

Mental Distress and Pseudo-Hagiography in *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*¹

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ABSTRACT: This article examines *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* as a significant yet overlooked source for understanding constructions of mental distress in medieval Iceland. Although the saga is categorized as one of the *samtíðarsögur* [contemporary sagas], its depiction of two individuals cured by Hrafn—an unnamed woman suffering from *hugarválað* and a man experiencing fits of *vitfirring*—closely parallels treatments and terminology in Icelandic hagiography. Through these episodes, the saga presents mental impairment as intertwined with physical symptoms and treatable through Hrafn's combined medical skill and divinely bestowed healing powers. Their clear resemblance to miracle accounts strengthens the classification of the saga as pseudo-hagiographic, a characterization further supported by the omission of these scenes in the *Sturlunga saga* version. These examples contribute to broader discussions of disability, healing, and sanctity in medieval Icelandic literature.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article examine la saga *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* comme une source importante mais négligée pour comprendre les constructions de la détresse mentale dans l'Islande médiévale. Bien que cette saga soit classée parmi les *samtíðarsögur* (sagas contemporaines), sa description de deux personnes guéries par Hrafn – une femme anonyme souffrant de *hugarválað* et un homme souffrant de crises de *vitfirring* – correspond étroitement aux traitements et à la terminologie utilisés dans l'hagiographie islandaise. À travers ces épisodes, la saga présente les troubles mentaux comme étant liés à des symptômes physiques et pouvant être traités grâce aux compétences médicales et aux pouvoirs de guérison divins de Hrafn. Leur ressemblance évidente aux récits de miracles renforce la classification de la saga comme pseudo-hagiographique, une caractérisation encore renforcée par l'omission de ces scènes dans la version de la *saga Sturlunga*. Ces exemples contribuent à élargir le débat sur le handicap, la guérison et la sainteté dans la littérature islandaise médiévale.

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Within the last two decades, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to constructions of impairment and disability in medieval literature and history, utilizing interdisciplinary approaches to cast light on how visible and invisible difference was understood in the Middle Ages. One of the most significant contributions to this emerging field of study remains Irina Metzler's 2006 monograph *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking About Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400*. Metzler's work provided the theoretical foundation for later studies and inspired readings of a variety of medieval Latin and vernacular texts through the lens of critical disability studies, an approach that "rejects the traditional bio-medical understanding of disability as an individual deficit" and instead proposes that disability should be understood as "as a social phenomenon embedded in social arrangements and cultural conventions" (2).

In the field of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and medieval Icelandic history, a number of contributions have recently appeared, which discuss physical, sensory, and mental difference² in medieval Iceland.³ These studies have clearly demonstrated how what we now refer to as "disabilities" are present in the prose narratives of medieval Iceland, both in characters who are central to the narrative as well as those who are incidental within it. Various forms of physical, sensory, and mental difference may be an important part of a central saga character's background, and/or an explanation for their nickname, or may be critical to a major episode within the saga. In minor (often unnamed) characters, physical, sensory, and mental difference may serve as a foil to the major character, or the major character may "cure" the other's state of difference in order to demonstrate their own powers. As a whole, as these studies indicate, appearances of disability motifs in the saga corpus speak to what the saga public thought was narratively believable, and as such warrant closer consideration.

The important scholarship on physical, sensory, and mental difference in Old Norse society has concentrated primarily on what can be gleaned from the Sagas and Tales of Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur* and *þættir*), narratives based on events that took place in Iceland during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries. Recent research has built upon this foundational work through an examination of the lives and experiences of disabled people in Iceland as depicted in Old Norse-Icelandic hagiography through an analysis of all instances of physical, sensory, and mental difference from the bishops' sagas (*biskupa sögur*)—native Icelandic hagiographies that contain a number of examples of miracles and miraculous events surrounding individuals who were cured of a variety of forms of visible and invisible difference (Van Deusen).

An Old Norse-Icelandic text that has much overlap with the bishops' sagas, and which ought to be brought into the larger and ongoing conversation

surrounding constructions of disability in medieval Icelandic hagiographic literature, is *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* [*The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson*], a *samtíðarsaga* [contemporary saga] with overt hagiographic overtones. The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate through the identification and analysis of two instances in the saga that the text is also a valuable source for an understanding of psychological disability in medieval Iceland through its descriptions of the experiences and treatments of individuals who are depicted as experiencing mental distress, which may, in turn, cause individuals to experience physical or sensory difference. Secondly, it argues that the saga's presentation of mental difference is another important way in which this saga may be characterized as pseudo-hagiographic in nature, especially when compared to other vernacular hagiographies and the version of text incorporated into *Sturlunga saga*.

