Mirator 2/20 (2021)
eISSN 1457-2362
Glossa ry - Keskiajan tutkimuksen seura / Sällskapet för medeltidsforskning /
Society for Medieval studies in Finland
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Disabled Masculinity: Njáll's beardlessness in the changing religious landscape of Medieval Iceland

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To cite this article:
Meg Morrow, 'Disabled Masculinity: Njáll's beardlessness in the changing religious landscape of Medieval Iceland', Mirator 2/20 (2021), 21–37.

Disabled Masculinity: Njáll's beardlessness in the changing religious landscape of Medieval Iceland

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The term 'disabled masculinity', as some modern scholars have noted, appears to be paradoxical in that masculinity is typically associated with personal autonomy and physical ability.[1] The relationship between the able body and masculinity within society is intrinsically linked. Therefore, evaluating the implications of disability and masculinity using an intersectional approach is particularly useful, considering the implicit relationship between the body and gender. This is especially pertinent for societies that are far removed from the modern period – in this instance, the medieval Nordic world. This article will strive to examine the implications of the depiction of one man's disability specifically within the medieval Icelandic world – namely, that of Njáll Þorgeirsson, the titular character of the medieval *Brennu-Njáls saga*. He poses an interesting dilemma for saga audiences, as he does not adhere to the traditional characterization of a male saga hero in the *Íslendingasögur* or Icelandic family sagas. This unorthodox characterization revolves around one apparent physical defect: the inability to grow a beard. This physical difference immediately poses a challenge to his manhood, which in turn he compensates for with religious and legal knowledge.

Disability Models and Medieval Religions

Scholarly discourse surrounding disability in the medieval Nordic world is a relatively recent development in medieval studies. Attempting to apply the medieval theories of disability presented by scholars such as Edward Wheatley or Irina Metzler has sometimes proved troublesome, in particular for instances of disability that occur before or around the conversion to Christianity. Both Wheatley and Metzler agree that the 'medical model',[2] a model that evaluates instances of disability as a problem to be corrected by modern medicine, has little to no place in the Middle Ages seeing as society was not structured around scientific cures. Wheatley introduces a solution to this with the 'religious model', which maintains that most medieval Christian societies would understand disability through a theological lens. Certain disabilities were considered punishments for sin, or evidence that someone's soul was inherently corrupt. Sensory disabilities, in particular, were sometimes allegorical with spiritual blindness physically manifesting as blindness. The only cures available were through the miracles of Christ, various saints, or the power of God itself. As Wheatley notes, this presents the problematic idea that 'somehow the disabled person himself is to

[1] See, for example, Robert Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgewood & Nathan J. Wilson, 'The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity', *Men and Masculinities* 15, 2 (2012), 174–94.

[2] Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind*, University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor 2010, 4; Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about impairment in the high Middle Ages, c.1100–1400,* Routledge: New York and London 2006, 9.

blame for resisting a cure'.[3]

This thought is echoed throughout medieval Christian texts and certainly presents a valid model of interpretation for understanding disability in the later Middle Ages in Western Europe, in particular in England and France where the Christian church had already secured its foothold as the central power in society.[4] On the other hand, despite the Icelandic sagas being composed in a Christian environment, many of them deal with the pre-Christian past.[5] This is especially true for the Icelandic family sagas, a specific genre concerning the period running from the settlement of Iceland during the late ninth century until several decades following Iceland's conversion to Christianity in 999/1000 CE. There does not appear, at the moment, to be a stable model to establish the role of disability within pre-Christian Icelandic society. The goal of this article is not to establish a new model, but rather to consider a hybrid between two of the most applicable models available to us. One must lean heavily on Wheatley's religious model, seeing as the saga writers were operating in the late thirteenth and fourteenth century, and were accordingly products of the Christian church and its institutions within Iceland.

Constructions of pre-Christian religion can be used in a similar way to attempt to understand the societal significance of various impairments, but scholars lack the same amount of available material to establish concrete perceptions of what disability would constitute in a pre-Christian society. The second model that should be simultaneously considered is the cultural model, which attempts to evaluate disability not only within the individual cultural context of the instances of impairment but also does away with the impairment versus disability binary established using the social model.[6] Instead of distinguishing between the two, the cultural model simply uses the term disability 'to include both the reality of corporeal differences as well as the effects of social stigmatization'.[7] When it comes to a culture that is historically removed from our own, the cultural model allows us to bypass our preconceived notions of what impairment or disability *should* entail and instead to focus only on what the text tells us about the reality of living with a disabled body. By employing both of these models, we can explore not only the implications of disability within the sagas, but we can also analyze the shifting depiction of impaired characters as medieval Icelandic culture developed from a pre-Christian to a Christian society. As mentioned above, this article will focus on the character of Njáll, as depicted in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, and how his disability interacts and intersects with the changing religious landscape of medieval Iceland. Born before the conversion to Christianity, the depiction of Njáll evolves alongside the religious reforms of Iceland in the narrative, ending with his saint-like depiction in death.

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[3] Wheatley 2010, 11.

[4] Wheatley 2010, 4.

[5] The phrase 'pre-Christian past' refers to the period in Iceland before Christianity was adopted as the official religion (c. 1000 CE). The term is not intended to indicate that medieval Icelanders were unfamiliar with Christianity before this date, or that all Icelanders were practicing pre-Christian religions. Rather, it is intended to highlight the fact that society was then not structured around Christianity in the way that it is in the later medieval period.

[6] For a more thorough discussion of the social versus cultural model, see Joshua R. Eyler, 'Introduction: Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges', in Joshua R. Eyler ed., *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, Ashgate: Burlington 2010, 1–8.

[7] Eyler 2010, 6.

