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STUDIA I MATERIAŁY Z DZIEJÓW EUROPY ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIEJ

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DISCOVERING MEDIEVAL MASCULINITIES. A PERSONAL STORY

Some years ago, I saw one of the most beautiful films from the silent film era, "Tol'able David" by Henry King (1921). When young David is first introduced on the screen he is still a boy, as his clothes clearly indicate. He is wearing short trousers. David likes the girl next door and admires his strong, masculine older brother, who has a job of a great responsibility. He drives the mail-hack. When the brother's wife gives birth to their son, all the men present, the doctor, the brother and the father, gather to celebrate with drinks and cigars, the pleasures of the grown man's world. David wants to join them but they push him away. He is not yet a man. The family's peaceful world is disrupted when a criminal gang enters the scene. After an inevitable fight with them, the older brother becomes paralysed and crippled for life, deprived of his former status. David then wishes to replace him and drive the mail. He also tries to take revenge and in a moving scene his mother prevents him from going out with a gun. She clings to him and falls into the mud but doesn't let go of the boy. Instead of doing a man's job he must run errands for his mother. The family's troubles are not over. The father dies of a heart attack. Now, David is entrusted to drive the mail hack. He cannot escape the gangsters on his way and experiences a real David-Goliath fight with one of them, but he manages to escape and saves the mail, and thereby his honour. In the lovely scene that concludes the film, the battered and exhausted David humbly tells the girl next door, who obviously adores him, that he is "tol'able, just tol'able", but the proud mother cries out: "A man, my David".

For film enthusiasts, "Tol'able David" is a wonderful experience. For the medievalist, it is stunning to discover that constructing masculinity is the obvious theme of the film. It shows the transition from boyhood to manhood, as do many

medieval texts. He needs to separate himself from childhood play and the mother's world. The fight with the tall gangster and driving the mail is his initiation rite. Finally, he is accepted as a grown-up man. I saw this film in Nottingham while staying there as a visiting scholar in 2008. During a previous visit, back in 1995, I found a little book in the University Bookshop in Nottingham, *Medieval Masculinities*, edited by Claire A. Lees[1]. Inspired by this book, I decided to organize the first *Medieval Masculinities* course at my University. I did not know exactly what to expect, but it was considerably smaller than any class on women's or gender studies (which was more or less understood as women's studies). No enthusiastic young men were eagerly waiting in the class-room when I entered to give the first lesson. Only four female students sat there, but later one male student joined them and thereby saved the course, as we needed to have a minimum of five people to keep a class going. Feminist Studies, originating as Women's Studies, later becoming Gender Studies, paved the way for our present-day Masculinity Studies. It all began in the vibrant late sixties and seventies. In the enthusiastic, early stage of gender studies, the majority of scholars working on women's studies were women themselves. Academic studies became a part of feminism and were even seen as a means of the campaign for women's rights and recognition. Scholars took pleasure in discovering women, in texts and in history. The early works of the Icelandic feminist scholar Helga Kress are a good example, her later works became more dynamic and theoretical[2]. Women felt that they benefitted from academic women's studies, they were rediscovering and rewriting history and literary history, and this re-evaluation soon spread to other academic disciplines. Male students did not feel the same enthusiasm in the beginning, but I am glad to say that times have changed. I have offered masculinity courses several times by now, they have multiplied in number and more and more male students have enrolled. At first, male students were shy and not comfortable with males being read about and analysed as gender. Men had always been visible in texts, there seemed to be no need to search for them, contrary to the need to search for women in the early stages of women's studies. Women have had the tendency to see women's studies as a boost to their identity, but male students in a masculinity class felt insecure. Students had read male-dominated history as an equivalent of general history and were comfortable with that. It took some time to realize that although the subjects of study had been men, the discourse had not been about masculinity yet. Present-day masculinity studies have changed that.

