“Blautr erum bergis fótar borr”
Disabled Masculinity and Irregular Phalli in the *Íslendingasögur*

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ABSTRACT: Numerous medieval Icelandic sagas discuss men who have irregular phalli. While previous studies have attempted to understand the relationship between medieval Icelandic men and their irregular penises through a psychoanalytic lens, this article instead focuses on the intersection of disability theory and masculinity theory to examine the cultural and social implications of having an irregular phallus in the medieval Icelandic world, which will be labeled as a “sexual disability.” As this study will reveal, these sexual disabilities were perhaps the most culturally disabling for men in the medieval Icelandic world because of the gender-specific significance of the penis and its impact on their perceived masculine performance.

RÉSUMÉ: De nombreuses sagas islandaises médiévales évoquent des hommes ayant un phallus anormal. Alors que des études précédentes ont tenté de comprendre la relation entre les hommes islandais médiévaux et leurs pénis anormaux à travers le prisme de la psychanalyse, cet article se concentre plutôt sur l'intersection entre la théorie du handicap et la théorie de la masculinité afin d'examiner les implications culturelles et sociales d'un phallus anormal dans le monde islandais médiéval, qui sera qualifié de « handicap sexuel ». Comme le révélera cette étude, ces handicaps sexuels étaient peut-être les plus invalidants sur le plan culturel pour les hommes dans le monde islandais médiéval en raison de la signification spécifique du pénis en fonction du genre et de son impact sur leur performance masculine perçue.

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Trigger Warning: Pages 13–15 include non-graphic conversations of rape.

Discourse surrounding the relationship between masculine identity and the body has always been dominated by the penis: the sex organ serves as the primary differentiator between biological males and females, and thus holds tremendous power over depictions of maleness and masculinity throughout history.[2] The society depicted by Old Icelandic literature is no different: conversations of "penile problems," as Carl Phelpstead labels them in his article "Size Matters: Penile Problems in the Sagas of the Icelanders," permeate many narratives in the *Íslendingasögur*. Phelpstead cites a handful of sagas where the penis functions in a non-normative way: *Grettis saga*, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, and *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Through a Freudian reading, he strives to understand the relationship "between the male genitals and men's identities in medieval Iceland" (421). He argues that because "psychoanalysis has become so thoroughly embedded in contemporary discourse," it naturally constructs the modern reader's perception of sex and sexuality (421). His study states that, using psychoanalysis, we can connect modern notions of penile issues to medieval ones, thereby constructing a reasonable idea of what the relationship between the male body and masculine identity was in medieval Iceland. However, as Phelpstead acknowledges, utilizing Freud to understand the relationship between sexuality and gender in medieval Iceland is not an ideal theoretical framework because Freud's theories were not attuned to historical difference. As the discourse of psychoanalysis did not exist in the medieval period, utilizing Freud to analyze the role of the penis leads us to the dangerous practice of projecting modern understandings of gender and sexuality backwards onto the past. Phelpstead instead suggests, in his conclusion, that a Lacanian reading might be more productive, as Lacan is more sensitive to the nuances of cultural history.[3]

Phelpstead's article provides an interesting launching point for a different theoretical approach: the intersection of disability studies and masculinity studies, which I, along with other scholars, have labelled "disabled masculinity" in previous works.[4] Disabled masculinity focuses on the social impact of a disability within medieval Icelandic culture by combining the cultural model of disability studies with the theory of hegemonic masculinity. This interrelated social construction allows this study to analyze the ways men had to overcome the societal constraints of both their disability as well as the interlinked implications for their masculinity. The relationship between the two identity categories coalesces in the overarching theory of disabled masculinity, which will be used here to analyze the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and the irregular penis. This study is an important piece of the broader conversation on disabled masculinity within the medieval Icelandic world; it

will explore aberrant penises within the Old Norse corpus to determine whether these irregular phalli can be constituted as instances of sexual disability. In this study, the term "sexual disability" refers to instances where the genitals function or are presented in a non-normative way, typically hindering the person from engaging in normative intercourse.

Men who were physically disabled were also subjected to having their masculine identity challenged because of their perceived lack of physical ability.[5] Since the penis is the preeminent marker of masculinity, medieval men who were afflicted with sexual disabilities sometimes committed violent acts of hyper-aggressive masculinity in an attempt to "reclaim" their position of masculine power within society. Additionally, men who were sterile or otherwise unable to impregnate a woman also suffered a blow to their masculinity. This study demonstrates that, once revealed to the society in which the man lived, sexual disabilities were among the *most* culturally disabling for men within the medieval Norse world because of the significance of the penis and its power over the hegemonic masculine ideal.[6]

Utilizing the Icelandic sagas as a historical witness to medieval disability has obstacles: much ink has been spilled about the historical veracity of the sagas and issues of dating further complicate the conversations. The narratives found in the Íslendingasögur depict the medieval Icelandic world roughly between the settlement of the country (870 CE) and the country's conversion to Christianity (1000 CE), yet they were not written down until the twelfth century at the earliest (Clunies Ross 29, 53). From a historical perspective, scholars consistently question how trustworthy this information is; however, from a literary perspective, the texts are full of rich cultural information. The central question here focuses on whose cultural information they are portraying: as Crocker, Tirosh, and Ármann Jakobsson argue,

> Whether the sagas should be viewed as historical, fictional, or some combination of the two, they are first and foremost narratives. Even if a given saga succeeds, to some degree, in correctly describing the social reality it purports to represent, it also inevitably constitutes an interpretation of that same reality (13).