Mental Distress in *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*

Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar, which belongs to the textual corpus of the so-called *samtíðarsögur* [contemporary sagas] due to its account of events that had only just recently occurred, concerns the eponymous Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (d. 1213), a wealthy chieftain from Eyri in Arnarfjörðr. Hrafn was the son of Sveinbjörn Bárðarson *svarti* [the Black] and Steinunn Þórðardóttir, and married Hallkatla Einarsdóttir in Kaldaðarnes, with whom he had eight children. Hrafn was a poet and a skilled craftsman who was both well-spoken and well-versed in the law, and who travelled widely. Politically, Hrafn was a chieftain who was known for being generous, capable, and popular (Ólason 373). Details of his career as a chieftain and as a healer are recounted in *Hrafn's saga*, which was composed between 1230 and 1250 and exists in the so-called “separate saga” in two versions (the original A-version and the condensed B-version) and the text incorporated into *Sturlunga saga*. The saga, which was edited in 1987 by Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, centres on Hrafn's feud with the Vatnsfjörðr chieftain Þorvaldr Snorrason (d. 1235), which ultimately led to Hrafn being killed in 1213.

Prior to the description of Hrafn's feud with Þorvaldr Snorrason, the separate saga describes in great detail Hrafn's devotion to God and his career as a physician [*læknir*]. Shortly before 1200, Hrafn went on pilgrimage to Canterbury, St. Giles, Rome, and Santiago de Compostella, where he visited shrines of saints and dedicated his life to God. Once he returned to Iceland by way of Norway, Hrafn began to practice healing, and treated a number of individuals of a variety of ailments and did so without accepting payment. The saga author stresses that God assisted Hrafn in all of his healing tasks. He writes that “Torvelt er at tína öll ágæti íþróttligrar lækningar hans, þeirar er guð gaf honum. En fyrir því má slíkt eigi undarligt sýnask, at guði eru engir hlutir

ómáttugir, ok af guði er ǫll sǫnn lækning” [It would be difficult to enumerate all the skilful treatments and cures which God granted Hrafn to perform. But this should not seem strange, since from God comes all true healing], and then quotes St Paul: “Alii gratia sanitarum in eodem spiritu” [to some men is given the grace [of healing] by the Holy Spirit] (*Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* 6; *The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson* 9–10). Indeed, the divine gift of healing was said to have been bestowed upon Hrafn’s family by St. Óláfr of Norway through his son, Magnús góði [the Good], alongside whom Hrafn’s great-grandfather fought at the battle of Wends (*Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* xci–xcii; McDougall 66).

Through a combination of medical skill and divine favour, Hrafn healed a variety of conditions; these included wounds, illnesses that caused extreme swelling throughout the body, and painful bladder stones. In addition to these physical ailments, Hrafn is said to have treated two individuals who are characterized by the saga as in need of a cure for their experiences of mental distress. In both cases, the accounts are brief, and detail within the span of several sentences the individuals’ psychological conditions and the methods by which Hrafn cured them. However, despite their length, the accounts cast light on how mental distress was named and treated in medieval Iceland. The first account involves an unnamed woman, whose experiences of mental distress and Hrafn’s treatment thereof are described as follows:

Kona sú kom á fund Hrafns, er mikit hugarválað hafði. Hon grét lǫngum ok var svá brjóstþjungt, at nær helt henni [p. 6] til ǫrvilnunar. Hrafn tók henni æðablóð í hendi í æði þeiri er hann kallaði þrotandi. En þegar eptir þat varð hon heil.
(*Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* 5–6)

[A woman came to Hrafn; she was very depressed in mind, often wept a great deal, and she had such a feeling of heaviness in her chest that it was difficult for her to breathe: she was near despair. Hrafn opened a vein in her arm called the *þjótandi*, and after that she was well.]
(*The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson* 8)

The second example, which immediately follows the first (indicating a perceived thematic connection between the two on the part of the saga author), concerns a man named Þorgils, who is similarly suffering from mental distress; unlike the unnamed woman, who is described as having *hugarválað* [depression, literally misery of mind or heart], Þorgils suffered from fits of *vitfíring* [insanity, literally wit estrangement] that brought on violent physical attacks. The text reads:

Þorgils hét maðr, er tók vitfíring. Hann var svá sterkr, at margir karlar urðu at halda honum. Síðan kom Hrafn til hans ok brenndi

hann í hofði díla nokkura, ok tók hann þegar vit sitt. Litlu síðar varð hann heill.

