

XII: SAGA AF TRISTRAM OK ÍSQND

The *Saga af Tristram ok Ísqnd*, also known as *Tristrams saga ok Ísqndar*, occupies an important position in the history of medieval literature. In part this is because it provides the only complete, though condensed, account of the twelfth-century *Roman de Tristan* by Thomas (of Britain, or d'Angleterre), which now exists otherwise only in fragments, but which formed the basis for Gottfried von Strassburg's unfinished masterpiece, *Tristan und Isold*. From the nineteenth century to the present day the saga has therefore been a major source for the study of the Tristan legend. And the legend itself continues to fascinate now, as it did in the Middle Ages, because it is the quintessential tale of a compulsive love that transcends all other loyalties.

The importance of this saga specifically for Old Norse–Icelandic studies is that it was probably the first of the large-scale works to be translated from French at the behest of Hákon Hákonarson, king of Norway 1217–63. As such it helped to create an enthusiasm in the north for stories of the romance type — which show a concern for love as well as fighting, for the fantastic, for emotions quite freely expressed, for beauty and other sensory delights, for elegant manners, for costly display, and not least for accomplishments such as the knowledge of languages and music. The romance translations made for King Hákon, which embody these characteristics, make up a significant corpus in their own right. They would still do so, assuming that they had survived, even if they had not exerted influence beyond Norway; but in fact they soon arrived in Iceland, where themes and concerns from them were drawn into the Sagas of Icelanders, and where native imitations started to be written and to develop a character of their own. Eventually the romantic sagas, generally known today as *riddarasögur* (Sagas of Knights), came to be one of the dominant genres of Old Icelandic literature.

As regards the saga's origin, the main piece of evidence is the prologue found in the seventeenth-century Icelandic manuscript AM 543 4to, which contains the earliest complete version of the work now extant. This states that the translation was made at Hákon's command in 1226 by a certain Brother Robert. Such attributions always leave room for scepticism, but in this case there is wide agreement that the statements of the prologue are highly plausible, for in most of its parts the saga bears a strong stylistic likeness to

other romance translations made for King Hákon that are preserved in Iceland, and also — most significantly — to *Strengleikar*, a collection of short pieces based on Breton *lais*, which has survived in a Norwegian manuscript from c.1270 and is probably close to its original form. It is apparent, nevertheless, that the *Saga af Tristram ok Ísönd* as we have it is by no means identical to Brother Robert's version and that it has been modified, as one would expect, during the centuries of its transmission in Iceland. It was probably Robert himself who pushed the material in the direction of native sagas by concentrating on the story and omitting the many long passages of reflection that may be said to adorn, or alternatively to clog, the French text; but the very few leaves of the saga surviving from medieval manuscripts, which are themselves Icelandic and no earlier than the mid-fifteenth century, render Thomas's words at somewhat greater length than is the case with the later manuscripts, and thus show that the saga has undergone at least one further round of shortening. There are signs too of material being added from sources other than Thomas. The consequence is that the work contains many discontinuities and inconsistencies, some of which are mentioned in the notes to the extract given here; but often enough, when Thomas or Gottfried seem bent on maximum elaboration, the saga strikes to the heart of the matter in a way that is astute, honest and humane (see note 11 below, for example).

One of the most noticeable features of the *Saga af Tristram ok Ísönd* is the style in which many of its parts are written. It is not unlikely that this so-called 'court style', which is common to the Hákonian romances, was established by Brother Robert, or perhaps developed for the very first time, in this particular saga. The most obvious characteristics are the following: the frequent use of constructions based on present participles, which is regarded as unidiomatic in classical Old Norse; a good deal of alliteration, whether in formal pairs or in longer *ad hoc* strings; the habitual use of synonymous doublets, with or without alliteration; and repetitions of an underlying lexical item in varied forms. There is also the occasional recourse to rhyme and other forms of wordplay. These mannerisms derive from medieval Latin prose and can also be observed, in different concentrations, in the 'learned style' translations of Latin texts and in the 'florid style' of later religious works; but in the court romances they are integrated with the relatively plain manner displayed by native

Icelandic sagas, eschewing simile and working for the most part in sentences that are not especially complex. No doubt the purpose of the verbal decorations was to dignify the prose in general, and in particular to indicate the importance of passages where such decorations are in high density.

