

Contextualizing Old Norse - Icelandic Bodies

Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan
(University of Memphis)

Accused of committing adultery by her husband Atli, Guðrún laments in *Guðrúnarkviða III* that her slain brothers Högni and Gunnar are unable to avenge her honor, and, on her own, Guðrún must prove her innocence before a hall of seven hundred men. How does she survive? She puts her own body between herself and death: Guðrún calls for an ordeal in which her flesh will serve as her defense, and her anatomy will testify to her innocence. She assertively tells Atli to have Saxi sanctify the cauldron into which she dramatically plunges her bare hands to retrieve the precious stones tossed around by the boiling water. When she successfully removes these objects from the boiling cauldron, she declares, '*Sé nú seggir: sykn em ek orðin, heilagliga*' (*Gðr. III 9.5-7*) ('Look now, men of the host: guiltless am I by the sacred ordeal.') Atli is relieved, for Guðrún's bright hands emerge unscathed and *heilár* (*Gðr. III 10.3*) ('hale, whole.'). When Guðrún's accuser, the slave-woman Herkia undergoes the same trial, her flesh also clearly denotes her culpability and her hands are scalded. Betrayed by her own body, the dishonest slave woman is drowned in a bog while Guðrún, by virtue of her unblemished flesh, survives. This poem posits a clear conclusion – the flesh speaks the truth. In Old Norse-Icelandic sources, literary and legal, the body is expressive and the message it communicates is valued. Numerous examples testify to the belief that the body would not lie, that it could even overcome its own physiological limits, like Guðrún's miraculously unburned hand, to reveal the truth about an individual's nature or behavior. As dramatically illustrated in *Guðrúnarkviða III* and represented in the law texts (*Gulaping*, §§32, 158; *Frostaping*, III.15, 18, IV.5, 6, VIII.10, etc.) physical ordeals were prescribed to prove guilt or innocence: the guilty perpetrator offered up infected and deformed flesh, whereas the innocent victim maintained a clean, healthy body (Bartlett, 1986).

Concerns that the body reflect its socially sanctioned identity are found in laws showing how bodies were remade to reflect criminality – the flesh was legally manipulated to broadcast a specific, socially mandated message to the community, a concept based on the medieval Germanic 'reflecting penal principle' in which 'the outer form of the punishment is intended to symbolize or refer to the nature of the crime' (Ström 1942, 141). For instance, the Norwegian *Gulaping* law, which probably dates to the mid-twelfth century (Norseng 1991:138-44; Larson 1935:26), records that a freed bonds-woman or a native slave-woman who stole was subjected to facial mutilation: for each of her first two offenses, an ear was cut off, and the third time she was caught stealing, her nose was amputated. Furthermore, the *Gulaping* law exhorts the community to call the offending woman *Stufa* and *Nufa* ('Stumpy' and 'Stubby'), after which, the law code says, she can go on stealing if she likes (*Gulaping*, §259). Her body is remade, and she is reintroduced into society with a new name that brings her deformed anatomy to the fore. Not only is the body of the criminal violently deprived of its recognizably human facial attributes, but the laws prevail upon society to publicly articulate the significance of this unnatural deformity. The text's declaration that she can then continue stealing if she likes is perhaps prompted by a

belief that her violently transformed anatomy now dictates her inevitable identity as a thief, a medieval Scandinavian version of the statement that anatomy is destiny.

This dehumanizing mutilation, which robbed females not only of the important commodity of physical attractiveness, but also a recognizably human face, served, in other countries, to punish sexual misbehavior (Schulenberg, 1985, 49-50), yet in Norwegian law it is specific to female slaves and freed bondswomen who commit theft. The ears and nose, then, on the female body of the lowest socio-economic classes, become loci in which status and criminality are expressed. While they are not amputated but merely deformed, it is perhaps significant that the poem *Rígsþula* devotes particular attention to the female slaves' noses, Þír's *niðrbiúgt* ('down-curving') nose, and that of her daughter *Arinnefia* (Eagle-beak/Hearth-nose), and two of the children, male *Drumbr* and female *Drumba* ('Stumpy'), are given derisive names similar to *Stufa* and *Nufa*, those prescribed for the mutilated female thief.

