* describes a person of sufficient intellectual capacity to pass the trough-saddle test.<sup>8</sup> *Hygginn* describes intellectual ability in reference to a man being ‘so intelligent that he can manage his inheritance, and govern his words and oaths’, variants of which are used repeatedly.<sup>9</sup> The phrases *svo hygginn að* and *hyggjarni* suggest the intellectual capacity conveyed by *hyggja* was a graded quality, of which one could have more or less. The phrase ‘but if his understanding improves’ shows that *hyggja* could change.<sup>10</sup> Thus *vit* and *hyggja* are used differently – a man has or does not have *vit*, whereas his *hyggja* can vary. These legal clauses show careful deliberation over determining intellectual capacity.

The phrase ‘so intelligent that he can ... govern his words and oaths’ indicates that to control his inheritance a man needed to be competent to participate in legal procedures. The verb *hyggja* has a

<sup>4</sup> Ari Þorgilsson, ‘Íslendingabók’ in Siân Grønlie ed. & transl., *Íslendingabók: Kristni Saga (The Book of the Icelanders: The Story of the Conversion)*, London Viking Society for Northern Research: London 2006, 12.

<sup>5</sup> ‘er eigi veit hvort trýjusöðull skal fram horfa á hrossi eða aftur, eða hvort hann skal horfa á hrossinu fram eða aftur’, Gunnar Karlsson, Kristján Sveinsson & Mörður Árnason eds., *Grágás: lagasafn íslenska Þjóðveldisins*, Mál og menning: Reykjavík 1992, 49; Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote & Richard Perkins eds. & transl., *Laws of Early Iceland: Gragas – The Codex Regius of Gragas with Material for Other Manuscripts*, 2 vols., University of Manitoba Press: Winnipeg 1980, II: 5–6.

<sup>6</sup> ‘óvita ... ef hann átti eigi vit til’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 33; Dennis et al. 1980, I: 49.

<sup>7</sup> ‘hann má ríða fullum dagleiðum og taka hest sinn á áiföngum, og sé hann svo skyggn að hann megi hitta leið sína þar sem honum er kunnigt ... ef þeir eru tólf vetra gamlir eða eldri og svo vitugir að þeir kunni að ráða fyrir orði og eiði’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 227; my translation.

<sup>8</sup> Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 49; Dennis et al. 1980, II: 5–6.

<sup>9</sup> ‘svo hygginn að hann kunni fyrir erfð að ráða og fyrir orði og eiði hyggja’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 236; my translation.

<sup>10</sup> ‘en ef honum batnar hyggjandi’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 50; Dennis et al. 1980, II: 6. This is unusual when compared to other medieval law codes; see Metzler 2016, 140–62.

subsidiary meaning of ‘to intend, purpose’, demonstrating that intellectual capacity was required to exercise meaningful intention. The term *heimskr* is also found in the *Erfðabátttr* section of *Grágás*, which concerns inheritance, referring to the marriage of a *heimskr* man. Elsewhere, *Grágás* uses *heimskr* as shorthand for those whose intellectual impairment is sufficiently severe to provide legal immunity.<sup>11</sup> This choice of word implies that it was a relatively benign term, descriptive rather than insulting, although in different contexts it might be used maliciously.

Multiple clauses and tests to determine intellectual capacity show that this was an area of concern. This may have stemmed from a fear that the exploitation of those underage or with insufficient understanding could upset the balance of power and disinherit legitimate heirs, creating conflict. Also possible is that someone could be denied their rights and property through spurious claims of intellectual impairment, necessitating tests which legally required witnesses, as Wendy Turner has investigated in late medieval England.<sup>12</sup> As mental capacity is only pertinent to inheritance and legal participation, there is minimal reference to the mental capacity of the landless or of women.

Some gradation in the ability to govern one’s own affairs is implied by the prescription that if a man ‘is incapable of looking after his property to the last unit’, he should be treated as a dependent.<sup>13</sup> This clause is uncompromising. Theoretically, an heir to a complex property with tenant farms could be deemed a dependent, whereas the same man would inherit a simpler legacy legally. The definition of sufficient mental capacity thus differed according to the responsibilities of the individual. As with *hyggja* words, this clause implies a spectrum of intellectual capacity and flexibility in determining dependency.<sup>14</sup>

The age(s) of legal responsibility indicate when an individual was expected to develop full intellectual capacity. A person with sufficient mental capacity was expected to be fully competent to inherit and control their property by sixteen, but ‘It is lawful for a son to prosecute a killing case if he is between 12 and 16 winters old’.<sup>15</sup> This acknowledges that people matured intellectually at different rates. Ambiguity about the age of intellectual maturity is clear from another clause, in which the *Staðarhólsbók* and *Konungsbók* manuscripts disagree about the age of legal responsibility for a killing: ‘It is prescribed that if a man younger than sixteen winters old [K: than twelve winters old]’.<sup>16</sup> While this period normally lasts between the ages of twelve and sixteen, the

<sup>11</sup> For comparative legal clauses, see Irina Metzler, ‘Speechless: Speech and Hearing Impairments as Problem of Medieval Normative Texts – Theological, Natural-Philosophical, Legal’, in Sally Crawford & Christina Lee eds., *Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disability* (BAR International Series, 2668), Archaeopress: Oxford 2014, 59–68, at 60–63.

<sup>12</sup> Wendy Turner, ‘“He was not an idiota from birth, nor is he now”: False, Temporary and Overturned Charges of Mental Incapacity in Fourteenth-Century England’, in Sally Crawford & Christina Lee eds., *Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disability* (BAR International Series, 2668), Archaeopress: Oxford 2014, 37–46.

<sup>13</sup> ‘kann eigi til fulls eyris ráða’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 49; Dennis et al. 1980, II: 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Hunted Children of Kings: A Theme in the Old Icelandic Sagas’, *Scandinavica* 43, 1 (2004), 5–27, at 14–15.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Rétt er að sonur sæki vígsök tólf vetra gamall og yngri en sextán vetra’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 237; Dennis et al. 1980, I: 157.

<sup>16</sup> ‘[Þ]ar er yngri maður vegur mann en sextán vetra [K: en tólf vetra] gamall...’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 235; Dennis et al. 1980, I: 155.

trough-saddle test adds ‘if his understanding improves...then when he is twenty’ a man can inherit his property, showing that developing mature intellectual capacity could be delayed beyond the expected spectrum.<sup>17</sup> However, ‘Everyone is required to keep established fasts who has reached the age of twelve winters’ unless they are *óvittr*.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, according to the laws, assuming adult responsibilities began with simple actions such as keeping a fast, progressing to complex actions like conducting a lawsuit. However, the speed of intellectual development and eventual capacity are strongly associated: many saga protagonists, for example, demonstrate exceptional abilities when surprisingly young. The precocity of both Egill Skallagrímsson, who kills an older boy who has humiliated him in a ball game when Egill is seven, and Gunnbjörn Finnbogason, who aged eight breaks three ribs of a boy seven years older, signals their extraordinary later capabilities.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, the youthful Grettir develops slowly, and never reaches his full strength, although Glámr’s curse complicates this association. In any case, this implies that the capabilities which Grettir never achieves are linked to his childhood development.<sup>20</sup> Similarly the age at which intellectual, social and political maturation occurred, according to indicators defined in law, signified the intellectual capacity of the future adult. From here follows four case studies of characters from the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus who were deemed to have intellectual impairments by those around them.