All the stylistic features just mentioned, except rhyme, are well represented in the extract given here, which comes from the last third of the saga when Tristram and Ísönd have been forced to part, Tristram to live in Brittany and Ísönd to remain with her husband in Cornwall. The description of the Hall of Statues is not extant in the fragments of Thomas's work (nor did Gottfried reach so far in the story), but the episode must originally have been present in the poem because one of the fragments (lines 941–1196) begins with Tristan recalling his love and kissing his beloved's image, corresponding to a point in ch. 81 of the saga. Grotesque though the episode may seem to modern taste, it clearly caught the Icelandic imagination, as shown by the fact that it is echoed in several native romances (cf. Schach 1968), notably in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* ch. 7.

The passage has been transcribed from the manuscript mentioned above, AM 543 4to. Norwegianisms of the types listed on page 59 above do not occur in the manuscript orthography of the extract except for the occasional appearance of *y* in place of *i*; this feature has been retained here only for the name Bryngvet, which is consistently spelled thus. In general the spelling of the manuscript is post-medieval but has been normalised in line with the usage of *ÍF*, and the following substitutions have been made: *konungr* for *kóngur*, *inn* for *hinn* etc., *lifanda* for the Norwegian neuter form *lifandi* and *eigi* for *ei*.

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XII: SAGA AF TRISTRAM OK ÍSQND

Chapter 80

Nú lætr Tristram skunda smíðinni þat er hann má, ok líkar honum þar vel undir fjallinu. Smíða þar trésmiðir ok gullsmiðir, ok var nú allt kompásat ok búit saman at fella. Tristram lofaði þá smiðunum heim at fara, ok fylgði þeim til þess <er> þeir váru ór eyggi komnir ok síðan h<eim> til síns fósturlands. Nú hefir Tristram öngvan félagar þar hjá sér nema jötunninn;¹ ok báru þeir nú allt starf smiðanna ok felldu saman hválfhúsit, svá sem efnit var áðr af smiðunum til búit, allt steint ok gyllt með inum bezta hagleik.² Ok mátti þá berliga sjá smíðina fullgørva, svá at enginn kunni betr æskja.

Undir miðju hválfinu reistu þeir upp líkneskju eina, svá hagliga at líkams vexti ok andliti at enginn ásjáandi maðr kunni annat at ætla en kvikt væri í öllum limunum, ok svá frítt ok vel gørt at í öllum heiminum mátti eigi fevri líkneskju finna.³ Ok ór munnum stóð svá góðr ilmr at allt húsit fylldi af, svá sem öll jurtakyn væri þar inn<i>, þau sem dýrust eru. En þessi inn góði ilmr kom með þeiri list ór líkneskjunn, at Tristram hafði gørt undir geirvørtunni jafnsítt hjartanu eina boru á brjóstinu, ok setti þar einn bauk fullan af gullmølnum grøsum, þeim sætustum er í váru öllum heiminum. Ór þessum bauk stóðu tveir reyrstafir af brenndu gulli, ok annarr þessara skaut ilm út undan hnakkanum þar sem mættisk hárit ok holdit, en annarr með sama hætti horfði til munnsins. Þessi líkneskja var, at sköpun, fevrd ok mikilleik, svá lík Ísqnd dróttningu svá sem hon væri þar sjálf standandi, ok svá kviklig sem lifandi væri. Þessi líkneskja var svá hagliga skorin ok svá tignarliga klædd sem sómði inni tignustu dróttningu. Hon hafði á hofði sér kórónu af brenndu gulli, gørvu með alls konar hagleik — ok sett með inum dýrustum gimsteinum ok öllum litum.⁴ En í því laufinu sem framan var í enninu stóð einn stórr smaragdus, at aldri bar konungr eðr dróttning jafngóðan. Í hægri hendi líkneskjunnar stóð eirvøndr eðr valdsmerki, í inum efra endanum með flúrum gørt, innar hagligustu smíðar: leggr viðarins var allr klæddr af gulli ok settr með fingrullsteinum; gulllaufin váru it bezta Arabíagull; en á inu efra laufi vandarins var skorinn fugl með fjøðrum ok alls konar litum fjaðranna ok fullgørt at vængjum, blakandi sem hann væri kvikr ok