Realistically, it is impossible for an Icelandic saga to reproduce the events and social reality of the settlement period in Iceland entirely and faithfully; despite this, the saga authors constructed narratives that reflect "certain prevailing ideologies and mentalities . . . in the ways physical, mental, and sensory differences were experienced, communicated, represented, and interpreted in medieval Iceland" (Crocker, Tirosh, and Jakobsson 14).[7] Literary narratives have long preserved information about individual cultures' perspectives on identity and depictions of disability are no different. Therefore, this study presumes that

the sagas, while not infallibly historically accurate, do present a realistic depiction of disabled masculinity within medieval Iceland. This study also argues that this depiction was influenced both by the original source material of the sagas from the settlement period *and* the perspective of the saga author or authors. By assessing these sagas as narratives, we can utilize the concept of narrative prosthesis, introduced by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, which argues that literary narratives heavily rely on disabled characters as an "opportunistic metaphorical device" to "differentiate the character from the anonymous background of the 'norm'" (222). As stated above, the Icelandic sagas are rich with cultural information: the way disabled characters are treated, discussed, and presented allows us as a modern audience to "assess shifting values and norms imposed upon the body" in literature (Mitchell and Snyder 224). The narrative examples of men with sexual disabilities demonstrate what values and norms were imposed upon the male body, and more specifically upon the penis. As Mitchell and Snyder argue, "disability serves as an interruptive force that confronts cultural truisms" (223). By analyzing the examples of medieval Icelandic men through the framework of narrative prosthesis, we will be able to both uncover cultural information about disability *and* masculinity in the Icelandic sagas. The following literary examples will demonstrate how meanings surrounding the functioning and non-functioning penis change based on one's historical and cultural context. By analyzing the medieval Icelandic male through an intersectional theoretical approach, we can develop an understanding of the key facets of masculine identities, and the repercussions of threats to those identities, through these examples of irregular phalli.[8]

Cultural Constructions of Disability and Masculinity

The introduction of disability studies to the world of medieval studies brought a variety of conceptual frameworks to be used in the analysis of medieval disabilities: the most popular being the religious, social, and cultural models.[9] As many scholars have noted in their work on disability, what is most important for medievalists is the ability to resist projecting our own modern definitions of disability and impairment backwards onto the medieval period.[10] As I have argued in previous work, the cultural model, also developed by Mitchell and Snyder, provides the best opportunity to utilize the context provided by the medieval source material to build an understanding of disability. Created in response to the social model, which draws a distinction between "disability" as the social exclusion that people with impairments experience versus "impairment" as the physical or mental limitation (Shakespeare 214), the cultural model does not distinguish between these two

concepts. Instead, the cultural model uses the term "disability" to "include both the reality of corporeal differences as well as the effects of social stigmatization" in the medieval world (Eyler 6). This is particularly important for medieval scholars: by bypassing a system in which the medieval scholar is forced to "sort" instances of disability, we can "take into account the entire spectrum of experiences for people with disabilities and [it] does not force us to focus on constructed perceptions of disability at the expense of real, bodily phenomena" (Eyler 6). What is most important for this study is examining the discourse *around* the instances of disability: how is the male body perceived to be able or disabled within the social context of medieval Iceland? This type of analysis also allows us to expand beyond modern disability categories (like blindness, limb loss, chronic illness, etc.) to examine unique instances of disabilities that may not qualify as a disability in our modern world. Similar to my examination of the saga character Njáll's inability to grow a beard in a previous study, the cultural impairment of these irregular phalli constitutes a disability because it disables the perceived masculinity of each man within the patriarchal society in which they live (Morrow 24). Thus, an intersectional reading of disability and masculinity is essential to uncover the cultural understandings of phalli and their problems within the Old Norse world.

Like disability, masculinity should be understood as a cultural construction. James Messerschmidt makes a crucial distinction when defining masculinity:

> Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting (21).

Thus, when we are discussing masculinity, we are discussing those configurations of practice that are contingent on social and historical context. Masculinity is an unfixed category if it is being studied in isolation: until it interacts with historical, social, and cultural meaning, we cannot define the concept. In his monograph *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam makes the interesting claim that masculinity only becomes legible when "[it] leaves the white male middle-class body" (2). Masculinity can only truly define itself through interacting with other subordinated men, women, non-binary people, or children. Halberstam's point supports the need for intersectional readings of masculinity, as masculinity is more often defined by what it is *not*. This notion appears in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's famous study on insults in saga literature, *The Unmanly Man*, which demonstrates how the insult trading systems of the Icelandic sagas defined "what a man *must not be*, since in that case he is no man" (24). Men are inherently defined by what they are not: this is the notion underpinning hegemonic masculinity.

I am not the only medieval scholar to utilize hegemonic masculinity to understand the medieval Norse world: my use is directly inspired by Gareth Lloyd Evans, who argues that hegemonic masculine ideal "can be considered as the crystallization of the masculine ideal" (2019, 16). In other words, since the hegemonic ideal is rarely attainable, there are multiple expressions of masculinity that are deemed acceptable within society, and yet, all expressions of masculinity are perceived to be deficient in relation to the hegemonic ideal. Some masculinities are perceived to be more deficient than others, organizing a hierarchy of acceptable masculine gender performance. Essential to this fact is that hegemonic masculinity preserves patriarchal power over women. R.W. Connell argues that "hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women" (183). Throughout the primary source examples of irregular phalli, we see women, subordinated men, and children comment on the male character's failures: this consistently moves the male further from the hegemonic masculine ideal, sometimes forcing him to reassert his masculinity violently upon them.

