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**Rasmussen, Ann Marie, *Rivalrous  
Masculinities*. Notre Dame: University  
of Notre Dame Press, 2019**

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*Rivalrous Masculinities* is a collection of essays that are grouped around the broadly defined theme of masculinities, contained within interdisciplinary gender studies. Born out of a research and teaching project investigating ‘changing images of masculinity and the male body from the Middle Ages to the present’ (xi), it evolved into the collection as it currently stands. This collection includes critics who have made significant advances within the field of gender studies such as Gillian Overing, Clare A. Lees, and Karma Lochrie. The collection centres around the argument that masculinity is ‘pluralized’ in medieval literature, distinct from biological sex and existing in multiple forms, which—as the editor acknowledges—closely adheres to Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performative. The collected essays are particularly diverse in their approach, including criticism in literary analysis, art history, religion and history. While this might attract a wider audience, this also means that not every essay will be directly applicable to varying scholars. It is, however, impressive in its variety; indeed, the essays do not adhere to one literary culture, class or even specific period within the broadly defined medieval era. For example, Gillian Overing discusses ‘angst’ among warrior-leaders in *Beowulf*, while Diane Wolfthal assesses the portrayal of male servants in a variety of later medieval portraits, both secular and religious. Rasmussen manages to balance appealing to a wider audience

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against in-depth research on a variety of different topics. The collection does not directly comment on Old Norse studies and applies only in the broadest conceptual sense. While some of these chapters present arguments that can, in turn, readily be applied to Old Norse literature, the collection makes no claim to be a study of Norse masculinities, and therefore is better suited to scholars new to the study of masculinities and looking to ground themselves in different approaches and perspectives. The most useful of these chapters for Norse focused researchers would be Clare A. Lees' 'A Word to the Wise: Men, Gender, and Medieval Masculinities,' Gillian Overing's chapter 'Men in Trouble: Warrior Angst in Beowulf,' and Karma Lochrie's 'Medieval Masculinities Without Men.'

Ann Marie Rasmussen uses the preface of this collection to discuss the original impetus, acknowledging the need for the expansion of masculinity studies into undergraduate teaching. However, the variety of disciplines included in this collection has resulted in some chapters being less relevant to scholars of Old Norse, such as Astrid Lembke's chapter 'Predicaments of Piousness: The Trouble with Being a Learned Jewish Family Man in Premodern Europe.' Rasmussen notes that masculinity is as equally pluralized as femininity. Often, masculinity has been recognised as a singular entity (you are either masculine or not), while femininity has been explored through a broad range of different types of behaviour and characters since the early feminist readings of the 1980s. Clare A. Lees' chapter discusses the relationship masculinity studies has to gender studies, observing that some studies are 'asymmetrical, if not independent of, feminist, gendered, and queer understandings of culture and history' (1). She goes on to state that the early publications of the 1990s were 'prompted, at least in part' by feminist reassessments of women and gender (1). The second half of this chapter moves on to assess the reproduction of 'masculine wisdom [...] across the generations' in the Old English poem *Precepts* (1). This chapter not only reveals points of analysis not yet taken up in Old English scholarship but also provides a wealth of knowledge for those new to masculinity studies, tracing the various avenues in which such a study can be undertaken.

Gillian Overing's chapter, entitled 'Men in Trouble: Warrior Angst in Beowulf,' discusses the difficulty leading men face in the epic poem when

negative emotions contrast with their otherwise strict masculine identity. Overing begins the chapter discussing Old English weather terms, used frequently in *Beowulf* to depict negative emotions and inner turmoil. The framework of this chapter displays the potential for philological analysis to work with gendered readings of medieval texts. This provides great potential readings for scholars of both Old English and Old Norse, as gendered and queer readings do not frequently overlap with philological studies. While not directly commenting on Old Norse literature, this chapter provides a useful starting point for scholars of Old Norse literature looking to use close textual analysis in support of gendered readings through its philological approach, a method applicable to studies in medieval linguistics beyond Old Norse and Old English. The warriors who have become leaders, including Hrothgar, struggle with their own deeply emotional inner turmoil, Overing stating that ‘this precise sorrow ranks above so much else’ (33). She points to the link between masculinity and the painful emotions they are experiencing, claiming that ‘this is a crisis between men, about the crucial relation between the king and his loyal shoulder-companion, and the loss of that relationship, and it is acutely registered, understood by another man’ (33). Overing’s chapter reveals a gap in current *Beowulf* scholarship, with further potential for such analysis to be expanded into the Old Norse heroic corpus.