The interest in aspects of masculinity is not entirely new. I want to mention here a few influential early works, from the Old Norse-Icelandic point of view. In 1980, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen published his *Norrønt nid. Forestillinger*

[1] *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Mediaeval Cultures), ed. by C.A. Lees, Minneapolis 1994.

[2] H. Kress, *Óþarfar unnustur og aðrar greinar um íslenskar bókmenntir*, Reykjavík 2009.

om den umandige mand i de islandske sagaer. An English translation appeared in 1983[3]. Modern studies see gender as relational and put emphasis on culturally constructed masculinity, difference and diversity. Feminist scholars have shown that gender roles put restrictions upon women, but scholars are now beginning to ask questions about how men reacted to the demands that were made on them. In 1993, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and Carol Clover published studies on the interaction between power and gender in the Icelandic sagas[4]. Sørensen pointed out that masculinity and femininity should not only be seen as opposites but also in relation to each other. A man's honour and prestige depended not only on himself but also on the appreciation of the women in his family. Men played an active part in society, but women watched over their honour and prestige, evaluated them and often encouraged them to take revenge and fight with their *frýjur*. Although there was a clear distinction between manliness and unmanliness in Old Icelandic society, both categories, male and female, were movable. A woman could be encouraged to adopt masculine behaviour, but a man would be degraded to the sphere of women if he showed any inclination towards femininity. But while Sørensen sees power as a metaphor for sex, Clover argues that sex can be a metaphor for power. The terms Clover suggests in her analysis to present the opposites are *hvatr* (vigorous) versus *blauðr* (soft, weak), instead of a man versus woman. Her analysis is influenced by Thomas Laqueur's book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, where he presents the idea of the "one-sex model" in European history, which, according to Laqueur, prevailed in Western culture until the eighteenth century[5]. The one-sex model implied that femininity was simply a lack of masculinity and that women should therefore be understood as lesser man.

Theoretical approaches have changed and developed since the early days of gender studies. Influential studies have appeared, such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* presenting her ideas of gender identity and its signs as a performance[6]. Despite being influential, Butler has been criticised for her emphasis on discourse which according to her critics denies history any validity other than as text. What I have found most rewarding when teaching Medieval Masculinity is that no other courses have offered such completely new and unexpected readings of well-known and much read texts. Students have produced excellent papers and theses. Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir wrote a challenging paper called "Voru Æsirnir argir?"[7]

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[3] P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Norrønt nid. Forestillingen om den umandige mand i de islandske sagaer*, Odense1980; English translation: *The Unmanly Man. Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, Odense 1983.

[4] P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære. Studier i Islændingesagaerne*, Århus 1993; C. Clover, *Regardless of Sex. Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe*, "Speculum" 58 (1993), pp. 363–387.

[5] Th. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge MA 1990.

[6] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York 1990.

[7] Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, *Voru Æsirnir argir?*, "Mímir" 44(=50) (2005), pp. 100–107.

She wrote this paper while still being an MA student and it is published in a journal written and edited by students, but should not be overlooked.

In my own research, I have looked at several aspects of masculinity. Dragon-slaying and initiation rites are the topic of some of my articles[8]. The dragon-slaying motif links the narratives with the myth of the creation of the world, coming of age, and fertility. As previously mentioned, numerous saga texts tell us of the transition from boyhood to manhood, promising boys and un-promising boys, the *kolbítar*[9]. Stories telling of *kolbítar* indicate that meeting the demands of the society was not always easy for boys. In my articles, I have analyzed several *fornaldarsögur*, the Old Norse translation of *Parceval saga*, and *Kjalnesinga saga*. The two young protagonists of the *Kjalnesinga saga*, Búi and Kolfinnr, do not live up to the expectations of the society and its ideals. Kolfinnr is a typical *kolbítr*, but unlike the kolbítar in the *fornaldarsögur*, he does not grow up to perform heroic deeds. Búi's relationships with women show his insecurity and dependence. The issue of social demands is also the topic of my analysis of *Eyrbyggja saga*'s *Máhlíðingamál*[10]. In the beginning of the *Máhlíðingamál* narrative, the peaceful poet Þórarinn is accused of neglecting his duties as a man. It is implied that he doesn't provide enough for his family and he is said to have accidentally chopped off his wife's hand, therefore also seriously neglecting his duty to protect her. He was supposed to take care of the lives of his family members and uphold the family's honour. Their honour is in danger when he is accused of cowardice. In the stanzas attributed to him, he seeks balance in trying to be a man of peace and reconciliation and upholding his masculine honour. Paradoxically, he must prove himself by means of violence. Secular heroes have received more attention than saints and monks. They may not be the "typical males", but because of that they are intriguing and interesting. Bishops represent power and authority and it is emphasized that staying chaste requires masculine qualities, strength and stamina[11]. It has been rewarding to see how rapidly masculinity studies have grown during the last twenty years. Sessions on masculinity