Evans poses his theory of hegemonic masculinity in response to Carol Clover's famous one-sex/one-gender model and argues that a framework of hegemonic masculinity is a more productive lens for analyzing the multiple masculinities present in the medieval Norse world.[11] The existence of *multiple* masculinities is of the utmost importance for conversations of sexual disability. Evans contends that hegemonic masculinity is contingent on the idea of a hierarchy of masculinities; some masculinities are more acceptable than others, but subverting that hierarchy does not equate to feminization (2019, 62). Therefore, subversive masculinities are still identified as masculinities, and we can discuss the disabled male body without erasing the masculine identity of the disabled man. A male figure that is struggling with a sexual disability is still a man: this will be explored in the discussion of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Evans also emphasizes that "masculinities, while often spoken of in abstraction, cannot be regarded as isolated from the myriad of other factors which produce subject positions and subjectivity," so hegemonic masculine identity itself is dependent on physical ability or disability (2019, 19).

Phallic Cults, Castration, and Defamation

Psychoanalytical theory was correct to suggest that the concept of the phallus is more than biological: it is imbued with cultural significance. The purpose of this section of the study is to examine contextual material to develop a cohesive picture of the cultural ideals for both the penis and, more broadly, male genitals in medieval Scandinavia before examining the moments of "lack" that we encounter in the Íslendingasögur. There are a few sources that

explicitly discuss penises that are available to us for this endeavor: *Vǫlsa þáttr* (a story about phallic worship from *Ólafs saga helga*), *Grágás* (the medieval Icelandic law codes), as well as episodes of sexual defamation from the Íslendingasögur and *fornaldarsögur*. While not all these narratives are exactly contemporary to the Íslendingasögur, the topics discussed were part of the cultural worldview within which the sagas themselves were composed. For example, although some scholars have claimed that *Vǫlsa þáttr* "may well be so heavily fictionalised that it can no longer be said to have any historical basis," Luke John Murphy instead argues that it undoubtedly reflects Christian discourse about late forms of paganism, with the late-fourteenth century Icelanders who transcribed what was presumably once an oral tale accepting its (doubtless idealised) events as possible in their ancestors' worldview (66–7).

In a similar vein, the narratives of the fornaldarsögur typically include fantastical elements, but "the kind of world that they inhabit is half familiar in terms of Icelandic social conventions, although in many cases it is distinctly aristocratic and in that respect unlike Icelandic farm culture" (Clunies Ross 78).[12] When discussing broader cultural issues like castration, sexuality, and disabled masculinity, both the *Vǫlsa þáttr* and the fornaldarsögur provide relevant cultural information for assessing instances of irregular phalli in the Íslendingasögur, especially when utilizing narrative prosthesis as a tool to assess the meaning mapped onto disabled characters within the sagas.

Vǫlsa þáttr is a short tale found in *Ólafs saga helga* that tells the story of a pre-Christian family engaging in phallus worship: after a horse is slaughtered for meat, the son of the farmer takes the severed *vingull* [horse penis] and shakes it at his mother, sister, and the female slave woman who lived with them. Instead of discarding the penis, his mother wrapped it in herbs and preserved it: it then became an object of worship in the farmer's home and verses were spoken over it every evening.[13] The verses are the most illuminating examples for understanding the cultural significance of the penis: it is consistently referred to as a *blœti* [a thing worshipped or a sacred object] (Zoëga 61) and the verses focus on its potential to bring sexual pleasure. Despite not being a human penis, the *Vǫlsi* is consistently referred to as an object to be used for human sexual pleasure through penetration. For example, the farmer's son speaks a mocking verse to the slave woman: "Þér er, ambátt, / þessi Vǫlsi / allódauflegur / innan læra" [For you, [slave woman], this rod is not at all dull between the thighs] and, later, the slave woman speaks her own verse while worshipping the penis: "Víst eigi mættag / við of bindast / í mig að keyra, / ef við ein lægjum / í andkætu" [Certainly I would not be able to resist driving [it] into myself, if we two were lying alone in mutual pleasure] (1089).[14] The slave woman is the only one that has sexually explicit remarks either directed at her or by her, which indicates that there might be broader implications for studies of class and

sexuality here; despite this, the point remains that this specific phallic object is defined by its role in sexual pleasure. The size of the phallus is also emphasized: the farmer's wife verse states that "aukinn ertu, Vǫlsi" [You are enlarged, Vǫlsi] and the farmer's son calls the vingull *rǫskligr* [powerful]. The emphasis on sexual pleasure, power, and size for the horse phallus signify the importance of those qualities for the female members of the house when it comes to expectations of an ideal phallus. Although the phallus is clearly a horse phallus rather than a human one, the way the women in the household discuss and venerate it highlights their expectations for an ideal human phallus. Their emphasis is primarily on its ability to provide sexual pleasure above all else. The over-emphasis on sexual pleasure as the leading ideal quality for a penis is not echoed everywhere in the corpus: other instances focus on issues of fertility and reproduction.

In the Old Norse law codes, laws about castration focus strongly on the role of conception. As Phelpstead notes, the word used for castration in *Grágás* is *gelda*: "a Norse word borrowed into English as 'to geld' and retaining in English its original meaning: to render infertile by excising or isolating the testicles" (423). Episodes of castration in the law codes are primarily focused on preventing certain non-ideal men from reproducing. We are told that: "Rett er at gellda gongo menn oc varðar eigi við lög þoat þeir fae örkumbl af eða bana" [It is lawful to castrate vagrants and there is no legal penalty even if they get lasting injury or death from it] (*Grágás* 203, Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 219) and "eigi ero menn scyldir at taca við eins manz bornom fleirom en tueim lavngetnom þeim er anara brøðra ero nema gelldr se faðir barnana" [Men are not required to take over more than two third cousins who are the illegitimate children of the same man unless the father of the children is castrated] (*Grágás* 26, Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 50). As Dennis, Foote, and Perkins note, the legal issues of castration are primarily preventative: it is the unlawful actions of a man that lead to his forced inability to reproduce. Like other disabilities that can sometimes be caused through punitive measures (e.g., losing a hand because of stealing), a man who has been legally castrated is both physically disabled—he cannot father children anymore—and socially disabled—he has been deemed *unfit* to father children, and his castration serves as a signifier of that fact. Men who have been castrated are subject to disabled masculinity, as it is evident that both the inability to reproduce and the power of social defamation work in tandem to remove them from the hegemonic masculine ideal.[15] Thus, a physical impairment that prevents a man from reproducing clearly constitutes itself as a disability in this cultural context.

