

Men Who Brew: Masculinity and the Production of Drink in Medieval Icelandic Literature

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INTRODUCTION

The role of alcohol in Old Norse-Icelandic literature has received considerable attention from scholars. Some of this work has examined the social effects of consuming alcohol, especially the cohesion, competition, and sometimes strife that drinking creates among bands of warriors (e.g., Enright 1996; Jochens 1993). The mead of poetry and the myths surrounding it have also been the focus of intense interest.¹ In general, these analyses have concentrated on the cultural and religious significance of drinks and drinking, not on how the drinks were produced. In practice, the brewers of alcoholic drink in medieval Scandinavia are usually assumed to have been women (cf. Ellis Davidson 1998, 138–41; Haywood 2000, 211; Jochens 1995, 127). It is curious, therefore, that the two brewers who receive the most extended treatment in medieval Norse literature—“Ale-Hood,” the protagonist of the Icelandic tale *Ölkofra þáttr* (1950), and the mythological being Ægir, who brews ale for the gods—are both male.² So, too, are the dwarfs who, according to Snorri Sturluson, brew the fabled mead of poetry (1998, 3).

1. For example, Doht (1974); Orton (2007); Quinn (2010); Schjødt (2008, 134–72); Stephens (1972); and Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002).

2. The treatment of sex as binary in this article is not intended to imply that any such binary exists in a biological or ontological sense. Rather, it reflects the fact that Norse literature itself, as Gareth Lloyd Evans points out, “generally understand[s] sex as a fact of biology” (2019, 7). For a cogent critique of Carol Clover’s countervailing “one-sex” model (Clover 1993), see Evans (2019, 12–5).

Recent scholarship on the construction of masculinities in the medieval Norse world³ suggests new ways of thinking about the roles and status of these male brewers. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock articulate four key principles that inform this work: First, “gender is socially constructed,” and the defining characteristics of a particular gender are therefore historically and culturally contingent (Evans and Hancock 2020, 3). Second, “gender is performative” (Evans and Hancock 2020, 3).⁴ As Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, and Kathleen Lennon emphasize, the performance of gender is in most cases neither conscious nor deliberate but instead is the (re-)enactment of an internalized cultural script (Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon 2002, 99). Third, “identity is intersectional”: how masculinity or femininity is performed also depends on age, status, and other aspects of an individual’s identity (Evans and Hancock 2020, 4). Finally, “masculinities are multiple”:

While it may be the case that a particular type of masculinity is culturally exalted and dominant in a given context or genre (what is typically termed “hegemonic masculinity”), there is nevertheless a plurality of ways of being masculine, some of which are viewed as more culturally acceptable than others. (Evans and Hancock 2020, 4)

Though its specific parameters are historically and situationally contingent, hegemonic masculinity represents the constellation of idealized masculine traits that is valorized in a particular culture, “the crystallization of the masculine ideal,” as Gareth Lloyd Evans puts it (2019, 16). Evans has applied the concept of hegemonic masculinity in his extended analysis of masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders). He observes that “few men, if any, live up to the ideal”; instead, the majority of men “embody a masculinity that is subordinate to the idealized form” (17). This results in a “hierarchization of different modalities of masculinity” and competition among men for status and dominance (17). At the very bottom of this hierarchy are “those who are thought to be *argr/ragr*” (18). This scathingly insulting adjective, along with the related noun *ergi*, is discussed in detail by Preben Meulengracht

3. Cf. Evans (2019); Tirosh (2020); and the essays anthologized in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature* (Evans and Hancock 2020). For a historical survey of the study of gender in Norse sagas, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2017). For an overview of the field of gender studies and related theory, see Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon (2002).

4. The notion of gender as performative is developed at length in Judith Butler’s influential *Gender Trouble* (1990).

Sørensen, who concludes that *argr*, when used of a man, has the primary meaning of “playing the female part in sexual relations,” that is, being anally penetrated (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 18). This base meaning acquired additional connotations of “unmanliness” in general and was applied to, for example, practicing certain forms of witchcraft (19). This expanded cluster of meanings led Meulengracht Sørensen to conclude that “the third and most important meaning of the words *argr* and *ragr* is ‘cowardly, unmanly, effeminate’ with regard to morals or character” (19–20).⁵

Between the hegemonic masculine ideal and the despised *argr* man lies the multiplicity of masculinities available to medieval authors and editors for depicting characters in Norse literature. In this article, I consider male characters who brew alcoholic beverages across a range of genres to investigate where these brewers appear to fit in the hierarchy of masculinities found in Icelandic literature from the long thirteenth century. To put these texts into cultural and material context, the first section below surveys archaeological and written evidence to address the question of how the work of brewing was gendered in medieval Iceland. Next, a consideration of how male brewers are represented in the more “realistic” saga-genres demonstrates that brewing alcoholic drink is associated with other characteristics of subordinate masculinities and thus can itself be viewed as a marker of relatively low male status. A final section turns to examples of male brewers in Norse mythology and explores how the insights gained from examining the sagas might be applicable in these non-human contexts.

WOMEN’S WORK?

