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# ‘Everyone thought it very strange how the man had been shaped’: The Hero and His Physical Traits in the *Riddarasögur*

CLAUDIA BORNHOLDT

The article argues that the depiction of the male hero’s physical attributes in three sagas composed at the court of King Hákon Hákonarsson in Bergen—*Þiðreks saga*, *Erex saga*, and *Tristrams saga*—reflect the merging of traditions and cultural expectations that took place in Norway when the Arthurian romances were imported and adapted into Old Norse-Icelandic. (CB)

## INTRODUCTION

The following description of the knight Samson stands at the opening of the Norwegian *Þiðreks saga* introducing the grandfather of Þiðrek, the eponymous hero of the saga:<sup>1</sup>

Einn riddari hét Samson. Hann var allra riddara beztr ok vaskastr. Hans hár ok skegg var svart sem blik ok hvárttveggja yfrit sítt. Hann var á allan vöxt sem risi fyrir utan þat, at hans leggir ok limir váru eigi svá hávir, en digrleiki ok afl sem inn sterkasti risi. Hans andlit var langt ok breitt, harðligt ok grimmligt. Millum hans augna var spannar, ok hans brýnn váru síðar, miklar ok svartar, svá sem tvær krákur sæti yfir hans augum. Hann var dökklitaðr ok þó manna drengiligstr. Hans háls var harðla digr ok herðar harðla breiðar ok þykkvar ok armar digrir ok harðir sem stokkar eðr steinn viðkvámu. Hans hönd var fögr ok mjúkir fingr ok vel vaxinn, ok með því mikla affi hefir hann fimleik bæði hest at ríða ok alls kyns leika at fremja, eigi síðr um fimleik en afl.

[There was a knight named Samson. He was the very best and bravest of all the knights. His hair and beard were as black as pitch and both were very abundant. He was like a giant in his overall stature, except that his legs and arms were not so long, though his stoutness and nature were like that of the strongest of giants. His face was long and broad, hard and grim in expression. Between his eyes was the distance of a span, and his brows hung down, large and black as though two crows were sitting over his eyes.

He was dark of complexion and yet the bravest of men. His neck was very thick and his shoulders were very broad and thick and his arms were stout and hard as a tree-trunk or a stone to the touch. His hands were fine and his fingers agile and well shaped. Together with his great physical strength he had the agility to both ride horses and to perform all kinds of games. He lacked neither agility nor strength.]<sup>2</sup>

If we look at this detailed description of Samson through the lens of continental medieval romance, we are immediately reminded of certain beastly, non-courtly creatures, such as the wild man in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* who is marked by his great height, extraordinarily large head, and hairy appearance.<sup>3</sup> There are many details in the description of Samson that would immediately lead a diligent student of the romances to sort him, like Chrétien's wild man, into the category of non-courtly, non-cultured, and beastly. Firstly, there is Samson's extraordinary size: he is as tall and stout and strong as a giant. Then there is his dark complexion, his dark beard and profusion of dark hair. His face is broad and long and hard and grim. He has low-hanging brows that are so dark in color that they recall two crows, that is, black birds that feed on carrion. He has a very thick neck, very broad and thick shoulders, as well as stout and exceedingly hard arms. In short, the knight Samson is a dark, hairy, tall, stout, and strong giant, and he is the very opposite of the fair knight we expect to find in Arthurian literature.

If we look at the description of Samson through the lens of the Old Norse-Icelandic literary tradition, however, we quickly notice that Samson's outer appearance is no longer quite so exceptional. The best comparison that comes to mind is Egil Skallagrímsson from the Icelandic *Egils saga*. Already during his first introduction to the saga (chap. 31), we learn that Egil was just as black-haired and ugly as his father and extraordinarily tall.<sup>4</sup> Later (chap. 55), we receive an even more detailed description of this exceptional man:

Egill var mikilleitr, ennibreidr, brúnamikill, nefit ekki langt, en ákafliða digrt, granstœðit vítt ok langt, hakan breið furðuliga, ok svá allt um kjálkana, hálsdigr ok herðimikill, svá at þat bar frá því, sem aðrir menn váru, harðleitr ok grimmligr, þá er hann var reiðr; hann var vel í vexti ok hverjum manni hæri, úlfgrátt hárit ok þykkt ok varð snimma sköllótt.