## Hreiðarr

The byname *heimski* has been attached to Hreiðarr, but does not appear in *Morkinskinna*, the earliest surviving manuscript attestation of his tale, which dates to the late thirteenth century.<sup>21</sup> *Morkinskinna* narrates the lives of the Norwegian kings from Magnús I (r. 1035–1047) to Sigurðr II (r. 1136–1155), and *Hreiðars þáttr* occurs during the first of these.<sup>22</sup> *Hreiðars þáttr* can shed light on perceptions of Magnús and his brief co-king Haraldr, but for these purposes, it will be treated as an individual story.<sup>23</sup> The term *heimskr* is not used of Hreiðarr explicitly, but is applied to other

<sup>17</sup> ‘ef honum batnar hyggjandi ... þá er hann er tuttugu vetra gamall’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 50; Dennis et al. 1980, II: 6.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Þeim manni er skylt að fasta lögföstu er hann er tólf vetra gamall áður’, Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 33; Dennis et al. 1980, I: 49.

<sup>19</sup> Sigurður Nordal ed., *Egils saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 2), Hið íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1933: 80–83, 98–103; Bernard Scudder transl., ‘Egil’s Saga’, Viðar Hreinsson et al. eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, 5 vols., Leifur Eiríksson Publishing: Reykjavík 1997, I: 68–69, 77–79; Jóhannes Halldórsson ed., ‘Finnboga saga’, in *Kjalnesinga saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 14), Hið íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1959: 315–16; John Kennedy transl., ‘The Saga of Finnbogi’, in Viðar Hreinsson et al. eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, 5 vols., Leifur Eiríksson Publishing: Reykjavík 1997 III: 256.

<sup>20</sup> Guðni Jónsson ed., *Grettis saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 7), Hið íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1936, 36–42, 118–23; Bernard Scudder transl., ‘The Saga of Grettir the Strong’, in Viðar Hreinsson et al. eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, 5 vols., Leifur Eiríksson Publishing: Reykjavík 1997, II: 64–67, 105–07.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Faulkes ed., *Two Icelandic stories: Hreiðars þáttr, Orms þáttr*, Viking Society for Northern Research: London 2011, 123.

<sup>22</sup> Theodore M. Andersson & Kari Ellen Gade eds. & transl., *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)* (Islandica 51), Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2000, 1–6.

<sup>23</sup> For an overview of the historical treatment of these short narratives or *þættir*, see Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Life and Death of the Medieval Icelandic Short Story’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 112, 3 (2013), 257–91.

characters in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, including Án, explored below. *Heimskr* and its related words originated in the term *heima*, meaning ‘home’, suggesting that someone who has never left home will be foolish. Although not necessarily an indication of intellectual impairment, it can be accommodated in the semantic field which refers to the unworldliness of the untravelled. By the end of his *þáttr* Hreiðarr has met two kings, killed a man and travelled abroad. Asking to accompany king Magnús to meet king Haraldr, Hreiðarr says he is not widely travelled, appealing to a common belief in the value of travel.<sup>24</sup> Hreiðarr sheds his foolish behaviour after leaving home, so the later nickname *heimski* might better be translated as ‘Hreiðarr the homebody’ than ‘Hreiðarr the fool’.

Young men who stayed at home could be dubbed *kolbíttr* and perceived as intellectually impaired. In medieval Iceland travel was a vital ritual in attaining masculine adulthood, so those who did not travel could be assigned the qualities of others who failed to attain adulthood.<sup>25</sup> While tangential to this article, it is interesting that journeying was so important and yet outlawry – forced exile from Iceland – was a ubiquitous penalty under Icelandic law. This tension is also reflected in the significance to adult masculinity of heading a household, alongside the risk of being mocked for effeminacy for spending time indoors. As people with intellectual impairment were, in Iceland as elsewhere in medieval Europe, likened to animals or children, not attaining adult masculinity rendered one vulnerable to suggestions of intellectual impairment. The most frequent model for maturation in the saga corpus shows adults fulfilling the character displayed as children, but a pattern provided by the *kolbíttr* shows inauspicious beginnings being confounded in early adulthood.<sup>26</sup>

Hreiðarr is introduced as ‘scarcely able to take care of himself because of his wits’, recalling the legal characterisation of intellectual impairment, although the ambiguity of ‘scarcely’ (*varla*) is important.<sup>27</sup> However, Hreiðarr’s consistent manipulation of others belies this initial impression. Similarly, when Þórðr describes Hreiðarr to Magnús, he states ‘He wasn’t called a genius [lit. a wise man] when he was young’.<sup>28</sup> The reference to Hreiðarr’s youth reinforces the link between mental development in childhood and intellectual capacity in adulthood. Yet notably he does not say that Hreiðarr *is* intellectually impaired, merely that he is *considered* as such. Þórðr’s tact when describing his sibling avoids insulting him or permitting others to do so; furthermore, understatement through negative definition evokes the legal terminology in *Grágás*.

Hreiðarr is dismissed as an *afglapi*, meaning an ‘oaf, fool, or simpleton’. Its related verb, *afglapa*, has a specific definition: ‘to disturb ... break the peace of a court ... public meeting’. The noun and the verb appear to differ but share the sense of a disordered variable in a place intended for order. *Afglapi* is used of Hreiðarr by Icelanders, when they learn that his brother Þórðr is taking

<sup>24</sup> Björn Sigfússon ed., ‘Hreiðars þáttr’, in *Ljósvetninga saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 10), Hið íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1940, 254; Robert Kellogg transl., ‘Hreidar’s Tale’, in Viðar Hreinsson et al. eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, 5 vols., Leifur Eiríksson Publishing: Reykjavík 1997, I: 380.

<sup>25</sup> Carolyne Larrington, ‘Awkward Adolescents: Male Maturation in Norse Literature’, in Shannon Lewis-Simpson ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, Brill: Leiden 2008, 151–66, at 152.

<sup>26</sup> On the *kolbíttr* motif, see Ásdís Egilsdóttir, ‘Kolbítur verður karlmaður’, in Ármann Jakobsson & Torfi Tulinius, eds., *Miðaldabörn*, Háskólaútgáfan: Reykjavík 2005, 87–100.

<sup>27</sup> ‘varla sjálfbjargi fyrir vits sökum’, Björn Sigfússon 1940, 247; my translation.

<sup>28</sup> ‘ekki var hann kallaðr vizkumaðr á unga aldri’, Björn Sigfússon 1940, 150; Kellogg 1997, I: 377.

Hreiðarr abroad, and indeed, everywhere that Hreiðarr goes, he provokes rough behaviour and conflict. The related term *afglapan* has a subsidiary definition of, according to Cleasby-Vigfússon, ‘any illegal steps to stop the course of law, so that ... there is a flaw in the procedure’, which would presumably occur if an *afglapi* were to operate in a court of law. There is a possible link to *glap-*, a prefix used in many contexts including *glapvíg*, referring to an accidental manslaughter, and *glapskuld*, meaning a fine for foolish conduct.<sup>29</sup> The occurrences referred to with *glap-* could be assumed to create disorder, linking this prefix to *afglapan*. This raises the question of whether a word refers to intellectual impairment as a category or as behaviour condemned as foolish, although such a distinction is not always possible or appropriate (e.g. ‘idiot’ and ‘fool’ in English).