Just as Wheatley posits that we can use the intersection of religion and disability to better understand the medieval conceptions regarding the societal implications of physical and mental disability, the intersection of gender and disability can be used to serve a similar purpose in this instance, as long as one is attentive to the religious implications underlying the predominately pre-Christian narrative. Disability operates on an axis of power within society – one's physical or mental impairment would have affected the amount of agency a person had within their individual culture.[8] Gender also operates on this axis of power; therefore, an intersection between gender and disability can be used to construct a further understanding of the social roles embedded within medieval Icelandic society. Not only is Njáll, as an individual character, an excellent case study for the presentation of physically impaired masculinity, but the entire saga narrative provides a consistent underlying anxiety surrounding the presentation and performance of masculinity. As Ármann Jakobsson notes, 'It turns out to be difficult to find a man whose manhood is not vulnerable' within the saga,[9] and the central conflict of the feud that constructs the narrative frame of the saga itself begins with a man failing to perform physically in order to have sex with his wife.[10]

Throughout the saga, Njáll's nonconformist physical appearance affects his relationships and interactions with the other members of Icelandic society, exposing the anxiety surrounding the presentation of masculinity that underlies the conflicts between the feuding men in the saga. Some of these men, like Njáll's close ally Gunnarr Hámundarson, represent what both a modern and a contemporary audience would likely perceive as the ideal male in the Viking Age world: 'He was big and strong and an excellent fighter'.[11] Njáll is introduced rather differently: 'He was well off for property and handsome to look at, but there was one thing about him: no beard grew on him'.[12] Njáll is immediately marked by a physical lack: he is unable to grow a beard. His beardlessness is a static physical trait (he is beardless); but in the patriarchal society of medieval Iceland, it also represents his inability to engage in the performance of masculinity (he is unable to grow a beard). The beard is a well-known symbol of masculinity in many cultures and 'the absence of it is sometimes taken to symbolize diminished manhood figures in other sagas'.[13] Njáll is not the only beardless saga character we encounter throughout the overall saga corpus, but his beardlessness in this saga is central to the overwhelming theme of the power of gendered insults throughout this

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[8] Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, 'Ability and Disability: On Bodily Variations and Bodily Possibilities in Viking Age Myth and Image', in Ing-Marie Back Danielsson & Susanne Thedéen eds., *To Tender Gender: The Pasts and Futures of Gender Research in Archaeology*, Stockholm Studies in Archaeology: Stockholm 2012, 33–60, at 37, 58.

[9] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in Njáls Saga', *Viator* 38, 1 (January 2007), 191–215, at 193.

[10] Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., *Brennu-Njáls Saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 12), Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag: Reykjavik 1954, 20–26. On this episode in the saga, see Carl Phelpstead, 'Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders', *Exemplaria* 19, 3 (2007), 420–37.

[11] 'Hann var mikill maðr vexti ok sterkr, manna bezt vígr', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 52; Robert Cook transl., *Njal's Saga*, Penguin: London 1997, 34. All English translations are from Cook 1997.

[12] 'Hann var vel auðigr at fé ok vænn at átliti, en sá hlutr var á ráði hans, at honum óx eigi skegg', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 57; Cook 1997, 35.

[13] Ármann Jakobsson 2007, 197. See also Carl Phelpstead, 'Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* 85, 1 (2013), 1–19; William Sayers, 'Njáll's Beard, Hallgerðr's Hair and Gunnar's Hay: Homological Patterning in Njáls saga', T*ijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 15 (1994), 5–31.

specific narrative.

While Njáll's beardlessness may not affect his ability to *function* physically, such as a more widely recognized physical impairment like blindness or the loss of limb, the social impairment inflicted upon Njáll based on his physical inability to grow a beard constitutes itself as a disability – disabling his masculinity in a patriarchal society. Yet, as John P. Sexton notes, his beardlessness does not become a defining factor until his enemies 'inscribe it with shameful meaning.'[14] This follows Wheatley's claim that 'the 'disgrace' that attaches itself to a stigma is more powerful than the bodily evidence that gives rise to the stigma'.[15] Njáll's opponents are not afraid to imply that his physical impairment is loaded with disgrace, calling him 'Old Beardless' (*karl inn skegglausi*)[16] and composing shameful verses about him in order to immortalize this disgrace. However, Njáll is able to find agency through both religious and legal knowledge – despite never wielding a weapon,[17] Njáll's intelligence forces even the most masculine members of Icelandic society to submit to his wishes. Forced to look outside of physical prowess for agency, Njáll compensates for his physical impairment by enacting power through both extraordinary legal and religious knowledge, or perhaps divine power itself. Furthermore, due to the changing nature of the religious landscape in Iceland, Njáll's disabled masculinity situates him as a liminal figure; it is an essential aspect in his religious depiction, one which alters throughout the course of the narrative, mirroring the shift in Iceland from a pre-Christian to a Christian society up until his death, where he meets an almost saint-like end. Not only does his liminality function to bridge medieval Iceland's transition from a pre-Christian to a Christian society, it also works in conjunction with his gender status. As Metzler notes, 'The liminality of impaired persons is especially apparent in terms of gender, in that disabled people are deemed nowadays not to fit into the gendered male/female roles, so that severely impaired people are regarded as quasi-asexual'.[18] Njáll exists in this space between male and female: his lack of a beard emasculates him in order to allow him to occupy this liminal position in society.

Modern scholarship surrounding the intersection of masculinity and disability has posed the question: 'How do disabled men *negotiate* the intersection of these two social categories of experience?'[19] Modern discourse surrounding disabled masculinity initially seemed to focus almost exclusively on physical impairments, in particular on men who were normative before suffering from a disabling event – they were 'perceived as 'once like us' and therefore were easier to empa-

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[14] 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, at 157.

[15] Wheatley 2010, 20. Wheatley is here building on ideas presented by sociologist Erving Goffman in Erving Goffman, *Stigma*: *Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity,* Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1963.

[16] Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 114; Cook 1997, 74.

[17] Ármann Jakobsson notes that 'the only time he is shown with a weapon is in extreme old age when he goes to visit his old friend Ásgrímr and has a 'short-axe' (*taparøxi*) in his hand, probably more suitable for chopping wood than for use in battle,' 2007 201. So, despite the fact that he is seen holding a weapon at one isolated incident within the saga, there is no reference to Njáll ever *using* a weapon.

[18] Metzler 2006, 31.