Castration also carries a weight of *sexual* defamation beyond the inability to reproduce, as demonstrated by a conflict between two men, Án and Ketill, in the fornaldarsaga *Áns saga bogsveigis*. After Ketill accuses Án of wanting to have sex with another man at the king's court, Án seeks out Ketill and: "Hann batt hann

ok rak af honum hárit ok bar i tjöru ok mælti, at svá skyldi hverr fljúga sem fjaðraðr væri. Hann stakk ór honum annat augat, síðan geldi hann hann" [Án tied him up and shaved the hair off him and smeared on tar, and said that any creature that was feathered should be able to fly. He put out one of his eyes and next he gelded him] (*Áns saga* 384, Hughes 319). By removing Ketill's testicles, Án has rendered him infertile, physically disabling him. In conjunction, Án has also dealt a crushing blow to Ketill's masculinity: by gelding or castrating Ketill, "Án has utterly emasculated him and marked him, in Sørensen's schema, as a *níðingr*" (Lawing 91). The stigma attached to Ketill's new, visible disability also disables his status as a man in the king's court:

> Ketill leitar til skipanna ok sagði konungi, ok báru honum vitni stafir hans, at hann var stirðr orðinn, en sjón var sögu ríkari um augu hans ok eistu, at á burt var hvárttveggja. "Afhendr ertu mér," sagði konungr ok rak hann á burt frá sér.
>
> [Ketill made his way to the ship and told the king and his staves bore him witness that he had become crippled while the sight of him was a more powerful tale concerning his eye and his testicles that both were missing. 'You're unfit for me,' said the king and drove him away from him.]
> (*Áns saga* 384, Hughes 319)

The king's reaction to Ketill's disabled masculinity emphasizes that male genitals held significant social weight beyond their ability to impregnate a woman. It is evident that castration and other phallic injuries were not just a physical disability related to a man's ability to reproduce: Ketill is marked as a níðingr, and, through this, he is moved to the margins of society, no longer able to hold the same type of male power as he did before. The fact that Án put out one of Ketill's eyes adds further insult to injury; as Christopher Crocker notes, in medieval Icelandic saga literature, "the act of blinding was concurrently regarded as a symbolic equivalent to the act of castration, particularly when brought about through violence or torture" (272). Án's partial blinding of Ketill adds further stigma to Ketill's disabled masculinity, serving as a visual marker that signifies Ketill is now a níðingr. This example is one of many that demonstrates that the concept of *níð* was an extremely powerful one: Sørensen argues that níð was an "affront to honor" that usually had "sexual import" (11). Being marked níðingr, as Án marks Ketill, is a serious issue. A níðingr is the man who has this stigma attached to him: it is a charge loaded with social disgrace and typically includes an accusation of irregular sexual behavior. Again, we have an example of castration being inflicted in response to a man's previous actions, but this episode is significantly more violent than the hypothetical examples described by *Grágás*: medieval Norse men could enact terrible violence

against others when their masculinity was threatened. This episode further indicates that castration as a form of sexual disability carried significant symbolic weight: castration immediately removes men from the hegemonic masculine ideal. This episode is not the only one that shows how fear of sexual defamation weighed heavily on the minds of medieval Scandinavian men.

Another example of the power of níð that Sørensen begins his study with is the famous conflict between Skarphéðinn and Flosi over a silk robe in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. During a negotiation for the murder of Hǫskuldr, Flosi's son-in-law and Njáll Þorgeirsson's foster son, after he had been killed by Njáll's sons, Njáll adds a silk robe and a pair of boots onto the pile of silver that will be paid to Flosi as settlement for Hǫskuldr's death. Flosi perceives the silk robe as a gender-based insult from Njáll, as the robe is gender-ambiguous. Flosi then insults Njáll's masculinity to his son Skarphéðinn.[16] Skarphéðinn responds that Flosi is "brúðr Svínafellsáss . . . hverjan ina níundu nótt ok geri hann þik at konu" [the sweetheart of the troll at Svínfell . . . [and] he uses you as a woman every ninth night] (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 314, Cook 210). Flosi, affronted at both the silk robe and Skarphéðinn's comment that he is the passive receiver of homosexual intercourse, breaks the fragile peace that the two sides had been trying to achieve. Afterwards, Flosi burns Njáll's entire family to death inside their home: accusations of níð are clearly no joke in the Old Norse corpus. We will see this pattern of violence, established by figures like Án and Flosi, continue with our examples of disabled masculinity.

The social significance of normative sexuality in medieval Scandinavia is clear from these examples: for men to achieve the hegemonic masculine ideal, they must be able to reproduce, provide sexual satisfaction to their partners, engage in acceptable sexual relationships, and have an adequately sized penis. If their sexual prowess is slandered by any implication that it is non-normative, they react violently. By establishing the masculine ideal in relation to the functionality of the penis, we can now examine whether certain examples from the Íslendingasögur qualify as examples of disabled masculinity.

Sexual Disability in the Íslendingasögur

There are multiple instances of irregular phalli within the Íslendingasögur, including mentions of erectile disfunction, undersized penises, and an extra-large penis that hinders a man's ability to consummate his marriage. While an overlarge or undersized penis may not be constituted as a traditional disability, the impact on an individual man's societal perception within medieval Scandinavia was inarguable. As noted earlier, Phelpstead's argument that "a penile problem such as erectile dysfunction compromised the ability of a man to assert or maintain [a] dominant position" (433) is, in fact, an argument for

the fact that disabled masculinity is at play here: the man's irregular phallus negatively affects his social standing as a man, thus we can define these moments as disabilities within medieval Iceland.

