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None So Blind As Those Who Will Not See: Blindness, Wisdom, and Incomprehension in *Morkinskinna*

Thomas Morcom (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen)  0000-0001-5006-7180

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As sight is often considered the principal human sense, the possibility of the removal of this central element of human experience via blindness constitutes a cross-cultural anxiety, with explorations of the degree to which sightlessness debilitates an individual being prevalent throughout world literature (see Kleege 2009). With regard to medieval literature, this anxiety is typically expressed through the moralisation of visual impairment, whether negatively, as an indicator of the sinfulness or foolishness of the afflicted, or positively, as a means of facilitating direct communication with God due to abstraction from the physical world (see Hawkins 2011: 148). Examples of both empowering and enfeebling blindness are present in Old Norse literature, neatly emblematised in the mythic models of the two *Æsir* with visual impairments: Óðinn, who sacrificed an eye for wisdom at Mímisbrunnr, and Höðr, deceived by Loki to slay Baldr due to his blindness (see Lassen 2000). The saga corpus is also notable for its deft, even sensitive, treatment of characters who lose their sight: Crocker (2020: 276–84), for instance, has discussed the precise depiction of the practicalities of navigating an ocularcentric society while blind in relation to *Þorsteins saga hvíta*. This chapter will explore the complex motif of blindness as it relates to the development of the characterisation of King Haraldr harðráði in *Morkinskinna*, a compilation of *konungasögur* preserved in GKS 1009 fol., which recounts the period from the succession of Magnús góði to the death of Eysteinn Haraldsson (ca. 1030–1157). *Morkinskinna* has previously been noted for its focus on the unrestricted agency of marginal groups amongst the Scandinavian elite, particularly the poorer, often Icelandic, figures who seek their fortune within the Norwegian *hirð* (see Ármann Jakobsson 2014: 117); here it will be investigated whether the blind figures who appear in the text are afforded a similar dignity. Blindness will be demonstrated to have a strong connection to both knowledge and ignorance but, atypically, not necessarily on the part of the sightless characters themselves. Instead, the presence of physically blind characters consistently betokens a simultaneous or ensuing moment of incomprehension or error on the part of the royal protagonists of *Morkinskinna*. Play between the insights afforded to the sightless and the crucial details that sighted characters fail to see forms a minor motif in *Morkinskinna* and episodes dealing with these two categories of blindness are often presented in parallel for the sake of ironic contrast.

The first blind character introduced in *Morkinskinna* provides a neat preliminary example of this structural effect within the narrative.¹ The relevant episode can be found during the extended analepsis of Haraldr harðráði's adventures as a member of the Varangian Guard, a period, it is important to note, in which he employs the pseudonym of Norðbrikt to conceal his status as a member of the Norwegian royalty and brother of the royal martyr Óláfr helgi. As kingliness is regularly presented as a physically apparent trait in the sagas, however, a number of Byzantines, particularly Haraldr's rival Gyrgir, become increasingly suspicious that Haraldr is not a commoner. Royal disguises are relatively common in *Morkinskinna* and while this form of concealment is not strictly analogous to blindness, it is important that Haraldr's actions in this section of the narrative are taken in the context of unsuccessful attempts to discern his heritage on the part of the Byzantine elite. In a large conflict between Byzantium and an unspecified heathen force, Haraldr and the Varangians are tasked with leading the defence as a test of his character. Haraldr, while rallying his men, uses the language of sight and perception to demonstrate his awareness that his and his men's identities are being closely appraised: "Væringjar áttu nú stefnur sín í millum, ok segir Haraldr þeim at honum er mikill grunr á – 'at menn muni oss þykkjask um skynja hér í Miklagarði'" (*Mork*: I, 95; "The Varangians now gathered themselves together and Haraldr said to them that it was a deep suspicion of his – 'that people will attempt to inspect us here in Miklagarð'").² The verb *skynja* can denote both the physical act of 'perception' and the abstract quality of 'understanding', stressing the visual nature of the scrutiny Haraldr and his followers are under. Haraldr promises to dedicate a church to his brother St. Óláfr if he is victorious, before marching into battle. It is then, during the introduction of the opposing commanders, that the first blind character is introduced: "En þeir heiðingjar hófðu fyrir her sínum marga konunga, ok var blindr einn, ok var sá þó vitrastr" (*Mork*: I, 95; "And the heathens had many kings leading their army, and one was blind but he was nevertheless the wisest of them"). It is worth noting that while blindness and wisdom are associated here, the formulation used suggests that this is an atypical circumstance: for the narrator at least, blindness does not *necessitate* wisdom. This is perhaps due to keen-sightedness being a conventional trait of celebrated kings in saga literature (see Lassen 2003: 17–21). The blind king's wisdom is soon demonstrated during the crushing defeat of the heathen army, in which he is granted a vision of St. Óláfr leading the Norse forces into battle: "En í ǫðru lagi þá sér sá inn blindi maðr, er konungr var, mann ríða fyrir Væringjaher á hvítum hesti" (*Mork*: I, 95; "But, conversely, the blind man, who was a king, saw a man riding before the Varangian force on a white horse"). This scene plays upon inversions of sight and sense, in presenting the heathen faith of the kings as a more dire form of blindness, in this case to the reality of the Christian faith as championed by St. Óláfr, than a physical lack of sight. The hagiographic motif of blindness facilitating ecstatic vision is here being employed ironically (see Firth 2016: 14), with only the least keen sighted of the kings being able to see the spiritual truth. This episode is also one of the few instances