A similar pattern occurs in words used to attribute wondrous or odd behaviours to Hreiðarr. *Kynjalæti*, meaning ‘strange gestures’, is used once, describing the behaviour of Hreiðarr in his youth.<sup>30</sup> However, the related *kynligast* describes the poem Hreiðarr recites for Magnús; the choice of word supporting Magnús’s observation that Hreiðarr’s life and poem parallel each other. Some other words with the prefixes *kyn-/kynja-* have the sense of ‘wondrous’ or ‘monstrous’, including *kynburðr*, *kynmein* and *kynjavetr*, meaning ‘a strange birth’, ‘an unnatural illness’ and ‘wonder-winter’, respectively.<sup>31</sup> The texts in which these occur are all explicitly religious in content and purpose. Nevertheless, the choice of this prefix to represent the wondrous or odd demonstrates that unnatural connotations could be attached to Hreiðarr and the unusual behaviours of his youth.

Hreiðarr is repeatedly described as *undarligr*, meaning ‘wondrous, extraordinary’, although exclusively by his advocates. His long-suffering brother Þórðr tells him to be less *undarligr*; Eyvindr, who shelters Hreiðarr, calls him *undarligr*, and Magnús uses the word to describe Hreiðarr’s poem.<sup>32</sup> As with the *kyn-* words, these instances are not referring to intellectual impairment, but rather to eccentric behaviour. Hreiðarr’s mental capacity does not change in the tale, but his behaviour does, particularly in response to aggravation, prompting revised perceptions of him. Initially he is mocked and pushed around without losing his temper, which he considers a failing.<sup>33</sup> Magnús is reluctant for Hreiðarr to meet Haraldr, suspecting Hreiðarr may get angry, at which Hreiðarr insists that he accompany Magnús.<sup>34</sup> Here two markers of maturity are connected – responding to goading with anger and travelling widely.

The first time Hreiðarr is provoked is at a Norwegian assembly where ‘Hreidar found himself being pushed and shoved and handled roughly’.<sup>35</sup> He is amused by this but is retrieved from the

<sup>29</sup> Eiríkur Jónsson & Finnur Jónsson eds., *Hauksbók efter de Arnamagnæanske håndskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675, 4<sup>o</sup> samt forskellige papirhåndskrifter*, Thieles bogtrykkeri, Copenhagen 1892–96, 61; Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., ‘Hallfreðar saga’, in *Vatnsdæla saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 8), Hið íslenzka fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1939, 193.

<sup>30</sup> Björn Sigfússon 1940, 260; Kellogg 1997, I: 384.

<sup>31</sup> C. R. Unger ed., *Stjorn: Gammelnorsk Bibelhistorie Fra Verdens Skabelse Til Det Babyloniske Fangenskab*, Feilberg & Landmark: Oslo 1862, 80; Guðbrandur Vigfússon ed., ‘Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar’, in *Sturlunga Saga including the Islendinga Saga of Lawman Sturla Thordsson and Other Works* 2 vols., Clarendon: Oxford 1878, II: 275–311; ‘Guðmundar saga’, in Jón Sigurðsson & Guðbrandur Vigfússon eds., *Biskupa Sögur*, S.L. Möller: Copenhagen 1856, 416.

<sup>32</sup> Björn Sigfússon 1940, 240, 258, 260.

<sup>33</sup> Björn Sigfússon 1940, 252; Kellogg 1997, I: 379.

<sup>34</sup> Björn Sigfússon 1940, 254; Kellogg 1997, I: 380.

<sup>35</sup> ‘verðr Hreiðarr skauttogaðr mjök ok færðr í reikuð’, Björn Sigfússon 1940, 249–50; Kellogg 1997, I: 377.

situation by Magnús's summons. The second time Hreiðarr is targeted is at Magnús's court where 'Hreidar [was] at first teased a lot by the king's men ... They made all sorts of remarks to him and discovered that he was an untiring talker'.<sup>36</sup> However, 'he was always laughing at what they said and getting the better of them; he loved so much to prattle', a perhaps unexpected attribute for someone others considered a fool.<sup>37</sup> The ambiguity of Hreiðarr's reputation as a fool recalls the court jester: his oddness and assumed impairment render him an object of entertainment. Similarly, on meeting king Magnús, Hreiðarr asks him to stand, remove his cloak and turn around. He identifies a flaw which only Magnús's uncle has previously highlighted. Hreiðarr uses the licence provided by the multi-faceted role of 'fool' to tell Magnús something nobody else would. This evokes the common motif of Icelanders telling truths to Norwegian kings, from which Magnús benefitted earlier in life.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, Haraldr's retainers isolate Hreiðarr and start roughhousing him, 'But then the game intensified to the point that they were being very rough with him ... Still he pretended that he was having fun and laughed constantly'.<sup>39</sup> When Hreiðarr wishes to stop, Haraldr's men call him a 'fiend' (*fjándi*) and threaten to kill him, whence he loses his temper, killing the main antagonist. As Haraldr's retainers have isolated Hreiðarr, nobody can resolve the situation. These men do not know Hreiðarr, his strength or how misleading his presentation is. The revelation that Hreiðarr pretended to enjoy the game calls into question his amusement on previous occasions and suggests his presentation may be deceptive.

Afterwards, Hreiðarr is discomfited.<sup>40</sup> Magnús refuses Haraldr compensation because the claim is invalidated by the provocation but *not* because Hreiðarr is intellectually impaired. Haraldr holds Hreiðarr responsible. The perception of Hreiðarr is complex but this suggests that he is not legally *óvitr*. Hreiðarr is never mocked thereafter, indicating he is no longer safe to ridicule, a marker of adult male status. Subsequently Hreiðarr attains additional markers of maturity. Magnús's early prediction that he might become a fine craftsman is fulfilled after Hreiðarr has killed. He makes a gilded silver pig for Haraldr, who seeks his head. Hreiðarr's metalwork is outstanding but causes offence as the pig has teats and Haraldr's father's nickname was 'sow' (*syrr*). Previously this could be an unfortunate mishap. However, Hreiðarr's proven ability to recognise and avenge a threat confirms his responsibility for his actions. To medieval Icelanders, Hreiðarr's craftsmanship may

<sup>36</sup> 'Hreiðarr verðr í fyrstu fyrir miklum ágang af hirðmönnum. Ok breyttu þeir marga vega orðum við hann ok fundu, at hann var ómállatr', Björn Sigfússon 1940, 253–54; Kellogg 1997, I: 380.

<sup>37</sup> 'var hann jafnan hlæjandi við því, er þeir mæltu, ok lagði hvern þeira fyrir, svá var hann leikmikill', Björn Sigfússon 1940, 254; Kellogg 1997, I: 380.

<sup>38</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* (Íslenzk fornrit 26–28), Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson ed., 3 vols., Hið íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1951, III: 26–31; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Anthony Faulkes & Alison Finlay eds. & transl., 3 vols., Viking Society for Northern Research: London 2015, III: 17–19. On Icelanders' relationship with Norwegian kings in other contexts, see Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts*, Brill: Leiden 2005, 182–95; Yoav Tirosh, 'Icelanders Abroad', in Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann & Stephen A. Mitchell eds., *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, De Gruyter: Berlin 2018, 502–07.