One closely related legal example of the status-based treatment of the body is found in the Sjælland law which mandates that large compensation was due to a free man whose nostrils had been slit 'because that is a slave's mark and not a free man's' (cited and translated in Karras, 1988, 121) The Sjælland law suggests, firstly that the nose-mutilation was a well-known form of body language that clearly identified the bearer as a slave, or perhaps, given the Gulabing evidence, a slave guilty of a crime. Secondly, it records the idea that the free man's flesh was to be treated differently from that of the socially disenfranchised, powerless slave, which in some ways reminds us of how slaves were conceptualized, repellent as it is to us now, as compromised and less than human, and their flesh was similarly subjected to different codes and reading strategies than free beings. Indeed, as Karras discusses, the range of Scandinavian law codes record that calling a free person *þræll* ('slave'), or *ambáttarson*, ('son of a slave-woman') was considered as slanderous as saying a man had born a child or was another man's passive sex partner, or labeling a man a female animal or other derisive feminine term (Karras, 1988, 66). The serious offense caused by labeling a free man a slave attests to the fact that slaves, and their bodies, were often figured as undesirably subhuman, unnatural, and 'Other'.

Other bodies posed problems as to their relative position in terms of the more clearly normative human community, namely, deformed infants or, more cruelly, 'monstrous births.' According to the various Norwegian laws, the humanity of a newborn child was determined based on physical criteria, some of which resonate with the dehumanizing depictions of slaves. Without the body that could be read as humanly formed, the child could be abandoned and denied participation in the human community, in this life and the afterlife, as will be discussed in further detail at the close of this paper. These briefly mentioned laws (and numerous other examples from the sources that extend beyond the scope of the present paper) point to the widespread and high-stakes contexts in which the body was conscientiously read and interpreted in the medieval Norse world. A great deal of confidence was placed upon the flesh as an accurate indicator of an individual's character and humanity, which warrants further exploration. I should note that I am not in this paper necessarily interested in recovering the historicity of the body practices or physical forms described, and will not, therefore, try to assess how, when, or where they were applied, or if they existed predominantly as theoretical constructs. The different strategies that advise on how the

body is to be read and tested for its significance, and the ways that medieval Norse texts depict the 'Other', which could be a socially dis-empowered slave or a deformed infant, are valuable because of what they can reveal about medieval Scandinavian assumptions about the normative, human body, where it ends, and why.

Turning to the exceptionally detailed poem *Rigspula* ('List of Rígr') and its rigorously organized catalogue of bodies, the paper now considers the anatomies with which *Rigspula* endows slaves, free farmers, and nobles, and the features the poem teaches its audience to look for in the physical depictions of different classes. The literary lesson in taxonomy provided by *Rigspula* is followed with a brief examination of the anatomical interpretive strategies suggested by codes regarding the exposure of deformed infants, with special attention paid to the following questions: Are the dehumanizing anatomical descriptive strategies that are used to mark literary bodies off as peripheral consistent with the forms focused upon in non-'literary' contexts? Where were the lines between ideal and monstrous, human and subhuman, drawn, and how confident are the sources, literary and legal, in determining how a body should be read? Finally, the paper will in conclusion consider where that leaves us, modern scholars, who seek to read and understand Old Norse-Icelandic physiognomy.

Old Norse - Icelandic literature evidences a very conservative bodily aesthetic, and even in depictions of handsome characters, a likely site for a descriptive catalogue, as Jenny Jochens writes, '... the sources are, as we have seen, reticent about founding beauty on specific bodily or facial features' (Jochens, 1991, 21). The reader typically leaves the texts with largely abstract impressions of the physical identity of the featured characters, be they beautiful or grotesque. *Rigspula*, a poem whose proposed dates range from the tenth to the thirteenth century (Amory, 2001, 3-15), is a rare exception that provides a confident and unusually thorough guide to bodies, and while the literature typically privileges free or upper-class figures, *Rigspula* gives the highest level of bodily detail to the slaves' bodies, and provides an arguably meaningful juxtaposition of a figure's corporeality and his or her access to social, economic and political power.

