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# NARRATING BLINDNESS AND SEEING OCULARCENTRISM IN *ÞORSTEINS SAGA HVÍTA*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

AS A MEDIEVAL TEXT, *Þorsteins saga hvíta* (hereafter simply *Þorsteins saga*) presents modern scholars with certain challenges. For example, although the saga has commonly been dated to the mid-thirteenth century, its oldest surviving attestations are from the early seventeenth century, where it commonly appears alongside other *Íslendingasögur* primarily set in the Eastfjords. The paper manuscripts AM 156 fol. and AM 496 4to, both dated to around the mid-seventeenth century, have primarily been used for modern editions of the saga. The former is attributed to the priest Jón Erlendsson (c. 1600–1672) and the latter is said to have been written at the direction of Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason (1597–1656).<sup>2</sup> The saga's apparent relationship to the more well-known *Vápnfirðinga saga* is also a matter of some contention. In particular, the question of whether the saga was written as a standalone narrative, a concise prequel, or survives as an incomplete expanded revision of *Vápnfirðinga saga* remains unresolved and is probably unresolvable.<sup>3</sup> Although not unique in presenting these

- 1 This article emerges from the research project *Fötlun fyrir tíma fötlunar* [Disability before disability], which is supported by *Rannsóknasjóður* [the Icelandic Research fund], Grant of Excellence No. 173655-05.
- 2 On the dating and manuscript attestations of the saga, see Jón Jóhannesson, "Formáli," *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit XI (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), xi–xiii; Jakob Jakobsen, "Indledning," *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jakob Jakobsen (Copenhagen: S.L. Møllers, 1902–03), iii–xi; Sigríður Baldursdóttir, "Hugmyndaheimur Vopnfirðinga sögu," *Gripla* 13 (2002): 76–79.
- 3 See Jón Jóhannesson, "Formáli," vi–viii; Grímur M. Helgason and Vésteinn Ólason, "Formáli," *Íslenzkar fornsögur*, ed. by Grímur M. Helgason and Vésteinn Ólason, 9 vols. (Hafnarfjörður: Skuggsjá, 1968–76), 7. viii; Gisli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. by Nicholas Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 138–39.

and similar difficulties for modern scholars, the uncertainty surrounding the saga's medieval "authenticity" and the indeterminable nature of the text have likely contributed to a general lack of scholarly interest in *Þorsteins saga*.<sup>4</sup>

The saga's brevity and relatively simplistic or perhaps unbalanced plot might also factor into this. Of its artistic merits, Jón Jóhannesson, for example, was rather dismissive, writing that "Eigi þarf margt að ræða um Þorsteins sögu sem listaverk. Samsetningunni er mjög ábótavant ... samtöl og tilsvör flest fremur dauf, persónurnar óbrotnar og sviplitlar" [There is little to discuss of Þorsteins saga as a work of art. The composition is very wanting ... the dialogue is mostly rather dull, the characters simplistic and feeble]. He concludes that it is "furðulegt, hve lítið höfundinum hefir þar orðið úr tilvöldu söguefni" [amazing how little the author has made of this very suitable story material].<sup>5</sup> Yet, *Þorsteins saga* has typically avoided the pejorative "postclassical" label applied to certain of the sagas, perhaps on account of its "realism" and the absence of paranormal elements in the text.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as Gwyn Jones, have been more complimentary of *Þorsteins saga*, suggesting that there is "much beauty in the story" and,

- 4 What little attention it has attracted is often centred on how aspects of the narrative coincide with or differ from certain aspects of either *Vápnfirðinga saga* or the parts of *Landnámabók* with which it seems to share some intertextual relationship; see Sigríður Baldursdóttir, "Hugmyndaheimur Vopnfirðinga sögu," 70–79; Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*, 139–42; Guðfinna Kristjánsdóttir, *Frá Bjólan til Bjólfs: Mannanöfn í sögum tengdum Austfirðingafjórðungi* (MA diss., University of Iceland, 2009); Jakob Benediktsson (ed.), *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, Íslenzk fornrit I* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), 289, 290–91, 334, 336, 396–97. The saga has sometimes also been referenced, often briefly, in discussions of bloodfeuds, conflict resolution, and the law in early Icelandic society; see, for example, William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 234, 369n22; Merrill Kaplan, "Once More on the Mistletoe," *News from Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture in Honor of John F. Lindow*, ed. by Merrill Kaplan and Timothy R. Tangherlini (Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 2012), 46, 58; see also Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 23–24, 272–73.
- 5 Jón Jóhannesson, "Formáli," xi; see also Grímur M. Helgason and Vésteinn Ólason, "Formáli," viii. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- 6 On the ideological construction of the classical and postclassical categories, see Ármann Jakobsson and Yoav Tirosh, "The 'Decline of Realism' and Inefficacious Old Norse Literary Genres and Sub-Genres," *Scandia* 3 (2020): 102–38.

with respect to the final meeting between the two Þorsteinns – discussed in more detail below – he wonders “if this is not great literature, we may well ask what is.”<sup>7</sup> Valdimar Ásmundarson similarly considered the saga to be “víst sögulega sönn og vel rituð” [certainly historically accurate and well written].<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of the subjective opinions of scholars concerning the artistic value of the saga, *Þorsteins saga* is worthy of greater scholarly interest than it has hitherto provoked, not least when regarded from a disability studies perspective. It has commonly been remarked that Þorsteinn fagri [the fair] Þorfinnsson rather than the eponymous Þorsteinn hvíti [the white] Ólvisson, is the saga’s real protagonist and hero.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the story of the younger Þorsteinn fagri’s journeys abroad, his partnership with Einarr Þórisson, Einarr’s betrayal, Þorsteinn’s vengeance, and the latter’s exile and return to Iceland take up much of the central part of the narrative. Notably, the enmity between the two arises after Þorsteinn fagri experiences an illness abroad, becomes incapacitated for some time, and Einarr takes advantage of the situation. Though absent during many of these events, the elder Þorsteinn hvíti nevertheless plays a significant role at both the opening and, even more so, during closing stages of the narrative, one that is particularly concerned with his vision loss and subsequent blindness. Through these narrative elements, the saga provides a striking example of what John Sexton refers to as “the rich cultural response to the premise of disability” found in medieval saga writing.<sup>10</sup> With respect to the eponymous Þorsteinn hvíti in particular, the saga’s audience is provided with an opportunity to contemplate the experience of vision loss or blindness, which surely some of its members would be familiar with firsthand. More than this, however, through his character, the saga confronts the hegemony of vision that commonly characterizes medieval saga writing.