1 This episode falls within *Morkinskinna*'s largest lacuna, which is conventionally filled from the version of the text preserved as a later addition to *Flateyjarbók*. On the basis of the overlapping extant text in both manuscripts, however, there is an extremely high level of congruity between the two texts, to the point of it being reasonable to assume that this material was present in largely the same form in GKS 1009 fol.

2 All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

in the account of Haraldr's adventure in Byzantium where the narrative does not refer to him by his pseudonym of Norðbrikt, as if to validate the success of his disguise, perhaps further reinforcing the theme of the miraculous intercession of Óláfr helgi revealing concealed truths, in this case, Haraldr's royal Norwegian heritage.

This utilisation of the disabling quality of physical blindness for its perceived metaphorical connection to a blinkered worldview or ignorance to a fundamental truth is persistent throughout *Morkinskinna* and extended in relation to Haraldr's deteriorating relationship with the Byzantine emperor Mikael. Following his victory, Haraldr seeks to fulfil his vow to construct a church and dedicate it to St. Óláfr, but is blocked by the emperor, who fears the growing prestige of his Varangian retainers. Haraldr overturns the prohibition through rhetorical skill and dedicates the church regardless, but the emperor, in what appears to be a moment of pique, removes the clapper of the church bell. He is then visited by a terrifying dream vision of Óláfr, to whom he does not respond. He is then afflicted with an unspecified "œsiligum sjúkleika" (*Mork*: I, 96; "powerful sickness"), which is only remedied by the replacement of the clapper and the giving of further gifts. Mikael is associated with the previously mentioned blind heathen king through receiving a miraculous visitation of St. Óláfr and reveals himself to be spiritually short-sighted in turning a blind eye to the vision he has been granted, with the result of the degeneration of his physical body. While this is not explicitly confirmed as a loss of eyesight at this point, the connection is reinforced later, when following further slander to the emperor by his Byzantine enemies, Haraldr is imprisoned in a dungeon. As he is led into captivity, Haraldr believes he sees his brother Óláfr on the street. He is later rescued from his imprisonment by a widow who has been granted a "fyrirburðr" of St. Óláfr (*Mork*: I, 111; "vision"), which has the inverse result to the affliction of the Byzantine emperor, as she is miraculously healed through her observance of the saint's commands. Clear-sightedness, health, virtue, and wisdom are all associated as interconnected features of the saintly visitation, and the widow's report to Haraldr extends the intertwined imagery of sight and truth, as her account of her dream concludes with a demonstration of the veracity of her words due to them having led her to Haraldr's location: "Ok síðan fór ek hingat, sem nú máttu sjá" (*Mork*: I, 111; "And afterwards I came here, as you can now see"). For Haraldr, the widow becomes a providential figure, the sight of whom delivers him from the darkness of imprisonment in a dungeon and allows him to experience second-hand the vision of his brother Óláfr.