Preserved in the *Codex Wormianus* (ca. 1350) that contains *Snorra Edda*, and the *First, Second, Third and Fourth Grammatical Treatises*, the scholastic manuscript context might suggest that *Rigspula* was included because it functionally and formally resembles the *pulur*, versified catalogues of *heiti*, or names, that served as mnemonic devices for scholars and poets. Indeed, the first half of the poem comprises a poetic store-house of meticulously drawn portraits whose anatomies operate as markers of identity and social status, and as such, *Rigspula* might have been seen as a key to the aesthetics of the body. Indeed, several of the names of characters representative of the three enumerated social groups recorded in *Rigspula* are also found in *Skáldskaparmál*, including those of Kari's daughters, Jarl's sons, as well as those of the founding couples and the slave- and freeman-class daughters-in-law. Three or four of the twelve male slave-child names are also given (*Skáldskaparmál*, §§63, 64, 65 and 66). In some ways, *Rigspula* is reminiscent of an extended mnemonic device: a poet or scholar might, like other medieval Europeans (Carruthers, 1990, 43-4, 93-4), have been expected to 'walk through' the houses as does Rígr, repeating everything three times to engrave all of the images of domestic and laborious existence in his memory.

Though a scribe introduces the poem with a statement that the mysterious Rígr is to be identified with the god Heimdallr, a comment whose intent is to fix this poem and its events within the familiar Nordic mythical landscape, it is important that the composer of *Rígrspula* did not bring the first part of the poem containing the class tableaux into the orbit of the extant Norse pantheon with all of its mythic and narrative baggage. As a series of portraits divorced from specific times, places and characters, the first half of *Rígrspula* is uniquely useful as a key to literary appearances that, by virtue of what I think is a conscientious anonymity, intends to give a widely applicable set of guidelines for reading the bodies or, in the case of poets to whom much of the content of the Codex Wormianus was addressed, depicting bodies with recognizable significance. In many ways, then, the poem might be said to operate like the law codes which similarly give an anatomical rubric for assessing bodies.

The first half of *Rígrspula*, an incomplete poem of forty-eight stanzas, is a threefold repetition of the wandering Rígr's visit to the homes of three couples of different social ranks. In each home and for three consecutive nights, Rígr dispenses advice, consumes a meal with the couple, dispenses advice again, and sleeps between the couple in their bed. Nine months later, each woman gives birth to a son who is a clear class representative in terms of body, form, function, and name – the three children are called *Þræll*, *Karl* and *Jarl*, 'Slave', 'Free-man' and 'Earl'. The poem describes each child's body, his work, his spouse, and their children. The second part of the poem focuses on the development of one child in particular, *Konnr ungr*, the boy's name a play on *konungr*, 'king', and though *Rígrspula* is incomplete, one expects that *Konnr ungr* will ultimately rule the social body introduced in the poem.

Rígrspula's spectrum of physical forms begins with the slaves (*'þrælar'*). The newborn child *Þræll* is *hǫrundsvartan* ('black as flax') (*Rþ.* 7.2). When *Þræll* is born, *var þar á höndom/ hrokkít skinn,/ kropnir knúar,/ .../ fingr digrir,/ fúllíkt andlit,/ lotr hryggr,/ langir hælur* (*Rþ.* 8) ('There was wrinkled skin on his hands, gnarled knuckles, ... thick fingers, a foul-shaped face, a crooked spine, and long heels.') The poem gives us a view of the entire body: from his long heels to his 'foul-shaped face', all of the details point to internal, skeletal disfigurement – the body is not superficially ugly, but twisted and bent at the core. *Þræll*'s image accurately reflects a picture of the slave or servant living close to and often times below subsistence level. Osteoarthritis, the most common disease in the Middle Ages, crippled the spine and other body parts, as did osteochondritis, or congenital dislocation of the hip, along with several other bone and joint diseases (Rubin, 1974, 36-8; Sellevold, 2001, 142-52) whose effects probably inform both the depiction of *Þræll*'s spouse and some of the slave children's names listed below. While the images may be rooted in the overwork, malnutrition, and disease that were the realities of a slave's life, the poem implies that the twisted, deformed body is physiologically natural for members of a class deprived of a legal voice and valued largely for their physical labor: *Þræll* possesses this form as a baby who has not, of course, had time to be marked by the grueling life of the slave.