Brewing is generally assumed to have been a household task that, like cooking and the textile arts, would have been part of the domestic work done by women *fyrir innan stökk* (within the threshold).⁶ One source of evidence for such labor is archaeology. Some crafts and occupations leave unambiguous physical traces. For example, spindle whorls and loom weights, which are common finds in graves and settlement sites, provide definitive evidence of spinning and weaving activity. These

5. See also Ármann Jakobsson (2008, 55–8).

6. Jenny Jochens was among the first scholars to look systematically at women’s work in medieval Scandinavia (Jochens 1993; 1995). This article is indebted to her work for the identification of many Icelandic texts that mention brewing.

artifacts are strongly associated with women in Northern Europe; indeed, the presence of tools for making or embellishing textiles has been taken as *prima facie* evidence of the presence of women at a site (Wallace 2000, 213).⁷ In contrast, brewing can be accomplished without any specialized equipment (Bennett 1996, 17–8), so grave goods are not, unfortunately, of much help in identifying brewers.

Evidence of the brewing process itself can sometimes be identified, however. The first step in the production of ale is “malting,” a process in which cereal grains are first sprouted and then dried or “roasted.” Occasionally, the presence of large quantities of charred grain allows a malting kiln to be identified in the archaeological record.⁸ Intriguingly, a spindle-whorl was recovered from an Iron Age malting kiln in Uppåkra, Sweden (Larsson, Svensson, and Apel 2019, 1965), which suggests that women may have been involved in malting grain at this site. By the thirteenth century, Iceland was mostly dependent on imports for its grain supply, and barley imported in the form of malt is assumed to have been destined for brewing (Gelsing 1981, 14). To make ale, the malt is first ground and then heated with water (“mashed”). To start the fermentation, yeast is added to the “wort” produced from the mash. The ale would have been ready to drink in a few days (Bennett 1996, 19; Nordland 1969, 244) and would have been consumed fresh because, absent a preservative such as hops, ale goes sour quickly (Bennett 1996, 19; Nordland 1969, 245). In some cases, the mashing or wort stages of brewing can be identified either by the presence of “brewing stones”⁹ (Nordland 1969, 123–4; Grønnesby 2017; Viklund 2011) or from the remains of herbs added to the brew as flavoring agents (Behre 1999, 36–41; Viklund 2011). In an analysis of Viking Age settlement sites, Graham and Merryn Dineley

7. Neil Price stresses that the identification of artifacts with sex or gender is more problematic than has long been assumed. He critiques the circular reasoning that assigns gender to graves based on the assemblage of deposited artifacts, then relies in part on those assignments to infer a relationship between artifact type and gender (Price 2014, 179). The association of women with textile crafts in the archaeological record remains strong, however, and Price himself interprets the presence of textile tools and other “female” artifacts in (osteologically) male graves as suggesting a deviation from gender norms that potentially signals that the deceased was a practitioner of magic (Price 2019, 102–3, 223).

8. For examples of archaeological evidence of malting in Northern Europe, see Nelson’s *The Barbarian’s Beverage* and references cited therein (2005, 80).

9. “Brewing stones” show a characteristic pattern of cracking from the thermal shock that occurs when hot stones are added to cold mash or wort. This procedure allows liquid to be heated in wooden vessels that cannot be set directly over a fire.

interpret the presence of large drains and abundant brewing stones as evidence of ale production and conclude that “every Viking or Norse farmstead had a brew house” (Dineley and Dineley 2013); this suggests that brewing was, as has long been assumed, a ubiquitous household task. Karin Viklund discusses the excavation of a medieval Swedish farm occupied from the eleventh through the thirteenth century: the evidence shows that the likely brew house was “situated close to a long house” (Viklund 2011, 243), which makes it probable that this form of household labor was indeed performed by women.

This is as far as the archaeological evidence can take us, which leaves written texts as the primary basis for determining if and how the labor of brewing was gendered in the medieval Norse world. England, for which the documentary record is considerably more complete than is the case in Scandinavia, provides an instructive parallel. In her extensive study of brewing in medieval England, Judith M. Bennett found that women performed or supervised all ale-brewing until the late Middle Ages, when the craft became professionalized. Men gradually took over commercial production, though women continued to brew at home (1996, 14–36). Well into the fourteenth century, even brewing ale for sale was still carried out exclusively by women in England (Bennett 1996, 25). The more limited evidence from Scandinavia suggests a similar pattern there (Söderberg 2007, 136; Unger 2004, 226).

Icelandic sagas dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries occasionally mention brewing. Two words, *öl* and *mungát*, are used for ale in Old Norse-Icelandic texts; *mungát* is thought to have been the stronger brew (Fell 1975, 86).¹⁰ Both types were produced from malted cereal grains, typically barley. The need to heat the mash/wort accounts for one of the usual verbs for making ale, *heita* (to heat); the other is simply *gera* (to make).¹¹ In Iceland, it is likely that barley ale was the only alcoholic drink produced locally and that by the thirteenth century, any barley or barley malt available would have been used for

10. In this article *öl* and *mungát* are translated as “ale” (or occasionally “strong ale” for the latter), rather than “beer,” to avoid confusion with ON *bjórr*. Though cognate to modern English “beer,” *bjórr* originally designated a drink based on honey and fruit; the product was considerably more potent and precious than the grain-based drink designated by *öl* or *mungát* (Fell 1975, 87–9; see also Kylstra 1974).

11. Though a verb *brugga*, cognate to English “brew” and having the same meaning, is attested in Old Norse-Icelandic, it is rarely used in Norse texts (Cleasby, Vigfusson, and Craigie 1957, s.v. “brugga”). For mead, the verb *blanda* (to mix) is used, probably because pure honey ferments rather slowly and presumably would have been mixed with another source of fermentable sugars, such as fruit, to promote faster brewing.

brewing ale (Zori et al. 2013, 154). Mead (*mjóðr*) would rarely, if ever, have been consumed in Iceland; it was a rare and precious drink that would have been imbibed only by the elite (Fell 1975, 81). Nonetheless, it played an important role in Icelandic literature, especially poetry.