18 bauk] bauðk. 32 lifum, *but corrected in the manuscript*.

lifandi. Þessi líkneskja var klædd inum bezta purpura með hvítum skinum; en þar fyrir var hon klædd purpurapelli, at purpurinn merkir
 36 harm, hrygð, vólk ok vesplð er Ísönd þolði fyrir ástar sakir við Tristram. Í hægri hendi helt hon fingrulli sínu, ok þar var á ritat orð þau er Ísönd dróttning mælti í skilnað þeira: ‘Tristram,’ kvað hon, ‘tak þetta
 39 fingrull í minning ástar okkar, ok gleym eigi hörmum okkar, vólk*<i>* ok vesplðum, er þú hefir þolat fyrir mínar sakir ok fyrir þínar.’⁵

Undir fótum hennar var einn fótkestill steyptr af kopar í líking þess
 42 vánda dvergs er þau hafði rægt fyrir konunginum ok hrópat;⁶ líkneskjan stóð á brjósti honum því líkast sem hon skipaði honum undir fœtr sér, en hann lá opinn undir fótum hennar því líkt sem hann væri
 45 grátandi. Hjá líkneskjunni var gort af brenndu gulli lítil skemtan, rakki hennar, höfuð sitt skakandi ok bjöllu sinni hringjandi, gort með miklum hagleik.⁷ En qðru*<m>* megin dvergsins stóð ein líkneskja lítil, eptir
 48 Bryngvet, fylgismey dróttningar; hon var vel sköpuð eptir fegrð sinni ok vel skrydd inum bezta búnaði, ok helt sér í hendi kerí með loki, bjóðandi Ísönd dróttningu með blíðu andliti. Umbergis kerit vátu þau
 51 orð er hon mælti: ‘Ísönd dróttning, tak drykk þennan, er gort var á Írlandi Markis konungi.’⁸ En qðru*<m>* megin í herberginu, sem inn var gengit, hafði hann gort eina mikla líkneskju í líking jötunsins, svá
 54 sem hann stæði þar sjálfr einfœtr ok reiddi báðum höndum járnstaf sinn yfir oxl sér at verja líkneskjuna; en hann var klæddr stóru bukkskinni ok loðnu — ok tók kyrtillinn honum skammt ofan, ok var
 57 hann nakinn niðr frá nafla — ok gnísti tönnum, grimmr í augum, sem hann vildi berja alla þá er inn gengu.⁹ En qðru*<m>* megin dyranna stóð eitt mikit león steyptr af kopar ok svá hagliga gort at enginn hugði
 60 annat en lifanda væri, þeir er þat sæi. Þat stóð á fjórum fótum ok barði hala sínum um eina líkneskju, er gort var eptir ræðismanni þeim er hrópaði ok rægði Tristram fyrir Markis konungi.¹⁰

63 Enginn kann at tjá né telja þann hagleik er þar var á þeim líkneskjum er Tristram lét þar gora í hválfinu. Ok hefir hann nú allt gort þat er hann vill at sinni, ok fær nú í vald jötunsins ok bauð honum, sem
 66 þræli sínum ok þjónustumanni, þetta svá vel at varðveita at ekki skyldi þar nærri koma; en hann sjálfr bar lyklana bæði at hválfhúsinu ok líkneskjunum. En jötunninn hafði allt fé sitt frjálst annat. Ok líkaði
 69 þetta Tristram vel, er hann hefir slíku á leið komit.