Þræll's partner, *Þir* ('Slave-woman') has the outdoor laborer's *armr sólbrunninn*, (*Rþ.* 10.4) ('sunburnt arms') and *aurr var á iliom* (*Rþ.* 10.3) ('the soles of her feet were muddy'), their ruddy and muddy appearances in opposition to the feminine ideal of bright, white fairness exemplified by aristocratic *Móðir* below. *Niðrbiugt er nef* (*Rþ.* 10.5) ('the nose is curved down') and her travel-worn, or as

Carolyn Larrington translates, 'bandied' legs, (Larrington, 1996, 247) (*gengilbeina*, *Rb.* 10.2) are exposed to the audience's eye. Even accounting for climate differences among the many proposed sites for the poem's composition, bare legs are unlikely and perhaps a narrative expedient to publicize Þir's body. While feet such as Njorðr's and Steingerðr's attract some attention, the Norse texts give no information on shapely legs, due to the impropriety and shame of even partial bodily exposure (Gade, 1998, 236-7). Commenting on the absence of leg imagery in thirteenth-century love poetry and kennings, Guðrún Nordal writes that 'The arms, the eyes, and hair make up the attractive components of a woman's body, but the legs are outside the visual sphere. In courtly writing the legs must be covered' (Nordal, 2001, 263), yet the poet exposes Þir's legs and the image given of this slave-woman is dominated by anatomy consisting of parts improperly exposed, bent and malformed, burned and dirty.

The slave-children are given degrading names (*Rb.* 12-3). The sons are: *Hreimr* (Yelper), *Flósnir* (Cowshed-boy), *Klúrr* (Ugly One), *Kleggi* (Sticky-lump), *Kefsir* (Servile Bedmate), *Fúlur* (Stinker), *Drumbr* (Stumpy), *Digraldi* (Fatty), *Drøttir* (Limper), *Høsvir* (Grey-one), *Lútr* (Stooper) and *Leggialdi* (Layabout? Long-legs?). The daughters are: *Drumba* (Stumpy), *Kumba* (Dumpy), *Økkvinkálfa* (Thick-Calf), *Arinnefia* (Eagle-beak/Hearth-nose), *Ysia* (Shouter), *Ambótt* (Bondswoman), *Eikintiasna* (Chatterbox? Raging? Oak-peg?), *Torrughypia* (Tattered-Dress/ 'Raggedy-hips' (Larrington, 1996, 248)), and *Trónobeina* (Crane-legs.) Depending slightly on how the occasionally uncertain names are translated, of the twenty-one names at least fourteen contain references to degraded physical appearance. Instead of being named for their social roles like the other children, most slave-children are recognized for negative characteristics highlighting ugly form. Additionally, many of the names are garbled and messily inarticulate, which reminds us that members of this class were denied a legal voice, self-determination and the power to create and regulate their identity.

How does *Rígsþula* teach its reader or audience to read the slave? In this lowest class ridiculed corporeality plays the key role in identity construction, and, in stark contrast to other bodies of higher classes to be discussed below, the slave body is depicted in its entirety. As slaves were conceptualized by the law codes as commodities, with few exceptions lacking individual legal status, honor-price, and personal rights (Karras, 1988, 112), it was permissible not only to depict their exposed bodies, but to overtly portray them as deformed or ugly, an act punishable with outlawry if directed at a 'free' body, as attested by laws regarding *níð* ('verbal abuse') (Sørensen, 1983, 14-32). Excessive attention to their contorted anatomies dehumanizes the thralls and relegates them to a powerless social periphery where they are physical objects to be stared at and then, as the children's names suggest, derisively ridiculed.

When the middle class of free-farmers is discussed, the status-symbol accoutrements or the effects of grooming are the focus rather than anatomy. The male householder, Afi, is well-groomed and neatly outfitted: *var skegg skapat, / skör var fyr enni, / skyrtó þröngva* (*Rb.* 15.3-5) ('His beard was groomed, his hair was trimmed across his forehead, (he wore) a tight tunic'). His wife Amma is described even more exclusively in terms of her dress: *sveigr yar á höfði, / smokkr var á bringo, / dúkr var á hálsi, / dvergar á öxlom* (*Rb.* 16.5-8) ('A head-dress was on her head, a smock on her chest, a scarf at her neck, dwarf-pins at her shoulders'). All descriptive attention is

focused on refined objects that adorn their bodies, significantly from the waist up, and even when the naturally occurring hair is described, only the fact that it has been brought into order warrants attention.