<sup>39</sup> 'Nú dregsk þó svá leikrinn, at þeir gera honum nokkut harðleikit ... Ok svá lét hann sem honum þætti it mesta gaman at ok hló við jafnan', Björn Sigfússon 1940, 256; Kellogg 1997, I: 381.

<sup>40</sup> For the impact of committing killings, see Marion Poilvez, 'Those Who Kill: Wrong Undone in the Sagas of Icelanders', in Daniela Hahn & Andreas Schmidt eds., *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, Herbert Utz Verlag: Munich 2017, 21–58.

also belie his impairment: given the perceptions of intellectually impaired people noted here, would those sharing these perceptions believe that something so exquisite could be made by an intellectually impaired man?

On Hreiðarr's return to Magnús, he recites a poem he has composed '[A]nd it was most unusual, most peculiar at the beginning and better towards the end'.<sup>41</sup> Magnús observes that this parallels Hreiðarr's life, then gives him an island before telling Hreiðarr to leave Norway for fear of Haraldr, so Magnús will buy the island back. A ship, cargo and money would be more conventional for a Norwegian king to give an esteemed Icelandic retainer, and more convenient. This could be a formal recognition that Hreiðarr can manage land, marking him as legally competent. Hreiðarr can now engage in the socio-political economy of honour, perform crafts, compose poetry and hold land. The end of the *þáttr* queries whether he was ever impaired: 'For the most part he outgrew the foolishness which he had adopted in the first half of his life'.<sup>42</sup>

## Helgi Ingjaldsson

Helgi Ingjaldsson appears in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. Like many medieval sagas, its date of composition is unclear, but is thought to be in the early-middle thirteenth century. However, extant manuscripts date from no earlier than the fourteenth century. While there is a shorter and a longer version of the saga, the details of this episode remain the same in both versions.<sup>43</sup> Like Hreiðarr, Helgi is called an *afglapi* and similarly presents a source of disorder. In both narratives, *afglapi* is used as an insult. The term *glópr* may be related to *afglapi*. Within this text, a woman named Álfðís uses it to insult Börkr's men, who are searching for Gísli.<sup>44</sup> It also appears in *Víga-Glúms saga*, again linking impairment with not travelling, when Glúmr's opponent claims that Glúmr is still a *glópalði* despite going abroad.<sup>45</sup> *Glópr* is consistently used pejoratively.

Helgi, the most unambiguously impaired of the characters under consideration, has the epithet *fífl*, meaning a 'fool' or 'boor'. *Fífl* denotes severe impairment, so carrying great potential as an insult. The term *eldhús-fífl*, meaning 'fireside-fool', is applied to Ketill 'trout' (*hængr*) Hallbjarnarson in the eponymous saga.<sup>46</sup> This identifies a connection between the figure of the *fífl* and the aforementioned *kolbítr*, recalling the association between intellectual impairments and *heima*. Eldar Heide has described the phenomenon of the 'ash lad' (a variant of *kolbítr*) as

<sup>41</sup> 'ok er þat allundarligt, first kynligast, en því betra er síðar er', Björn Sigfússon 1940, 260; Kellogg 1997, I: 383.

<sup>42</sup> 'ok hefir hann gørt sér at mestum hluta þau kynjalæti, er hann sló á sik inn fyrra hluta ævinnar', Björn Sigfússon 1940, 260; Kellogg 1997, I: 384.

<sup>43</sup> Emily Lethbridge, 'Gísla saga Súrssonar: Textual Variation, Editorial Constructions and Critical Interpretations', in Judy Quinn & Emily Lethbridge eds., *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, University Press of Southern Denmark: Odense 2010, 123–52, at 127–29.

<sup>44</sup> Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943, 87–88; Regal 1997, II: 35.

<sup>45</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson ed., 'Víga-Glúms saga', in *Eyfirðinga sögur* (Íslenzk fornrit 9), Hið íslenzka fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1956, 26; John McKinnell transl., 'Killer-Glum's Saga', in Viðar Hreinsson et al. eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*, 5 vols. Leifur Eiríksson Publishing: Reykjavík 1997, II: 279.

<sup>46</sup> Guðni Jónsson ed., 'Ketils saga hængs', in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda*, Íslendingasagnaútgáfan: Reykjavík 1954, 156.

[an] idle, dirty boy ... always sitting at home poking and blowing on the fire ...  
[performing] work of low status and often the responsibility of a young child or another  
person considered unfit for more demanding tasks.<sup>47</sup>

Staying by the fire is also associated with the very elderly and the very young, who, like intellectually impaired people, are often dependent on others. In his dotage, Egill Skallagrímsson is castigated for sitting by the fire, and Grettir Ásmundarson's burgeoning masculinity is insulted that his father gives him a job involving sitting by the fire.<sup>48</sup> According to Cleasby-Vigfússon, *fiþfl* is cognate with the Old English *fifel*, meaning 'a monster'.

The superlative *æriligast*, derived from *æriligr* meaning 'mad', is used by Gísli Súrsson to describe how he will convince as Helgi Ingjaldsson, a ruse he employs to escape his pursuers. The words related to *æriligr* suggest connotations of 'frenzy' or 'rage', as do uses of these words elsewhere: in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, for example, *ærsl* describes a violent storm.<sup>49</sup> In chapter 53 of *Njáls saga*, Otkel's 'horses became excited' (*ærask nú báðir hestarnir*) and bolted away.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in *Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds Gilla* within *Heimskringla*, a plague of rabid dogs transmit their madness to their victims, both of whom are described as *ærðist*.<sup>51</sup> During a conflict between the Ingimundarsons, and the magic-worker Ljót and her son, Ljót informs her opponents that if they had not prevented her in time, she would have made them 'raving mad'.<sup>52</sup> There are many similar examples in the literature.

A possible exception in the use of words related to *æriligr* occurs in *Fóstbræðra saga*, wherein Þormóðr tries to capsize a boat he is sharing with one 'Fífl-Egill', who asks 'Why are you acting so foolishly? Are you mad? Do you want to capsize the boat?'<sup>53</sup> Unlike the previously cited examples, there is no indication of violence or frenzy here, although Þormóðr is agitated, so perhaps Egill is using hyperbole. The events of both *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Gísla saga* take place in the same area in the west of Iceland, both describe inappropriate behaviour in boats as *æri-r/-ligr* and both are thought to be fairly early in composition. However, the sagas do not share any surviving medieval manuscripts. Nevertheless, this might bear further investigation. As these examples suggest, in most cases the behaviour referred to with *ær-* words is frenzied rather than foolish. The normative legal, philosophical and medical texts of medieval Europe provide a categorical difference between

<sup>47</sup> Eldar Heide, 'Loki, the Vätte, and the Ash Lad: A Study Combining Old Scandinavian and Late Material', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011), 63–106, at 67–68.

<sup>48</sup> Sigurður Nordal 1933, 294–95; Guðni Jónsson 1936, 38.

<sup>49</sup> Finnur Magnússon & Carl Christian Rafn eds., *Fornmanna sögur: eptir gömlum handritum útgefnar að tilhlutun hins Norræna fornfræða félags*, 12 vols., Harðvig Friðrek Popp: Kaupmannahöfn 1835, X: 135.

<sup>50</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., *Brennu-Njáls Saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 12), Hið íslenska fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1954, 134; Magnus Magnusson & Hermann Pálsson transl. & eds., *Njáls Saga*, Penguin: London 1960, 131.