42 höfðu.

Chapter 81

Sem Tristram hafði lokit starfi sínu, þá reið hann heim til kastala síns sem hann var vanr, etr ok drekkr ok sefr hjá Ísodd, konu sinni, ok var kærri með félagum sínum.¹¹ En eigi er honum hugr at eiga líkamslosta 72 við konu sína, en þó fór hann leynt með, því engi maðr mátti ætlan hans né athœfi finna, því allir hugðu at hann byggði hjónskapliga sem hann skyldi með henni. En Ísodd er ok svá lunduð at hon leyndi 75 fyrir hverjum manni svá tryggiliga at hon birti hvárki fyrir frændum sínum né vinum.¹² En þá er hann var í burtu ok gørði líkneskjur þessar, þá þótti henni mjök kynligt, hvar hann var eða hvat hann gørði. 78

Svá reið hann heim ok heiman um einn leynistíg at enginn varð varr við hann, ok kom svá til hválfhússins. Ok jafnan sem hann kom inn til líkneskju Ísöndar, þá kyssti hann hana svá opt sem hann kom, 81 ok lagði hana í fang sér ok hendr um háls sem hon væri lifandi, ok ræddi til hennar mǫrgum ástsamligum orðum um ástarþokka þeira ok harma. Svá gørði hann við líkneskju Bryngvetar, ok minntisk á 84 orð þau er hann var vanr at mæla við þær. Hann minntisk ok á alla þá huggan, skemtan, gleði ok ynði er hann fekk af Ísönd, ok kyssti hvert sinn líkneskit, er hann íhugaði huggan þeira; en þá var hann hryggr 87 ok reiðr, er hann minntisk á harm þeira, vás ok vesalðir, er hann þolði fyrir sakir þeira er þau hrópuðu, ok kennir þat nú líkneskju hins vanda ræðismanns. 90

Notes

¹ The giant, Moldagog, is introduced in ch. 73 as the owner and defender of the land. Tristram defeats him in single combat by chopping off one of his legs, at which point the giant swears loyalty to Tristram and surrenders his treasures along with his territory; in return Tristram fashions a wooden leg for his new vassal (ch. 76).

² Ch. 78 says that the main structure of the vaulted building had been made by an earlier giant who abducted the daughter of a certain Duke Orsl and brought her to the place, where he inadvertently killed her because of his size and weight (*sakir mikilleik<s> hans ok þunga*) while trying to have sex. The fragments of Thomas's poem do not contain this story, but versions of it are told by Wace and Geoffrey of Monmouth.

³ *Kvikt* and subsequent words modifying *líkneskja* have the neuter form, perhaps by attraction to *annat*. But *fullgort* in line 33 (modifying *fugl*) and *gort* in line 46 (modifying *skemtan* or *rakki*) are also neuter where one would expect masculine or feminine forms, and it is probably to be explained as the use of 'natural' gender (or rather referring to animals and statues as neuter, as often in English) and the tendency to looseness in grammar that is common in seventeenth-century manuscripts and was reversed by nineteenth-century purists. In all three cases the adjective is separated from its noun. Cf. Gr 3.9.8.2.

⁴ The words *kórónan var* are to be understood in front of *sett*.

⁵ The full account of the parting is in ch. 67.

⁶ In the Norwegian original there would have been perfect alliteration on *rægt* and *hrópat* (*rópat*; the initial breathing in such words is early lost in Norwegian, see p. 59 above); likewise on the phrase *hryggr ok reiðr* in the final sentence of the extract. The dwarf, who appears for the first time in ch. 54, tries to gather evidence against the lovers by sprinkling flour between their beds so that King Markis will see Tristram's footprints (ch. 55). He is with the king when the lovers are discovered embracing in an orchard — the event that brings about their separation (ch. 67). There is no indication in the rest of the saga that he is ever punished for his enmity towards Tristram and Ísønd, or that he regrets it at all; nevertheless his tears, as depicted in the sculpture, are to be understood primarily as signifying remorse, though with

overtones of cowardice. In much Old Norse literature it is shameful for males to weep except when mourning a person of rank, but in the romances it is common even for heroes to weep at moments of strong emotion, as Tristram himself does when he parts from Ísǫnd (ch. 68).