[19] Shuttleworth et al. 2012, 175. Emphasis mine.

thize with.[20] Men who *become* disabled are more likely to identify their disabled masculinity as an individual problem, not a problem with the overall structure of society.[21] The limited analysis that focuses on this type of disability has been critiqued and expanded by scholars: not only have they begun to include mental and early-onset disabilities in their interpretation of disabled masculinity, there has also been a focus on exploring the further intersectionality of disabled masculine identity. Tom Shakespeare points out that the masculinity of disabled men was subject to a multitude of identity categories, and therefore that their masculine identity differed between each individual – the idea being that each man, even if he had the same disability as another man, experienced the relationship of disabled masculinity differently.[22] This idea of the individualized experience is especially pertinent to the discussion of Njáll's disability: if one surmised that each disabled man had a shared lived experience of disabled masculinity, we would lose a critical opportunity to study the implications of other intersecting factors of Njáll's lived experience as a disabled man living in medieval Iceland.

Njáll is able to negotiate the intersection of these two social categories – disability and masculinity – through his liminality, but Njáll's appearance may also be read as an instance of narrative prosthesis, a term introduced to analyze the role of the disabled body within literary texts. Njáll's disability, his beardlessness, functions as a 'dynamic entity' which the narrative itself is constructed around. Njáll 'resist[s] or refuse[s] the cultural scripts assigned to [him],'[23] and therefore creates a platform for a critique of the social norms of saga society – one which, consequently, opens a door to a modern audience attempting to understand the social implications of the medieval saga world. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder point out: 'By contrasting and comparing the depiction of disability across cultures and histories, one realizes that disability provides an important barometer by which to assess shifting values and norms imposed upon the body.'[24] Clearly, Njáll's beardlessness can be read through multiple levels of interpretation, each one adding clarification regarding the social implications of disabled masculinity within medieval Iceland.

Manhood and Impairment in Medieval Iceland

On the surface, the inability to grow a beard may not appear to be a drastic detriment to one's social status. However, as Carl Phelpstead highlights, 'Njáll's beardlessness becomes symbolic of his Otherness and of his position on the margins of society'.[25] This is evident even within the first couple of lines depicting Njáll: his beardless quality precedes his legal skill, suggesting that his knowledge functions as compensation for his lack of this important masculine physical feature.

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[20] Shuttleworth et al. 2012, 183.

[21] Shuttleworth et al. 2012, 177.

[22] Tom Shakespeare, 'The Sexual Politics of Disabled Masculinity', *Sexuality and Disability* 17, 1 (1999), 53–64; see also Russell P. Shuttleworth, 'Disabled Masculinity: Expanding the Masculine Repertoire', in Bonnie G. Smith & Beth Hutchison eds., *Gendering Disability*, Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey 2004, 166–78.

[23] David Mitchell & Sharon Snyder, 'Narrative Prosthesis', in Lennard J. Davis ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (Fourth Edition), Routledge: New York 2014, 222–35, at 224.

[24] Mitchell & Snyder 2014, 225.

[25] Phelpstead 2013, 10.

Furthermore, we see many instances of mockery that Njáll endures based on his appearance alone, some of which come from Hallgerðr, the wife of his best friend Gunnarr. One instance of Hallgerðr's mockery even explicitly calls Njáll's gender into question by contrasting it against his wife Bergþóra's appearance:

> Hallgerd took her [Bergþóra's] hand and said, 'There's not much to choose between you and Njal – you have gnarled nails on every finger, and he's beardless'.[26]

Not only does Hallgerðr echo the common insult of calling Njáll beardless, which happens multiple times throughout the saga, she also further challenges his masculinity by pointing out the masculine appearance of his wife's hands, alluding that the couples' gender roles may have been switched and she is unsure of who really is 'the man of the house'.[27]

Flosi, one of Njáll's rivals, also calls into question Njáll's masculine identity during a memorable episode later in the saga by immediately associating Njáll with a gender-ambiguous silk cloak that Njáll had added to a settlement payment.[28] Of the cloak, Flosi remarks: 'it's my guess that your father gave it, Old Beardless, for there are many who can't tell by looking at him whether he's a man or a woman'.[29] By emasculating Njáll, Hallgerðr's and Flosi's insults – in conjunction with echoed sentiments from other saga characters – are reflective of the societal consensus regarding Njáll's appearance: his inability to grow a beard is not only an overt physical difference, but a direct reflection of his inability to hold traditional male power in this society without compensation. Sexton best summarizes the implications of Njáll's beardless state being disparagingly labelled by his enemies, as well as his son's being called 'dung-beardlings' (*taðskegglingar*), when he writes,

> The implications of a nickname calling Njal 'beardless' include an insinuation of sexual deviancy or passivity; casting doubt on the fidelity (and, possibly, the sexual role) of his wife; and either the uncertain parentage of his children (due to their ability to grow beards) or their practice of the repugnant cosmetic contrivance of smearing manure on their faces to mask their own beardlessness and impotence. The marker of Njal's unbearded face, then, creates the potential for his body, and his family, to be devalued.[30]

However, before fully integrating the argument of how Njáll's other abilities compensate for his disabled masculinity, we must first define how to approach both masculinity and disability in the saga age. Only then can we observe the intersection of these two properties and how they work together in an attempt to force Njáll to the margins of society.

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[26] 'Hallgerðr tók hǫndina Bergþóru ok mælti: 'Ekki er þó kosta munr með ykkr Njáli: þú hefir kartnagl á hverjum fingri, en hann er skegglauss', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 91; Cook 1997, 57.

[27] Ármann Jakobsson 2007, 196.

[28] This cloak – the *silkislæður* – has been subject to analysis by many scholars, the most prominent reading of it coming from Ármann Jakobsson. It will be discussed further below.

[29] 'þat er mín ætlan, at til hafi gefit faðir þinn, karl in skegglausi – því at margir vitu eigi, er hann sjá, hvárt hann er karlmaðr eða kona', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 314; Cook 1997, 210.

[30] Sexton 2010, 159.

The concept of gender in the saga age has been interpreted in different ways; on one side of the spectrum, Carol Clover's one-sex/one-gender challenged the traditional binary of male and female established in the sagas.[31] Based on her examination of a variety of medieval Icelandic sources, Clover writes that, instead of gender being divided between men and women,

> the fault line runs not between males and females per se, but between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men).[32]

As opposed to using the binary of masculine and feminine, in her one-sex/one-gender model, Clover instead replaces these terms with *blauðr*, meaning 'soft, weak', and *hvatr*, meaning 'bold, active, vigorous' – although Clover notes that both terms have far deeper meanings than this. However, throughout her analysis, it seems that *hvatr* and *blauðr* do not truly distinguish themselves as being different from the gender-specific binary she strives to replace. Furthermore, Clover's implication through this model that women were not innately framed by their biological sex despite their 'exceptional' qualities is problematic.