(*Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* 6)

[There was another man by the name of Thorgils who was subject to fits of insanity. He was so strong that several men had all they could do to hold him when the attacks came on him. Hrafn cauterized him in several places on the head; then he came to his senses and a little later he was cured.]

(*The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson* 8)

In both of these scenes, the individuals are evidently cured of their mental distress through Hrafn's medical intervention—for the woman, by bleeding, and for the man, by cauterization, which was a common treatment at the time (*The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson* 7; see also McDougall 66–67). As Ásdís Egilsdóttir notes, Hrafn's use of medical techniques is hardly uncommon when considered within the broader context of medieval miracle stories, which “frequently tell us that people tried to get help from local healers and home remedies before they invoked a saint and there was also a very fine line between folk-remedies and ecclesiastically approved methods” (35).

No background is given for either of the two instances of mental distress in *Hrafn's saga*, and as such the text does not provide information on their perceived causes; there is no description of any moral failing or particular action that led to the two individuals' experiences, which is not atypical in comparable examples from the *biskupa sögur* and hagiographic literature more generally speaking, where the focus tends to be on the miraculous cure, which showcases the power of the saintly individual and their connection to God (Van Deusen 13). The saga makes clear that in both instances, mental distress brings on temporary physical impairment, speaking to how interrelated experiences of physical, sensory, and mental difference were seen as being; the woman has difficulty breathing due to having *hugarválað*, and Þorgils loses control of his body in his fits of *vitfirring*. What is also clear from the text is the belief that mental distress can be cured through Hrafn's divinely endowed healing powers. And, as is characteristic of instances of physical, sensory, and mental difference in the *biskupa sögur*, the individuals and their experiences are included not for their own sake, but rather to demonstrate the saintly nature of the individual who cured them, and their special relationship with God. Some incidental insight is given as to their condition and, in the case of Þorgils, how it was managed by members of his community, namely through restraint, much like the binding strategies used for individuals experiencing mental distress in, for example, *Jóns saga helga* as well as *Guðmundar saga A* (Van Deusen 15–16; 19–20). And just like in comparable examples in the *biskupa sögur*, no further information is provided on the individuals after the scenes in which they are

healed; the purpose of their stories has been served, as they have sufficiently demonstrated the sanctity of the healer and his special relationship with God, from whom all healing comes (Van Deusen 21–22).

Of particular interest when considering the hagiographic nature of the two examples in which Hrafn treated individuals experiencing mental distress are the Old Norse terms used to describe their experience—the neuter noun *hugarválað* for the woman and the feminine noun *vitfirring* for Þorgils. The *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* lists 15 instances of the noun *hugarválað* in the corpus of Old Norse–Icelandic prose. Other than its use in *Hrafns saga*, it is found exclusively in religious literature—both in translated texts from Latin and German sources as well as in a number of examples from the saga of Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson, in which the saintly bishop cured individuals afflicted with this condition. Christopher Crocker, Yoav Tirosh, and Ármann Jakobsson note that examples of *hugarválað* in hagiographic narratives are “often presented as temporary” and point to the example of “when Saint Þorlákr cures a man who tried to commit suicide when in the throes of a bout of *hugarválað* (melancholy)” (16). Another example concerns a woman named Þorbjörg, who according to *Jarteinabók Þorláks byskups önnur* “tók vanheilsu mikla, svá at hon var ávallt með miklum vanmætti, en stundum hætt með öllu. Hon hafði ok *hugarválað* mikit, en var snauð at auðæfum” [became very sick, so that she was always very weak, and sometimes stopped altogether. She also had a great depression, and she was poor]. Bishop Þorlákr appeared twice to Þorbjörg; the second time he appeared to her, “styrkði byskup hana þá með öllu, ok er hon vaknaði þá var hon heil” [he strengthened her in everything, and when she awoke she was cured] (*Biskupa sögur II* 240). In the case of *Hrafns saga*, more traditionally medical methods are used to treat the woman, but previous remarks in the saga regarding the divine nature of Hrafn’s healing gift (bestowed upon his family through the intercession of St. Óláfr) is what ultimately accounts for the treatment’s effectiveness.