The poet describes Baby Karl as *rauðan ok riððan./ riððo augo* (*Rþ.* 21.5-6) ('red-haired and ruddy, his eyes darted about'). His rosiness and red hair point to a vigor that contrasts Þræll's blackness. Significantly, the poem does not allow our gaze to move from Karl's face, as if even a middle-class infant should not be seen naked. The woman Karl marries is not described in bodily detail, but we see her dangling household keys, goatskin kirtle, and bridal veil (*Rþ.* 23), and her name, *Snør*, 'Daughter-in-Law,' focuses on her familial role. This couple produces sons called: *Halr* (Man/Master), *Drengr* (Young Man/Warrior), *Hǫldr* (Freeholder), *Þegn* (Vassal), *Smiðr* (Smith), *Breiðr* (Broad), *Bóndi* (Farmer), *Bundinskeggi* (Braided-Beard), *Búi* (Dweller), *Boddi* (Householder?), *Brattskeggr* (High-Beard), and *Seggr* (Man/Warrior) (*Rþ.* 24). The daughters are named: *Snót* (Brisk-Woman), *Briðr* (Bride), *Svanni* (Wise), *Svarri* (Damsel?), *Sprakki* (Lively), *Fliðð* (Woman), *Sprund* (Vigorous), *Víf* (Woman/Wife), *Feima* (Shy), and *Ristill* (Cutting) (*Rþ.* 25). Three of the twelve sons' names are various terms for 'man', six are derived from laborers' occupations, one refers to strength and two focus on groomed, styled beards. The daughters' names draw upon words for 'woman' with different shades of meaning, and concentrate on admirable personality traits. Exalted to a role rather than degraded by virtue of their flesh, the laboring class has successfully broken outside of the bounds of the body, and *Rígsþula* privileges the message that this class is to be read primarily as socially productive, not corporeal, people.

When Rígr visits the third couple, Faðir sits stringing a bow, and it is the female, Móðir, whose physique attracts the poem's attention. Interestingly, the osculation of this noble woman is initiated by her own eyes: *...huskona hugði at ǫrnum./ strauk of rípti, sterti ermar* (*Rþ.* 28.5-8) ('... woman of the house contemplated her arms,/ stroked the fabric, tightened the sleeves'). By following Móðir's own example, *Rígsþula* legitimates a reading of her as a physical object. The description focuses first on her elaborate dress, consisting of head-dress, brooch, long cape and shirt (*Rþ.* 29.1-4) and then moves on to her visage: *brun biartari./ briðst líðsara./ háls hvitari/ hreinni miðlo* (*Rþ.* 29.5-8) ('brows brighter, breast lighter, throat whiter than pure driven snow'). In contrast to Þræll and Þfr, Móðir's flesh is purest white, and the descriptive eye does not wander from the top of her body.

The child Jarl is described thus: *bleikt var hár./ biartir vangar./ ǫtul vóro augo/ sem yrmlingi* (*Rþ.* 34.5-8) ('His hair was blond, his cheeks bright, his eyes were frightful as a young snake's'). The brightness of his blond hair and face is highly conventional (Jochens, 1991, 4-5). Frightening, snake-like eye's are less ubiquitous, though Vǫlundr, Ólafur Haraldsson and, of course, Sigurðr ormr í auga ('with the snake in the eye') are credited with them (Dronke, 1997, 229). These eyes are likely related to the mythical serpent, the basilisk, whose petrifying gaze and crown-shaped crest or spot was described by Pliny (*Naturalis Historiæ*, viii.78) and Isidore (*Etymologiae* XII.iv.6) and numerous bestiaries. On one level, these eyes are fantastic and monstrous, yet like Jarl's parents, who gaze into each other's eyes (*Rþ.* 27.3-6), or like his mother, who the poet has actively turn the gaze onto herself, Jarl controls the gaze and what it takes in. This description presents him as the empowered, aggressive royal

who subjects others to his petrifying eyes that discourage any uninvited, prying gaze, while downtrodden Þræll and his kin are the de-humanized objects of the poem's stare. Lastly, it is noteworthy that all of Jarl's description is appropriately focused on his head, the most divine part that, according to the pervasive scheme of the Body Politic, rules the other members.