7 Gwyn Jones, “Introduction,” *Four Icelandic Sagas*, trans. by Gwyn Jones (New York: Princeton University Press, 1935), 8; see also Jakobsen, “Indledning,” i, xii–xiii.

8 Valdimar Ásmundarson, “Formáli,” *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, ed. by Valdimar Ásmundarson (Reykjavík: Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1902), i.

9 See, for example, Jón Jóhannesson, “Formáli,” vi; Jakobsen, “Indledning,” xi–xii.

10 John Sexton, “Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas,” *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. by Joshua R. Eyler (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 163; see also Ármann Jakobsson, Anna Katharina Heiniger, Christopher Crocker and Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, “Disability before disability: Mapping the uncharted in the medieval sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies* 92 (2020): 440–60.

## Narrating blindness

Þorsteinn hvíti is first introduced in the saga as a late-coming settler in the east of Iceland. He nevertheless manages to purchase land in the Vápnafjörður region, establishes a farm, soon marries, and fathers five children, the most promising of whom is a son named Þorgils. Þorsteinn eventually accumulates great wealth, power, and property in the form of the farmstead at Hof and even a *goðorð* [chieftainship]. Some years later his wife Ingibjörg takes ill and dies, which is said to be a great loss for Þorsteinn, but he carries on at Hof as before. Þorsteinn is next mentioned when, after some unspecified measure of time, it is said that he “tók augnaverki svá mikinn, at þar fyrir missti hann sjónina” [experienced eye-pain so severe, that he lost his vision]. Following this, he “þykkisk vanføerr til umsýslu” [felt incapable of managing things] and, at his father’s request, his son Þorgils agrees to help manage things and to assist Þorsteinn as much as he can to maintain the farmstead at Hof. This arrangement seems to work, and both Þorsteinn and Þorgils, along with the latter’s wife Ásvör and the couples’ two children Helgi and Guðrún, carry on living at Hof.<sup>11</sup> The narrative then expands the cast of the saga, including the introduction of Þorsteinn fagri, who becomes the focus of the central part of the narrative. Yet, Þorgils, the elder Þorsteinn, the arrangement between father and son, and the latter’s loss of vision all come to play a crucial role in Þorsteinn fagri’s story and the later stages of the narrative.

Þorsteinn hvíti’s *hagr* [condition] is, of course, not unique in medieval saga writing. References to vision loss, or at least its threat, similarly following the onset of *augnaverkr* [eye-pain] appear in several sagas, including, for example, *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, and perhaps also implicitly in *Vatnsdæla saga*.<sup>12</sup> Kirsi Kanerva has shown that, in medieval saga writing, *augnaverkr*

11 *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit XI (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), 3–6.

12 *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit III (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), 191–92; Björn Sigfússon (ed.), *Ljósvetninga saga*, Íslenzk fornrit X (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1940), 103; *Fóstbræðra saga*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit VI (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), 174–77; *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, in *Harðar saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Íslenzk fornrit XIII

is often closely associated with perceived moral transgressions and seems to have “informed the saga readers of the conflicting emotions of the saga protagonists who were recognized as flouting certain social norms.”<sup>13</sup> She goes on to suggest that, “whatever its emotional aspects, eye pain was also a disease, and a moral one, that affected the well-being of the individual and suggested inferiority of character in the sufferer.”<sup>14</sup> While this may be the case for some or all of those examples cited above, there is little to suggest that the *augnaverkr* and subsequent loss of vision Þorsteinn hvíti experiences should be associated with any perceived moral transgression nor that the saga’s contemporaneous audience would have viewed him as a man of inferior character on this account. In fact, Þorsteinn may stand out as an exception among several other “nasty old men” in the sagas who seem to “lash out in fury against their destiny,” which might include the onset of vision loss or other infirmities.<sup>15</sup>

Þorsteinn’s vision loss is, nevertheless, a crucial aspect of his story. However, it does not seem to invite social stigma, affect his social status, or preclude Þorsteinn from seemingly continuing to live what might be considered a “good and normal life.”<sup>16</sup> Certainly, his vision loss requires him to take certain steps to adjust to his new reality, mainly by enlisting his son Þorgils to assist him with or perhaps even take over the running of

(Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), 170; Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Vatnsdæla saga*, Íslensk fornrit VIII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), 95–96.

- 13 Kirsi Kanerva, “‘Eigi er sá heill, er í augun verkir’: Eye Pain as a Literary Motif in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Íslendingasögur,” *ARV – Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 69 (2013): 10. On the occasional connection between dreams and the onset of *augnaverkr*, see Christopher Crocker, “Disability and Dreams in the Medieval Icelandic sagas,” *Saga-Book* 43 (2019): 42–54.
- 14 Kanerva, “‘Eigi er sá heill, er í augun verkir,’” 25; see also Annette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2003), 52–55.
- 15 Ármann Jakobsson, “The Spectre of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104 (2005): 325; see also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “Ageism and Taking Care of the Elderly in Iceland c. 900–1300,” *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 227–42; Thomas Morcom, “After Adulthood: The Metamorphoses of the Elderly in the *Íslendingasögur*,” *Saga-Book* 42 (2018): 25–50; Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 78–83.
- 16 Benjamin Haas, “Dis-/ability and Normalism: Patterns of Inclusion in Romance Literature,” *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 225.