Haraldr, on being liberated, immediately gathers his men and storms the palace of the Byzantine emperor. It is here that the motif linking blindness and wisdom established up to this point in Haraldr's adventures in Byzantium reaches its violent climax: "Ok síðan ganga þeir til svefnhúss þess er stólkonungur svaf í ok brjóta þar upp, gera konung handtekinn ok lúka svá við hann at þeir stinga ór honum bæði augu" (*Mork*: I, 112; "And afterwards they walked to that bedchamber where the emperor slept and broke into that place, seized the king and it ended up for him that they stabbed out both of his eyes"). In having failed to recognise the nobility of two members of Norwegian royalty, both Óláfr and Haraldr, the Byzantine emperor has revealed the limits of his ability to see what is true and just in relation to his Scandinavian guests. This engenders his blinding by Haraldr, which constitutes an appropriate vengeance, in the sense that the mutilation alters the emperor's physical condition to be in line with his impaired disposition. The emperor's blindness also places him in contrast with the trope of the keen-sighted exemplary monarch and becomes

a further indicator of his unsuitability for rule, with his embodiment of this trait through a complete loss of sight concluding the narrative's gradual deconstruction of his initial status as a peerless ruler and signalling the end of his presence in the text. From the perspective of medieval disability studies, it is important to note that physical impairment (both in terms of illness generally and blindness specifically), political errors of judgement, issues arising from a fractious personality, and failures of spiritual discernment are not fully distinguished as separate negative categories but form a nexus of associated incapacities that might disqualify an individual from effective and just kingship (see Tovey 2010: 135–148). It might even be tempting to say that this sequence rests upon a social model of disability, wherein the behaviours of a blind individual are not intrinsic qualities of the phenomenon of sightlessness, but socialized qualities demanded by the wider community of which they are members (see Wheatley 2010: 5–8). The Byzantine emperor is depicted as incapable of comprehending his surroundings on an abstract level through his political and moral failures, a state presented as so akin to the condition of blindness, that his actions instigate his physical loss of sight. In this manner, a sophisticated view of disability is demonstrated in this passage, which rather than centring the debilitating nature of blindness as an embodied disability, explores how the negative characteristics conventionally associated with the condition in the medieval period may manifest in those who initially appear able-bodied.

As discussed above in relation to the Byzantine emperor, the text is not limited in its exploration of blindness to a simple equivalence of a character's lack of sight with either negative or positive characteristics associated with this disability. Rather, the text considers blindness in tandem with other forms of alteration to perception, with the introduction of a blind character providing a means of signposting that the theme of failures of acumen or incomprehension is being explored within a sequence. This is most strikingly achieved in the case of *Stúfs þáttr blindi*. Stúfr is an Icelandic man whose blindness is introduced as his defining quality, as evidenced by his nickname. The narrative stresses a range of other characteristics he possesses, however, all of which are conventionally positive for an Icelandic visitor to Norway: he is from a well-respected family, a wise man, of large stature, and an accomplished skald (see *Mork*: I, 290–291). In contrast with the ignominious treatment of the blind elsewhere in *Morkinskinna*, Stúfr acts with independent agency and is granted respect by all the characters with whom he interacts in the *þáttr*. This includes Haraldr harðráði, at this point sole king of Norway, who encounters Stúfr after visiting his host. Despite Haraldr's generally formidable reputation as an easily enraged ruler, this is one of several episodes in *Morkinskinna* where Haraldr interacts with Icelanders with a degree of good humour not seen in his dealing with the Norwegian elite (see *Mork*: I, 230–232 and 270–284). The tone of the *þáttr* is playful and the central themes are the different forms wisdom and incomprehension can take, as will be expanded on below, but it should be stressed that Stúfr's blindness is not depicted as a condition which ensures his wisdom, as was true of the blind heathen king discussed above, as evidenced by Haraldr's comment "at Stúfr mun vera vitr maðr, þótt hann sé blindr" (*Mork*: I, 291; "That Stúfr was a wise man, even if he was blind"). Rather, *Stúfs þáttr* enacts the temporary parity between a peripheral figure and a king through the destabilisation of social conventions, an effect typical of the *þættir* of *Morkinskinna* (see Morcom 2020: 55–61); in this case this is achieved through Stúfr fundamentally altering the discursive expectations of the two men's