The Icelandic *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas), which were written soon after the events they describe, provide the most direct textual evidence for brewing practices in the long thirteenth century. *Sturlunga saga*, the great collection of *samtíðarsögur* compiled c. 1300 (Hallberg 1993, 616) mentions brewing only rarely. Ale was surely produced more often than these sparse mentions suggest, and the implication is that, like cooking, dairying, and so on, it was too commonplace to be worth mentioning in most instances. Of the four characters in *Sturlunga saga* who are identified as brewers, three are male, which suggests that a man's brewing ale might have been considered unusual and hence noteworthy. The first such brewer is an Icelander named Þórólfr who is twice called both a *munkr* (monk) and an *ölgerðarmaðr* (literally "ale-making-man," i.e., brewer) in *Íslendinga saga* (Sturla Þórðarson 1946, 488, 491). The second is a professional brewer (*heitumaðr*) named Erlendr who makes ale for the attendees at Iceland's annual assembly, the *Þing* (Sturla Þórðarson 1946, 267). The final example of a male brewer in *Sturlunga saga* is Björn, a retainer of a powerful landowner named Brynjólfr in Norway: "Hann gerði öl ok varðveitti drykk hversdagliga" (*Porgíls saga skarða* 1946, 107) [He brewed ale and was responsible for the drink every day]. As Jochens points out, these male brewers ply their trade in all- or mostly-male environments (1993, 171; Jochens 1995, 127): Þórólfr the monk presumably brews in his monastery. Erlendr brews specifically at the *Þing*, where the few women present were typically daughters for whom their (male) relatives were seeking husbands; as Jochens wryly comments, "once married . . . women were too busy" to go (1995, 115). Finally, there is no indication of any female presence in Brynjólfr's household, where Björn was in charge of providing drink.

The more typical situation on Icelandic farms is likely to be that described in the contemporary saga *Porgíls saga skarða*: "Húsfreyja var at ölgerð ok með henni Björn Sigurðarson ræðismaðr" (*Porgíls saga skarða* 1946, 129) [The mistress of the house was brewing ale, and with her Björn Sigurðarson the steward]. This brewing is considered worthy of mention only because it explains why the doors of the hall are standing open when enemies arrive, and it is reasonable to infer that the situation—the mistress of the house overseeing the brewing

of ale, with assistance from other household members such as the steward—reflects the usual (and therefore unremarkable) practice.

Evidence from *Jarnteinabók Þorláks byskups in forna* (“*Jarnteinabók I*”), a record of miracles performed by the Icelandic Bishop (later Saint) Þorlákr, confirms this perception. Þorlákr died in 1193 (Bibire 1993). The earliest surviving manuscript of *Jarnteinabók I*, AM 645 4to, dates to c. 1220 (Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2002, c), so Þorlákr’s deeds would still have been part of living memory. One of the saint’s miracles involves ale-brewing, and *Jarnteinabók I* paints a vivid portrait of an entire household at their wits’ end over a stuck fermentation:

Á þæ þeim er at Reykjum heitir var mungát gort á móti Páli byskupi þetta sumar. . . . En er kveykvur váru lagðar undir mungátsefni ok allt vandliga til búit þá gerði eigi við taka, ok váru kveykurnar ónýtar raunar. Varð þá hversvetna í leit at síðan, þess er í hug kom, ok kom þó eigi gørð í mungát, ok skipti þat dægum mjök mörpum er svá búit stóð, ok þótti þá flestum nær sýnt at allt myndi ónýtask. Þá hét húsfreyjan, er allt ábyrgðisk í, á enn sæla Þorlák byskup, at hann skyldi á nokkvern veg leiðréttta þeira mál. En er hon hafði heitit þá kom þegar gørð í kerin góð ok gnóg, ok varð þat et bezta mungát, ok þótti sú en fegrsta jartein vera þeim mǫnnum er kunnleikr var á. (Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2002, 113)

(At that farm which is called Reykjar, strong ale was brewed for a visit from Bishop Páll that summer. . . . But when the *kveykvur*¹² were placed under the wort and everything carefully prepared, the brewing would not start, and the *kveykvur* were proved useless. After that, whatever came to mind was attempted, and yet no fermentation started in the ale, and it happened that the household continued like this for very many days, and then it seemed obvious to most of them that everything would be wasted. Then the house-mistress, who was responsible for everything, called on the blessed Bishop Þorlákr, that he should in some way rectify their situation. And when she had called [on him], at once a good and plentiful brewing started in the pot, and it turned into the best ale, and that was thought to be the most beautiful miracle by the people who were acquainted with it.)

It is clear in this anecdote that, although the whole household is involved in the brewing, it is the mistress of the house who is responsible for overseeing the work.

12. The nature of the *kveykvur*, literally “kindlers” or “quickeners,” is uncertain; perhaps the wort was warmed, or perhaps some solid or semisolid material containing sugars or other yeast nutrients was added to the brew.

Additional confirmation of women's role in brewing comes from a very different type of source, the *fornaldarsaga* (legendary saga) *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*. Usually set in far-off lands or long-ago times, the legendary sagas frequently contain fantastic elements, but daily life even in the most exotic settings mirrors that of ordinary society. In *Hálfs saga*, a king named Alrekr finds himself with two wives, and he declares that he will stay married to the one “er bettra aul giordi” [who should brew better ale]; the two queens then “keptuzt um aulgiordína” [contended in ale-brewing] (*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* 1981, 1). Apparently, to imagine women, even those of royal status, brewing beer seemed neither outlandish nor inappropriate to a medieval Icelandic audience.