the farmstead at Hof.<sup>17</sup> Yet, there is no mention of Þorsteinn giving up, for example, his *goðorð* [chieftainship]. Although Þorsteinn's vision loss makes it difficult or perhaps impossible for him to perform certain physical tasks associated with looking after a farm, his ability to fulfill other important responsibilities expected of someone in his position is not affected by this change. He evidently also continues fulfilling his role as a patriarch by advising and helping arrange Þorgils's marriage to Ásvör Þórisdóttir. In contrast, the once heroic Egill Skalla-Grímsson becomes an object of ridicule and scorn when, as an old man, he has lost his vision and hearing. Even the *matseljan* [housekeeper] derides the elderly Egill for getting in the way as he warms himself by the fire on a cold winter day. It might be noted that of Egill, having now reached his ninth decade, the saga's narrator nevertheless contends "var hann þá hress maðr fyrir annars sakar en sjónleysis" [he was still a hearty man but for the sake of his vision loss].<sup>18</sup> Yet, the narrative construction of this final act of Egill's life appears to be at great odds with, and perhaps even undermines the saga's account of his earlier years, even if its portrayal of the aged hero may ultimately be a sympathetic one.<sup>19</sup> Annette Lassen has demonstrated that keen eyesight is frequently depicted as a symbol of masculine strength in medieval saga writing and the act of blinding was concurrently regarded as a symbolic equivalent to the act of castration, particularly when brought about through violence or torture.<sup>20</sup>

17 Cf. *Vápnfirðinga saga*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit XI (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), 23.

18 Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslenzk fornrit II (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), 294–96; see also Todd Michelson-Ambelang, *Outsiders on the Inside: Conception of Disability in Medieval Western Scandinavia* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015), 111–13. Based on these and other "symptoms," cases have been made for retroactively diagnosing Egill with either Paget's disease or Van Buchem disease; see Þórður Harðarson, "Sjúkdómur Egils Skallagrímssonar," *Skírnir* 158 (1984): 245–48; Jesse L. Byock, "The Skull and Bones in *Egill's saga*: A Viking, a Grave, and Paget's disease," *Viator* 24 (1993): 23–50; and Peter Stride, "Egill Skallagrímsson: The First case of Van Buchem disease?" *The Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* 41 (2011): 169–73.

19 Morcom, "After Adulthood," 44–48; Ármann Jakobsson, "The Spectre of Old Age," 316.

20 Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden*, 24–25, 43–52. On deliberate acts of blinding and symbolic castration in saga writing, see also Sean Lawing, *Perspectives on Disfigurement in Medieval Iceland: A Cultural Study based on Old Norse Laws and Icelandic Sagas* (PhD diss., University of Iceland, 2016), 164–66.

Although Egill's vision loss, which was not the result of violence or torture, may not result in his outright feminization, it does seem to play a vital role in diminishing his masculine status to a discernible degree.<sup>21</sup>

Although, due to his own vision loss, Þorsteinn does express some trepidation over being incapable of managing things on his own, he is never treated, like Egill, as an inconvenient burden to those around him and a pale shadow of his former self. Björn Hítðelakappi, who also experiences some kind of visual impairment later in life in the saga bearing his name, is – somewhat like the blind yet hearty Egill – simultaneously described as “dapreygðr ok manna bezt vígr” [weak-sighted and the best warrior]. Björn never faces the same kind of ridicule and social stigma as Egill.<sup>22</sup> Yet, like Qnundr tréfótr [wooden-leg], great-grandfather of the eponymous hero of *Grettis saga*, while the elderly Björn's acumen as a warrior may be enhanced by his loss of vision, at least during his later years, the narrative seems to suggest that such “praise is inescapably predicated in part on his ability to supersede his disability.”<sup>23</sup> In *Vatnsdæla saga*, on the other hand, the elder Ingimundr Þorsteinsson develops quite a reputation as a raider and a warrior before settling in Iceland. However, he becomes *nær blindr* [nearly blind] as an old man and is easily disposed of when he attempts to intervene in a conflict between his sons and the nefarious Hrolleifr Arnaldsson.<sup>24</sup> Of course, unlike Björn, Egill, Ingimundr, and Qnundr, there is no mention of Þorsteinn hvíti engaging in raiding, combat, or any other great physical feats as a younger man. Rather, his elevated social standing seems to rest upon his penchant for astute financial dealings, clever resource management, and popularity among his neighbours. A less frequently commented upon figure, the aged and blind Hlenni inn spaki/skakki [the wise/wry] in *Ljósvetninga saga*, may offer an interesting comparison. Like Þorsteinn, he is never depicted in this saga as a warrior but uses other qualities, such as his cunning and wit, to get the better of the

21 Morcom, “After Adulthood,” 44–47; see also Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 80–83.

22 *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, 197; Michelson-Ambelang, *Outsiders on the Inside*, 100–04.

23 Sexton “Difference and Disability,” 156.

24 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Vatnsdæla saga*, 60–62. For Ingimundr's earlier career as a raider and warrior, see Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Vatnsdæla saga*, 19–27.

powerful chieftain Guðmundr Eyjólfsson.<sup>25</sup> Yet, for both men, blindness remains an indelible part of their identity.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the question of whether Þorsteinn's blindness – as well as Hlenni's – should be viewed as a disability, carrying with it any social disadvantages, even if the same kind of thing can be regarded as a disability, for example, for Egill and perhaps Ingimundr, if not for Bjørn and Qnundr as well, remains unclear.<sup>26</sup> Such a question, however, may imply that the representation of Þorsteinn's visual impairment should be viewed primarily as a reflection of real, lived experience during the Middle Ages in Iceland. In this regard, it has been pointed out, for example, that the *augnaverkr* that he and several others in the sagas experience, as mentioned above, might reflect traditions stemming from a widespread historical vitamin A deficiency during the Middle Ages due to shortages of green and yellow vegetables.<sup>27</sup> Yet, the Þorsteinn hvíti found in the narrative of the saga bearing his name cannot be simply equated with the historical figure from which this depiction, in all likelihood, ultimately derives. The text does not provide a physical body through which something like a vitamin deficiency can be detected. There are, indeed, no contemporary documentary sources or physical evidence against which this aspect of the literary Þorsteinn, who postdates his living counterpart by at least several centuries, can be measured. This also happens to be the case for those other figures mentioned above. Although it may be a compelling prospect, particularly in light of the possibility of applying certain diagnoses using the sagas alongside other historical evidence, these figures – like all other literary characters – cannot be read simply as representations

25 Björn Sigfússon, *Ljósvetninga saga*, 54–57; Yoav Tirosh, *On the Receiving End: The Role of Scholarship, Memory, and Genre in Constructing Ljósvetninga saga* (PhD diss., University of Iceland, 2019), 143–45. The same Hlenni also appears or is mentioned in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Kristni saga*, *Landnámabók*, and *Víga-Glúms saga*. He is referred to as Hlenni inn gamli [the old] in each of these sources.