[Egil was a man who caught the eye. He had a wide forehead, bushy eyebrows and a nose, not long but impressively large. A great broad beard grew on a chin as massive as his jaws; his neck was stout and his shoulders heavy, far heavier than those of other men. When he grew angry, there was a hard, cruel look on his face. He was far above normal height but well-proportioned and though he once had a head of thick wolf-grey hair, he had grown bald early in life.]<sup>5</sup>

Another example from the sagas is the *skald* [poet] Gunnlaug from *Gunnlaugs saga*. He too is characterized by his black eyes, a very tall and stout stature and an ugly nose:

Svá er sagt frá Gunnlaugi, at hann var snimmendis bráðgörr, mikill ok sterkr, ljósjarpr á hárfór allvel, svarteygr ok nökkut nefljótr og skapfelligr í andliti, miðmjór ok herðimikill.

[It is said that Gunnlaug was exceptionally quick of growth, tall and strong, with light-chestnut colored hair, and he dressed very well. He had black eyes and a somewhat ugly nose and he had a likeable face. He was slender in the middle and strong in the shoulders.]<sup>6</sup>

Both Egil and Gunnlaug are the protagonists of their own sagas; they are great poets and great fighters, but they are also trouble makers, as is signaled by their rather ugly appearance and their dark features. Similar to medieval continental Arthurian literature, in the sagas a person's outer appearance is an important quality and, as Sverre Bagge observes for the description of the kings in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, 'outward appearances are not primarily symbols of inner qualities; they are important qualities in themselves.'<sup>7</sup> Bagge's examples from *Heimskringla* illustrate that the physical size of a man is clearly considered one of his most important royal characteristics because, as King Sigurd explains in *The Saga of the Magnússynir*, 'a man who is to be the leader of other men should be tall...so that he is easily seen and recognized when many men are together.'<sup>8</sup> In addition to physical height, a well proportioned body as well as beautiful eyes and hair dominate the depictions of the kings in Snorri's saga. As Bagge explains, 'beautiful hair is normally fair and most kings belonging to the Norwegian dynasty are also fair.'<sup>9</sup> A fine example of the ideal Norwegian king is Harald Sigurdarsson (King Haraldr *harðráði*), who, according to Snorri, was much taller and stronger than most men and exceptionally handsome.<sup>10</sup> King Sverrir, on the other hand, illustrates that lack of height was clearly considered a weakness, and therefore the author of *Sverris saga* goes to much effort to praise him despite his shortness:

Sverrir konúgr var maðr lágur á vöxt, þykkur, sterkr at afli, breiðleitr ok vel farit andlitinu;...Hann var sæmiligr höfðingi, þar sem hann sat í háseti með veglegum búnaði; hann var hárr í setunni, en fótlegggrinn skamr.

[King Sverrir was a short man, stout, strong in strength, wide in build and with a beautiful face....He was a very good chieftain, who sat in the high seat with splendid equipment; he sat tall in the high seat, but his legs were short.]<sup>11</sup>

As these few examples illustrate, the outward appearance of a hero and of a king mattered to the medieval Scandinavian audience just as much as it did to the audience on the continent. In the North, especially in the kings' sagas, outer appearance was considered a quality in itself—a quality that marked a man as a leader as is common for the idea of charismatic kingship.<sup>12</sup> The hero's outer appearance also mattered for the authors of the Arthurian romances on the continent. They interpreted a character's physiognomy as a crucial clue for the understanding of his character and they used the outward appearance

as a reflection of inborn worth and nobility, as is probably most vividly exemplified by Perceval/Parzival, but applies to the romances throughout. Moreover, in the romances the knight and likewise the king is signified not only by his inborn physical attributes but also externally by his clothes and knightly equipment. As Karen Lurkhur has recently shown in her Ph.D. dissertation, in Chrétien's romances the knightly 'indestructible, enclosed body' of the hero is to a large extent characterized by his armor, weapons, and frequently also his horse. Therefore the continental romances tend to place much more emphasis on detailed descriptions of these accoutrements than on the person's actual physical traits.<sup>13</sup>

This article takes a closer look at the description of the physical characteristics of some of the male characters in a small selection of Scandinavian courtly romances to show that the Norse adaptors of the continental sources altered characters and scenes in order to conform to certain expectations of their Scandinavian audience—expectations that were undoubtedly derived from a heroic ideal steeped in the tradition of heroic epic and the model of the ideal king's body we find in the Icelandic sagas of the Norwegian kings. As will be shown, the Scandinavian romances place special emphasis on the physical height of both the male protagonist and the opponents he faces during his knightly adventures.