The saga examples that Clover cites to support her argument actually further highlight that women were always framed by their gender first, then by the qualities that made them the exceptions to the rule. For instance, in Clover's example from *Gísla saga*, a woman named Auðr is given a bag of silver to betray her husband. Instead of telling the men the whereabouts of her husband, she takes the bag of silver and strikes their leader, Eyjólfr, in the face, breaking his nose. She tells him 'You will remember, as long as you live, you miserable man, that a woman has struck you', to which Eyjólfr replies 'Seize the bitch and kill her, woman or not!'.[33] Clover argues that Auðr here aligns closer to the *hvatr* side of the binary, and therefore is treated as a man by Eyjólfr and his men.[34] However, both Auðr and Eyjólfr frame Auðr's actions inherently by her gender first, then by the transgressive behavior she has exhibited; despite her actions, Auðr remains steadfastly a woman. She is not able to transcend the gender binary to be solely judged on a one-sex/one-gender model because she is primarily framed by her femininity. There does not seem to be any evidence that women were judged impartially on their merit alone; but Clover is correct in asserting that able-bodied men marked the top of the hierarchy concerning agency within saga age Iceland.

In response to Clover's model, Gareth Lloyd Evans has recently presented the hegemonic masculinity model. Hegemonic masculinity, which Evans defines as 'the crystallization of the

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[31] Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Representations* 44 (Fall 1993), 1–28.

[32] Clover 1993, 12.

[33] 'Skaltu þat muna, vesall maðr, meðan þú lifir, at kona hefir barit þik … Hafið hendr á hundinum ok drepi, þó at blauðr sé', Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson eds., 'Gísla saga Súrssonar', in Vestfirðinga sögur (Íslenzk fornrit 6), Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1943, 101; George Johnston transl., *The Saga of Gisli*, Dent: Toronto and Buffalo 1963, 51.

[34] Clover 1993, 2.

masculine ideal',[35] cannot be fully achieved by anyone, even biological males presenting as normative masculine members of society. Hence, despite the fact that men cannot achieve the hegemonic masculine ideal, 'deviation from the masculine ideal does not invariably imply feminization.'[36] Therefore, Evans argues, multiple versions of masculinity qualify as acceptable expressions of 'the masculine'; that is, all masculinities within saga society are seen as deficient in one way or another in relation to the hegemonic ideal, but it is evident that some masculinities are acceptably less deficient than others. This idea of multiple masculinities is another factor that serves to undermine Clover's argument. Rather than being fixed and ahistoric, in the sagas 'there is a 'multiplicity of masculinities', dependent upon a number of intersecting factors for their production'.[37] The correlation between masculinity and power is also less clear-cut than one would innately believe. The 'manliest' man, or the one closest to the hegemonic masculine ideal, did not necessarily hold the most power within society, precisely because there is more than one version of masculinity. Therefore, it is certainly plausible that men could occupy a place of power without visually adhering to the hegemonic ideal, just as it is plausible that men who physically adhere to the hegemonic ideal may not hold much social power.[38] This idea is reflected in the friendship between Gunnarr, and Njáll. As stated earlier, Gunnarr was initially described in terms of his physical prowess: 'He was big and strong and an excellent fighter'.[39] The emphasis placed on his *visible* masculinity is clear, just as the emphasis on Njáll's physically emasculated appearance is also clear.

Even Gunnarr himself, who may be the closest character in the saga to the hegemonic masculine ideal, grapples with his own masculinity at one point in the saga, asking: 'What I don't know… is whether I am less manly than other men because killing troubles me more than it does them'.[40] Gunnarr is unable to ascertain his own masculinity because of the unachievable hegemonic ideal that is presented by saga society. His questioning of his own masculinity is not the only place he demonstrates that his physical prowess doesn't necessarily equate to social power: whenever he is faced with a decision, Gunnarr actively seeks out Njáll's council and he always defers to Njáll's judgement. In the first interaction we see between these two friends, Gunnarr is the one seeking advice from Njáll concerning a dowry lawsuit. Njáll constructs a plan for him but tells him the plan will only work 'if you do not deviate from it' and Gunnarr concedes immediately, telling him, 'I won't deviate from it at all' prior to even hearing the plan.[41] When Gunnar successfully executes Njáll's plan against Hrútr, there is no question of who was actually responsible for the victory: 'but Gunnar did not come up with this by himself. Njal must have planned it all – no one is his match

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[35] Gareth Lloyd Evans, M*en and Masculinities in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2019, 10.

[36] Evans 2019, 17.

[37] Evans 2019, 15; see also Stephen Whitehead 'Hegemonic Masculinity Revisited', *Gender, Work and Organization* 6, 1 (1999), 58–62

[38] Evans 2019, 9.

[39] 'Hann var mikill maðr vexti ok sterkr, manna bezt vígr', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 52–3; Cook 1997, 34.

[40] 'Hvat ek veit…hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en ǫðrum mǫnnum at vega menn', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 138–39; Cook 1997, 93.

[41] 'ef þú bregðr eigi af … Hvergi skal ek af bregða', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 59; Cook 1997, 37.

for cleverness'.[42] Njáll's intelligence allows him to transcend the constraints of his 'effeminate' appearance, controlling society from a liminal position with intelligence, wisdom, and religious knowledge – not physical strength.

However, Njáll's intellectual compensation cannot protect him from society critiquing his emasculate appearance. His inability to grow a beard leads to this emasculation, which creates a direct correlation between his agency as a man and his agency as a person with a physically impaired body. Here again, the theory of hegemonic masculinity is most helpful for analyzing a case as unique as Njáll's. As Evans' notes, hegemonic masculinity 'does not see masculinity as an isolated category, but rather as produced at the intersection of a plethora of identity categories.'[43] Within the case of disability, it becomes clear that 'a body that is viewed as less than perfectly normative can render a subject's masculinity inevitably – and often permanently – subordinate.'[44] The incapacity to grow a beard is not a conventional form of disability, but the social implications of being unable to grow a beard in the cultural landscape of saga age Iceland constitutes it as such.