26 On the socio-cultural distinction between an impairment and a disability in a medieval context, rooted in the so-called “social model of disability” developed by disability activists in the 1970s and 80s, see Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about physical impairment during the high Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–37. For a general criticism of both the social model as well as a strictly cultural model of disability, see Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2014).

27 Bernadine McCreesh, *The Weather in the Icelandic Sagas: The Enemy Without* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 55.



of real people and the practice of interpreting these sources using modern medical criteria should hardly be seen as an endpoint of textual criticism.<sup>28</sup> Representations in the medieval sagas of nonconformist bodies or atypical sensory experiences do not generally welcome close comparison with modern medical understandings of these phenomena, not only on account of cultural, historical, or social differences, but because of the nature of the sagas themselves.

The *Íslendingasögur* are immensely valuable as sources of ideas, ideologies, and mentalities, if not of the period and society they purport to represent (ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-century Iceland), then of the period and society in which they were written and received (thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century Iceland, if not even later). Adopting such a perspective toward the sagas may allow for some insight regarding the varied ways sensory impairments such as vision loss or blindness were perceived and how they affected the everyday life of medieval Icelanders during this later period. Although, as discussed above, *Þorsteins saga* presents particular difficulties if regarded as a medieval text. In any case, scholars attempting to flesh out specific aspects of how a given saga reflects past social realities associated with vision loss or blindness run the risk of obscuring some of the more interesting questions a disability studies approach can generate. As Michael Bérubé explains, focusing solely on questions of representational accuracy or attempts to apply retrospective diagnosis “leads us away from the grainy details and specific passages and utterances, distracting us from what we should be asking about narratives as such.”<sup>29</sup> In this respect, Þorsteinn hvíti’s reappearance near the end of the saga is of particular interest less for the sake of how his depiction might reflect broader socio-cultural attitudes outside of the text and more with respect to how the narrative invokes Þorsteinn’s atypical sensory experience to confront the kind of ocularcentrism that commonly characterizes medieval saga writing.

28 Michael Bérubé, “Disability and Narrative,” *PMLA* 120 (2005): 570; Michael Bérubé, *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 19–20, 27, 66; see, for example note 18 above.

29 Bérubé, *The Secret Life of Stories*, 130.

## Seeing ocularcentrism

As mentioned previously, much of *Þorsteins saga* concerns the younger Þorsteinn fagri's journey abroad to Norway, his partnership with Einarr Þórisson, Einarr's betrayal and Þorsteinn's vengeance, and the latter's exile from and eventual return to Iceland. Amid these events, the elder Þorsteinn hvíti's son Þorgils, who had previously allied with Einarr at the behest of the malicious Hrani gullhǫttr [gold hood], is killed by Þorsteinn fagri's brothers, who also lose their lives in the conflict. Interestingly, the trouble between the two men begins with an illness – *skyrbjúgr* (scurvy) – that Þorsteinn fagri contracts while journeying abroad, which leads to him becoming *eigi liðfærr* (incapacitated) for some time. At Einarr's prompting, Þorsteinn becomes an object of ridicule among all those onboard on account of the illness and, once in Norway, Einarr has mocking verses made about his unwell partner. Later still, upon his return to Iceland, he arranges for the false news of Þorsteinn's death to spread in the community, which allows him to arrange a marriage with Helga Krákadóttir who had previously been betrothed to Þorsteinn. Þorgils Þorsteinsson, as a friend of Einarr's, helps to make the marriage arrangement and, thus, becomes embroiled in the feud that eventually results in his own death.<sup>30</sup> The elder Þorsteinn is hardly mentioned during this part of the saga, but he is predictably distraught when Hrani informs him of Þorgils's death, remarking “Fjándliga segir þú frá tíðendum. Illt hefir jafnan af þér hlotizk ok þínum ráðum” [You relate the news fiendishly. Evil has always proceeded from you and your counsels].<sup>31</sup> There is no subsequent explanation for how Þorsteinn hvíti gets along without his son, who had previously taken over management of the farmstead at Hof. It is said, however, that Þorgils's son Helgi, who was three years old when his father was killed, now shared ownership of the farm. Neither Þorgils's wife Ásvǫr nor their daughter Guðrún are ever mentioned again in the narrative, though the saga's medieval audience may have taken for granted their roles in maintaining the farm and Ásvǫr's role in raising Helgi. Yet, their absence from the narra-

30 *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 8–11.

31 *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 16. The elder Þorsteinn's remarks about Hrani allude to the fact that Þorgils's involvement in the feud between Þorsteinn fagri and Einarr was largely at Hrani's urging; see *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 10.

tive is still be worthy of note.<sup>32</sup> In any case, there is little apparently worth telling until five years later when Þorsteinn fagri returns to Iceland and the two Þorsteinns share a remarkable encounter.