conversation to compensate for his blindness, producing a space in which Haraldr is stripped of insight in a manner more serious than even Stúfr's sensory deprivation.

Stúfr achieves this feat by obscuring both his character and his intentions; in doing so, he subverts the conventions expected of an Icelandic visitor's interactions with a Norwegian king. In the first place, when he is asked by Haraldr as to his pedigree, Stúfr does not demonstrate his suitability to converse with a king by listing his preeminent ancestors, who include Glúmr Geirason and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, instead cryptically responding: “Ek emk Kattar sonr” (*Mork*: I, 291; “I am a cat's son”). This response clearly puns on the nickname of Stúfr's father, Þórðr kotttr, but being a son of a cat appears to be an obscure Norse idiom that also appears in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, where it likely has pejorative connotations and which this episode may intentionally echo (see Holtsmark 1963–1964: 144–155; Fidjestøl 1971: 50–51; Harris 2008: 173–182). Haraldr, perplexed, asks who the cat is that Stúfr claims as his father, but the Icelander simply demands that Haraldr guesses the answer before bursting into laughter. Nor will Stúfr even clarify the source of his mirth, instead repeating the same imperative formulation to the king: “gettu til” (*Mork*: I, 291; “Guess!”). At this point in the narrative, the following exchange occurs:

Konungr mælti: “Vant er mér þat at geta í skap þér. En þess get ek fyrst at þú sért maðr íslenzkr, en þá get ek þess næst at þú myndir at því hlæja ok hugsa hvar sú væri gyltrin er faðir minn var við kenndr” (*Mork*: I, 291).

The king said: “It is difficult for me to guess your nature, but firstly, I guess that you are an Icelandic man and, secondly, I guess that you may have laughed while thinking where the gilt pig my father was named after might be”.

In the first place, Stúfr's demands that Haraldr guesses his identity upend two common tropes of the *konungasögur*: that of the king's interrogation of a newcomer and that of kings employing disguises to conceal their royal pedigree, as in the episode in Byzantium discussed above (see Ármann Jakobsson 2014: 215–229). Here, conversely, it is Stúfr who conceals his identity via his refusal to provide clear answers to Haraldr's enquiries. Haraldr, consequently, admits it is hard to make out anything substantial about Stúfr's *skap*; while this word likely primarily indicates “mind” or “mood” here, its most literal and foundational sense is that of “shape” or “form”. In a conversation including a blind individual, the inability of the sighted king to discern a man's “shape” is a fitting indicator of the temporary parity that Stúfr's evasive answers have engendered, particularly as Stúfr himself is, intriguingly, able to discern that he is talking to a king without Haraldr being introduced to him. Haraldr is, however, able to demonstrate some of his own wisdom by correctly guessing not only that Stúfr is an Icelander but also that his laughter is derived from the embarrassing porcine nickname of Haraldr's father, the petty king Sigurðr sýr. Both men's fathers are embarrassingly associated with domesticated animals via their nicknames, but the humour is more complex than simple mockery. Elsewhere in *Morkinskinna*, Haraldr demonstrates an incredibly violent reaction to any mention of his father's nickname, as he views the perceived traits of a sow, as a feminine animal with a reputation for greed and dirtiness, as running directly counter to his status as King of Norway and a peerless masculine exemplar (see Evans 2019: 15–26). Stúfr, meanwhile, as a blind man, is similarly ill-suited to being associated with his father's sobriquet of the cat, an animal that prior to its more recent appreciation as a pet, was primarily valued for the keen eyesight and agility

that allowed it to effectively kill vermin (see Aerts 2015: 271–280). Stúfr, through the example of his own blindness, tacitly demonstrates to Haraldr the unsuitability of the nicknames of fathers when applied to their sons, defusing the potential insult and accounting for both Haraldr’s equanimity at this mention of his parochial heritage and his evaluation of Stúfr as a wise man.