Jarl's bride Erna, who is *mióflingraða, / hvíta ok horska* (*Rþ.* 39.5-7) ('delicate fingered, fair and sensible') is, with her perfectly formed digits, the opposite of dark, thick-fingered Þræll and his sunburnt, muddled mate. The children are named for familial roles and kinship positions, with no references to bodies or occupations: *Burr* (Boy), *Barn* (Offspring), *Ióð* (Child), *Aðal* (Quality), *Arfi* (Heir), *Moggr* (Young Man), *Niðr* (Descendant), *Niðjungr* (Kin), *Sonr* (Son), *Sveinn* (Youth), *Kundr* (Kinsman), and *Konr* (Noble-kin) (*Rþ.* 41). Their appellations indicate that male physicality has been bred out of importance as far as aristocratic identity is concerned. Noble female children are absent from the poem, perhaps due to the copyist's mistake, the author's concern to continue with Konr ungr's tale, or because the interest has come to rest on the role of kinship and kingship, patrilineally determined relations, and thus women are only of relevance as brides won to cement relations, augment kingdoms and produce male heirs.

The overarching pattern of *Rígsþula* is most clearly revealed through close juxtaposition. In stanzas eight, twenty-two and thirty-five, Þræll's crooked body is described, while Karl's farm work and Jarl's training as a noble warrior are elaborated upon. In stanzas ten, twenty-three and thirty-nine, in which spouses are portrayed, Þir's dirty and sunburnt body is depicted, Snør's house-matronly apparel is shown, and Erna's slim fingers and radiance, as well as her wisdom, are described. Those subjected by the prying eyes of the poem are the male and female thralls, completely disempowered and socially voiceless, as well as the aristocratic females, who also, while enjoying a more respectful and perhaps invited gaze are, in the patriarchal Eddic setting, valued as ornamental assets and bodies that produce heirs. On the whole, in the movement from powerlessness to authority, characters become less corporeal.

Rígsþula suggests that to be a purely physical being is disempowering, and it is probably no accident that the wise god Rígr is given no concrete physical depiction. In short, the poem *Rígsþula* indicates that the slave's body, with its subjectivity to disease, age, and work, is characterized by a kind of compromising, mundane corporeality, while the idealized body is one that resists fixation, rises above the biological realities of the flesh, sometimes contains fantastic physical members, and exerts power. As Thomas Hill writes, this poem 'denies explicitly the conception of common humanity' (Hill, 1986, 80) – it marks the slave class off as 'Other', as inferior to free humans, and for the most part its propagandistic efforts in dehumanizing this group are played out upon the body: the slave is degraded not only through fleshiness, but through being bent and crippled, and the emphasis is on the whole body and its contortions. Interestingly, in non-literary sources that give a key for determining humanity, some of the same anatomical areas are the focus, and so the way the body is 'read' in laws regarding malformed infants warrants examination.

The provincial Norwegian law codes, which range in date from the twelfth to the thirteenth century (Norseng, 1991, 138-44), devote significant attention to reading infant bodies. The *Ældre Eidsiváping* law records that if a child is born with defects,

with a back-to-front (*bakvendt*) form, with calves on the fronts of the legs rather than the back, and eyes on the back of the neck, but has a human head and a human voice, then the child is to be taken to the church and baptized. The bishop is to be consulted, and his advice, namely whether or not the child should be exposed, is to be followed (*Ældre Eidsvǫþing*, §5). The Gulaping law states though Magnús Lagebœtr forbade child exposure, his predecessor St. Óláfr permitted the child to be, after baptism, abandoned in the churchyard if the child's neck and face or toes and heels were inverted (*Gulaping*, §21). The Devil was believed to have twisted legs, which probably informs the infants' reversed legs, though the motif of variously marked feet is quite frequently associated with exposure of infants (Bragg, 2004, 18, 44-6, ff.). It is also significant that leg and foot deformities were a focus in *Rígsþula*'s dehumanizing depictions of the slaves' bodies, while the legs or feet of the empowered, free classes were never described. In the Eidsvǫþing and Gulaping descriptions, all human body parts are present, but the deformity results from their improper location, with attention focused on the face and legs, and while it seems likely that the child is abandoned, it is baptized first, which shows that it was identified as human and in possession of a soul.