A final fragment of evidence comes from a skaldic verse by Ormr Steinþórsson, who uses the woman-kenning “hrosta . . . gæi-Prúðr hanglúðrs” (Ormr Steinþórsson 2017, 327) [“watching Prúðr [name of a goddess] of the hanging vessel of mash”¹³ (Ormr Steinþórsson 2017, 327)]. Kennings that refer to women in terms of ale or mead are common, but most could refer equally well to serving or preparing the drink. In this case, however, *hrosti* specifically denotes the grain mash used to make ale (Cleasby, Vigfusson, and Craigie 1957, s.v. “hrosti”), so the woman in Ormr’s poem is essentially called a goddess of brewing.

Taken together, the range of evidence from all sources—archaeology, the cognate culture of medieval England, and medieval Icelandic texts—confirms that, for women, including women of the highest rank, to be in charge of brewing was indeed the normal state of affairs in medieval Scandinavian households. What, then, are we to make of the male figures who practice this craft across a range of literary genres?

BREWING IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS: THE CASE OF ALE-HOOD

In the *Íslendingasögur*, brewing is rarely mentioned. Even when it is, the identity of the brewer is usually effaced by constructions such as “var ǫlheita mikil” (*Grettis saga* 1936, 17) [there was a great ale-brewing], and “Yngvar . . . lét þá ǫl heita” (*Egils saga* 1933, 81) [Yngvar . . . then had ale brewed]. The only character, male or female, who is unambiguously identified as a brewer in the *Íslendingasögur* is Þórhallr in *Ǫlkofra þáttr* (The Tale of Ale-Hood; *Ǫlkofra þáttr* 1950), which has been dated to c. 1250 CE (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, xxxviii). Þórhallr’s character and status are integral to the function of the plot, which

13. Translation by Russell Poole (Ormr Steinþórsson 2017, 327), who tentatively dates Ormr’s work to the late twelfth century (Poole 2017, 323).

is summarized briefly here: Þórhallr, known as Ólkofri (Ale-Hood), makes extra money by brewing ale for sale at the *Ping*; in this respect, he resembles Erlendr in *Íslendinga saga* (discussed above). Ale-Hood accidentally burns down a woodland that is owned in common by six *goðar* (chieftains). They decide to sue the brewer at the next *Ping*. Ale-Hood's prospects look bleak until a young man, Broddi Bjarnason, decides to help him with the case. The two of them manipulate the *goðar* into accepting an insultingly poor settlement, and the tale concludes with a series of detailed and humiliating insults that Broddi directs at the outwitted *goðar*. It is highly unlikely that the events described ever happened: Þórhallr is mentioned nowhere else, and though the *goðar* who oppose him are known from other sources, they lived at different times (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, xxxv–xxxvi). Thus, Ale-Hood's characteristics can be attributed to folk tradition or authorial invention, not to any cultural memory of him as a historical figure, and he may well reflect a popular stereotype or caricature of the (male) brewer who provided ale at the assembly.

Before examining Ale-Hood's character in detail, it is worth quoting part of the description of hegemonic masculinity that Evans distilled from a close reading of the corpus of *Íslendingasögur*:

To embody a hegemonic masculine position a character: must be of fine physical appearance; must act heroically (which includes the display of physical and martial prowess); must be bold, sincere, and responsible . . . must act according to the dictates of honour at all times (must be both willing and able to exact due vengeance, and must act amicably with kinsmen) . . . and must not take part in “irregular” sexual practices. (Evans 2019, 25)

We can add to Evans's description an expectation of emotional stoicism. In *Emotion in Old Norse Literature*, Sif Rikhardsdóttir argues that male protagonists in these texts are expected to repress all outward signs of emotion:

Emotive behaviour is . . . a clear signal of gender categorisations and frames and reinforces ideological notions of masculinity and femininity. . . . This concern with masculinity and its associated codes for emotive behaviour (or suppression) is evident in the effort to avoid emotional display, particularly tears.¹⁴ (Sif Rikhardsdóttir 2017, 133, 138)

14. Kristen Mills complicates this picture somewhat and argues that it was not shameful for men to weep from grief as a “tribute” to a deceased person who was “held in exceptionally high esteem” (Mills 2014, 495). The very value of this “tribute,” however, lies in its excursion from normal behavior.

With this picture of the ideal saga-man in mind, we turn now to how Þórhallr Ale-Hood is described in his *þáttr*: First, “lítill var hann ok ljótr” (*Qlkofra þáttr* 1950, 83) [he was small and ugly]; he thus has the opposite of a “fine physical appearance.” Next, “honum váru augu þung” (*Qlkofra þáttr* 1950, 84) [his eyes were dim], and this is given as the explanation of why he wears the hood that is part of his nickname. His visual debility is the antithesis of the fierce, flashing gaze typical of heroes: in *Völsunga saga*, for example, “augu Sigurðar váru svá snör at fár einn þorði gegn at sjá” (1965, 58) [Sigurðr’s eyes were so keen that few dared to look at them]. Ale-Hood is also “heldr við aldr” (*Qlkofra þáttr* 1950, 83) [rather advanced in age]; significantly, the retainer Björn who brews for Brynjólfr in *Porgíls saga skarða* (see above) is also called an “aldraðr maðr” (1946, 107) [elderly man]. Old age is generally associated with a loss of masculinity in the sagas, proverbially so in *Hrafnkels saga*: “Svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk” (1950, 126) [As someone ages, so does he become *argr*].¹⁵ Finally, though Þórhallr himself is never accused of “irregular sexual practices,” it is telling that the one other man named anywhere in saga-literature as a brewer at the *Þing*, Erlendr, is nicknamed *bakrauf*, “asshole” (*Sturla Þórðarson* 1946, 267). Susceptibility to anal penetration by other men is central to the concept of *ergi*, so this nickname carries more than a hint of sexual deviance.