Following his exile for the killing of Einarr, Þorsteinn fagri immediately sets out for Hof. On his arrival there he first meets the young Helgi, who is eight years old at the time, playing outdoors. After a short exchange with the boy, he and his travelling companions enter the farmhouse. It is then said that “Þorsteinn hvíti kenndi farmanna daun ok spurði, hverir komnir væri” [Þorsteinn hvíti recognized the reek of seafarers and asked, who had come], leading his younger namesake and the brother of Þorgils’s slayers to identify himself.<sup>33</sup> Though slight, this “grainy detail” of the narrative is rather striking. The elder Þorsteinn’s keen sense of smell may recall certain motifs commonly found in folk tales where a prodigious sense of smell is sometimes associated with nefarious humans or other – often dimwitted – paranormal beings.<sup>34</sup> Yet otherwise absent of paranormal elements, the text more simply refers to those smells associated with the sea and seafaring travelers with which its original audience – probably no less than many of their modern counterparts – would have been well acquainted. Although the seafarers’ “reek” is stated as a fact and does not give the saga’s audience direct access to Þorsteinn’s inner thoughts and feelings, this small detail is a subtle gesture towards his atypical sensory experience of the event, which is contingent upon his vision loss. There is, for example, no such reference to the senses when the younger Þorsteinn had previously encountered Helgi playing outside, likely taking for granted that they had become aware of one another through the faculty of vision.

32 In *Vápnfirðinga saga* it is specifically stated that Þorsteinn “fæddi upp Helga, sonarson sinn” [brought up Helgi, his grandson], with no mention of his mother or a sister; *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 24.

33 *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 16.

34 Christine Goldberg, “Cannibalism, Motif G10,” *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, ed. by Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy (London: Routledge, 2016), 228; see also Yoav Tirosh, *On the Receiving End*, 244–45. Norwegian folk tales, such as “Soria Moria slot” and “Småguttene som traff trollene på Hedalskogen,” feature Trolls, for example, who detect the presence of unwanted visitors by the smell of their Christian blood; see Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe (eds.), *Norske Folke-eventyr*, 2 vols. (Christiania: Johan Dahl, 1843–44), I, 166–80 and Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe (eds.), *Norske Folke-eventyr: ny samling* (Christiania: I kommission hos J. Dybwad, 1871), 151–54.

Thus, although invoked using only a few words, the narrative methods of the saga's writer become apparent as the text briefly veers from Old Norse literature's typical ocularcentric norm. While far from a conclusive analysis, it is worth noting, for example, that the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP) contains 1179 citations for the verb *sjá* [to see/look], 470 citations for the verb *heyra* [to hear/listen], 94 citations for the verb *bergja* [to taste], 51 and 45 citations for the verbs *snerta* [to touch] and *þreifa* [to feel with the hand] respectively, and 27 and 12 citations for the verbs *þefa* [to smell] and *ilma* [to give off a pleasant scent] respectively.<sup>35</sup>

Concerning blindness and ocularcentrism more broadly, disability studies scholar Rod Michalko explains that “blindness is always experienced in the midst of sightedness” where “people are either born blind into a world organized by sight or lost their sight in the same world.” Thus, he continues, “the meaning of blindness is wrapped in its immersion in a ‘sighted world.’”<sup>36</sup> Consequently, vision loss or blindness, often conceptualized as the “empty other, the polar (and defining) opposite to the wholeness and norm of ‘seeing,’” is often seen to be antithetical to knowledge acquisition and other mental processes.<sup>37</sup> Though certainly with some exceptions, vision has been widely privileged over any other sense across history, including during the Middle Ages.<sup>38</sup> The same seems to hold true for the

35 Aldis Sigurðardóttir, Alex Speed Kjeldsen, Bent Chr. Jacobsen, Christopher Sanders, Ellert Þór Jóhannsson, Eva Rode, Helle Degnbol, James E. Knirk, Maria Arvidsson, Simonetta Battista, Tarrin Wills, and Þorbjörg Helgadóttir (eds.), *ONP: Dictionary of Old Norse Prose [Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog]* (Copenhagen: Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission), <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php>

36 Rod Michalko, *The Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 8; Rod Michalko, *The Difference that Disability Makes* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 136–40.

37 Scott Wells, “The Exemplary Blindness of Francis of Assisi,” *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. by Joshua R. Eyler (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) 67; see also Michalko, *The Mystery of the Eye*, 8–34, 65–101; David Michael Levin, “Introduction,” *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. by David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2–4.

38 In the context of medieval Christian culture, some have suggested that hearing, and sometimes even touch, rather than vision assumed primacy among the senses; see, for example, Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 65. However, some of these claims are made on rather thin evidence and, while hearing is commonly privileged above the remaining senses and sometimes touch as well, the hegemony of vision remains widely prevalent, particularly during the later Middle Ages; see Walter J. Ong, “The Shifting Sensorium,” *The Varieties of Sensory*

world depicted in *Þorsteins saga* and in other Old Norse literature where the visual is often taken for granted as a means through which the world is most naturally engaged with, but it is also often explicitly privileged as, if not the sole, then certainly the primary seat of knowledge generation and motivation. Pernille Hermann has demonstrated that the faculty of sight was intimately entwined with thought and memory in medieval Norse culture.<sup>39</sup> This is the case too, for example, for paranormal experiences such as dreams and, naturally, waking visions as well, the vehicle of which is predominantly visual imagery. Like other Indo-European languages, Old Norse is also highly dependent on a variety of explicit and occluded terms, metaphors, and other idiomatic phrases associating seeing and the visual with knowing, remembering, and thinking.<sup>40</sup> Yet, by giving way to this small but striking detail, *Þorsteins saga* confronts the hegemony of vision, if only momentarily, by relating the experience of blindness not as an empty other but as an experience that involves its own means for knowledge motivation and generation. Moreover, rather than an obstacle, the saga presents vision loss and blindness as something capable of generating its own narratives, including the story of sightedness' common inability to see itself as a norm about which everything, including stories, is typically constructed.<sup>41</sup>

The acknowledgement of Þorsteinn's atypical sensory experience, indeed, seems to entail a subtle and perhaps rare shift from the kind of ex-

*Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. by David Howes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 30; Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 34–45; Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 14–18; Béatrice Caseau, "The Senses in Religion: Liturgy, Devotion, and Deprivation," *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Richard G. Newhauser (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 89–91; and Pekka Kärkkäinen, "The Senses in Philosophy and Sciences: Mechanics of the Body or Activity of the Soul?" *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Richard G. Newhauser (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 118–20.