At the next level of deformity it is the absence of human attributes, rather than their mis-positioning, that is marked. The *Ældre Eidsvǫþing* law records that if an infant is not merely inverted, but lacks a human head or voice, then the child must be shown to the priest who, if he likes, can baptize the child before it is left to die in a grave in the churchyard (*Ældre Eidsvǫþing*, §6). The Frostaping law lacks specific detail, but similarly maintains that as long as the child has a human head, it should be fed and baptized, though it remains silent on the procedure for a child lacking a human head (*Frostaping*, II.1). The ultimate determinant of recognizable humanity is the presence of the human head and voice regardless of the rest of the body, an index used throughout the Middle Ages to ascertain humanity versus monstrosity (Williams, 1996, 134-40). This, of course, discounts the fact that the child is born of a human mother and father. Like the renderings of the thralls with their bent, contorted faces, backs and legs, these infants have human anatomies that are degraded and deformed to a much more severe degree, and their exclusion from participation as members of society is, in the legal material, justified through aberrant corporeality.

§1 of the *Ældre Borgarþing* law marks the same anatomical deformities in greater detail, yet the lines it draws between baptizable human and monstrous Other are more severe. Reverse-bodied children, described as above, as well as those born with a seal's flippers or hound's head, are to be abandoned in the *forvé*, a deserted ground that neither men nor livestock cross, the Devil's (*Ondes*) ground. This implies that the inversions which were elsewhere deemed deserving of Christian baptism and burial, as well as the hybrid animal-human deformities, are here read as truly monstrous and demonic births that should be placed as far away from human and animal contact as possible. The text goes on to describe an infant with a *bælg* ('skin' or 'belly?') where the *ansigtsform* ('shape of the face') should be, which suggests either a child born with a caul over the head, or the more fantastic blemmye whose lack of a head leaves the facial features to be positioned in the breast or belly. The blemmye along with a poorly rendered cynocephalus, or dog-head, like the one mentioned above, is illustrated in the twelfth or early thirteenth century Icelandic *Physiologus* (Halldór Hermansson, 1938, 14-5). Interestingly, this child with the

misplaced *bælg* is to be given *primsigne*, Lt. *prima signatio*, a blessing with the sign of the cross that was a preliminary to baptism, left to die at the church door and finally buried in the churchyard. The *Ældre Borgarþing* law is instructive not only in providing a view of infant deformity that appears to incorporate popular beliefs about demonic births as well as, in terms of the dog-headed child and the potential blemmye, images from the more fantastic wonder traditions of the monstrous races, but also because it reminds us of the uncertainties regarding bodily interpretation. Though the laws include discussions of the same body, the inverted, *bakvendt* form, and seek to provide a guide for interpreting the flesh and appropriately responding to its deformity, the sources nonetheless record different responses to it and its humanity. Furthermore, in multiple cases, just after giving a fairly detailed description of the deformed body and its specific varieties, the texts then nonetheless advise that a priest or bishop be consulted regarding the fate of the child. Namely, though the function of the law codes is to provide a clear and accessible key to the body and the actions required regarding it, the final reading of that body is routinely shifted to the judgment of a recognized authority figure. It is with consideration of this trend that I wish to conclude.

