

Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of the Icelanders, by Gareth Lloyd Evans. Oxford English Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xv+170. ISBN: 9780198831242.

This is the first book-length treatment of masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur*, or “family” sagas. Anyone familiar with the genre will know that the stories of characters like Grettir and Njáll revolve around multigenerational feuds and fierce contests of honor enacted in a male-dominated world. Yet, while there is considerable scholarship on women and gender in the sagas, investigations of masculinity have to date been limited to a handful of article-length studies. *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of the Icelanders* therefore makes a valuable and substantial contribution to Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship. More broadly, it is a very welcome addition to the growing but still relatively small body of monographs detailing diverse representations and experiences of manhood in the medieval world.

Written primarily over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but purporting to narrate events from the ninth to eleventh centuries, the *Íslendingasögur* are important to historical understandings of the medieval Nordic world and to contemporary perceptions of cultural identity predicated on that imagined shared past. Lloyd Evans’s interrogation of the construction of saga masculinities, and of the ways dominant ideals of masculinity are problematized and subverted in these narratives, makes this a particularly timely investigation given the cooption of an imagined hypermasculine “viking” identity by ethnonationalists and men’s rights activists in Scandinavia and elsewhere.

The book opens with a clear and concise introduction in which Lloyd Evans articulates his approach to gender as “a performative social construction that is separate from—although seemingly linked [in the world of the sagas] to—a notion of biological sex” (7). Chapter 1 expands on the theoretical framework with a valuable deconstruction of Carol Clover’s influential work on gender in medieval Scandinavia. Finding Clover’s argument for a “one-sex, one-gender model” inadequate to fully explain the construction and operation of masculinities in the sagas, Lloyd Evans deploys instead the concept of hegemonic masculinity. This approach allows masculinity to be understood as mutable, flexible, and unstable while also revealing the ways in which gender intersects with other categories of identity, including age, social status, sexuality, and race. Especially illuminating is an exploration of the untranslatable concepts of *nið* and *niðingr*, which operate in the sagas to delineate the opposite of “manliness”; what is “not *nið*” can therefore be inferred to represent ideal, or hegemonic, manhood.

Chapter 2, “Homosocial Masculinities,” engages with and expands upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s classic formulation of homosociality, in which relationships between men are triangulated in various ways through women. The sagas were almost exclusively masculine territory; most of the characters are men, and the narratives pivot around their ambitions, activities, and relationships with other men. As Lloyd Evans demonstrates, these homosocial relationships—whether the affective bonds of kinship and brotherhood, or combative dynamics in which one man sought to dominate and subdue his fellows—challenge Sedgwick’s formulation by centering dyadic homosocial relationships. Examining relationships between men in a range of sagas, Lloyd Evans establishes the traits expected of hegemonic manhood—for example, physical strength, domination, and cunning—but also shows how the sagas complicate this model by simultaneously valorizing and questioning hegemonic ideals.

Chapter 3, “Intersectional Masculinities,” ambitiously seeks to examine “interactions between masculinity and a range of other identity categories through which social power is fractured and hierarchized” (62). This is perhaps the least satisfying chapter, primarily because it attempts to cover so much ground. Sections dealing with youth and old age, social status, sexuality, and impairment/disability are nuanced and well-supported with textual evidence. There is a cogent analysis of same-sex sexual activity, well grounded in the theoretical literature and the historiography of medieval sexuality. Returning to the discourse of *nið*, Lloyd Evans finds two different attitudes to same-sex sexual activity in the sagas: a Christian ethic in which both partners are equally condemned, and also a much more dominant secular ethic in which only the submissive partner is considered *niðr*. Penetration then becomes part of a wider pattern of domination of subordinate men by those who claim hegemonic masculinity. The exploration of sexuality also usefully addresses the implications for masculinity when anal sex has not occurred, but other same-sex sexual activities have. However, sections covering other categories of identity are very brief, and so necessarily limited. In particular, the investigations of race and of religious identity are thought-provoking, but such intersections warrant more extended comparative analysis across a larger number of source texts. Overall, though, there is considerable merit in at least asking the questions, and Lloyd Evans is to be commended for providing a foundation on which he and others can build.

Chapter 4 applies the theoretical and methodological insights from earlier chapters to a stimulating close reading of *Grettis saga*. Earlier chapters examine characters who fail, for various reasons, to live up to the ideals of saga masculinity; here, Lloyd Evans analyzes Grettir’s “outlaw masculinity” in order to

interrogate the damaging implications of hypermasculinity. Grettir appears to possess all the qualities of hegemonic masculinity in abundance, but “when masculinity is successfully totalizing in its discursive inscription of the embodied subject it is just as problematic . . . as when it fails” (108). Lloyd Evans provides a plausible argument for Grettir’s “homo(anti)sociality,” as his excesses of hegemonic masculinity preclude him forming normative homosocial bonds. In a compelling exploration of the troubled relationship between hypermasculinity and monstrosity, the author examines Grettir’s interactions with Glámr the revenant, concluding that the supernatural functions as an externalized manifestation of Grettir’s own hypermasculine but antihomosocial character. Through Grettir, the saga “enacts a striking critique of the cultural hegemony of masculinity and also of the impossible—and even contradictory—demands that it places upon the masculine subject” (143).

Chapter 4 is the first chapter to incorporate discussion of the dating of manuscript witnesses and the relationship between *Grettis saga* and other types of material (poems, other saga genres) with which it appears. This strengthens the analysis by anchoring the saga firmly in its original manuscript context, and similar attention to reception would have been welcome earlier in the volume. However, this does not detract from the significance of the book’s central arguments and from the considerable contributions it makes to the scholarship both on saga literature and on medieval masculinities more generally. *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of the Icelanders* not only explicates, with great richness, the ways that characters understood, negotiated, embodied and performed masculinity, but also provides evidence for how the sagas simultaneously promoted, subverted and transformed hegemonic ideals.

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