<sup>51</sup> N. Linder & H. A. Haggson eds., *Heimskringla eða Sögur Noregs konunga Snorra Sturlusonar*, 3 vols., Schultz, Uppsala 1872, III: 194; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Anthony Faulkes & Alison Finlay eds. & transl., 3 vols., Viking Society for Northern Research: London 2015, III: 177.

<sup>52</sup> 'þer mundut allir ærst hafa', Eiríkur Jónsson & Finnur Jónsson 1892–96, 61; Hermann Pálsson & Paul Edwards eds. & transl., *The Book of Settlements*, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg 2007, 86.

<sup>53</sup> 'hvi letr. þv. sva heimskliga. ok fer sem. erir menn. eða hvart vill þv hvelfa vndir okkr skipin', Eiríkur Jónsson & Finnur Jónsson 1892–96, 405; Martin S. Regal transl., 'The Saga of the Sworn Brothers', in Viðar Hreinsson ed., *Comic Sagas and Tales from Iceland*, Penguin Classics: London 2013, 85.

the insane (*freneticus, lunaticus* or *furius*) and people with intellectual impairments (*stultus, fatuus, idiota*).<sup>54</sup> There is an assumption that the former are destructive to others and to property, whereas those with intellectual impairment do not pose such a threat.

Does the use of *æriligr* in *Gísli saga* imply that the distinction between those perceived as ‘lunatics’ and people with intellectual impairments was less pronounced in medieval Iceland, or that narrative texts, with different priorities regarding the definition of various kinds of mental disorder, divided these forms less clearly? In the case of Gísli-Helgi, in order for his mimicry to succeed his behaviour must be observed to be *æriligr* at a distance, so perhaps Gísli adopts the more visibly disordered behaviour associated with those characterised as *æriligr* to signify a person with intellectual impairment. For this to be effective, the differentiation in normative texts between people with intellectual impairments and ‘lunatics’ would have been distinctly blurred. However, Gísli’s *æriligast* behaviour is not described as involving violence or frenzy, and it is not used of any other characters under consideration. Yet intellectually impaired people were socially marginalised and, as mentioned above, the term *fiðl* is associated linguistically with the monstrous. Perhaps this term was chosen to demonstrate a conceptual triangulation of the mentally atypical, the legally marginalised Gísli and the dehumanized.

If Hreiðarr’s reputation is an ironically clever means of circumventing social behavioural norms and manipulating others, he is very different from Helgi Ingjaldsson. In *Gísli saga*, Helgi is said to be as ‘great and simple-minded an oaf as ever there was ... He was known as Ingjald’s Fool’.<sup>55</sup> This title is a sad perversion of the patronymic.<sup>56</sup> A mentally competent son would have been referred to as ‘Ingjaldsson’; Helgi is never Ingjaldr’s son, but only his fool. This exemplifies the perpetual childhood endured by those deemed unable to function as independent adults. The saga states he was: ‘tethered by the neck to a heavy stone with a hole in it and left outside to graze like an animal’.<sup>57</sup> Helgi’s community clearly do not perceive him as fully human.<sup>58</sup>

Helgi has no voice, recalling both the insistence in *Grágás* that mental capacity depended on verbal ability and the assumption elsewhere in medieval Europe that deaf and non-speaking people were intellectually impaired because they could neither hear nor speak.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, his character must be explored through Gísli’s performance which, whether specific to Helgi or a *fiðl* stereotype,

<sup>54</sup> Metzler 2016, 140–84.

<sup>55</sup> ‘afglapi sem mestr mátti vera ok fiðl ... ok er kallaðr Ingjaldsfiðl’, Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943, 79; Regal 1997, II: 31.

<sup>56</sup> The giving of epithets is complicated, as indicated in John P. Sexton, ‘Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas’, in Joshua R. Eyler ed., *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, Ashgate: Burlington 2010, 149–63. See also, for example, the changing names of Hrói in William Morris transl., ‘The Tale of Hroi the Fool’, in *The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter May Morris*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, 140–50.

<sup>57</sup> ‘sú umbúð veitt, at raufarsteinn var bundinn við hálsinn, ok beitt hann gras úti sem fénaðr’, Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943, 79; Regal 1997, II: 31.

<sup>58</sup> On the animalisation/dehumanisation of Helgi, see Ármann Jakobsson, Anna Katharina Heiniger, Christopher Crocker & Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, ‘Disability before Disability: Mapping the Uncharted in the Medieval Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies* 92, 4 (2020), 440–60, at 448–49. While not specific to people who are intellectually impaired or the medieval period, some interesting observations on the process of dehumanization have been made, e.g. David Livingstone Smith, ‘Paradoxes of Dehumanization’, *Social Theory and Practice* 42, 2 (2016), 416–43.

<sup>59</sup> Gunnar Karlsson et al. 1992, 236; Dennis et al. 1980, I: 156; Metzler 2014.

is valuable. Gísli describes how he will ‘wrap myself up in the tackle and hang overboard a few times and act as stupidly as I can’.<sup>60</sup> Gísli cannot imitate Helgi by copying his physical characteristics; these apparently do not mark a *fífl* – he must amuse an audience with his behaviour. Later Börkr drily observes, ‘there is a great deal of talk about Ingjald’s fool’, referencing the diverting properties of a *fífl* while denying Helgi his name and therefore an independent existence.<sup>61</sup> For saga authors, a character like Helgi solely provides entertainment to others. His internal life does not merely go undescribed, it does not exist. While Hreiðarr is also a source of entertainment, in his powerful motivations and manipulations his internal life is evident.

The reaction of Börkr’s men to Gísli-Helgi, who is being rowed in the opposite direction by the enslaved woman Bóthildr, is also telling. Börkr urges them to row to Ingjaldr’s island:

‘We’re having fun with the idiot...Look at how madly he’s behaving.’ Then they said what a terrible thing it was for her to have to look after this fool. ‘I agree,’ said Bothild, ‘but I think it’s just idle amusement for you ...’.<sup>62</sup>

Gísli escapes by drawing attention to himself; this is a convincing performance as *fífl*. Gísli demonstrates that Helgi is not considered to be fully human while the author uses Bóthildr to express the irritation experienced by the carers of intellectually impaired people. Her role separates her from those amused by Gísli-Helgi – for her his antics are stressful. Bóthildr’s position adds to the entertainment; they laugh at Gísli-Helgi while enjoying the *schadenfreude* of false pity for her. Bóthildr clearly understands their double meaning, demonstrating intelligence rarely attributed to servile characters in sagas.

Gísli mimics Helgi in marginalisation. An outlaw himself, Gísli also exists outside of Icelandic socio-political life, albeit for different reasons.<sup>63</sup> He too struggles for survival without a secure social position. One labelled a *fífl* is unlikely to be targeted with deadly violence but cannot partake in society; the outlaw can participate socially but his legal status prevents him from doing so. Both are marginalised yet targeted, the former with mockery and abuse and the latter with lethal violence. As with Hreiðarr, Helgi and Gísli are simultaneously targeted and excluded.

## Porkell Sigurðsson

*Finnboga saga ramma* is thought to have been composed in the fourteenth century and is found in the fourteenth-century saga manuscript *Möðruvallabók*.<sup>64</sup> Porkell Sigurðsson, a minor character, is enigmatic. It is said that ‘he was thought rather slow’, but as he stays with Finnbogi’s household,

<sup>60</sup> ‘vefja mik í vaðnum ok vera stundum útan borðs ok láta sem ek má æriligast’, Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943, 82; Regal 1997, II: 32.