The use of the noun *vitfirring* is more widespread and is found in religious texts but also in other works, such as medical miscellanies and law codes. However, the entries for this word in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* indicate a large portion of those works in which the term is found are works that may be defined as religious in nature, and the term is used in descriptions of cures performed by Iceland’s saintly bishops, as well as in *Cecilíu saga*, which was translated into Old Norse from Latin (*Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*; Van Deusen 13, 16). One such example, which can be compared to the episode in *Hrafns saga*, is from the S and H recensions of *Jóns saga helga* and concerns a man named Kálfr, who “tok *vitfirring* svá at hann varð í þöndum at hafa” [lost his mind and had to be tied up] (*Biskupa sögur I* 283; *The Saga of St. Jón of Hólar* 77). One of Kálfr’s kinsmen made a vow to Bishop Jón on his behalf, and on the next night Kálfr experienced a vision of a man who was “mikill ok virðuligr” [tall and noble-

looking] (*Biskupa sögur I* 283; *The Saga of St. Jón of Hólar* 77). The man, who was presumably Bishop Jón himself, told Kálfr that he had experienced God's wrath for leading an evil life and for failing to cross himself before he drank. He advised Kálfr to behave more carefully and piously in the future, and instructed him how to do penance for his sins, which the man said would also please the holy Bishop Þorlákr. Kálfr awoke the next morning, "heill orðinn" [completely cured] and with his wits restored, and told his kinsmen of what he had seen (*Biskupa sögur I* 283; *The Saga of St. Jón of Hólar* 77). Unlike the episode in *Hrafn's saga*, where there is no cause indicated for Þorgils' vitfirring, the author of *Jón's saga* provides an explanation for Kálfr's vitfirring. However, the means by which the men are understood through the respective texts to have been cured—through the intervention of an individual endowed by God with healing powers—is the same, as is the manner in which the individuals with vitfirring were handled: by being bound. But with the instance of the unnamed woman, there is an implied medical understanding of how to treat the condition, which is combined with a religious one. As Guðrún P. Helgadóttir notes, while "the accounts of Hrafn's treatments begin and end with phrases closely resembling those that are conventional of reports in miracles . . . the methods he is described as using are of a pragmatic kind, firmly based on classical medical learning and its medieval development in southern Europe," though the saga author did not "discriminate between the powers of healing divinely bestowed and powers of healing humanly acquired" (*Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* xciv).

***Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* as Pseudo-Hagiography**

Margaret Cormack describes *Hrafn's saga* as being "infused with the odor of sanctity," and discusses the various hagiographic motifs found in the saga, including his work as healer (210). Ásdís Egilsdóttir similarly points out the hagiographic qualities of the text, comparing the text to the legend of St. Þorlákr. Ásdís writes that the healing powers exhibited by Hrafn and the miracles he performs are one of the many qualities that characterize Hrafn as a saint-like figure, particularly since his healing abilities derive ultimately from God (32). She writes that the way in which Hrafn's cures are described is

not very different from the miraculous cures related in the Icelandic saints' lives. The need for divine sanction and support is obvious when Hrafn has to perform a risky operation. Hrafn seeks the opinion of priests and wise men in his household; they say that the patient will die unless he is operated on. On their verdict and with God's help Hrafn decides to operate, and before doing so he asks everyone present to chant five paternosters.
(Egilsdóttir 36)

Similarly, in the introduction to her critical edition of the saga, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir points out the comparability of the healing miracles in *Hrafns saga* with those found in Icelandic saints' lives (xciii–xciv). Sarah Baccianti, too, comments on the “link between healing hands, spiritual intercession . . . and medical knowledge” in the saga, where Hrafn is portrayed as a saint-like figure, and his medical skill is a gift from God (75–76). None of this, of course, is a coincidence, as the saga author is said to have modelled his life of Hrafn on the life of St. Magnús by Master Robert as well as the life of Thomas Becket, probably the one written by Robert of Cricklade (*Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsónar* lxiv–lxxiv; Egilsdóttir 34–35; Antonsson 170).

