



Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*.
Oxford English Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Print,
xv+170 pp., £55, ISBN: 9780198831242 (Hardcopy)

Review

'[A]re not almost all studies of saga literature [...] in some ways studies of men?' (p. 8). This hypothetical question, which seems to lie behind the focus on women in most gender studies of Old Norse literature, implies that women and femininities are seen as constructed, whereas men and masculinities are naturalized. After a brief introduction to the topic, including a short but convincing argument for the need to also critically study men and masculinities, Gareth Lloyd Evans in the present study sets out to construct a new model of saga masculinities. Rightfully breaking away from Carol Clover's 'one-sex, one-gender model with a vengeance',¹ which has dominated the study of gender in medieval Iceland since its appearance in 1993, Evans instead proposes for the *Íslendingasögur* [sagas of Icelanders] a model of hegemonic masculinities. This concept, developed in the 1980s by Carrigan, Connell, and Lee,² 'can be considered the crystallization of the masculine ideal' (p. 16). It follows a few principles: first, there are multiple masculinities. This is shown in *Egils saga*, for example, by Egill and his son Þorsteinn, who are both recognized as masculine despite their evident differences. Second, masculinities falling short of the hegemonic ideal are subordinated to it and viewed as inferior. The primacy of the hegemonic masculine ideal, then, is dependent on this subordination, which implies the hierarchization of different modalities of masculinity.

This hierarchization is, of course, dependent on interaction of masculinities. For the second chapter, Evans therefore draws heavily on the revolutionary work of Eve

¹ Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Representations*, 44 (1993), 1–28 (p. 18). Published under the same title in *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. by Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: 1993), 61–85; and *Speculum*, 68.2 (1993), 363–87.

² Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', *Theory and Society*, 14.5 (1985), 551–604.

Kosofsky Sedgwick on homosociality and homosocial desire.³ Noting its ‘effective inevitability’ in the sagas of Icelanders, Chapter Two investigates homosocial bonds between men, either dyadic or triangulated through a woman (p. 62). Supported by various examples which are succinctly discussed, this chapter covers homosocial masculinities through a number of topics, including, among other things, gift giving, social obligations, and judgement.

The third chapter, *Intersectional Masculinities*, applies Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality.⁴ This is the revolutionarily self-evident acknowledgement that ‘different identity categories — [in Crenshaw’s focus] black and woman — *intersect*: they overlap and interact to produce experiences that cannot be reduced to either individual facet of identity’ (p. 63). By juxtaposing masculinity with age, race, impairment, sexuality, religion, and socio-economic status, Evans shows how the intersection of masculinity with various identity categories problematize characters’ claims of the masculine ideal. Not only does this, then, demonstrate the hierarchization of masculinities, but it also shows that masculinity in the sagas is ‘a precarious thing that is constantly open — and subject — to subversion’ (p. 106).

The choice for Grettir of *Grettis saga* as the case study making up the fourth and final chapter may seem odd at first, but this is justified by Evans: ‘while its prevailing mode is that of the *Íslendingasaga* genre, its popular narratives of outcasts and the supernatural enable the exploration and interrogation of social themes which are here writ large and pushed to their limit’ (p. 109). Evans first shows how Grettir grows into his role as the total embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, and then cleverly demonstrates how the interaction between his *hypermasculinity* and the masculinities of others actually displays its dysfunctionality. Violently rejecting most homosocial

³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985; repr. 2016).

⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’, *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140 (1989), 139–67.

bonds and eventually outlawed and killed, Grettir in *Grettis saga* can, then, be read as a literary critique of the cultural hegemony of masculinity.

As Evans astutely notes in his conclusion, ‘Old Norse literature has historically been — and continues to be — misappropriated by the intolerant, who draw on the popular contemporary perception of it as unrelentingly and exclusively masculinist. Racists, xenophobes, misogynists, transphobes, ableists, and homophobes would all twist Old Norse sources to fit their exclusionary agendas’ (p. 145). Evans’ observations that masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur* were not only multiple, hierarchical, intersectional, and precarious, but also that extreme masculinity proved to be dysfunctional, are therefore incredibly important. This book provides a thorough yet accessible study of the topic for both academics and the general public alike, and is itself a strong argument for making academic publications more accessible for general audiences. As the first book-length study of masculinities in the sagas of Icelanders (to the knowledge of the present reviewer) it is a much-needed contribution to the study of Old Norse literature, and one which will undoubtedly provide a significant framework for the study of Old Norse masculinities.

B.O.B. van Strijen

Independent scholar

Van Strijen, B. O. B. Review of *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, by Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Ceræ: An Australasian Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 7 (2020), 80–82.



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