Metzler argues, from the perspective of the social model, that it is better 'to speak of 'impairment' during the medieval period, rather than of 'disability', which implies certain social and cultural connotations that medieval impaired persons may not have shared with modern impaired people'.[45] However, Wheatley also makes a point when distinguishing between disability and impairment: 'impairment is the particular physical condition… while disability is constituted by the restrictive social and political practices that construct the environment of a person with an impairment'.[46] We as readers are privy to these 'restrictive social and political practices' that construct Njáll's environment; we are able to see exactly how Njáll is treated in the saga based on his physical difference or, indeed, impairment, both to his face and behind his back, and therefore we can construct an understanding of what the cultural and social connotations are concerning his impairment. Therefore, we can evaluate the implications of Njáll's appearance within his culture from an emic perspective, paying particular attention to hegemonic masculine ideals, which constitute his inability to grow a beard as a disability.

The axis of power constructed in reference to the able or disabled body is related to the theory of hegemonic masculinity beyond saga Iceland. Instead of the ideal male, however, the ideal figure is what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls 'the normate', which is 'the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them'.[47] The relationship between the 'normate' figure, othered figures, and the society in which they exist can only be understood when they are explored together. As Garland-Thomson writes,

[42] 'ok mun eigi Gunnarr einn hafa um ráðit. Njáll mun þessi ráð hafa til lagt, því at engi er hans maki at viti', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 65; Cook 1997, 41.

[43] Evans 2019, 21. In his work, Evan's deploys the critical framework of 'intersectionality' first developed by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw.

[44] Evans 2019, 91.

[45] Metzler 2006, 2.

[46] Wheatley 2010, 3.

[47] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* Columbia University Press: New York 1997, 8.

> the normate subject position emerges […] only when we scrutinize the social processes and discourses that constitute physical and cultural otherness. Because figures of otherness are highly marked in power relations, even as they are marginalized, their cultural visibility as deviant obscures and neutralizes the normative figure that they legitimate.[48]

The social judgement of Njáll's identity within the saga age culture is thus a product of two intersecting ideals that he fails to visibly adhere to: the hegemonic ideal for men and the 'normate' for what an able masculine body should look like. These interpretations are based on the historical, social, and cultural background, and this lens of analysis further asserts the intrinsic link between gender and disability when it comes to the construction of identity in the medieval Nordic world.[49]

The disability represented by Njáll's beardlessness is the result of a complicated intersectional chain-reaction that starts with a social perception of his 'lack'. Men have beards in Njáll's society; he does not. Men also have social power in his society; he does. In saga age Iceland, male power was traditionally demonstrated through visual and performative means, whether it be through appearance or physical feats. Metonymically, Njáll's beardlessness should be a sign of his lack of male agency, but it is not, because he has found substitutes to supply his perceived 'lack' and gain agency in his society, namely religious and legal knowledge. Legal knowledge is arguably central to masculinity in the sagas, and particularly so in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which features many men possessing great legal knowledge. Njáll, however, demonstrates an extraordinary legal acumen throughout the saga, which is perhaps best exemplified when he brings the courts to a standstill in order to attain a chieftainship for Hǫskuldr Þráinsson.[50] Despite the fact that Njáll is not 'hindered in fulfilling [his] role physically, the perception of [his] body in society clearly points towards a problematic reading … and thus towards a subsumed status in certain contexts'.[51] Therefore, despite potentially threatening his position on the axis of power within society, Njáll acknowledges the social perception of his physical lack and compensates for it, resituating himself in a less visible, or liminal, position of power.

Pre-Christian Roots and Divine Power

As stated above, the function of religion in the narrative of *Brennu-Njáls saga* is an imperative cornerstone of Njáll's characterization. The narrative begins around 960 CE in what was pre-Christian Iceland.[52] However, the first manuscript of the saga we have access to was recorded around

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[48] Garland-Thompson 1997, 8–9.

[49] Tory Vandeventer Pearman similarly uses a 'historicized consideration of the links between the sociocultural production of gender and bodily ability', in her discussion of the female body and disability to further understand the intertwined nature of these two categories, particularly for female bodies, in the medieval world; see Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature,* Palgrave Macmillian: New York 2010.

[50] For this episode in the saga, see Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 240–48; Cook 1997, 164–67.

[51] Sarah Künzler, *Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature,* Walter de Gruyter: Berlin/Boston 2016, 153.

[52] Cook 2001, xl.

1280 CE by Christian scribes.[53] This clearly indicates that the saga does not provide an authentic, wholly untainted view of pre-Christian Icelandic society. Despite this, the narrative displays a consistent shift in the depiction of characters that mirrors the change in religion throughout the second half of the saga. Through analyzing this shift, we can perhaps find some veracity about pre-Christian society in Iceland when it is juxtaposed with post-conversion Iceland.

The function of religion in this particular saga has been long discussed and long disagreed upon. Some identify Njáll as an Óðinnic figure while others argue that his life cycle follows that of a saint.[54] Both arguments have their merits, because both religions are present within the saga. Christianity is not mentioned by name until well over halfway through the saga, as discussed further below. Therefore, despite being inevitably influenced by not only the Christian compiler or compilers of the text but also the Christian culture surrounding the production of the physical text itself, there is a tangible pre-Christian presence at the beginning of the saga, and many of Njáll's gifts appear to have pre-Christian implications:

> he was wise and prophetic, sound of advice and well-intentioned, and whatever course he counselled turned out well. He was modest and noble-spirited, able to see far into the future and remember far into the past, and he solved the problems of whoever turned to him.[55]

This initial description of Njáll does not evoke the Christian god, but rather Óðinn, the Norse god of knowledge and prophecy. Jeffery Slusher argues that this descriptive passage of Njáll is similar to the portrayal of Óðinn in *Ynglinga saga*, of whom it said 'he spoke so well and so smoothly that all who heard him believed all he said was true', which renders Njáll an Óðinnic figure of wisdom within the saga.[56] Óðinn's knowledge is also linked to a physical impairment – he sacrifices an eye for a chance to drink from Mímir's well of knowledge.[57] However, this impairment does not constitute itself as a disability, nor does it lead to vision loss. Blessed with the ability to access other forms of knowledge and wisdom, Óðinn's transhuman status allows him to bypass the typical

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[53] Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Introduction', in Emily Lethbridge & Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir eds., *New Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls Saga,* Medieval Institute Publications: Kalamazoo 2018, xiii–xxii, at xvii.