Haraldr is so pleased with Stúfr’s company that he invites the Icelander to entertain him further during the evening. Stúfr is able to recite eleven consecutive *flokkar*, which while presented unremarkably in the narrative, constitutes an exceptional feat of artistic performance given that skalds, as presented in the *konungasögur*, tend to recite only one poem at a time to an elite audience (see Fidjestøl 1997: 119–120). Furthermore, Stúfr, when questioned by the king, claims authorship of all eleven *flokkar* and, indeed, it would have been highly unusual for a skald to recite another poet’s works before a king (see Würth 2007: 267). As the only extant skaldic verse attributed to Stúfr is *Stúfsdrápa* and as we have no more than eight individual works preserved for any given skald, we can say with a reasonable degree of confidence that Stúfr’s achievement here is fictional and, to an Old Norse audience, potentially fantastic. Finlay (2015: 92) views this as a “validation of the poet’s competence to vouch for Haraldr’s reputation”, but this may also be an early representation of the enduring cross-cultural belief that blindness heightens the acuity of an individual’s other faculties, in this case memory, to almost superhuman levels: the modern scientific consensus, in fact, is that blindness correlates strongly with an enhanced verbal memory (see Amedi et al. 2003: 758–766). Haraldr, in typically acerbic form, responds to this considerable feat by asking if Stúfr has any verses in his repertoire other than *flokkar*, to which Stúfr rejoins: “Eigi kann ek drápur færri en ek hefi flokkana ort, þá sem nú kvað ek” (*Mork*: I, 291; “I know no fewer *drápur* than the *flokkar* I have composed and just recited”). Stúfr’s tactic, as before, rests on the disorienting omission of information that precludes Haraldr from seeing his qualities clearly. A *drápa*, as the most ornate form of skaldic encomium, was viewed as best suited to present to a king, but Stúfr initially withholds these from his performance, with the revelation of his equally consummate mastery of this poetic form necessitating Haraldr’s reappraisal of Stúfr as a skald. Ármann Jakobsson (2014: 109–112) argues that the *þættir* of *Morkinskinna* encircle kings, with the characters introduced within them allowing for multiple perspectives on royal figures to be presented; there may be some irony, therefore, that in the case of the blind Stúfr, it is the king who must work to repeatedly re-evaluate the qualities of his guest, seeing him in a new light each time.

In the morning, when Haraldr is preparing to leave, Stúfr asks the king to grant him a request, but when Haraldr enquires as to its nature of his entreaty, Stúfr is again evasive, saying: “Heit þú mér áðr en ek segi þér” (*Mork*: I, 292; “Promise me before I tell you”). Here, for a third time, Stúfr enforces a form of incomprehension upon Haraldr to equalise their encounter, now with more material consequences as the king must cede Stúfr the power to name his own price, while he himself goes into the negotiation blind. Stúfr does not abuse this privilege, however, perhaps in a display of reciprocity for the civility with which Haraldr has treated him, asking in the first place for the king’s seal on a letter to aid him in obtaining the *dánarfé* (“property of a deceased person”) and, in the second, the king’s permission to compose a poem in praise of him. The third time this formula is repeated, however, Haraldr refuses and insists on knowing the request prior to obliging. Stúfr