39 See Pernille Hermann, "Memory, Imagery and Visuality in Old Norse Literature," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114 (2015): 317–40; Pernille Hermann, "The Mind's Eye: The Triad of Memory, Space and the Senses in Old Norse Literature," *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 47 (2017): 203–17.

40 On the pervasiveness of ocularcentrism in Indo-European languages, see Stephen A. Tyler, "The Vision Quest in the West, or What the Mind's Eye Sees," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 40 (1984): 23–40.

41 Michalko, *The Mystery of the Eye*, 156–67.

ternal focalization that broadly characterizes this and other saga narratives toward the internal.<sup>42</sup> This movement helps to render what would surely already be a tense meeting all the more poignant. The elder Þorsteinn begins by asking his younger namesake, the brother of his son Þorgils's killers, "Hvárt þótti þér of lítil mín skapraun, ef þú sóttir mik eigi heim, blindan karl ok gamlan?" [Do you think my trials too little without you seeking me out at my home, a blind old man?]. Þorsteinn fagri did not arrive at the farm, however, with hostile intents but is seeking to make amends for the killing of Þorgils. He promptly offers Þorsteinn hvíta sjálfðæmi [self-judgment] and claims that Þorgils will be compensated "svá at eigi hafi annarr maðr dýrri verit" [so that no man had been put at a higher price]. The elder Þorsteinn refuses the offer, claiming that he "eigi vilja bera Þorgils, son sinn, í sjóði" [does not want to carry Þorgils, his son, in a purse]. Þorsteinn fagri then dramatically leaps forward and places his head on his elder namesake's knee, forfeiting his life.<sup>43</sup> Þorsteinn hvíti replies,

Eigi vil ek láta höfuð þitt af hálsi slá. Munu þar eyru sœmst, sem uxu. En þá geri ek sætt okkar í millum, at þú skalt fara hingat til Hofs til umsýslu með allt þitt, ok ver hér, meðan ek vil, en þú sel skip þitt.

[I don't want to have your head struck from your neck. Ears fit best where they grew. But then I'll make an agreement between us, that you will come here to Hof to manage things with all you have and will stay here as long as I wish, and you will sell your ship.]

Þorsteinn fagri agrees to these terms and the arrangement between the two lasts for eight years. The saga relates that, during this time, the younger

42 On external focalization and saga style, see Daniel Sävborg, "Style," *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London: Routledge, 2017), 112–15.

43 William Ian Miller Miller has referred to this act as a "forgiveness ceremony," noting that similar arrangements are made by Brodd-Helgi's son Bjarni in both *Vápnfirðinga saga* and in *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*, among other places; Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 57, 322n32, 369n22; see *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 62–63; *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslensk fornrit XI (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), 77–78; see also Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga*, 23–24; Sigríður Baldursdóttir, "Hugmyndaheimur Vopnfirðinga sögu," 74–76.

Þorsteinn was to the elder Þorsteinn “í sonar stað í allri umsýslu” [like a son in managing everything], taking the place of the deceased Þorgils.<sup>44</sup>

The meeting between the two Þorsteinns is remarkable for several reasons, not least the lingering effect of the opening and subtle textual gesture toward the elder Þorsteinn’s inner life.<sup>45</sup> Although he seems to deprecatingly refer to himself as a “blind old man,” the saga’s audience has hardly been conditioned to pity the elder Þorsteinn as they might readily pity Egill, for example, during his later years, as mentioned above. However, as Sif Ríkharðsdóttir has shown, in contrast to the prose that surrounds it, the poetry in *Egils saga*, including a few verses Egill recites lamenting the effects of aging, often appears to “manipulate the reader into an empathetic position and provide an alternative insight into characters’ inner lives.”<sup>46</sup> The same can be said of the subtle gesture the narrative makes toward the elder Þorsteinn’s inner life through its intimation of his atypical sensory experience; that is, his awareness of the presence of the seafaring visitors through his sense of smell. Yet, he is never confronted with the kind of ridicule, scorn, or social stigma Egill faces. In this respect, the younger man’s refusal to treat his arguably vulnerable counterpart in the same way that Einarr had treated him during his own period of illness and convalescence years earlier is also noteworthy. That Þorsteinn fagri makes no attempt to take advantage of the “blind old man” demonstrates both his moral character and – contrasted with Einarr’s behaviour – the saga’s overall attitude toward the proper conduct toward those with illnesses or impairments.

Regarding the elder Þorsteinn’s refusal to take the offered vengeance for his son upon Þorsteinn fagri, Ámundi inn blindi [the blind] in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, though not an old man and said to have been blind since his birth, may offer an interesting point of comparison. He miraculously gains momentary sight and, unlike Þorsteinn, opts for violence when

44 *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 17–18.

45 For a somewhat similar reading of a scene featuring the aforementioned Hlenni in *Ljósvetninga saga*, see Yoav Tirosh, *On the Receiving End*, 145–46.

46 Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 103; see also Lois Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 189–90; and Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova, “Egill Skalla-Grímsson: A Viking Poet as a Child and an Old Man,” *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 295–304.

given the opportunity to avenge the killing of his father.<sup>47</sup> Yet, in Ámundi's case, following immediately on the heels of the saga's account of Iceland's conversion to Christianity, his act of vengeance is arguably understood to be divinely sanctioned and serves – at least to the saga's audience – as an obvious illustration that God “can intervene when and as he sees fit.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, through the miraculous killing of his father's slayer, Ámundi fans the embers of an old feud, reigniting the conflict between the sons of the eponymous Njáll and the Sigfússons, which eventually culminates in the burning at Bergþórshváll.<sup>49</sup> The aforementioned efforts of the aged and nearly blind Ingimundr Þorsteinsson to prevent violence, his extended dramatic death scene, and his son's vengeance upon their evil pagan adversaries in *Vatnsdæla saga*, convey a similarly didactic and moral tone. Ingimundr and his sons are portrayed as proto-Christians whose actions are informed by a strong sense of Christian morality, which is preoccupied with determining and doling out both rewards and punishments.<sup>50</sup> No such spiritual framework is provided or even vaguely implied during the encounter between the two Þorsteinns. Rather, doubtlessly drawing on the experience of losing his own son to violent conflict, Þorsteinn hvíti is afforded an opportunity and succeeds in expressing his own personal views on the futility of the retributive cycle of violence that society seems to demand he must help to perpetuate.<sup>51</sup>

47 Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslenzk fornrit XII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), 248, 272–74.