The examples discussed in this paper point to a firm belief in the body as something to be read and heeded: the ordeal in *Guðrúnarkviða III* posits a faith in the body as an accurate indicator of innocence; the logic behind mutilation of criminal bodies was that the community at large could and would accurately assess their meaning; *Rígsþula* confidently lays out a clear physiognomic rubric for reading (and perhaps writing) class-specific literary bodies; and legal texts provide a fairly consistent paradigm for determining if a deformed infant should be exposed. As tempting as it is to locate clearly systematized keys to Old Norse-Icelandic bodies, the sources are also rife with examples that alert us to the anxieties associated with misreading. The results of a physical ordeal were not as clear-cut as the miraculously untouched state of Guðrún's guiltless hand suggests. A priest or other respected figure was called upon to read the flesh to determine if it had healed cleanly enough to prove its owner's innocence – the public at large was not deemed able to interpret the bodily evidence for themselves. Furthermore, a good deal of guesswork and bribery was probably involved, which Robert Bartlett points out is shown in *Ljósvetninga saga*, Ch. 23, when the evidence of the flesh is contested and the objectivity of the adjudicating priest is questioned (Bartlett, 1986, 40-1). In the case of the thieving slave-woman or freed bondswoman, the public remade her form in a specifically mandated way that presupposes the community's fluency with the language of the legally mutilated body, yet the insistence that the community as a whole partake in vocalizing her new, derogatory name based on her deformity could, rather, point to the need to remind the public just what that bodily mutilation signified. Even in the poem *Rígsþula*, which provides inarguably clear paradigms, it takes three generations of males and females in each of three classes to get the different possibilities for bodily depiction across. Lastly, as mentioned just above, when a deformed child was born, though given a clear list of possible deformities, the parents were in numerous cases told to take the child to the church and defer to the decision of the priest or the bishop.

In short, the body and flesh are treated as highly significant, but numerous cases raise the possibility that the body will not be correctly read, and the anxieties regarding production of an accurate interpretation of the body have implications for the ways we

assess textual anatomies. Can modern scholars accurately interpret these bodies, which provided problems even for contemporary medieval audiences? I would sound a hopeful note and suggest that, with care, we can. Appeals in the sources to individuals such as the priests, bishops and other authority figures convey an assurance that the body logic, however riddling, is there to be read. We can, firstly, recognize broad patterns, such as become familiar through proscriptive texts like *Rígsþula*. Secondly, as sources like the laws on newborn infants advocate, these bodies must also be considered on a case-by-case basis as unique concatenations of social, legal, literary, and religious significance. Luckily, the medieval Scandinavian sources are rich with materials that can give us compelling contexts for understanding these important body-texts, and they await our further exploration.

Bibliography

- Amory, F. 'The Historical Worth of *Rígsþula*', *Alvissmál* 10 (2001), 3-20.
Ældre Borgartingslov. Vikens kristenret, ed. T. O. (no surname given), (Oslo, 1914).
Ældre Eidsivatings lov. Kristenretten, ed. T. O. (no surname given), (Oslo, 1914).
 Bartlett, R. *Trial by Fire and Water* (Oxford, 1986).
 Bragg, L. *Oedipus borealis* (Madison, 2004).
 Carruthers, M. *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge, 1990) (repr. 1994).
 Dronke, U. *The Poetic Edda: Volume II: Mythological Poems* (Oxford, 1997).
 Gade, K. E. 'The Naked and the Dead in Norse Society', *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988), 219-45
 Halldór Hermannsson, ed. *The Icelandic Physiologus. Islandica* 27, (Ithaca, 1938).
 Hill, T. '*Rígsþula*: Some Medieval Christian Analogues', *Speculum* 61/1 (1986), 79-89.
 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, 2 vols., ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911).
 Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy* (Toronto, 2001).
 Jochens, J. 'Before the Male Gaze: the Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse', in J. Salisbury (ed.), *Sex in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1991).
 Karras, R. *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven, 1988).
 Larrington, C. *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford, 1996).
 Larson, L. *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* (New York, 1935).
Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius, ed. G. Neckel (Heidelberg, 1927).
Norges gamle Love indtil 1387, ed. R. Keyser and P.A. Munch, (Oslo, 1846-95).
 Norseng, P. 'Law Codes as a Source for Nordic History in the Early Middle Ages', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 16/1 (1991), 137-66.
 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, tr. J. Healy, *Natural History* (London, 1991).
 Rubin, S. *Medieval English Medicine* (London, 1974).
 Schulenberg, J. T. 'The Heroics of Virginité' in J. Kirshner et al. (eds.), *Women of the Medieval World* (Oxford, 1985).
 Sellevold, B. *From Death to Life in Medieval Hamar* (Oslo, 2001), 142-52
 Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. A. Faulkes, (London, 1998).
 Sørensen, P. M. *The Unmanly Man*, tr. J. Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983).
 Ström, F. *On the Sacral Origin of the Germanic Death Penalties* (Stockholm, 1942).
 Williams, D. *Deformed Discourse* (Montreal and Kingston, 1996).