requests to be made a *hirðmaðr*, a comparatively high-ranking member of Haraldr's retinue, but the king claims it is fortunate he refused, as he needs the assent of the rest of the *hirð* to grant this. It is possible that such a rule may have existed amongst the Norwegian elite in the eleventh century (see Andersson/Gade 2000: 444), but it is referenced nowhere else in *Morkinskinna*, wherein kings often spontaneously induct visitors into the *hirð* without consultation. The significance of the reference to the custom here links to another commonality of *Morkinskinna*'s *þættir*: the reassertion of kingly wisdom at these episodes' conclusions. Haraldr has endured the various forms of incomprehension engendered by Stúfr's cryptic conversational style and has been repeatedly deprived of crucial information, placing his condition in parallel with Stúfr's own sensory deprivation. At the point of Stúfr's final question, however, Haraldr reasserts his right to demand information from a subordinate man and, consequently, makes a wise decision in not promising more than he can give. Furthermore, in requiring the appraisals of his *hirðmenn* before admitting Stúfr into his company, Haraldr acknowledges the limits of his own perspective and the consequent need for a communal reckoning as to the Icelander's worth. As the assent of the *hirðmenn* resolves Stúfr's perplexing presence and transforms him into a conventionally dutiful skald at the *þáttir*'s conclusion, *Stúfs þáttir* may, at its core, stand as a warning that bewilderment, understood through its metaphorical associations with blindness, can befall even the wisest of kings and that it is the duty of his retainers to aid him in seeing clearly.

If this is the case, then *Stúfs þáttir*'s positioning within the wider *Morkinskinna* compilation is highly ironic as it stands as the last instance of constructive rule on the part of Haraldr harðráði, being followed by two sequences of deeply unwise conduct on the king's part, which his retainers fail to correct. The first and less consequential instance is *Odds þáttir Ófeigssonar*, in which the titular Oddr extracts tribute from the *Finnar* without the king's permission. Then, when an enraged Haraldr tries to search their ship to seize the ill-gotten wealth, Oddr conspires with his friend Þorsteinn, who is serving the king, to repeatedly conceal the spoils, before making his escape (*Mork*: I, 293–7). In this case, Haraldr is presented at his most overbearing and is misled by his own follower: as such he proves unable of seeing the goods concealed under his nose. More seriously, Haraldr's disastrous decision to invade England is presented in the text in a manner which echoes many of the previously established themes linking an inability to see clearly with a failure of political acumen on the part of a royal figure, particularly those from the Byzantine sequence discussed above. Haraldr is confronted with a sequence of increasingly forbidding omens warning against his current course of action, which escalate until he, like the Byzantine emperor he once served, is granted a dream vision in which Óláfr helgi delivers a skaldic stanza warning the king of his impending death (*Mork*: I, 305–306). Haraldr, again like the Byzantine emperor, ignores the vision he has been granted, an error exacerbated by the fact that he also fails to heed the warnings of his *hirðmenn* as to the formidable martial capability of his English enemies. After some initial successes, Haraldr harðráði and his army are caught outside York by Harold Godwinson's forces, the latter king riding out to deliver his terms for the Norwegian surrender himself. Haraldr, unaware that he is in the presence of his kingly rival, misses a crucial opportunity to kill his opponent without engaging in battle, only discovering Harold's identity from his brother, Tostig Godwinson, when he has ridden back to his forces. Haraldr then complains: "Of lengi var ek þessu

leyndr” (*Mork*: I, 315; “For too long was this concealed from me”). The use of the verb *leyna* here stresses that Haraldr’s wider political error is embodied in his inability to see the true nature of his adversary, just as the Byzantine emperor was previously unable to discern Haraldr’s own royal personage due to his disguise. At this climactic moment, the blindness of incomprehension afflicts Haraldr and betokens his imminent defeat and death.

The physical condition of blindness operates at the centre of a complex network of abstract values in *Morkinskinna*, both positive and negative. Blindness in of itself is a moralised condition only for kings, where it is presented as indicative of an inability to rule effectively, but the example of Stúfr demonstrates that sightlessness, while undeniably an impediment, can be mitigated by shrewd behaviour. Moreover, the visceral severity of blindness is manipulated in *Morkinskinna* to force repeated consideration of the abstract forms of incomprehension yet more serious than even sensory deprivation, most crucially in the metaphorical blindness of kings to the disastrous consequences of their courses of action. This is depicted most artfully through the royal biography of Haraldr harðráði and there is no little tragedy in his fall within this narrative from the blinder of his enemy to a man blinded by his own ambition.

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