I begin this section with an analysis of Hrútr's irregular phallus in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. His penile disability comes from a supernatural curse from the Norwegian Queen Gunnhildr, with whom he was having a sexual relationship during his time abroad in Norway, as a punishment for not telling her about his betrothed back in Iceland. She states: "Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur" [If I have as much power over you as I think I have, I cast this spell: you will not have *sexual pleasure* with the woman you plan to marry in Iceland, though you'll be able to have your will with other women] (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 21, Cook 13; emphasis added). In a previous study on disabled masculinity in the Íslendingasögur, I have shown that many disabilities impair one's masculinity based on the origin of the disability; however, Hrútr's situation is more complex than losing a limb in battle or developing a disability due to old age (Morrow 7). He is cursed, and while there is a plethora of arguments regarding the validity of the supernatural within the sagas, I would instead draw attention to the *exact* wording of Gunnhildr's curse: "Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla " [If I have as much power over you as I think I have] (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 21, Cook 13). Gunnhildr's curse lies in her individual influence over Hrútr as opposed to an inescapable supernatural malediction. The specificity of her curse is important, too: the word *munúð* [pleasure; lust] (Zoëga 304) points again to the importance of sexual pleasure. As we also saw with *Vǫlsa þáttr*, discourse surrounding the ideal phallic object in medieval Scandinavia focuses on its ability to provide sexual pleasure for its sexual partner—Gunnhildr is intentionally sexually disabling Hrútr for his new wife when she performs her curse.

Once Hrútr returns to Iceland and marries his betrothed, Unnr, she appears to be unhappy in her marriage and eventually confesses to her father that she wants to divorce Hrútr. When her father, Mǫrðr, demands more details, she states:

> Ek vilda segja skilit við Hrút, ok má ek segja þér, hverja sǫk ek má helzt gefa honum. Hann má ekki hjúskaparfar eiga við mik, svá at ek mega njóta hans, en hann er at allri náttúru sinni annarri sem inir vǫskustu menn [. . .]. Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hǫrund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik, en þó hǫfum vit bæði breytni til þess á alla vega, at vit mættim njótask, en þat verðr ekki. En þó áðr vit skilim, sýnir hann þat af sér, at hann er í œði sínu rétt sem aðrir men.

> [I want to divorce Hrut, and I can tell you what my main charge against him is—he is not able to have sexual intercourse in a way that gives me pleasure, though otherwise his nature is that of the manliest man [. . .]. When he comes close to me his penis is so large that he can't have any satisfaction from me, and yet we've both tried every possible way to enjoy each other, but nothing works. By the time we part, however, he shows that he's just like other men.]
> (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 24, Cook 15–16).

Considering the relationship between Hrútr's sexual disability and his perceived masculinity is difficult here: according to Unnr, the issue is that Hrútr's penis gets so large that he is unable to satisfy her. From this, we can at the very least infer that Hrútr is unable to ejaculate inside of Unnr, and most likely that he is unable to penetrate her at all. The question of whether this affects Hrútr's perceived hegemonic masculinity within society would be much easier if he had been cursed with erectile disfunction or a below-average penis.[17] We've seen that a larger penis size was seen as favourable in *Vǫlsa þáttr*, and the example from *Grettis saga* will also highlight this fact; at first, one would think that Hrútr's masculinity could only be bolstered by this physical issue. Clearly, it is not the *size* that disables Hrútr's masculinity—it is the inability to penetrate his wife. Furthermore, if one looks closer at the specific language the two women use to describe the implications of his problem, one might infer that Hrútr's inability to consummate his marriage with Unnr could be reflective of a few different issues: his internal guilt for lying to Gunnhildr about his and Unnr's betrothal, his guilt regarding sleeping with Gunnhildr while he was betrothed to Unnr, or perhaps his inability to overcome the power that Gunnhildr has over him. Regardless of the reason, it's evident that his physical performance is subjugated by the power the two women have over him and therefore should be deemed an instance of disabled masculinity within patriarchal Icelandic society, because his ableness is affected by female influence. Truly, the size of his penis is of no consequence—it is his inability to correctly consummate his marriage with his wife that is the real issue. Phelpstead reads this episode as an instance of Freud's concept of "psychical impotence," and argues that Hrútr was perhaps actually suffering from impotence that he was unable to mentally overcome because he truly believed himself to be cursed by Gunnhildr (432). In addition to not being able to bring sexual pleasure to his wife, he is also unable to impregnate her. Although I disagree with utilizing Freud's theoretical lens here, it does seem that Hrútr is suffering from a non-traditional impotence. Thus, Hrútr's irregular phallus is doubly disabled: it cannot bring his wife sexual pleasure, and it cannot impregnate her. This causes a negative social reaction to Hrútr's masculinity, and he is forced to take drastic measures.