[54] For further reading about the pre-Christian interpretation, see Jeffrey L. Slusher, 'Runic Wisdom in 'Njal's Saga' and Nordic Mythology: Roots of an Oral Legal Tradition in Northern Europe', *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 3, 1 (Summer 1991), 21–39. For the Christian interpretation, see Lars Lönnroth, 'Christianity, Revenge and Reconciliation in Njáls saga', in Lars Lönnroth, *The Academy of Odin. Selected Papers on Old Norse Literature,* Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark 2009, 179–87.

[55] 'vitr var hann ok forspár, heilráðr ok góðgjarn, ok varð allt at ráði, þat er hann réð mǫnnum, hógværr ok drenglyndr, langsýnn ok langminnigr; hann leysti hvers manns vandræði, er á hans fund kom', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 57; Cook 1997, 35.

[56] 'hann talaði svá snjallt ok slétt, at öllum er á heyrðu, þótti þat eina satt', Páll Eggert Ólason ed., *Heimskringla Snorra Sturlusonar,* Menntamálaráð og þjóðvinafélag: Reykjavík 1946, 9; Lee M. Hollander transl., H*eimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, University of Texas Press: Austin 1992. 10; Slusher 1991, 23.

[57] Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason, eds., *Eddukvæði: Goðakvæði* (Íslenzk fornrit), Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag: Reykjavík 2014, 298.

constraints of disability and turn his sacrifice into an additional source of power.[58] Njáll is firmly human, but he also is able to manipulate the cultural climate to assert power, despite his disabled masculinity, sometimes in less than honest ways, such as the previously mentioned lawsuit against Hrútr. This incident, where Njáll gives Gunnarr a specific set of instructions, including using a disguise and a false name, to manipulate Hrútr into accepting the suit against him, is arguably the most Óðinnic instance in the saga; an instance of manipulation and trickery, but still within the confines of the laws of the land.

The parallels drawn between Óðinn and Njáll are not the only such allusions in the first half of the saga. The descriptions of Njáll's prophetic abilities are shrouded in pre-Christian overtones, such as the dream he has of Gunnarr's enemies:

> 'Many things are passing before my eyes,' he said, 'I see the fierce personal spirits of many of Gunnar's enemies, but there is something strange about them – they seem in a frenzy but act without purpose'.[59]

The use of the Old Icelandic word *fylgjur* meaning 'personal spirits', is an indication that this dream is pre-Christian in nature – prophetic dreams based around *fylgjur* were a common trope in the sagas and the term originated in the pre-Christian Nordic world.[60] Furthermore, Njáll is the only character we see having any sincere, unchallenged prophetic ability in the saga. Even his enemies acknowledge the validity of his prophecies, highlighted by a discussion between Þorgeirr Starkaðarson and Mǫrðr, where they discuss how to best defeat Gunnarr:

> Njal made a prophecy to Gunnar about the course of his life and told him that if he killed more than once within the same bloodline, his death would follow swiftly.[61]

Mǫrðr and Þorgeirr devise a plan to defeat Gunnarr based solely on the whisperings of a premonition that Njáll had about his fate. This is just one of many examples of the overwhelming belief the members of the Icelandic community set in store by Njáll's prophecies. Hǫgni similarly states, later in the saga, after seeing his father Gunnarr appear in his gravemound: 'I would believe it if

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[58] On the cultural significance of Óðinn's impairment, see Lois Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga,* Fairleigh Dickinson Press: Madison 2004, 71–78; Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, '"Blindur er betri en brenndur sé": Um norræna guði og skerðingar', in Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson & Kristín Björnsdóttir eds., *Fötlun og menning: Íslandssagan í öðru ljósi,* Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, Rannsóknasetur í fötlunarfræðum: Reykjavík 2013, 27–49, at 35–39.

[59] 'Mart berr nú fyrir augu,' sagði hann; 'ek sé margar fylgjur grimmligar óvina Gunnars, ok er þó nǫkkut undarliga: þær láta ólmliga ok fara þó ráðlausliga', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 170; Cook 1997, 115.

[60] See, for example, William Friesen, 'Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal *Fylgjur* in Icelandic Saga', *Scandinavian Studies* 87, 2 (2015), 255–80. The idea that *fylgjur* were a pre-Christian reality has recently been challenged by some scholars. See, for example, Bernadine McCreesh, 'Animal-Fylgjur – Cultural Memory or Literary Fiction?', in A. Mathias Valentin Nordvig & Lisbeth H. Torfing eds., *The 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past, 5th-11th August 2012*, Aarhus: Aarhus University 2012, 225–26. However, for the sake of this article I believe that the surrounding depiction, in conjunction with the explicit term *fylgjur*, implies that this is a pre-Christian gift.

[61] 'Njáll hefir spát Gunnari ok sagt fyrir um ævi hans, ef hann vægi í inn sama knérunn optar en um sinn, at þat myndi honum bráðast til bana', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 167; Cook 1997, 113.

Njal told me … for it's said that he never lies'.[62] Despite being degraded for his emasculate appearance, Njáll's knowledge and wisdom outstrips all conventional aspects of power within medieval Icelandic society. As William Sayers writes,

> Here, absence of facial hair is compensated for by the seer's power, seated in the mind; the mark of masculinity active in the present is suppressed in favor of knowledge of the future outcomes of such male activity.[63]

Despite being pejoratively identified as 'Old Beardless' (*karl inn skegglausi*), Njáll's individual agency is bestowed upon him by pre-Christian prophetic gifts, marking him as different but giving him the ability to anticipate, manage, and manipulate the fates of men from his liminal position.