In character, Ale-Hood is “heldr síkr” (*Qlkofra þáttr* 1950, 83–4) [rather stingy] and “hann var maðr ekki nafnfræg” (*Qlkofra þáttr* 1950, 84) [he was not a famous man], whereas a typical saga-hero is generous and has won fame for his deeds. Throughout *Qlkofra þáttr*, Ale-Hood’s behavior is neither emotionally controlled nor “bold, sincere, and responsible.” After some empty boasting about how much support he will get in the lawsuit, he finds that he is in fact friendless and no one will help him. At this point, Broddi takes pity on the miserable Ale-hood, and he sends a messenger to bring the brewer to the booth of Broddi’s kinsman Þorsteinn:

[Maðr] gekk út, ok þar hjá búðarvegginum hitti hann Qlkofra. Stóð hann þar ok grét aumliga. Þessi maðr bað hann ganga inn í búðina ok taka af sér ópit,—“ok eigi skaltu snökta, er þú kemr til Þorsteins.” Qlkofri varð grátfeginn. (*Qlkofra þáttr* 1950, 86)

15. For discussion of old age as diminishing masculine status in the Icelandic sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson (2005); Clover (1993); Evans (2019, 78–83); Morcom (2018); and Jón Viðar Sigurðson (2008).

([The man] went out, and there by the wall of the booth he met Qlkofri. He was standing there and was weeping wretchedly. The man told him to go into the booth and to leave off his wailing,—“and you must not snivel, when you arrive at Þorsteinn’s.” Qlkofri began weeping for joy.)

Ale-Hood thus displays, to a comical degree, the opposite of the rigid emotional control characteristic of hegemonic masculinity in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Overall, Ale-Hood’s gender performance embodies a subordinate masculinity indicative of low status. Yet it is that performance that ultimately leads to his success. First, Ale-Hood’s relative weakness makes the *goðar*’s acts of persecution and prosecution unworthy of their own higher status. As Evans observes, only defeating a man of equal or greater status enhances a man’s own standing, whereas dominating a weaker man invites censure (2019, 50). Meulengracht Sorensen concurs and notes that, in laying a charge against the wretched Ale-Hood, the *goðar* “have acted in a manner below the dignity of proper men” (Meulengracht Sorensen 1983, 37). It is this very fact that elicits Broddi’s sympathy—he characterizes the chieftains’ prosecution of the case as “lítilræði” (*Qlkofra þáttur* 1950, 86) [meanness]—and Broddi’s own status is enhanced by his successful handling of the case and the insults he heaps on the defeated *goðar*. William Sayers reads the whole *þáttur* as fundamentally a conflict between the untried young Broddi and the arrogant chieftains: “What is at stake is . . . enhanced prestige” (1991, 48). No “enhanced prestige” accrues, however, to Ale-Hood himself, who simply carries out Broddi’s plan; indeed, once the case is won, Ale-Hood himself is scarcely mentioned, and the final section of the *þáttur* focuses on Broddi and the chieftains.

Nonetheless, Broddi’s stratagem involves a (conscious) performance by Ale-Hood that relies for its success on the social expectations created by the brewer’s (unconscious) gender performance of subordinate masculinity. On Broddi’s advice, Ale-Hood goes to two of the *goðar* and obsequiously begs them to take pity on him: “Hann fell til jarðar allr ok kraup til fóta þeim” (*Qlkofra þáttur* 1950, 87) [He fell right down to the earth and crept to their feet]. He then carries on at length, flattering the chieftains, imploring them for help, and piteously expressing his terror that the other plaintiffs will kill him. The two *goðar* find this display “allvesaliga” (*Qlkofra þáttur* 1950, 87) [completely pathetic], but it never occurs to them to question its sincerity. Precisely because Ale-Hood is *not* a saga-hero, “bold, sincere, and responsible,” his play-acting is completely convincing.

To sum up: to the extent that Icelandic sagas allow us to evaluate the social situation of male brewers, these men are associated with subordinate masculinities. These identities are intersectional with both (advanced) age and (low) social rank: Ale-Hood and Björn are both described as old, and Ale-Hood and Erlendr are not wealthy landowners but instead must rely on brewing to earn money. What, then, are we to make of a male deity who brews? The next section considers the case of Ægir and other brewers in the world of Norse myth.