As previously mentioned, the contents of this collection are applicable to Old Norse studies only in the broadest conceptual sense, due to the lack of direct commentary on Old Norse literature or histories of medieval Scandinavia. The following chapters are the furthest from Scandinavian studies in the material they explore, however, their approaches have relevance for a student of Norse material. Diane Wolfthal discusses the portrayal of servants in a variety of later medieval paintings, from the fourteenth century to the early eighteenth century, a majority of which were produced in France and Germany. Wolfthal reveals how the depiction of servants within these paintings constructs a subordinated masculinity not equal to that of their royal masters or significant religious figures,

claiming that these servants are ‘not viewed as fully independent, adult men.’<sup>2</sup> For example, Wolfthal analyses different portrayals of Christ before Pilate, showing how Christ is centred in the frame due to his significant status in Christian teachings, while servants are often in the background or concealed at the sides, with their faces partially hidden or facing away entirely in different paintings, including the secular ones. While Wolfthal makes a strong argument that contributes well to the collection’s theme of pluralized masculinities, it is difficult to find a direct connection, if any, to Old Norse literature, as it verges on the early modern rather than medieval. Karma Lochrie’s chapter, entitled ‘Medieval Masculinities Without Men,’ explores the possibility of masculinity not being specifically tied to maleness. As pointed out by Lochrie, female masculinity and trans-masculinities are both another area which has been neglected within the still growing field of masculinity studies. While Lochrie discusses a variety of Middle English and late medieval French texts in this chapter, the same argument could usefully be applied to saga heroines or the debate on warrior women.

Despite the variety of focuses within each chapter, there are other chapters that are Norse-relevant. This collection sets out to reveal the plurality of masculinities, using a variety of approaches beyond that of literary analysis, showing through its broad scope just how diverse the picture of masculinity is. However, while this variety of approaches within the collection emphasises the different and sometimes contrasting types of masculinity found within the medieval period, not all of these chapters can directly correlate to equivalent analysis on Old Norse studies, although some of the arguments made within the collection might be directly applied to Old Norse texts. The struggle between the knight and the courtier in Darrin Cox’s chapter ‘The Knight Versus the Courtier’ reveals the battle for domination between opposing masculine identities, depicted through the spiritual courtier and secular, violent figure of the knight in battle. While commenting on medieval France, the analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> Wolfthal, Diane, ‘When Did Servants Become Men?’ in *Rivalrous Masculinities* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) 184.

power structures within a courtly setting is a point worth noting for scholars of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* in particular. Ruth Mazo Karras' chapter 'David and Jonathan: A Medieval Bromance' is a particular effective chapter, looking at male homosocial relationships between and their significance in the realm of the political,<sup>3</sup> a recurring theme in Old Icelandic Sagas.

While this collection is perhaps overly ambitious in its international and cross-disciplinary scope, it does manage to live up to its own expectations of revealing pluralized masculinities across multiple fields of medieval studies, from the literary to the historical. Certain chapters of the collection are less conceptually applicable for scholars of a different field, although many of these focus on literary analysis and will be of interest to scholars of medieval literature in particular. However removed from the medieval Scandinavian context many of the essays appear to be, this collection is still a worthwhile read for scholars new to the study of masculinity.

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<sup>3</sup> Karras, Ruth Mazo, 'David and Jonathan' in *Rivalrous Masculinities*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) 152.