48 Elizabeth Walgenbach, “Inciting Miracle in *Njáls saga*: Ámundi hinn blindi's Gift of Sight in Context,” *Saga-Book* 43 (2019): 132; see also Siân Grønlie, *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 142–43. This episode has generated a great deal of scholarly debate centring on its religious dimensions and whether the return of Ámundi's blindness following his act of vengeance should be interpreted as a punishment for having miscomprehended God's will by killing rather than offering Christian forgiveness to his father's killer; see, for example, Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 145; Annette Lassen, “Hedninge på kristent pergament: Fremstillingen af mødet mellem hedenskab og kristendom i dele af den norrøne litteratur,” *Transfiguration: Nordisk tidsskrift for kunst og kristendom* 3 (2001): 23–41; William Ian Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody? A Reading of Njáls saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 188–91; Andrew Hamer, *Njáls saga and its Christian Background: A Study of Narrative Method* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 122–30.

49 Walgenbach, “Inciting Miracle in *Njáls saga*,” 134.

50 Grønlie, *The Saint and the Saga Hero*, 123–33; cf. Morcom, “After Adulthood,” 26–30.

51 Sigríður Baldursdóttir, however, contends that Þorsteinn should be regarded as a proto-Christian or “noble heathen.” Based on the idea that *Þorsteins saga* and *Vápnfirðinga saga*



Yet, unlike a number of other elderly men in the sagas, some of whom also experience vision loss or other infirmities associated with aging, Þorsteinn hvíti does not simply retire out of the vengeance game – often ritualized through the act of literally retiring to bed – in which he never really seemed to take part anyway.<sup>52</sup> Vengeance, of course, is not the only viable option, but the elder Þorsteinn is equally defiant in refusing financial compensation. His refusal to do so once again seems to demonstrate a keen awareness of the pitfalls of the social structures within which he and his younger namesake are operating. Þorsteinn’s defiant refusal to “carry his son in a purse” may speak to his awareness that taking such a payment in lieu of blood vengeance could make him the object of shame.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, as William Ian Miller contends, while financial compensation may appear to serve as a mechanism to thwart violent conflict, the purse itself can just as easily act as a token or reminder of the corpse for whom it was paid, creating a situation in which the violence it was meant to avert is ironically hastened.<sup>54</sup> The depth of Þorsteinn’s desire to prevent further violence is apparent when, after the saga jumps several years ahead, he encourages Þorsteinn fagri to leave Iceland when he suspects that Þorgils’s orphaned son, Brodd-Helgi, who has now come of age, might begin looking to avenge his father’s death.

Returning to the poignant encounter between the two Þorsteinns, with the traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution seemingly having been exhausted, the elder Þorsteinn opts for a radical method of conflict resolution such that his younger namesake becomes “like a son” to him, filling in for the son he has lost. This solution allows the elder Þorsteinn

share not only an intertextual connection but also an ideological one, she suggests that the encounter between the two Þorsteinns should be viewed as conveying a similarly positive Christian message as the one found in *Vápnfirðinga Saga*; see Sigríður Baldursdóttir, “Hugmyndaheimur Vopnfirðinga sögu,” 81, 99–100.

52 On the common trope of “retiring to bed” and, thus, out of the vengeance game in medieval saga writing, see William Ian Miller, *Losing It* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 129–40.

53 Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 190.

54 William Ian Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 106–07; see also, for example, Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, Íslenzk fornrit VII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), 80; Otto J. Zitzelsburger (ed.), *The Two Versions of Sturlaugs saga starfsama: A Decipherment, Edition and Translation of a Fourteenth Century Icelandic Mythical-Heroic Saga* (Düsseldorf: Michael Tritsch, 1969), 15.

to avoid the shame and the potential for an escalation of violence that financial compensation might entail while simultaneously preventing the abilities of his younger namesake from being squandered, putting them rather to productive use. Instead of inflicting punitive damage, either through violence or imposing a financial burden designed to damage the opposing side as much as possible, the arrangement can be regarded as a more restorative approach to justice. Þorsteinn's solution is centred not on punishment but on repairing the harm, where possible, that has resulted for both the surviving victims and the perpetrators of the killings of Einarr and Þorgils.<sup>55</sup> The elder Þorsteinn gains a surrogate son who is able to take over the management of the farm at Hof as his own son once had done. The younger Þorsteinn, though his father Þorfinnr is still living, gains a surrogate father who, for example, helps to arrange a marriage with Helga Krákadóttir, whom he had previously planned to marry prior to his friend Einarr's betrayal.

## Conclusion

After eight years at Hof and at his surrogate father's urging, the younger Þorsteinn departs for Norway along with his wife, father, and father-in-law, where he lives for the remainder of his life, and "þótti inn vaskasti maðr" [was thought the most valiant man]. Þorsteinn hvíti, remaining at Hof with his grandson Helgi, dies the following year whereupon it is said he was thought to have been "it mesta mikilmenni" [the greatest of men].<sup>56</sup> The meeting that took place nearly a decade earlier between the two Þorsteinns is a defining moment for both men. During that tense en-

55 On the differences between restorative and punitive justice, see, for example, John Braithwaite, "A Future Where Punishment is Marginalized: Realistic or Utopian?" *UCLA Law Review* 46 (1998–99): 1727–50.