Hrútr strives to reassert his masculinity against his father-in-law after Mǫrðr attempts to reclaim Unnr's dowry from him post-divorce settlement—he challenges him to a duel for the dowry and, due to Mǫrðr's old age, Mǫrðr is forced to decline "ok hafði Mǫrðr af ina mestu svívirðing" [and Mord was much disgraced] (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 28, Cook 18). Hrútr is therefore able to maintain a semblance of masculinity, despite the embarrassment he experiences throughout the court proceedings. However, there is also an implication that Hrútr has overstepped or acted dishonorably: by challenging an old man to an unequal fight, Hrútr potentially strays from the hegemonic masculine ideal into the realm of hypermasculinity.[18] This concept threatens the parameters set by hegemonic masculinity: although Hrútr is *technically* acting within the cultural structure of medieval Icelandic masculinity by challenging Mǫrðr, his actions are overly aggressive. Mǫrðr is told by his friends that this duel will inevitably end in his death; thus, there is no real option for him—he must forfeit. Furthermore, the challenge does not fully absolve Hrútr of his societal shame surrounding his failed marriage: after the trial, two boys are playing when they engage in a game:

> Annarr þeira mælti: "Ek skal þér Mǫrðr vera ok stefna þér af konunni ok finna þat til foráttu, at þú hafir ekki sorðit hana." Annarr svaraði: "Ek skal þér Hrútr vera; tel ek þik af allri fjárheimtunni, ef þú þorir eigi at berjask við mik." Þetta mæltu þeir nǫkkurum sinnum; þá gerðisk hlátr mikill af heimamǫnnum.
>
> [One of them said "I'll be Mord and summon you to give up your wife for not screwing her." The other answered, "I'll be Hrut, and I'll say that you must forfeit all property claims if you don't dare to fight with me." They repeated this a few times, and much laughter arose among the household.]
> (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 29, Cook 18).

Although Hrútr responds gracefully to the mockery, the fact that the saga included this episode at all clearly demonstrates Hrútr's fall from the hegemonic masculine ideal: being mocked by children exposes his disabled masculinity. His hypermasculinity in the face of his irregular phallus is unable to fully repair his masculine identity.

Another instance of an irregular phallus belongs to the saga hero Grettir, whose penis size is mocked by a servant woman for being too small:

> Þá mælti griðkona: "Svá vil ek heil, systir, hér er kominn Grettir Ásmundarson, ok þykki mér raunar skammrifjamikill vera, ok liggr berr. En þat þykki mér fádœmi, hversu lítt hann er vaxinn niðri, ok ferr þetta eigi eptir gildleika hans ǫðrum."

> [Then the serving woman said, "Upon my word, sister, Grettir Asmundarson is here, lying naked. He looks big-framed to me all right, but I'm astonished to see how poorly endowed he is between the legs. It's not in proportion to the rest of him."]
> (*Grettis saga* 240, Scudder 165).

Grettir, in some senses, clearly aligns with the hegemonic masculine ideal—the servant woman is shocked to see that he is *lítt vaxinn* down there, and his penis size is placed in a contrast with his striking physical figure. Grettir's physicality is highlighted earlier in the saga as far surpassing all other men in Iceland.[19] This episode once again shows that there was a clear relationship between penis size and perceived masculinity within Icelandic society—information we could not absolutely confirm within the story of Hrútr, but between the maidservant's surprise, as well as Grettir's response to the accusation, it is evident that his undersize penis is a detriment to Grettir's masculinity. He speaks two stanzas in retribution, but the second stanza more adequately displays Grettir's rage at the insult:

> Sverðlítinn kvað sæta,
> Saumskorða, mik orðinn;
> Hrist hefir hreðja kvista
> hœlin satt at mæla;
> alllengi má ungum,
> eyleggjar bíð Freyja,
> lágr í læra skógi,
> lotu, faxi mér vaxa.
>
> [The seamstress sitting at home,
> short-sworded she calls me;
> maybe the boastful hand-maiden
> of ball-trunks is telling the truth.
> But a young man like me
> can expect sprouts to grow
> in the groin-forest: Get ready
> for action, splay-legged goddess.]
> (*Grettis saga* 240–41, Scudder 166).

After this statement, Grettir physically "reclaims" his masculinity from the maidservant that insulted his size in the first place: we are told that Grettir seized the servant-woman and "Griðka œpði hástǫfum, en svá skilðu þau, at hon fryði eigi á Gretti, um þat er lauk" [The servant-woman shouted out at the top of her voice, but when she left Grettir she did not taunt him again] (*Grettis saga* 241, Scudder 166). It is evident that Grettir performs a violent, non-consensual

sex act to reclaim his masculinity: the stanza above indicates that Grettir's rape of the servant-woman is instigated solely by her insult about his penis size. Rape was motivated by a variety of factors in the Old Norse world, but here we see that it is "used as a tool to show who was the other's superior" (Ljungqvist 436).[20] In part, Grettir's action does succeed: we cannot constitute Grettir's perceived small penis as a physical disability, because he clearly demonstrates that his penis can be effective in sexual penetration while erect, despite being lítt vaxinn while flaccid. However, Grettir's violent response to a comment from a servant-woman, a member of the lower class, indicates an anxiety about the social implications of his perceived lack of size, and therefore this *does* qualify his undersized flaccid penis as an instance of disabled masculinity, one that he attempts to compensate for with a heinous sexual crime. The fact that Grettir resorts to rape here is particularly important: "the fear created by rape has . . . acted historically and cross-culturally as a means of social control" (Messerschmidt 11) for men, and this demonstrates the real threat posed to women who challenge a man's embodied masculinity during this historical period. This also has implications for the modern day: the fact that Grettir reclaims his masculinity by force in a way that is both sadistic and violent against women points towards a still-present issue of patriarchal power being linked to sexual prowess and violence. Grettir's toxic violence almost overshadows the implication that he has a small penis, revealing the dangers of a man's perceived sexual ability in relation to hypermasculinity.[21] We also know that, despite rape being illegal in medieval Iceland, Grettir is never punished for his crime.[22]

The last example of penile disability within the sagas comes from *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. As Egill ages he develops a variety of disabilities: impaired eyesight bordering on blindness, an ambulatory disability that affects his ability to walk, and finally, erectile dysfunction.[23] After being insulted by some women after falling over, Egill laments the state of his "bergis fótar borr" [middle leg][24] and states:

> Vals hefk vǫfur helsis;
> váfallr em ek skalla;
> blautr erum bergis fótar borr,
> en hlust es þorrin.
>
> [My head bobs like a bridled horse
> it plunges baldly into woe
> my middle leg both droops and drips
> while both my ears are dry.]
> (Egils saga 294, Scrudder 181).