The relationship between Njáll and Gunnarr represents the contrasting embodiments of pre-Christian and Christian ideals, in particular when both of their deaths are imminent. Gunnarr, the exemplary 'pagan' hero whose physical appearance recalls that of the Norse god Þórr,[64] dies fighting in one last heroic show of his physical prowess. Alongside him, the last pre-Christian hero of the saga, the old ways die as well. As Lars Lönnroth states, 'Gunnarr represents the heroic ideals of the pagan era, while Njáll himself becomes a spokesman and finally a martyr for a new Christian ideal and a new world order'.[65] Njáll's original pre-Christian characterization is reflective of the value of prophetic and legal wisdom as compensation for disability, just as Óðinn's sacrifice highlights. There would have been value in reflecting Óðinn's best characteristics – his wisdom and his prophetic knowledge – and therefore Njáll's ability to access these forms of knowledge would have been perceived as valuable. However, with a change in the medieval Icelandic world view, Njáll's portrayal in the later parts of the saga reflects a new, Christian way of thinking.

Conversion to Christianity

According to the saga, when Icelandic society adopted Christianity in 999/1000 CE, Njáll was roughly sixty-five years old, Gunnarr had been dead for eight years, and over two thirds of the narrative had transpired.[66] Christianity is first mentioned in reference to the changes in religion instigated by King Óláfr in Norway. In response to men stating, 'that it was absurd to reject the old faith', Njáll says: 'It seems to me that this new faith is much better, and that he who accepts it will be happy. If the men who preach this religion come out here, I will speak in favor of it'.[67] This quick acceptance of Christianity saga seems rushed, but Njáll's advice is prophetic and sound. He under-

[62] 'Trúa mynda ek, ef Njáll segði mér … því at þat er sagt, at hann ljúgi aldri', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 194; Cook 1997, 130.

[63] Sayers 1994, 12.

[64] Slusher 1991, 23.

[65] Lars Lönnroth, 'New and Old Interpretations of Njáls Saga', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavian* 13 (2017), 101–14, at 104.

[66] Cook 2001, xl–xli.

[67] 'at slíkt væri mikil firn at hafna fornum átrúnaði … Svá lízk mér sem inn nýi átrúnaðr muni vera miklu betri, ok sá mun sæll, er þann fær heldr. Ok ef þeir menn koma út hingat, er þann sið bjóða, þá skal ek þat vel flytja', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 255; Cook 1997, 172-73.

stands that accepting the new religion is beneficial in the long run to maintain peace in the country. This sentiment is echoed in the lawspeaker Þorgeirr's statement when he decrees Christianity to be the official religion of Iceland: 'if the law is split asunder, so also will peace be split asunder, and we cannot live with that'.[68] In the context of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the acceptance of Christianity in Iceland was not a decision based on devout belief, but rather compromise in order to prevent violence between Christian and non-Christian members of society. As a part of this compromise, pre-Christian practices were allowed to continue in secret, as well as the eating of horsemeat and the exposure of children.

Christianity asserts itself most prominently in the latter part of the the saga when it comes to instances of death or dying, beginning with the slaying of Hǫskuldr, Njáll's foster son, in the wake of the conversion episode. Njáll's biological sons are manipulated against Hǫskuldr by Mǫrðr and eventually set out to kill him due to Mǫrðr's deception. The relationship between foster son and father in medieval Iceland was a close one, and the relationship between Njáll and Hǫskuldr was exceptionally close. In fact, when Hǫskuldr dies, Njáll laments:

> I loved Hoskuld more than my own sons, and when I heard that he had been slain I felt that the sweetest light of my eyes had been put out, and I would rather have lost all my sons to have him live.[69]

Hǫskuldr was as much a part of Njáll's family as his biological sons, which makes this crime even more horrific: it is nearly fratricide. After Skarpheðinn Njálsson swings the first blow to Hǫskuldr's head, Hǫskuldr says: 'May God help me and forgive you' before he dies.[70] Some scholars read Hǫskuldr as a martyr for the new, Christian religion, the most prominent being Lönnroth, who argues that, in Hǫskuldr's death scene, 'the narrator is very deliberately creating a medieval *passio*, or a description of martyrdom!'[71] Perhaps this is an explanation for why Njáll aligns himself with Hǫskuldr as opposed to his biological sons; he wishes to identify with the new, Christian ways as opposed to the old systems of vengeance and violence that his biological sons have resorted to.

From here, the actions of the characters are increasingly framed around what they believe the correct Christian action should be. We see them begin to question the foundations of the legal culture they had created and start to ponder whether their current laws fit in with the new code of morality enforced upon them as Christian men. Njáll's arbitration of Hǫskuldr's slaying demonstrates the nature of conflating Christian morals with preexisting medieval Icelandic law. Additionally, the final attempted settlement between the feuding factions again shows how Njáll's effeminate appearance affects his place within society. The arbitration is initially successful, as he appeals to the morals of the prosecutors, the most important being Flosi, Hǫskuldr's father-in-law. Instead of

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[68] 'ef sundr skipt er lǫgunum, þá mun ok sundr skipt friðinum, ok mun eigi við þat mega búa', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 271–72; Cook 1997, 181.

[69] 'ek unna meira Hǫskuldi en sonum mínum, ok er ek spurða, at hann var veginn, þótti mér sløkkt it sœtasta ljós augna minna, ok heldr vilda ek misst hafa allra sona minna ok lifði hann', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 309; Cook 1997, 207.

[70] 'Guð hjálpi mér, en fyrirgefi yðr!', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 281; Cook 1997, 188.

[71] Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Criticial Introduction*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1976, 96.

banishing or outlawing the Njálssons, the fine is set at the three times the normal price for killing someone – six hundred ounces of silver. In addition to the silver, however, it is said that 'Njal took a silk robe and a pair of boots and placed them on top of the pile'.[72] When Flosi receives the settlement, he takes offense to the gender-ambiguous robe and interprets it as an insult. When asked by Skarpheðinn who Flosi thinks has given the silk robe (*silkislæður*), Flosi responds, as mentioned above, by attacking Njáll's physical appearance.