A close examination of the two instances in the saga in which Hrafn cures individuals of mental distress confirms previous characterizations of the saga as pseudo-hagiographic in nature, and Hrafn, in turn, as a pseudo-saintly figure. As noted above, the examples considered in this article may be directly compared to the names for and treatments of mental distress found in the larger corpus of bishops' sagas and translated hagiographical literature from medieval Iceland, a corpus that provides a unique perspective on physical, sensory, and mental difference through their focus on both the perceived cause of the condition and its perceived cure through divine intervention (Van Deusen). But, as noted above, the examples in *Hrafns saga* stand slightly apart from these instances, as they combine both a medical and religious understanding of the treatment for the mental distress experienced by the unnamed woman and Þorgils. The saga author makes clear that Hrafn's skill in medicine and his healing abilities are bestowed upon him by the grace of God, as is the case in comparable examples from, for example, the sagas of Iceland's holy bishops as well as translated hagiographic literature. In this way, the examples of mental distress and their combined medical and religious methods of healing, described with vocabulary found predominantly—or exclusively, in the case of *hugarválað*—in hagiographic and religious texts, and following the same healing paradigms as in these texts (namely, to show predominantly the saintly power of the healer), reflect the saga's hybrid characterization as a contemporary saga and a hagiography.

It is also noteworthy that these scenes do not appear in the *Sturlunga saga* version of the text. The elimination of these scenes in *Sturlunga saga* also supports Úlfar Bragason's conclusion with regard to the key differences between the longer version of the saga and the shortened version in *Sturlunga saga*. Úlfar writes that

whereas the author of the original version mixed elements of hagiographic literature with a conventional feud story, his purpose being to write an exemplum of a good Christian, the compiler of *Sturlunga* tried to eliminate the hagiographic features by shortening

Hrafn's saga in accordance with other feud stories of his compilation. These changes resulted in a different emphasis and meaning of the *Sturlunga* version of *Hrafn's saga*.
(267)

Ásdís Egilsdóttir similarly observes that the separate saga is “a mixture of hagiography and a conventional thirteenth-century Icelandic feud narrative,” and states that the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* “omits or shortens hagiographic, religious or supernatural material” (29). The absence of the examples discussed above from the *Sturlunga saga* version is therefore consistent with previous scholars’ argument that the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* intentionally omitted the material that could be characterized as hagiographic.

Conclusion

Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar is a valuable source to consider when attempting to understand constructions of disability in medieval Iceland, and especially how mental distress was named, experienced, and treated. The examples in the saga of the unnamed woman and of Þorgils mirror similar examples of mental distress from the *biskupa sögur*. As such, they serve to further solidify the characterization of the saga as pseudo-hagiographical, particularly since these examples were omitted in the *Sturlunga saga* version. The examples not only help to characterize *Hrafn's saga* as a pseudo-hagiography and reflect through their own hybrid medical and religious features the saga’s hybrid nature,⁴ but they also contribute to our larger understanding of how various forms of difference were understood and experienced, particularly within a Christian religious context. The two episodes in question also serve to remind us that psychological disability is not a modern phenomenon, and that individuals in the premodern world experienced difference in a variety of different ways, just as they do today. Because of the distinctly Christian perspective from which this text was written, the scene in which two individuals are cured of mental distress through Hrafn’s combined medical and religious intervention also illustrates how hagiographic and pseudo-hagiographic texts provide deeper insight into ideas of the perceived religious causes for and especially the means of “curing” individuals with physical, sensory, and mental difference. As such, it ought to be considered both within the larger hagiographic corpus but also alongside examples from the “secular” sagas as well as within the wider scope of the religious understandings of disability in the European Middle Ages.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank the co-editors of this special issue, Yoav Tirosch and Alice Bower, and my two peer reviewers, whose suggestions for changes and additions have greatly improved this article. Any remaining omissions or errors are my own.
2. As Christopher Crocker, Yoav Tirosch, and Ármann Jakobsson rightly point out, there are a number of problems with applying a contemporary notion—disability—to literature where such a concept simply did not exist. I follow the lead of these scholars, who have been at the forefront of recent research on disability in medieval Iceland, by referring to what the sagas show us not as instances of an individual experiencing disability, but rather as examples of individuals who are depicted as physically, mentally, and sensorially different (23–24). For the purposes of this article, I refer to individuals who are depicted as mentally different, and specifically those who experience mental distress.
3. See, for example, Anderson; Jakobsson 2013 and 2014; Sayers (published as Bragg) 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2006; Crocker 2019 and 2021; Sigurjónsdóttir and Rice; Høyersten 1998, 2001, and 2007; Kanerva; Matheson; Michelson-Ambelang; Sexton; and Tirosch. For a more complete bibliography, see Christopher W. E. Crocker's *Bibliography of Disability and the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (<https://cwecrocker.com/bibliography-of-disability-studies-and-the-medieval-icelandic-sagas/>).
4. For an in-depth discussion of the co-existence of multiple body images and lived religion in the Old Norse milieu, see Frog 2019.

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