

Marie Novotná: *Pojetí těla ve staroseverské literatuře.*

Praha: Herrmann & synové, 2019, 194 pages. (The Concept of the Body in Old Norse Literature)

As the title of the book implies, its central theme is the depiction of the body and of the boundaries between the physical and psychical or mental aspects of a person in Old Norse literary texts. It is the first publication written in the Czech language with a primary focus on this topic, which has not received enough attention in traditional historiography. Marie Novotná, who is a researcher in the field of Scandinavian Studies, a translator, and a teacher at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, has filled this gap in research with a study that is based on an analysis of literary texts, but aims at getting beyond the texts, to the ideas and attitudes that are reflected in literature.

The study shows that the Old Norse concept of the body cannot be universally defined, because it includes a broad range of various ideas, which are represented to various degrees in different texts. The author explains that this is because Old Norse literature is based both on pre-Christian notions and on Christian ideas and continental influences. Old Norse texts were created from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, when Christianity was already firmly established in the Nordic lands. At the same time, however, the texts were based on older oral traditions to a greater or lesser extent, so they also reflect remnants of the original pre-Christian concept of the relationship between the physical and mental aspects. This concept did not involve the idea of the body and the mind or soul as two separate aspects of the human being – instead, it was based on the idea of an inseparable whole that includes both the physical and the psychical element. At the time when the texts were written down, however, the Old Norse social elites that created the texts were already influenced by continental ideas: first and foremost by Christianity, which introduced the dichotomy between a mortal body and an immortal soul, and also by continental medieval medical science with its specific concepts of the body and of illness. Old Norse texts combine both cultural influences, and they reflect a wide array of varying concepts of the body, from the idea of a complete unity of the physical and mental elements to a clearly defined dichotomy between body and mind. The dominance of any specific concept in an individual text does not necessarily depend only on the time of its origin, but also on its genre and theme.

The book consists of a necessary introduction and two main chapters. The introduction presents some key Old Norse terms connected to the body and mind and outlines the cultural context of the texts that are analysed in the chapters. Examples from these texts illustrate the various concepts of the body, mind, emotions, and soul in Old Norse literature.

The first chapter deals with somatic displays of emotions. It points out one of the characteristic traits of the typical Old Norse saga style, the absence of direct descriptions of the protagonists' feelings. The sagas depict only the external, physical displays of emotions, such as extreme weariness, change of face colour, swelling, aching eyes, or even death. In the author's opinion, this manner of literary presentation of emotions is not caused by the writers' inability to describe feelings directly. Instead, it is based on a perception of the relationship between the mind and the body that differs from

the dominant views in modern Western culture. The Old Norsemen did not regard the somatic aspects as external displays or consequences of emotions existing in a separate mental sphere. They believed that a feeling and its physical aspect are one and the same thing, because the physical and mental sphere are inseparably connected. Emotions were therefore regarded as physical phenomena. The author illustrates this concept with many relevant examples from various Old Norse texts.

The second chapter focuses on the literary motif of shapeshifting and on the various possible meanings and connotations of the Old Norse term *hamr*, which can denote shape, form, or appearance, but also character – specific personal traits or the “animal character” of a person, which can affect the person’s physical or mental state or both. Selected examples from sagas, poetry, and other texts show that the motif of shapeshifting is not only found in different situations in Old Norse literature – shapeshifting for the purpose of crossing a distance, shapeshifting in a fight, or shapeshifting connected to practising magic – but also that different texts reflect different concepts of the relationship between the body and the mind in this context. In some cases, the physical and mental aspect cannot be separated, *hamr* is both form and character, and these two elements cannot be distinguished from each other. This is for example the “giant in eagle’s shape” that creates wind according to mythological poetry; this creature does not assume the shape of an eagle only temporarily and physically, but it is not an ordinary eagle either. In the opposite case the transformation is only physical or only mental, which presupposes the idea of the body and mind as two separate, clearly distinguished aspects. That is the case for example in the Eddic heroic poem of *Völundr* and its introductory prose. In this story the valkyries, mythical women, assume the shape of swans, but they can remove their “swan garments” like pieces of clothing, and their character is not transformed by the change of shape. The blacksmith *Völundr* also escapes from captivity by flying up in the air, and the text does not directly specify whether we should imagine shapeshifting or only a flying device made by the blacksmith – in any case his ability to fly is a purely physical aspect. Between these two opposites lies a broad range of ideas that combine elements of both. As an example we can name battle ecstasy, which involves both physical aspects, such as superhuman strength and invulnerability, and mental aspects, such as extraordinary fury – but it is not a complete transformation, only a manifestation of certain dispositions that are specific to the given person. These and many other examples aptly illustrate the diversity of the possible concepts of the body and mind in Old Norse literature.

The idea that the pre-Christian concept of the relationship between body and mind differed from the Christian concept is not new or surprising in itself. The merit of this study, however, is that it does not focus primarily on this dichotomy, but rather on elements of continuity. It shows that both concepts existed simultaneously for a long time, and that the transition from one to the other was gradual. Both concepts could also intermingle and create many various ideas. That is true of medieval literature in general, but Old Norse culture provided more space for diverse ideas than continental culture, in which Christianity was more dogmatic and the boundaries between popular and learned traditions were more sharply delineated. For this reason, Old Norse texts are perfect as sources for an analysis of continuity between the pre-Christian and Christian perception of people and of their various aspects.

The author demonstrates an extremely broad knowledge of Old Norse texts of various genres, from the sagas of Icelanders and Eddic poetry to lawbooks and learned treatises. At the same time, however, she works with the texts in a manner that opens them up to readers who are not experts on Old Norse literature or medieval literature in general. The book is highly informative, but also easy to read and understand, so it can speak both to medievalists or literary scholars and to a broader audience.

Lucie Korecká

<https://doi.org/10.14712/24646830.2020.24>