Considering erectile disfunction alongside disabled masculinity is straightforward in comparison to other instances of disability within the corpus: one's masculinity is inherently disabled if one's penis is not functioning. However, Clover and Phelpstead's reading of Egill's *blautr* penis through the one-sex/one-gender model attempts to erase the relationship between penile function and masculinity. Phelpstead is correct in asserting that "for [Egill] this is not merely a medical problem or an unfortunate constraint on his sex life: it is also integral to his (and presumably other people's) sense of his identity" (426). However, Phelpstead argues that through the deterioration of Egill's penile function, he essentially *becomes* a woman because he aligns more with the *blauðr* end of the gender spectrum (427). Evans directly addresses this argument and highlights the difference between one's masculinity being diminished from a physical impairment versus vanishing entirely: Egill sees his inability to achieve an erection as a detriment to his existing masculinity, and "so too this verse illustrates Egill's consideration of the fact that his body now acts as an obstacle to his attaining the status of hegemonic masculinity" (2019, 82). It is important to consider Egill's status as a man in tandem with the disability of being unable to obtain an erection without erasing his manhood. Disabled masculinity does not connotate femininity, and Egill's example of the downfalls of old age overarchingly show that despite his deteriorating masculinity, he is never perceived to be feminine. While impotence is certainly a sexual disability, it does not negate Egill's male identity; however, it does diminish it. Once again, we see the importance of mockery at play with these three examples: we know that Egill has fallen from the hegemonic masculine ideal because we are *told* by the women in the narrative, just as we are told by the children who mocked Hrútr and the servant woman who mocked Grettir. The social reaction to each man's irregular phallus, alongside that man's individual response to that reaction, allows us to develop a nuanced understanding of the severity of a sexual disability in medieval Iceland.

Conclusion

Based on these examples, one can infer that anything other than a normative penis does qualify as a sexual disability within medieval Iceland. That sexual disability, in turn, negatively affects the individual man's societal power, thus disabling his masculinity. The intersection of disability and masculinity shows itself prominently in issues of irregular phalli: whether the more obvious cases, such as erectile disfunction or having a small penis, or the less obvious cases, such as having an overlarge penis that is unable to penetrate one's wife, the relationship between penile problems and men is a particularly aggressive one. Furthermore, the stakes appear much higher for the men in question's ability to achieve the hegemonic masculine ideal if they have irregular penises,

and, therefore, some of them must reclaim their masculinity through violent or illegal instances of aggressive hypermasculinity. We see many issues of hypermasculinity at play in medieval Iceland that have modern day implications: violence and rape are tied to challenges of a man's ability to sexually perform in both medieval and modern cultures. Utilizing the framework of disabled masculinity exposes the fragility of the hegemonic masculine ideal in medieval Scandinavia and demonstrates how powerfully the functioning penis dictated one's position to that ideal. Finally, by moving away from a psychoanalytical lens of analysis, we can better understand the way historical context shaped individual perceptions of the "ideal" versus "non-ideal" phallus in the medieval Icelandic world, and how these perceptions intersected with other aspects of the hegemonic masculine ideal, such as physical prowess or honorable actions. This study sheds light on just one of many different forms of disabled masculinity in the medieval Icelandic world, with the hope that scholars will continue to explore the various ways disability and masculinity intersect to uncover significant cultural information from the period in the future.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on a short chapter from my MA thesis on "Disabled Masculinity" at the University of Oslo. After returning to the content, I decided to write an expanded version of the paper.
2. Masculinity in this context is "the term used to classify those behaviours, acts, and styles generally associated with being a man." (Evans and Hancock 2). The contemporary understanding of gender is that it is both socially constructed and performative. Despite problematic discourse surrounding biological sex as "fact," in the context of the Icelandic sagas, "the genitals are endowed with gendered meaning [which] is a cultural effect rather than an inevitable product of biology" (Evans 2019, 7). The sagas present a world where sex and gender are distinct but "nevertheless generally understand sex as a fact of biology" (Evans 2019, 7). Thus, in this context when discussing masculinity, I am referring to men who are *both* socially and biologically men: that is, they identify as male and have male sex organs.
3. I have considered a Lacanian reading of these instances of penile problems through Jacques Lacan's "The Signification of the Phallus." I do believe that the Lacanian reading helps us move in the right direction, as Lacan's conceptualization of the phallus is significantly less tangible than Freud's interpretation. Instead of fearing the loss of a physical organ, Lacan develops the idea that the phallus acts as a unique type of signifier, reconstruing Freud's castration anxiety into an idea of symbolic castration. Therefore, Lacan is more focused on the social perception and construction of gender related to the erect penis. The concept of disabled masculinity moves this concept out of the

symbolic realm and into the physical one: I am not concerned with symbolic castration, but rather the lived reality of men with irregular phalluses.

4. See Meg Morrow 2021 and 2020. See also Lavender's discussion of disabled masculinity (2020) and Evans's section on impairment/disability and masculinity in his chapter "Intersectional Masculinities" (2019, 87–90). For contemporary studies on disabled masculinity, see Shuttleworth et al.

5. This article is focused on physical disabilities, but this concept could also be applied to a study on mental disabilities at some point in the future.

6. On the flipside, unless revealed by a sexual partner (such as the maid in *Grettis saga* or Hrutr's wife Unnr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*) or through physical castration, sexual disabilities were easier to hide than other, more visible disabilities. Sexual disabilities only become socially disabling when they are revealed to the broader society.