Despite being a Christian, Flosi shows no hesitation to slander Njáll, even though doing so will risk the already unstable settlement they have decided upon to keep the peace. Furthermore, by defaming Njáll to Skarpheðinn, Njáll's infamously short-tempered son, we can assume that Flosi is fully aware of the peace he is forfeiting by trading this insult. Njáll's intention behind adding the silk robe to the payment is unclear and has long perplexed scholars. There has been plenty of scholarly discussion regarding this episode in the saga.[73] However, the most insightful analysis of the episode comes from Ármann Jakobsson, who explores the contrasting and perhaps ambiguous nature of this decision: does Njáll desire the settlement to fail so he can die in a Christian atonement for the death of Hǫskuldr, or does Njáll add it to the pile as a gesture of goodwill which Flosi misinterprets?[74] There is an argument to be made for either interpretation, but the fact remains that we cannot definitively state who is the cause of the failure of the settlement. However, one thing for certain is that Njáll's disabled masculinity plays a vital role in the breaking of the settlement, which culminates in the burning of Njáll.

When Flosi brings his men to attack the Njálsson's after the failed arbitration, both sides identify as Christian. After an unsuccessful first attack, Flosi decrees that there are only two choices going forward: to retreat or to burn Njáll and his family inside the farm. In resolving to choose the latter of these difficult options, he remarks 'and that's a great responsibility before God, for we're Christian men. Still, that is the course we must take'.[75] Medieval Iceland, as a society, was clearly in the early stages of understanding the tenets of Christianity. Here, Flosi and his men attempt to justify that killing Njáll's sons will be their best course of action, despite the fact that they are aware innocent people will die. In contrast to Flosi, however, Njáll has never appeared more saint-like than he does in his final moments when he passively accepts his death and decrees that his sons should come inside instead of staying outside to defend themselves with weapons.[76] He speaks to the members of his household calmly, telling them: 'Have faith that God is merciful, and that he will not let us burn both in this world and in the next'.[77] While his sons fight to the last moment, as would be expected from them, Njáll lays down with his wife and grandson under a blanket and yields to his fate, despite Flosi offering him a chance to live.

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[72] 'Njáll tók silkislœður ok bóta ok lagði á ofan á hrúguna', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 312; Cook 1997, 209.

[73] This discussion is expertly summarized in Yoav Tirosh, 'Víga-Njáll: A New Approach Towards Njáls saga', *Scandinavian Studies* 86, 2 (2014), 208–26, at 210.

[74] Ármann Jakobsson 2007, 199–200.

[75] 'ok er þat þó stór ábyrgð fyrir guði, er vér erum kristnir sjálfir. En þó munu vér þat bragðs taka', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 328; Cook 1997, 219.

[76] Tirosh suggests that Njáll's actions are rather an effort to punish his son's for killing Hǫskuldr; see Tirosh 2014.

[77] 'Trúið þér ok því, at guð er miskunnsamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæði láta brenna þessa heims ok annars', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 329; Cook 1997, 220.

His death is the opposite of that of his friend Gunnarr, who dies in action, perhaps seeking to go to Valhalla in his death or to live peacefully in his gravemound where his son Hogni and others saw him.[78] Njáll, on the other hand, calmly accepts his fate and seeks to ascend to the Christian heaven. After the house is burned and the family is dead, Njáll's son-in-law Kári returns to bring Njáll's remains to a church. When they discover where he and his wife Bergþóra's bodies were, under the ox-hide, 'They lifted it off and underneath lay the two of them, unburned. They all praised God for this and thought it a great miracle'.[79] Njáll's preserved body is clearly distinguished from his wife's; as Kári's companion Hjalti explains, 'Bergthora's body is as I would have expected, though well preserved. Njál's countenance and body seem to me so radiant that I've never seen a dead man's body as radiant as his'.[80] Njáll's final appearance may echo the medieval Christian view that the body, upon dying, would be perfected and not retain any marks of impairment when it ascended to heaven.[81] For Njáll, however, it seems that instead of correcting his physical appearance, in death the radiance of his body outshines his beardlessness. Only in death is Njáll's appearance finally flawless in the eyes of contemporary men and the description of his radiant body draws attention to his pure soul. His preservation is portrayed as a Christian miracle and therefore accentuates the finality of his acceptance of Christianity.[82]

Conclusion

Njáll's characterization throughout the saga is primarily based on his legal and religious knowledge, yet this knowledge is, on the surface, overshadowed by his beardless appearance. Despite his inability to look the part and perform certain kinds of actions that are inherently masculine, he is often able to control the outcomes of more 'manly' men; first through wisdom and foresight, and later through Christian morality, all the while using these skills in conflation with his extraordinary legal knowledge. Furthermore, even though he is considered flawed in comparison to the hegemonic masculine ideal, as well as not being fully able bodied, Njáll again manipulates religious and legal knowledge to his benefit until the death of Hǫskuldr. There, we see his disabled masculinity play a crucial role in his death, after it plays a vital role in the failed settlement for Hǫskuldr's murder. Finally, he accepts his fate as atonement for the death of his beloved foster-son and he dies a martyr-like death.

The intersectionality of gender studies and disability studies in the case of such a complex character as Njáll allows for a better understanding of the function of divine and legal knowledge within medieval Iceland's patriarchal society. These qualities function as compensation for Njáll's otherwise disabled masculinity and therefore allow him to transcend the typical constraints of

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78 See Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 192–93 for this specific episode.

79 'þeir tóku hana upp, ok váru þau bæði óbrunnin undir. Allir lofuðu guð fyrir þat ok þótti stór jartegn í vera', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 342; Cook 1997, 229.

80 'Líkami Bergþóru þykki mér at líkendum ok þó vel. En Njáls ásjána ok líkami sýnisk mér svá bjartr, at ek hefi engan dauðs manns líkama sét jafnbjartan'', Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 343; Cook 1997, 230.

81 See Metzler 2006, 56–57; Caroline Bynum, 'Why all the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective', *Critical Inquiry* 22, 1 (1995), 1–33, at 19–27.

82 Cf. William Ian Miller's interpretation of this scene in William Ian Miller, *Why is your axe bloody?* Oxford University Press: Oxford 2014, 232–34.

society. It remains that the identities of disabled or impaired members of this society were also innately subjected to ideas about gender, depending upon the specific physical impairment and the identity of whom it is attributed to. By exploring this intersection, we can start to understand the multifaceted layers of complex saga characters such as Njáll, who is more than his beardless appearance may suggest, but is nevertheless subjected to the cultural implications others ascribe to it.