BREWERS IN NORSE MYTHOLOGY

Before discussing Ægir, the most prominent brewer in the mythic corpus, it is worth giving some attention to the brothers Fjalarr and Galarr, two *dvergar* (dwarfs) who brew the mead of poetry in Snorri's account of its origin (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 3). The antiquity of Snorri's version of the myth has been questioned: Roberta Frank, for example, argues that much of it is a late invention, either by Snorri or his immediate predecessors, that was created to explain obscure or misinterpreted kennings (1981). The skaldic corpus itself is difficult to interpret here, as kennings of the general type "people of the rock/mountain" can refer either to giants or dwarfs, and determining which is meant in a particular instance often depends on the interpreter's presuppositions about the poet's intended meaning. Similarly, "Fjalarr" and "Galarr" occur as names for giants as well as dwarfs (Simek 1993, 84, 97). For the purposes of this article, however, however, the origin of the myth is beside the point: for thirteenth-century Icelanders, either an inherited tradition that dwarfs brewed the mead was readily accepted, or else it seemed natural to them to assign the brewing of a mythic drink to dwarfs. Part of the explanation presumably lies in dwarfs' skill in making magically potent artifacts of all kinds, but their other creations, such as Þórr's hammer or Freyr's ship, clearly lie in the realm of smithing or carpentry, crafts typically practiced by men. In light of the above discussion of brewers in the sagas, then, is there evidence to suggest that these dwarfs may also embody a type of subordinate masculinity?

First, a caveat: the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity discussed thus far are based on analyses of Icelandic sagas. Because the specific expectations of hegemonic masculinity are contingent on context, they cannot be applied uncritically across genres, as Evans emphasizes (2019, 146–7). Further work is needed to elucidate fully how masculinities are conceptualized in Norse myth. Nevertheless, in many respects,

the divine society depicted in both Snorri's work and the poetic *Edda* mirrors human culture, especially in its more quotidian aspects: the gods preside in halls where their followers drink and feast, they meet in an assembly to make decisions, they hold a funeral for Baldr, and so forth. Thus, behaviors associated with subordinate masculinities in the sagas may tentatively be interpreted as having a similar significance in the mythic realm.

Insofar as schemas derived from the sagas apply, *dvergar* do indeed appear to embody a subordinate form of masculinity. In both Snorri's *Edda* and eddic poetry, dwarfs are, almost without exception, male.¹⁶ In sagas, they are often described as physically ugly (Simek 1993, 68). In Norse literature generally, they are renowned for their skill in creating precious objects such as swords (Battles 2005, 38–45). It is therefore noteworthy that Ale-Hood is not only a brewer but a smith and carpenter as well: “Var hann hagr við járn ok tré” (*Ólkofra þáttur* 1950, 83) [He was skillful with iron and wood]; these abilities notwithstanding, “engi var hann ípróttamaðr” (*Ólkofra þáttur* 1950, 83) [he was not an accomplished man]; in other words, he lacked the more prestigious attainments proper to elite men. Ale-Hood's shielding of his weak eyes is also reminiscent of dwarfs, who characteristically shun the daylight (Battles 2005, 38). Finally, and significantly, dwarfs do not engage in combat in Norse myth: though they forge powerful weapons, they do not wield them. In this respect, they resemble women, who were prohibited from carrying weapons in the medieval law code *Grágás* (1852, 2:203–4).

The dwarfs of eddic myth can thus be viewed as an entire class of being that embodies a type of subordinate masculinity. It seems that, in Norse tradition, the subordinate status associated with noncombatant male artisans has been abjected from the gods onto the *dvergar*. It is striking that there is no craftsman-deity among the *Æsir* analogous to those in other Indo-European traditions, for example, Hephaistos/Vulcan in the Greek/Roman pantheon, or Goibniu of the Irish Tuatha Dé Danaan. At least one of the *Æsir* evidently views all dwarfs with contempt: Pórr is physically revolted by the dwarf who wishes to marry

16. *Fáfnismál* contains a cryptic reference to “dœtr Dvalins” (*Fáfnismál* 2014, 305 st. 13.6) [daughters of Dvalinn], but the same strophe also identifies these beings as *normir* (“norms”; st. 13.2), which calls into question whether these female offspring of a (male) dwarf were considered dwarfs themselves. Female dwarfs do appear in a few *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas) and *riddarasögur* (romances), but these may reflect Continental influence.

his daughter (*Alvíssmál* 2014, 438 st. 2), and the god capriciously kicks the dwarf Litr into the fire at Baldr's funeral (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 46). Assigning the brewing of the mead of poetry to dwarfs is consistent with this division of male roles between elite Æsir and subordinate *dvergjar*: if brewing is to be done by a male mythological figure, a dwarf would be the logical choice.

The other brewer found in Norse myth is Ægir, and at first, he might seem like an exception to the association of brewing with subordinate masculinities that has been identified thus far: as a deity of the sea, Ægir might be expected to appear as a powerful, and potentially destructive, force. The noun *ægir* can mean simply "sea," and the oldest concept of Ægir does indeed seem to be as a personification of the ocean; the notion of him as a brewer may have arisen from the visual resemblance between surf and the froth of a fermenting vat. In skaldic poetry, Ægir's role as a sea-deity is apparent; for example, one verse refers to "the jaws of Ægir/the sea":

Fœrir björn, þars bára
brestr, undinna festa
opt í ægis kjapta
úrsvöl Gymis vqlva.
(Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson 2017, 245)

Gymir's spray-cold spae-wife often brings the twisted-rope-bear [ship] into Ægir's jaws [under the waves] where the wave breaks.¹⁷ (Snorri Sturluson 1987, 91)

Ægir occurs here together with "Gymir's spray-cold spae-wife," who is presumably Rán, Ægir's female counterpart. Both Rán, whose name means "robbery, plundering," and her daughters, whose names all mean "wave," appear frequently in skaldic poetry. Judy Quinn notes that, in general, there is a "preponderance of female personifications of the sea in kennings" (2014, 90); Ægir himself is mentioned comparatively rarely. Thus, as a personification of the ocean, his role appears to be secondary to that of the female powers.