56 *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 18–19. The saga ends following a perhaps awkwardly placed anecdote explaining how Helgi, whose story is told in much fuller detail in *Vápnfirðinga saga*, acquired his nickname *Brodd* [Spike], which has attracted the particular attention of scholars seeking to establish connections between *Þorsteins saga*, *Vápnfirðinga saga*, and perhaps also *Trójumanna saga*; see *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 24n1; Jón Jóhannesson, "Formáli," vi–ix; Halldór Stefánsson, "Austfirðingasögur í útgáfu Fornritauðgáfunnar," *Múlaþing* 2 (1967): 46–52; Jón Helgason, "Paris í Troja, Þorsteinn på Borg och Brodd-Helgi på Hof," *Nordiska studier i filologi och lingvistik: festskrift tillägnad Gösta Holm på 60-årsdagen den 8 juli 1976*, ed. by Lars Svensson (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1976), 192–94; and Gisli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*, 141–42.

counter, the younger Þorsteinn adopted an entirely different approach to that of his former partner Einarr when confronted with the vulnerability of a potential adversary and chose not only to avoid taking advantage of the “blind old” Þorsteinn but agreed to take over the management of his farm in order to atone for the killing of Þorgils. Yet, the elder Þorsteinn is not depicted as only a physically vulnerable figure even if his vision loss is an indelible part of his character. Þorsteinn hvíti’s blindness and his ability to recognize what many others cannot appreciate, namely the apparent flaws inherent in the traditional methods by which disputes are managed in the society depicted in the saga, appear to be intimately entwined within the narrative. The construction of the poignant encounter between the two men and the emphasis placed on the elder Þorsteinn’s atypical sensory experience of the event, from its outset, lingers over the scene. Yet, rather than pity, the narrative method of the saga’s writer directs the reader into an empathetic position, providing a fine psychological portrait of Þorstein hvíti as he deftly resolves the situation. In so approximating life experiences otherwise inaccessible to sighted people, *Þorsteins saga* subtly confronts the hegemonic status of sightedness, not only as the principal seat of knowledge motivation and generation, but also as an essential or at least normalized condition for narrative itself.

If understood as a reflection of actual attitudes toward embodied differences, either during the period the saga describes or that during which it is thought to have been written, *Þorsteins saga* never seems to depict blindness as inevitably disabling. Yet, as in Þorsteinn hvíti’s case, this would naturally be contingent upon being a part of a social network that is able and willing to adapt to the new reality such a change brings about and to provide suitable support. It is also important to note that Þorsteinn’s blindness, unlike that of the aforementioned Ámundi, is not congenital but that his vision loss comes well after he has accumulated wealth and achieved a high-ranking social status in a society in which the foundations of leadership were structured around reciprocity and support.<sup>57</sup> Yet, the saga and the story of Þorsteinn’s blindness, when regarded against the backdrop of ocularcentrism and the hegemonic status of sight, seems to reveal even more. The story of Þorsteinn’s blindness is not that of an empty other,

57 See Sverrir Jakobsson, “From Reciprocity to Manorialism: On the peasant mode of production in Medieval Iceland,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 38 (2013): 273–95.

as something conceptualized as an absent antithesis to the fullness of sightedness. Neither is it a story of passing, overcoming, or erasing difference. Certain elements of the narrative may seem to echo the familiar link between visual impairment or blindness and clairvoyance or superability, which can be found in many instances in Old Icelandic literature, including in the well-known tale of Óðinn giving one of his eyes in exchange for knowledge at Mímir's well.<sup>58</sup> Yet, *Þorsteins saga* does not point toward this motif in any obvious ways and there is no indication that Þorsteinn gains any kind of paranormal knowledge or ability in conjunction with his loss of vision. Yet, apart from his access to visual stimuli, there is no indication that anything much is lost either. Þorsteinn's blindness is a noteworthy but not a principally abnormal or utterly defining quality. However, it performs a vital role as a narrative device within the saga, providing an opportunity for the saga's audience to contemplate not only the experience of vision loss and blindness, which surely some of its members would be familiar with firsthand, but also its potential for motivating and generating both knowledge and narrative in its own unique ways.

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- 58 See, for example, Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes, 2nd ed. (University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005) 17, 50. On this and other associations between visual impairment or blindness and clairvoyance or superability in Old Icelandic literature, see Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis*, 71–78, 107–23; Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden*, 56–59, 84–106; Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, “Blindur er betri en brenndur sé.’ Um norræna guði og skerðingar,” *Fötlun og menning: Íslandssagan í öðru ljósi*, ed. by Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson, and Kristín Björnsdóttir (Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands og Rannsóknarsetur í fötlunarfræðum, 2013), 35–38.

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## SUMMARY

Narrating Blindness and Seeing Ocularcentrism in *Þorsteins saga hvíta*

**Keywords:** sagas, disability, blindness, narrative

This article explores *Þorsteins saga hvíta* using a disability studies approach. It considers how the saga’s depiction of the eponymous Þorsteinn might reflect how vision loss or blindness was perceived and may have affected the everyday life of medieval Icelanders. Greater focus, however, is placed upon how the saga makes use of Þorsteinn’s vision loss and subsequent blindness to confront the hegemony of vision in connection with both knowledge and narrative.

## ÁGRIP

Að segja frá blindu og sjá augnmiðjun í *Þorsteins sögu hvíta*

**Lykilorð:** sögur, fötlun, sjónleysi, frásögn

Í greininni er fjallað um Þorsteins sögu hvíta frá sjónarhorni fötlunarfræði. Þar er fjallað um hvernig lýsing sögunnar á Þorsteini gæti endurspeglað hvernig sjóndepra

eða blinda voru skilgreind og birtust í daglegu lífi Íslendinga á miðöldum. Á hinn bóginn er megináherslan á það hvernig sagan nýtir sér sjónmissi og blindu Þorsteins til að takast á við ráðandi hugmynd um sjónina sem meginskynfærið í tengslum við bæði þekkingu og frásögn.

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