7. This question is also complicated by issues of Christianity: in many sagas, it seems that the evolution of the influence of Christianity had a significant impact on issues of disabled masculinity. However, there is no Christian rhetoric surrounding these examples that would suggest the same type of influence. I have chosen, for clarity's sake, to omit questions of Christianity for this study. My in-progress dissertation, "Investigating Disabled Masculinity: Intersections of Identity in Old English and Old Norse Literature," will strongly focus on the relationship between Christianity and disabled masculinity.

8. I use the term "intersectionality" as it is defined by Crenshaw (1991) in her groundbreaking work.

9. See Eyler (4–6) for a more thorough discussion of the other models.

10. As Crocker, Tirosh, and Ármann Jakobsson state: "When seeking to understand disability in the context of medieval Iceland, scholars must avoid projecting their own contemporary assumptions about disability onto the past and recognize that the perception of and values assigned to physical, mental, and sensory differences are subject to a variety of social factors" (24).

11. Clover's model, which is based, in part, on Thomas Laquer's "one-sex" or "one-flesh" model, is certainly thought-provoking and has sparked many productive conversations about gender in the medieval Norse world. However, there are some flaws to the model. See Morrow (2021, 27–28); Evans (2019, 11–15), and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (7–8).

12. Clunies Ross continues: "The themes, characters and the whole world of the fornaldarsaga lend themselves to interpretation, not as realistic narratives, but rather as subjects dealing with deep and disturbing human issues that cannot be approached from the perspective of the mundane world but must rather be enacted in a literary world in which often taboo subjects can be raised and aired, though not necessarily resolved" (80).

13. His study focuses more broadly on pre-Christian household religions in Iron-Age Scandinavia, but discussions of *Vǫlsa þáttr* can be found in Murphy (66–68, 72–74, 76, 80–82).

14. Although the translator chooses the word "maid" here, I argue that ambátt is better translated as "slave woman" to indicate clearly the difference in class status.

15. As Bullough says, "quite clearly, male sexual performance was a major key to being male. It was a man's sexual organs that made him different and superior to the woman. But maleness was somewhat fragile, and it was important for a man to keep demonstrating his maleness by action and thought, especially by sexual action" (41).

16. Flosi remarks: "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" [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] (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 314; Cook, 210). For a more thorough analysis of the silk robe episode, see Ármann Jakobsson (2007).

17. As Phelpstead argues: "one might expect such a curse to result in impotence, a premature case of Egill's problem, but Hrútr's affliction with an erection that is too big for intercourse is an unexpectedly cruel and ironic variation" (431). Ármann Jakobsson has also addressed the issue of the irony surrounding the curse: "It is possible to detect an irony in the nature of the curse. Impotence has always been seen as diminishing a man's maleness, but, while the mediaeval emphasis on the largeness of the penis may not quite have rivaled the modern one, a large penis would nevertheless also have been seen as a sign of manhood, as a physical attribute that clearly distinguishes men from women. When Gunnhildr makes Hrútr's member so large that he effectively becomes impotent, she might be making the statement that a penis fit for a queen is too large for an ordinary Icelandic woman. Or she has such a poignant sense of irony that in making her lover less sexually potent by enhancing his member, she demonstrates very effectively that being a big man is not always a blessing" (2007, 208–09).

18. Evans utilizes this concept in the last chapter of his book, where he analyzes Grettir's version of *hyper*masculinity. He argues that "it is shown that (hyper)masculinity problematizes a character's relation to self, family, society, and the very notion of masculinity itself" (2019, 107). Thus, despite Grettir adhering to many of the hegemonic masculine ideals of medieval Iceland, his aggressive actions sometimes overstep those ideals, thus revealing the issues that come with being "too" masculine.

19. Grettir reveals himself at an assembly: "Eptir þat kastaði hann kuflinum ok því næst ǫllum bolklæðum. Þa leit hverr til annars, ok brá mjǫk vá fyrir grǫn, þóttusk þeir kenna, at þetta var Grettir Ásmundarson, því at hann var ólikr ǫðrum mǫnnum fyrir vaxtar sakar ok þreleika" [After that he threw off his cowl and stripped to the waist. All the men looked at each other with expressions of alarm. They realized that this was Grettir Asmundarson, because he surpassed all other men in physique and strength] (*Grettis saga* 233; Scudder 162).

20. For more information on rape in the Old Norse world, see Ljungqvist.

21. For more information on Evans's analysis of Grettir's full characterization in *Grettis saga* in relation to this issue of hypermasculinity, see 2019, 107–42.
22. According to medieval Icelandic law, "the penalty for rape or attempted rape was also full outlawry" (Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 382). However, we never hear about any sort of legal repercussions for Grettir's actions. The inaction of the law could potentially be a result of the servant woman's class position, but we do not have any evidence from the saga to support this theory. Ljungqvist argues that this might be due to the fact that Grettir is punishing a "recalcitrant woman" and that throughout Old Norse literature "rapists are accorded consistently negative value judgments, apart from cases where rape is used to put a recalcitrant woman in her place" (440).
23. Discussing issues of blindness and deafness is outside of the scope of this study. For a more thorough analysis of sensory disabilities in the sagas, see Crocker and Tirosh.
24. Phelpstead provides a more literal breakdown of this kenning: "'Bergis fótar borr' is a kenning, a metaphorical poetic circumlocution, and like many skaldic kennings it has been interpreted in various ways. It might be translated literally as 'borer/drill of the hill of the leg/foot.' The 'hill of the leg' may then be interpreted to mean 'head,' in which case its borer or drill is the tongue and Egill is confessing an inability to compose verse as fluently as in the past. Alternatively a more obscene meaning of 'hill of the leg' entails that its borer or drill is Egill's penis" (425).

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