In the surviving myths, Ægir's primary role is clearly that of a brewer. The eddic poem *Hymiskviða* tells how Þórr and Týr obtained a huge cauldron for Ægir to use as a brew-pot, and *Lokasenna* relates

17. Translation by Anthony Faulkes (Snorri Sturluson 1987, 91).

the events at the feast where the resulting ale was drunk.¹⁸ There is no doubt that Ægir himself brewed the ale for the festivities: the prose introduction to *Lokasenna* says of Ægir, “hann hafði búið ásum ǫl” (*Lokasenna* 2014, 408) [he had prepared ale for the Æsir], and Loki addresses him directly in st. 65.1: “Ǫl gørðir þú, Ægir” [you brewed ale, Ægir]. Though he entertains the Æsir as his guests, Ægir does not appear to be one of them: Snorri includes Ægir in his list of *jötun*-names (Snorri Sturluson 1998, III st. 421) and depicts him in *Skáldskaparmál* as a visitor to Ásgarðr who is unfamiliar with its customs and culture; it is at the conclusion of Ægir’s visit that he invites the Æsir as a body to visit him in return (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 40). Quinn draws a similar conclusion about the ambiguous nature of Rán and terms her a “sea-deity” who, together with Ægir, resists “straightforward characterization as either a god/goddess or a giant/giantess” (Quinn 2014, 96).

In texts where Ægir acts as a character in the narrative, rather than a force of nature, he is far from embodying the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. On his visit to Ásgarðr, Ægir is portrayed by Snorri as something of a country bumpkin: he is deceived by the Æsir’s illusions (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 1), and the entire opening section of *Skáldskaparmál* uses Ægir’s ignorant questions as a framing device that allows Bragi to explain the craft of poetry and the myths it refers to. In *Hymiskviða* (2014), Ægir is called *barnteitr* (2.2), “merry as a child.” A similar adjective, *kátr* (cheerful), is often used to denote a pleasant state of mild drunkenness (Jochens 1995, 109), but the infantilizing addition “as a child” is unusual. Ægir clearly resents Þórr’s demand in *Hymiskviða* that he brew ale for the gods, but it seems he has little choice but to submit; Meulengracht Sørensen suggests that Ægir is in the position here of a subordinate retainer fulfilling an obligation to entertain his visiting liege (Meulengracht Sørensen 1988, 255).

All of the events discussed so far—Ægir’s visit to the Æsir in Snorri’s *Edda*, Þórr’s acquisition of a cauldron in *Hymiskviða*—lead up to the drama of *Lokasenna*. In this poem, the question of what constitutes hegemonic masculinity among the gods is answered by the text itself: Loki’s taunts would not be insulting unless they referred to behavior that was considered shameful and unworthy, so Loki’s accusations can

18. All references to *Hymiskviða* (2014) and *Lokasenna* (2014) in this article are to the Íslenzk fornrit edition *Éddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*. The poems proper are cited by strophe number and, where relevant, line number; their prose contexts are cited by page number.

be used to infer the masculine ideal that is valorized in the poem.¹⁹ At issue here is not whether the accusations are “true,” nor whether the poem reflects a primarily heathen or Christian viewpoint, but how masculinity is understood within the narrative context of the poem itself. The picture that emerges is highly consistent with the definition of hegemonic masculinity developed for the *Íslendingasögur* by Evans (quoted above). As John McKinnell observes, Loki’s insults fall “under the general headings of *ójafnað* (‘injustice’) and *ergi* (both ‘sexually disgraceful behavior’ and ‘cowardice’)” (2014, 195). Loki even accuses Óðinn of *ergi* directly: after claiming that Óðinn practiced *seiðr*, a form of magic that was considered *argr* when practiced by men (Price 2019, 173–5), Loki says to Óðinn, “ok hugða ek þat args aðal” (*Lokasenna* 24.6) [and I thought that the essence of *argr*]. Ármann Jakobsson agrees that most of Loki’s accusations “have something to do with *ergi*,” and he takes the poem as evidence that “human morals do not apply to the gods” (Ármann Jakobsson 2008, 60–1). In the broader mythic framework, there is some justification for his view. In the specific context of *Lokasenna*, however, the anger and defensiveness of the gods’ reactions demonstrate that even if they have acted as Loki claims, those behaviors are violations of their own values and standards. Regardless of what the Æsir may have done, to be brave, just, and narrowly heterosexual is clearly viewed as normative for the male deities in *Lokasenna*, and Ægir’s conduct can be evaluated accordingly.

In a certain respect, Ægir is central to the action in *Lokasenna*. The poem mentions six different times that the feast is held in his hall (3.2, 4.2, 10.6, 16.6, 18.3, 27.2). In paper manuscripts, the whole poem is titled *Ægisdrekkja*, “Ægir’s drinking party” (Meulengracht Sørensen 1988, 243). In the final strophe of the poem, Loki addresses Ægir directly (*Lokasenna* 2014, 65), so it is evident that Ægir is present during the feast where the drink he has prepared is served. It is remarkable, therefore, that even though Loki kills his servant, abuses his hospitality, and viciously insults him and his guests, Ægir is entirely passive: he *never acts nor speaks* in his own hall—not in *Lokasenna* proper, nor in the prose that frames it, nor in Snorri’s summary of the event. His wife Rán is also silent, but, when the sources are examined closely, it becomes clear that there is no evidence that Rán is present at the feast.

19. Evans employs a similar approach in his analysis of the *Íslendingasögur*: he infers the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in that corpus by considering which failings are viewed with particular scorn (2019, 24–5).