<sup>61</sup> ‘mikit er sagt frá fíflinu Ingjalds’, Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943, 84; Regal 1997, II: 33.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Gaman þykkir oss at fíflinu...svá sem þat getr æriliga látit.’ Þeir sǫgðu, at hon var hǫrmuliga stǫdd, er hon skyldi fylgja fola þessum. ‘Svá þykki mér ok,’ segir hon; ‘en hit finn ek á, at yǫr þykkir hlǫegligt’, Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943, 83; Regal 1997, II: 33.

<sup>63</sup> Poilvez 2017, 34–37, 41.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Chesnutt, ‘On the Structure, Format, and Preservation of *Möðruvallabók*’, *Gripla* 21 (2010), 147–67.

‘He ... was soon conducting himself in a more acceptable manner’.<sup>65</sup> Here, the implied link between intellectual capacity and changing social behaviour is fascinating. The term *seinligr*, meaning ‘slow’ or ‘dull’, does not appear elsewhere in these texts, implying that Þorkell Sigurðsson’s incapacity was perceived differently compared to the other characters. It is used alongside *eldsætr*, meaning ‘always sitting by the fireside’ – a further connection between intellectual development and homebodies.<sup>66</sup> When Þorkell is first introduced, he has taken longer than usual to develop behaviours demonstrating intellectual capacity, signalling a limited final capacity. Most uses of *seinligr* within the corpus describe slowness of a specific attribute, whereas here it is a holistic judgement. This impression is reinforced when Finnbogi, goading Jökull Ingimundarson, describes Þorkell as ‘not very quick’ (*ekki skjótligr mjök*). As with *seinligr*, in other texts *skjótliga* and *skjótligr* refer to specific qualities yet here *skjótligr* is generalised.<sup>67</sup> In both phrases, Þorkell’s ‘slowness’ is demonstrated to be universal, applicable to all aspects of his character.

*Draglokr*, meaning ‘loiterer’, is another insult aimed at Þorkell. This word is a *hapax legomenon*, preventing comparisons, but other words containing the *drag-* prefix have a sense of trailing behind, similar to the cognate in English. The implication that one who is a *draglokr* is not progressing under their own volition cleverly refers both to Þorkell’s slow intellectual development and his status as a follower under Finnbogi’s protection. It also recalls the subsidiary connotations of *hyggja*, as discussed above.<sup>68</sup> The sense of slowness in the three terms used exclusively of Þorkell imply an intentional decision to portray him as developmentally delayed. While slow development resulted in a reduced final mental capacity, these individuals did not necessarily occupy the same category as those referred to as a *fífl*.

Þorkell’s trajectory resembles Hreiðarr’s except his increased capacity is indicated by his marriage. While Finnbogi supports Þorkell’s marriage due to his conflict with the Ingimundarsons, doing so demonstrates trust in Þorkell, as it binds Finnbogi to any of Þorkell’s conflicts. Similarly, Þorgrímr accepts Þorkell as a son-in-law to create kinship with Finnbogi and Þorgeirr, but the dishonour of betrothing Þóra to a *fífl* would outweigh the connections gained. Yet, Þóra assents to the match, showing that Þorkell is a viable husband. Consent to marriage demonstrates intellectual capacity in *Grágás*. However, Þorkell’s reputation as *seinligr* remains – Jökull Ingimundarson asks why Þorgrímr would betroth Þóra to ‘such an idiot or fool as Thorkel?’.<sup>69</sup> Finnbogi turns Jökull’s own mockery of Þorkell against him, saying ‘You may consider ... Thorkel not to be very quick-witted’, but he is braver with women than ‘you champions’ (*þér garparnir*).<sup>70</sup> Only Jökull and his shepherd give Þorkell damning epithets: *fífl*, *glópr* and *draglokr*.<sup>71</sup> If Þorkell is considered mildly impaired, his status is ambiguous; unlike Helgi, Þorkell’s impairment is not included in an epithet.

<sup>65</sup> ‘hann þótti seinligr nökkut ... þótti hann þá brátt alþýðligri fyrir sakir siðferðis’, Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, 302; Kennedy 1997, III: 248.

<sup>66</sup> Eiríkur Jónsson & Finnur Jónsson 1892–96, 86.

<sup>67</sup> Rasmus K. Rask ed., *Fornmanna sögur: eptir gömlum handritum útgefnar að tilllutun hins Norræna fornfræða félags*, Harðvig Friðrek Popp: Kaupmannahöfn 1832, VII: 175.

<sup>68</sup> This was not unique to Iceland, see Metzler 2016, 109–14.

<sup>69</sup> ‘slíku fífli ok glóp sem Þorkell er?’, Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, 303; Kennedy 1997, III: 249.

<sup>70</sup> ‘þér þyki Þorkell...ekki skjótligr mjök’, Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, 305; Kennedy 1997, III: 250.

<sup>71</sup> Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, 303–4; Kennedy 1997, III: 249–50.

By bestowing these names Jökull and the shepherd are both casting insults and pushing Þorkell into a mocked and disenfranchised category.

Evidently once established, a reputation as a *fífl* cannot be lost. Wendy Turner's study using legal investigations reveals that in fourteenth-century England a history of intellectual capacity was significant when judging someone's current mental state. Someone who developed slowly or experienced episodic mental incapacity was differentiated both from those who had not, and the consistent *idiota*.<sup>72</sup> Medieval Iceland and England were very different, but the investigations Turner examined relied on evidence from neighbours, friends and relatives. Hence, intellectual impairment in both Iceland and England was somewhat socially constructed, and once dubbed incapable, this was permanent. Episodes of mental incapacity were remembered but did not necessarily condemn one to permanent exclusion.

The shepherd's insult of *draglokr* presents other complications. Once married, Þorkell should seek to support his own household. However, he remains with Finnbogi. Þorkell is no *fífl* but cannot defend himself from Jökull, so is no householder either. This exposes Þorkell to accusations he is a *kolbíttr*, reinforced by his initial description as *seinligr*.<sup>73</sup> The shepherd scorns Þorkell as a dependent. Þorkell dies bravely, but earlier the elderly Þorgrímr and the enslaved Svartr had to rescue him. Jökull Ingimundarson's defeat by a *glópr*, a slave and an old man shames him, but also shows that Þorkell cannot defend himself.<sup>74</sup> Despite the substantial difference in the severity of their impairments, neither Þorkell nor Helgi Ingjaldsson attain full maturity. Conversely, Hreiðarr easily kills a king's retainer. Landholding and marriage are legal markers of intellectual maturity and capacity but conduct in conflict is another important measure of adulthood. Yet these are fine distinctions compared to the dehumanised Helgi.

### Án inn heimski

During a brief episode in *Flóamanna saga*, which is thought to have been composed around the year 1300 and found in a manuscript a century later, Þorgils Örrabeinsstjúpr pretends to be a man named Án inn heimski, who 'roamed throughout the land and was known to everybody'.<sup>75</sup> As demonstrated above, the term *heimskr* and its derivations appear in a variety of texts from a range of genres, including lawbooks, suggesting that *heimskr* was semantically flexible. Hence it was probably less pejorative than *fífl*. In this episode, Þorgils-Án uses his disguise to try to elicit information from two men while hunting down some Vikings ensconced on an island. It is said that 'They laughed at him for indeed he was acting like a fool ... They pushed him about. Þorgils

<sup>72</sup> Turner 2014, 43.