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[8] Ásdís Egilsdóttir, *En verden skabes – en mand bliver til*, [in:] *Fornaldarsagaerne. Myter og virkelighed*, ed. by A. Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, A. Lassen, Copenhagen 2009, pp. 245–254. Eadem, *Serpents and dragons in two medieval narratives*, [in:] *Thinking Symbols – Interdisciplinary*, ed. by J. Popielska-Grzybowska, J. Iwaszczuk, Acta Archaeologica Pultuskiensia 6, Pułtusk 2017, pp. 69–74.

[9] Ásdís Egilsdóttir, *Kolbítur verður karlmaður*, [in:] *Miðaldabörn*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, T.H. Tulinius, Reykjavík 2015, pp. 87–100; Ibidem, *Esja´s Cave. Giantesses, Sons and Mothers in Kjalnesinga saga*, [in:] *Meetings at the borders. Studies dedicated to Professor Wladyslav Duczko*, ed. by J. Popelska-Grzybowska, J. Iwaszczuk in co-operation with Bozena Jozefow Czerwinska, Acta Archaeologica Pultuskiensia 5, Pultusk 2016, pp. 79–83.

[10] Ásdís Egilsdóttir, *Masculinity and/or Peace? On Eyrbyggja saga's Máhlíðingamál*, [in:] *Frederic Amory in Memoriam. Old Norse-Icelandic Studies*, ed. by J. Lindow, G. Clark, Berkeley, Los Angeles 2015, pp. 135–146.

[11] Ásdís Egilsdóttir, *Með karlmannlegri hughreysti og hreinni trú*, [in:] *Hugvísindaþing 2005: Erindi af ráðstefnu hugvísindadeildar og guðfræðideildar Háskóla Íslands, 18. nóvember 2005*, ed.

are presented at important conferences, such as *The International Congress of Medieval Studies*, Kalamazoo, and *International Medieval Congress*, Leeds. In 2008 and 2010, I organized an interdisciplinary Nordic workshop together with Henric Bagerius. In 2017, one year after my retirement, I gladly accepted to partake in sessions at Leeds, with promising young scholars including Yoav Tirosh, who has written his MA thesis on masculinity and male sexuality, and Gareth Evans who has published a book on masculinity and the Icelandic sagas[12]. In present-day theoretical studies, we find thought-provoking discussions on medieval sexuality and same-sex relationships.