She is not mentioned at all in *Lokasenna* or its accompanying prose. In Snorri's summary of the poem's events, his sequencing of statements gives the impression that Rán and her daughters are in attendance, but they are never explicitly stated to be so. After explaining that Loki kills one of Ægir's servants at the feast, Snorri continues:

Annarr þræll hans er nefndr Eldir. Rán er nefnd kona Ægis, en níu dóetr þeira, svá sem fyrr er ritat. At þeiri veizlu vannsk alt sjálft, bæði vist ok ǫl ok ǫll reiða er til veizlunnar þurfti. Þá urðu Æsir þess varir at Rán átti net þat er hon veiddi í menn alla þá er á sæ kómu. (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 41)

(Another slave of his is named Eldir. Ægir's wife is named Rán, and their nine daughters [are named] as was written above. At that feast, everything served itself, both provisions and ale; also all equipment needed for the feast. Then the Æsir became aware that Rán owned a net in which she caught all the people who went onto the sea.)

Normally, the mistress of the household would serve drink to honored guests, but because the drink serves itself in Ægir's hall, Rán's presence is unnecessary to fulfill this role. The gods "became aware" of Rán's net, but we are not told that they actually saw it, much less that Rán herself showed it to them. In her analysis of Rán across literary genres, Judy Quinn emphasizes the prevalence of violent images of Rán and her daughters as destroyers of men: Quinn characterizes this group of female sea-reivers as a "marauding band" that "inverts the familiar Viking stereotype in terms of gender" (2014, 95). The situation in *Lokasenna*, therefore, can be interpreted as one in which Ægir stays home and brews ale while the women of the family are apparently off a-viking, seizing ships and slaughtering warriors. Even Hofgarða-Refr's skaldic verse, quoted above, can be interpreted to support this view of Ægir's domestic milieu: Rán is bringing her prey home to Ægir. In Ægir, therefore, we may have an example not of a male being who embodies a subordinate masculinity, but of a complete transposition of gender roles in this family group of liminal, oceanic beings who are as much giant as god. In other words, Ægir's household can be read as "queer," and its gender arrangements as an inversion of the "normal" situation among the Æsir (and humanity).

The relationship between Ægir and Rán in *Lokasenna* can be compared to that between the Æsir couple Þórr and Sif at the same event. Þórr, like Rán, is initially absent on a martial mission: the prose introduction to the poem says that he is away in the east (*Lokasenna* 2014,

408), and Snorri adds that the purpose of Þórr's journey is "at drepa tröll (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 40) [to kill trolls]. When Þórr does arrive, he threatens Loki with violence and is clearly enraged, but he also has the self-command not to break the sacred peace of the hall. His wife, Sif, like Ægir, is present from the start. After Loki has insulted several of the gods, Sif ritualistically offers him a drink of mead:

Pá gekk Sif fram ok byrtaði Loka í hrímkálki mjöð ok mælti:

“Heill ver þú nú, Loki!
ok tak við hrímkálki
fullum forns mjaðar[.]”
(*Lokasenna* 2014, 418; st. 53.1-3)

(Then Sif went forward and served mead to Loki in a crystal cup and said:

“May you be well now, Loki!
and accept the crystal cup,
full of aged mead[.]”)

Here, Sif takes on herself the role that would normally be played by the mistress of the hall: Philip N. Anderson rightly interprets Sif's actions as an (unsuccessful) attempt to recall Loki to “the responsibilities which accompany the guest-host relationship” (2002, 154) and so restore peace in the hall. Sif is acting here as a “peace-weaver” in the sense identified by Larry M. Sklute: someone who, like Hroðgar's queen Wealþeow in *Beowulf*, creates “bonds of peace by means of personal behavior or action” (1970, 540). Thus, both Þórr and Sif behave appropriately for beings of their elite status and respective genders. In contrast, Ægir and Rán embody extremes that can be read as an implicit critique of their “queer” arrangement. Lacking the courage of even mediating female characters like Sif, Ægir never confronts his turbulent guest nor dares to so much as speak in his own hall. Lacking even the restraint or pragmatism of ordinary Vikings, Rán is a merciless destroyer of ships, crew, cargo, and all.

The above discussion has shown that, although women were generally in charge of brewing alcoholic drink in the medieval Norse world, men did act as brewers in some circumstances. For a man to engage in this characteristically feminine activity was, however, seen as somewhat problematic. In *Qlkofra þáttr*, a tale in the *Íslendingasögur* genre, brewing is one among many indicators of Qlkofri's subordinate masculinity and low status, and the same appears to be true for two of the male brewers mentioned in contemporary sagas, Björn and Erlendr. In the realm of

myth, the entire race of *dvergar* apparently represents a subordinate class of male artisans that is distinct from, and socially inferior to, the *Æsir*. That the brewing of the mead of poetry is assigned to a pair of dwarfs is consistent with viewing this class of beings as embodying a type of subordinate masculinity in the mythic realm. The case of *Ægir* can be viewed as another case of a brewer occupying a subordinate status, but it can also be read as subverting the idea of “masculinity” altogether. *Ægir*’s situation, in which he undertakes the domestic task of brewing while his wife and daughters are off raiding, can be seen as an inversion of the gender relations considered normative among humans and *Æsir* alike, at least in the context of *Lokasenna*. Ultimately, however, hegemonic ideals are reasserted through a negative portrayal of the actions of both sea-deities. Their inversion of normative gender roles goes too far: *Ægir* is too weak and passive, and *Rán* too brutally aggressive, to have been considered admirable by a medieval Norse audience.

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