⁷ Ísǫnd's dog, a gift from Tristram, came originally from Elfland (*Álfheimar*, ch. 61). In the saga he is portrayed as a large animal that hunts wild boar and deer when Tristram and Ísǫnd are living together in the woods (chs 63 and 64); but Gottfried (line 16,659) specifies two separate animals and represents the one of elvish origin as a small lapdog (line 15,805). Ch. 61 of the saga lays much emphasis on the delights of sensory perception, commenting on the silkiness and wonderful colours of the dog's coat, and saying that the sound of his bell transported Tristram 'so that he hardly knew whether he was the same man or another one' (*svá at hann kenndi varla hvárt hann var inn sami eða annarr*).

⁸ Ísǫnd's mother prepares a wine-like love potion and tells Bryngvet to serve it to Ísǫnd and King Markis on their wedding-night; but before Bryngvet can do so another servant finds it and unwittingly gives some to Ísǫnd and Tristram, thus causing all the pain that ensues from their love (ch. 46). Bryngvet perseveres with her instructions and serves more of the potion to Markis and his bride; on the evidence of the statue it appears that she hoped to rectify the situation by allowing Ísǫnd to fall in love with Markis, but ch. 46 says only that she gave the potion to the king without his knowledge, and that Ísǫnd did not drink it on that occasion.

⁹ The giant's trouserless condition is not mentioned elsewhere. Possibly it is meant to recall what was said of the chamber's previous owner and his size (note 2 above); but in any case its message is clearly 'Keep out, or else'.

¹⁰ *Maríadokk*, the steward referred to, is introduced as Tristram's friend and bed-partner, and as the man who first discovered the adulterous affair: he woke up in the night, noticed that Tristram was missing, went out in search of him and heard him talking with Ísǫnd (ch. 51). In the same chapter the saga states that it was not until a long time after this event that 'malicious persons' (*qfundarmenn*) told Markis

what was going on, and Mariadokk is not actually named as one of the tell-tales. Gottfried, however, states in his poem that the corresponding character, Marjodoc, quickly went to the king and pretended to have heard rumours (lines 13, 637–51). The end-on approach of the lion, which appears only in this passage, no doubt involves maximum disgrace for the steward.

¹¹ After parting with Ísönd, Tristram marries Ísodd, daughter of the duke of Brittany. The saga states bluntly that he does so either in the hope that new love will drive out old or because he wants a wife ‘for benefit and pleasure’ (*til gagns ok gamans*, ch. 69), this and the next sentence standing in place of much logic-chopping in Thomas (lines 235–420). On his wedding night, however, Tristram decides not to consummate the marriage because thoughts of Ísönd intrude, and he pretends to be ill (ch. 70). The assertion that his sickness was nothing else than pining for the other Ísönd (*ekki var önnur sótt Tristrams en um aðra Ísönd*, ch. 70) confirms that in the saga, as in the poems of Thomas and Gottfried, the two women originally had the same name.

¹² Ísodd has promised Tristram not to tell anyone that they do not have sex (ch. 70). Ch. 96 suggests that at one point she thinks he wants to become a priest or monk — possibly a joke. Eventually a chance event forces her to tell her brother Kardín, who then construes Tristram’s behaviour as an insult to the family (chs 82 and 83); but Kardín abandons any thought of a feud with Tristram when he sees the statue of Bryngvet, which he initially mistakes for a real woman, and falls in love (ch. 86). This, in fact, is the only narrative function fulfilled by the episode of the statues.