In 2015, March 12–13, Remigiusz Gogosz organized an international conference at the University of Rzeszów: *Constructing Masculinity in Old Norse Society*. The following articles were presented as papers at this conference.Hegemonic masculinity is the topic of Csete Katona's article on masculinity and social status. The article demonstrates how two male characters in a saga can complement each other, with one representing valour and the other balance. Occasionally, one man can possess both types of qualities. Remigiusz Gogosz analyses the performance of *mannjafnaðr* in *Magnússona saga*. His analysis of the episode and several other saga passages shows how games and sports are important in defining masculinity. The interest in emotions in medieval literature has been growing since the appearance of Barbara Rosenwein's *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*[13]. Jakub Morawiec studies weeping and manly behaviour, with special emphasis on how emotional communities express mourning for the dead kings. One of the examples he uses is the episode where the poet Sigvatr Þórðarson compares the husband's grief to his own, and he boldly states that the king's men have suffered a greater loss than the man who has merely lost a woman's embrace. Sigvatr portrays the husband as a wailing effeminate in comparison with his own bloody tears and masculine poetry. Marion Poilvez discusses the contradictory physical strength of Grettir Ásmundarson and his weaknesses, such as fear of the dark, that he shares with another well-known saga-hero and outlaw: Gísli Súrsson. She explains how outlaw narratives can help our understanding of the concept of masculinity in the sagas. The article also analyses an anectote in the saga where a servant-woman sees Grettir naked and tells a farmer's daughter mockingly that she was suprised at the small size of his masculine attributes. However, it must not be overlooked that Grettir overheard the conversation, seized the serving woman reciting a poem, and seems to have proven his case since she *frýði eigi um Gretti*

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by Haraldur Bernharðsson, Margrét Guðmundsdóttir, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, Þórdís Gísladóttir, Reykjavík 2006, pp. 31–40.

[12] Y. Tirosh, *The fabulous saga of Guðmundr inn ríki: representation of sexuality in Ljósvetninga saga*, Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 2014. Unpublished MA thesis, G.L. Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Oxford 2019.

[13] B. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Ithaca N.Y., 2006.

um þat er yfir lauk[14]. Tommy Kuusela brings forward the hyper-masculinity of Þórr in his analysis of *Þrymskviða*. When insulted, Þórr threatens to use physical violence. Kuusela points out that Þórr's masculinity is never questioned, on the other hand he is endowed with hyper-masculinity. The article includes a useful discussion of terminology. "God cyning", a good king as a hegemonic male, is the topic of Łukasz Neubauer's article. He analyses "Hrothgar's sermon" in *Beowulf* and draws attention to echoes from Saint Augustine's *City of God*. Włodzimierz Gogłoza studies the social status of women in medieval Iceland, in the light of the medieval lawbook *Grágás*. The article shows clearly that men benefitted more from the legal system than women. However, Icelandic women had more rights than European women in the Middle Ages.

In addition, three more scholars have contributed to this volume, Ármann Jakobsson, Yoav Tirosh and Miriam Mayburd. The fascinating, ambiguous and flexible masculinity of Loki is the subject of Ármann Jakobsson's essay. He emphasizes that Óðinn and Loki are able to become theriomorphic. When Loki changes into an animal, he also becomes female. Copulating with an animal in female animal form makes him as transgressive as anything expected from a human male. Does Loki have a gender at all?

Applying Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, Yoav Tirosh analyses the complex meaning of milk and milk products in several saga texts. He points out that there is an equation between milk and femininity.

The *meykóngr* (maiden king) is an intriguing figure. To put it simply, a *meykóngr* reigns by the virtue of her claiming masculinity and refusing to submit to a man. Analysing the longer version of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, Miriam Mayburd draws attention to the complex, ambigious character of the *meykóngr* persona in this text, showing how this saga variant reflects nuanced conceptions of masculinity in a newly aristocratic society of late medieval Iceland.

Masculinity studies take a fresh look at the traditional male pursuits as well as focusing on less well-studied areas. The articles in this volume show considerable variety. Inevitably, some genres are missing, such as translated texts, entertaining literature and contemporary sagas. These texts add greatly to our knowledge and understanding of medieval masculinity. It is my sincere hope that this volume will inspire scholars to continue to work on this fascinating subject.

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ODKRYWAJĄC ŚREDNIOWIECZNĄ MĘSKOŚĆ. HISTORIA OSOBISTA

Streszczenie

We wstępie Ásdís Egilsdóttir opowiada, w jaki sposób jako pierwsza zapoznała się z naukami o „męskości" i o jej pionierskich latach nauczania na uniwersytecie o „męskości" w literaturze średniowiecznej. W przedstawianym tomie pisze krótkie słowa wprowadzające do każdego artykułu.