<sup>73</sup> For further expansion on the *kolbíttr* as 'slow', see Sif Ríkharrðsdóttir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts*, D.S. Brewer: Cambridge 2017, 145–57; Rebecca Merkelbach, 'Engi maðr skapar sik sjálf: Fathers, Abuse and Monstrosity in the Outlaw Sagas', in Daniela Hahn & Andreas Schmidt eds., *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, Herbert Utz Verlag: Munich 2017, 59–93.

<sup>74</sup> Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, 307–08; Kennedy 1997, III: 252.

<sup>75</sup> 'hljóp um allt land, kunnr öllum mönnum', Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991, 307; Acker 1997, III: 296; Annette Lassen, 'Perseverance and Purity in Flóamanna Saga', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 118, 3 (2019), 313–28, at 313–14

[Þorgils] went back to his boat and capsized it beneath him'.<sup>76</sup> Án himself never appears in the saga, recalling Helgi's near-complete absence in *Gísli saga*.

Here again a person with an intellectual impairment is merely a place-holder, whose identity can be occupied and put to use by the protagonist enacting behaviours which signify intellectual impairment. Þorgils also performs Án by letting himself be pushed around, recalling Hreiðarr, and Þorkell Sigurðsson's inability to defend himself. Furthermore, Þorgils-Án's performed incompetence with a boat echoes Gísli-Helgi, which connects to the tests for mental competence in *Grágás* involving horses. Saddling a horse and rowing a boat are methods of transport related to farming and fishing, both fundamental in Iceland. Facility with transport is also linked to the implications of *heimskr*. Given the importance of travel in maturation, inability in a boat was symbolic of a broader inability to achieve full adulthood.<sup>77</sup>

## Analysis

Since the 1970s historians have argued that capitalism categorises disability depending on whether an impairment prevents an individual from contributing economically.<sup>78</sup> Considering the characters under examination, verse 71 of the eddic poem *Hávamál* is particularly apt, suggesting that everyone, those with trouble walking, missing arms, deaf, or blind, can perform some labour.<sup>79</sup> Hreiðarr can fully participate socio-economically and Þorkell can contribute labour, but Þorgils-Án shares the status of itinerants, and Helgi is deemed unable to contribute at all.<sup>80</sup> Evidence from late medieval Europe suggests that those judged impaired provoked widespread suspicion.<sup>81</sup> The characters discussed in this article display a wide range of competencies, yet attract similar labels, suggesting an economic model of impairment is insufficient.

Magnús's retainers also stop teasing Hreiðarr 'Because he was very strong and they found him apparently impervious to injury'.<sup>82</sup> Hreiðarr is further called '[U]gly ... [and] was strongly built' and even his brother Þórðr describes him as '[A] very big man, ugly and somewhat like a criminal in looks'.<sup>83</sup> Helgi 'was a very large man, almost a troll' and 'Þorgils was shabbily dressed when

<sup>76</sup> 'þeir hlógu at honum, enda lét hann heimskliga ... þeir færðu hann í reikuð. Ferr Þorgils nú til bats síns ok hvelfir honum undir sér', Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991, 307; Acker 1997, III: 296.

<sup>77</sup> See e.g. Larrington 2008, 152.

<sup>78</sup> Fay Skevington, 'The "unhal" and the Semantics of Anglo-Saxon Disability', in Sally Crawford & Christina Lee eds., *Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disability* (BAR International Series, 2668), Archaeopress: Oxford 2014, 7–14, at 8–9.

<sup>79</sup> David Evans ed., *Hávamál*, Viking Society for Northern Research: London 1987, 53; Carolyne Larrington ed. & transl., *The Poetic Edda*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2014, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Jamie Cochrane, 'Gossips, Beggars, Assassins and Tramps: Vagrants and Other Itinerants in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Saga-Book* 36 (2012), 43–78, at 45–46.

<sup>81</sup> Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairments*, Routledge: New York 2013, 39–42, 62–91.

<sup>82</sup> 'en fyrir því, at hann var rammr at afli ok er þeir finna, at hann gefsk ekki at grandí', Björn Sigfússon 1940, 254; Kellogg 1997, I: 380.

<sup>83</sup> 'ljótr ... vel at afli búinn ... mikill maðr vexti, hann er ljótr ok heldr ósýknigr', Björn Sigfússon 1940, 247–48; Kellogg 1997, I: 375–77.

he came to them'.<sup>84</sup> Hreiðarr's simple clothing and dirty hands are also part of his presentation as ignorant of social norms. Clothes are important in the sagas and are often used to communicate status and intentions.<sup>85</sup> Of these four characters, only Þorkell 'was handsome in appearance' (*fríðr var sýnum*).<sup>86</sup>

Gerhard Jaritz writes, regarding representations of 'natural fools' in late medieval religious artwork, that such images were 'of created ugliness, sometimes merging into comic ugliness ... nakedness, bald-headedness, gaping mouth, and the showing of tongue and teeth, other distorted facial expressions like squinting'.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the immaculate bodies of temporarily insane knights in medieval French romance literature often signal their true identity and reconcile the knight's mind, behaviour and body.<sup>88</sup> The physicality of intellectually impaired people differed between medieval cultures, but cultural constructions of ugliness crossed boundaries. We can also note from the examples above that the bodies of intellectually impaired people are consistently associated with unusual strength and size.

Extraordinary size and strength often signify marginal status in medieval Icelandic literature. Those with intellectual impairments are not experienced as threatening by their contemporaries in the literature, indeed their harmlessness is a diagnostic criterion of people with intellectual impairments. However, an intellectually impaired person may create existential anxiety: they resemble a human but lack the mental faculties which are used to demarcate humanity. Their bodies are frequently depicted as grotesque, and in their outlandish size was coded social unease about their existence. People with intellectual impairments in the sagas distort the social and cultural norms and processes which surrounded them.

Another aspect of the intellectually impaired person with the potential to operate with similarly enormous effects on the fragile socio-political homeostasis of medieval Iceland was the unpredictability of irrational individuals. In fact, intellectually impaired people present some characteristics traditionally associated with the monstrous: they are simultaneously human and not human, their bodies are disconcertingly large, and their unpredictability poses a great potential risk to order. However, in contrast to most monsters, intellectually impaired people are less malleable within medieval Icelandic culture – they are never desirable and never perceived as a physical threat despite their size; the intellectually impaired person is an uncomfortable but mundane destabiliser. He is not a monster in the strict sense but is proximal to the monstrous and shares some

<sup>84</sup> 'var mikill vexti, nær sem troll', Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943, 79; Regal 1997, II: 31; 'Þorgils hafði vánd klæði, er hann kom til þeira', Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991, 307; Acker 1997, III: 296.

<sup>85</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2010, 108–10.

<sup>86</sup> Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, 302; Kennedy 1997, III: 249.

<sup>87</sup> Gerhard Jaritz, 'Signs of Mental Disorder in Late Medieval Visual Evidence', in Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Susanna Niiranen eds., *Mental (Dis)Order in Later Medieval Europe*, Brill: Leiden 2014, 91–107, at 102–06.

<sup>88</sup> Sylvia Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2003, 182–83.

characteristics thereof.<sup>89</sup> The physical appearance of Helgi and Hreiðarr, for example, associates intellectually impaired people with other liminal groups that blur the margins between the human and the monstrous. The outlaw Grettir is so enormous he is mistaken for a ‘troll’ (*troll*) and an ‘evil wight’ (*óvættr*) on one occasion.<sup>90</sup> The monstrously large are not always intellectually impaired.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, this widely recognised physical aspect, signifying marginality in multiple contexts, indicated that some intellectually impaired people occupied this excluded status.

Þorgils-Án, Gísli-Helgi and Hreiðarr all undergo physical baiting and/or mockery. Other texts referencing Norse culture show this roughhousing was considered amusing. The Æsir’s first response to Baldr’s apparent immunity from injury is to throw things at him.<sup>92</sup> It is not detailed whether Baldr’s immunity to injury includes immunity to pain, but elsewhere in Europe it was believed that people with intellectual impairment could not feel pain and so assaulting them was harmless. Hrólfr’s retainers in *Hrólfs saga kraka* amuse themselves by throwing bones at Höttir, and Vikings reputedly killed the captured Saint Ælfheah of Canterbury with a volley of cattle bones.<sup>93</sup> In the medieval Nordic world, rough play targeting a differentiated individual was a form of entertainment. In Iceland, only one perceived as a *fífl* could safely be mocked like this – he has no status to be affected and the abuse he suffers carries no risk for his tormenters: he either lacks the capacity to retaliate or does not know that he should. This violence contrasts with that typically associated with the saga world: this is no duel and does not fit into an escalating exchange of injuries between groups of broadly equal strength. Rather it is the targeting of one individual by a group. It has no cause and serves no purpose beyond the pleasure taken in the act.

This understanding of those denoted as impaired clarifies Hreiðarr’s interactions. King Magnús’s retainers cease tormenting Hreiðarr when they realise he can respond. Haraldr’s men see Hreiðarr as impaired, so they automatically and erroneously conclude he is harmless. Þorgils-Án allows himself to be pushed around, showing the same assumption. The exclusion of intellectually impaired people from the honour economy interacts with the status of dependence. Those deemed unable to hold land, marry, engage in legal actions or control their words could not partake in the delicate exchanges of politics and violence that feud entailed. However, this rendered them vulnerable to other forms of violence as they were thus denied the (limited) protection of mutually assured destruction which maintained a kind of order in the saga world. In this world the impera-

<sup>89</sup> For monster theory, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock ed., *The Monster Theory Reader*, University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota 2020, 37–58; for ambiguous part-humans, see Arngrímur Vídalín, ‘Demons, Muslims, Wrestling Champions: The Semantic History of Blámenn from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Century’, in Ármann Jakobsson & Miriam Mayburd eds., *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, De Gruyter: Boston/Berlin 2020, 203–26.

<sup>90</sup> Guðni Jónsson 1936, 130; Scudder 1997, 111. For Grettir’s ambiguity, see Rebecca Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society: Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland*, De Gruyter: Boston/Berlin 2019, 159–60.

<sup>91</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North*, Punctum Books: Earth, Milky Way 2017, 124; Merkelbach 2019, 16.

<sup>92</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, Anthony Faulkes ed., Viking Society for Northern Research: London 2005, 45; Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, Anthony Faulkes transl., Dent: London 2001, 48. On Baldr’s death at the hands of the blind Hqðr, see Sharon Choe’s contribution in this special issue.

<sup>93</sup> David Slay ed., *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1960, 73–76; Michael Swanton ed. & transl., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Phoenix Press: London 2003: 142.

tive towards vengeance, combined with extensively detailed networks of kinship and allegiance, created a disincentive for violence as it would likely instigate a tit-for-tat of violence harming those closest to the original assailant. There was also a presumption that those most impaired would not understand the violence underlying the rough ‘games’, a presumption exploited by Hreiðarr, Gísli and Þorgils. Hreiðarr proves equal to the expectations of an adult male, despite his behaviour and moderate temperament, unlike Þorkell Sigurðsson. Hence Hreiðarr becomes an independent landowner but Þorkell remains under Finnbogi’s care.

Some characters in the sagas refuse to accept this treatment as children (and so still dependants) – as mentioned earlier, Egill Skallagrímsson and Gunnbjörn Finnbogason are prominent examples.<sup>94</sup> Hence while *Grágás* specifies ages for hitting developmental milestones in normative male adulthood, there were those who behaved in this way earlier, as well as those detailed here who met these expectations later. The conundrum of Hreiðarr is that he cultivates his reputation as an *afglapi* (or at least, does not modify his behaviour to defend against this reputation) in order to manipulate those around him – notably Þórðr and king Magnús. This reputation, or the behaviour which provokes it, in turn makes both wary of permitting Hreiðarr to accompany them on journeys. As Hreiðarr must travel and gain experiences to remove the *heima* connotations of his apparent impairment, if he was truly impaired, he would seemingly have been trapped in his dependency. Thus, his ability to manipulate his patrons and enforce his wants demonstrates that he is not in fact impaired, and it equips him to alter the reputation acquired earlier in his life. However, this demonstrates the difficulties those who were less capable would have experienced in similar situations.

## Conclusion

The treatment of intellectually impaired people in Old Norse-Icelandic literature ranges from Helgi to Hreiðarr. While *Grágás* is more prescriptive than literary sources when demarcating impaired people from those considered competent, this is predictable from a legal compendium. Nevertheless, the multiple tests for intellectual capacity and explicit acknowledgement that intellectual abilities can change over time shows that intellectual impairment was recognised to be a matter of degree rather than a single act of categorisation.

The limitations placed on intellectually impaired people are clear. Hreiðarr is barely able to take care of himself, Þorkell never holds land, Án is itinerant and Helgi is denied normative family relationships. The difficulties Gísli and Þorgils feign in boats, and Hreiðarr’s running rather than riding to meet King Haraldr, recall the tests for intellectual capacity in *Grágás* involving transport. The narrative texts follow the social implications of being identified as a *fiðr*: mockery without rebuttal, marginalisation and a perpetually dependent childhood condemned as a *kolbítr*. The tropes associated with intellectual impairment, such as delayed development and a trollish appearance, signal that a character belongs to this category while linking them to the other marginalised categories of outlaws and the peripatetic.

The widely accepted recognition of a set of characteristics and behaviours attributable to intellectually impaired people is demonstrated in Hreiðarr’s ability to use these features to his advan-

<sup>94</sup> Sigurður Nordal ed 1933, 98–103; Scudder 1997, I: 77–79; Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, 307–8; Kennedy 1997, III: 256.

tage, with a wink and a nod to the audience, who understand the social construction of impairment and so share the joke.<sup>95</sup> King Magnús's reluctant facilitation of Hreiðarr's landowning and craftsmanship forces Hreiðarr from the social category he has occupied and confirms that King Magnús has always known that Hreiðarr is performing a role. The licence to tell uncomfortable truths, traditionally given to the courtly fool and the Icelander, has been inverted and instead it is the king who sees the truth about Hreiðarr.

---

<sup>95</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *A Sense of Belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity, c. 1220*, Fredrik Heinemann transl., University Press of Southern Denmark: Odense 2014, 290–92.