I will open my discussion with a look at some examples drawn from *Þiðreks saga*, a saga that transmits and merges continental German subject matter derived from both the heroic and the romance tradition. It combines the heroic exploits of Sigurd/Siegfried and the Nibelungs with bridal-quest tales into which the names of the heroes of continental romance, such as King Arthur or Isolde, are interwoven in a manner that seems almost random.<sup>14</sup>

*Þiðreks saga* is unique for the long descriptions of the physical appearance of the male protagonists. These descriptions present us with a mixture of Scandinavian ideals of the ideal man and ruler that predate the import of the continental Arthurian literature and the newly imported chivalric ideals that reached the North around the middle of the thirteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The saga is structured around the life of the legendary king Theoderic (Dietrich of Bern in the German tradition).<sup>16</sup> King Þiðrek—in analogy to the tradition of the *matière de France* and the Charlemagne cycle, and maybe also in loose analogy to King Arthur's Round Table—assembles a group of twelve *riddara* [knights] at his seat of power.<sup>17</sup> Interspersed in the account of his rise to power, formation of his circle of knights, his loss of sovereignty, subsequent exile, and ultimate reclaiming of his throne, are various tales from the German heroic and mythological tradition (such as the *Niflunga saga* or the story of Velent the Smith) as well as several bride-winning stories. The saga shows some influences from the Arthurian tradition, most obviously through the inclusion of certain characters derived from it and the overall setting of the events in a

Christian and, admittedly rather superficial, chivalric environment. As Heiko Uecker has summarized, *Þiðreks saga* contains much that is not derived from the Nordic sphere and the sagas, 'such as the ambience, the knightly milieu, the never-ending exaggerations, but also linguistic and stylistic aspects.'<sup>18</sup> The saga's prologue, for example, contains the explicit didactic function of *prodesse et delectare*, to entertain and ennoble the audience:

En sögur af göfgum mönnum er nú fyrir því nytsamligar at kuna, at þær sýna mönnum drengilig verk ok fræknligr framkvæmdir, en vánd verk þýðast af leti, ok greina þau svá got frá illu, hverr er þat vill rétt skilja, þat er samþykki margra manna, svá at einn maðr má gleðja þá margra stund.

[These tales of noble men are now useful to know, because they show to men brave deeds and famous prowess, and they associate bad deeds with sloth, and in this way distinguish good from evil, for everyone who wants to discern that rightfully so. This is the opinion of many, that one can entertain in this way for many hours.]<sup>19</sup>

We also find considerable interest in the heroes' equipment, in luxury items, and in expectations set by the chivalric code, such as the knightly duty to protect women and the weak—a theme addressed in the encounter of Þiðrek and Ekka.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, during his adventures, Þiðrek rescues a knight captured by a dragon, defeats many beasts and men threatening the peace in his realm, mediates between his champions, and, at the climax of his career, he hosts a splendid feast for his retinue. The latter provides us with elaborate descriptions of King Þiðrek's champions, who are, throughout the saga, referred to as knights. If we read these descriptions carefully, we notice that the heroes' outer appearances reveal the merging of literary and cultural traditions that occurred in this saga. A similar observation can also be made with regards to the depiction of some of the characters in the Norwegian *riddarasögur* [sagas of knights] of Erex and Tristram, as we shall see in the second half of this essay.

#### ÞIÐREKS SAGA

To return to the description of Samson: the earlier interpretation of Samson's outer appearance was incomplete inasmuch as it solely focused on elements that we would label as unusual for a courtly knight and that strike us much more as distinctly 'Norse.' Already in the very first sentence of his description however, Samson is called 'einn riddari' [a knight] who, in fact, is introduced as being the best and bravest of all knights. And only after it has been established that Samson is the foremost of knights, do we learn about his physical traits. But here too, we find inconsistencies. As tall and stout and strong like a giant Samson is, he also has fine hands and very agile fingers that allow him to perform well on horseback and in all sorts of

games. These are not the hands of a giant who wields his large wooden club, such as the giant Viðolf mittumstangi [Viðolf with the pole] in the very same saga or, to give an example from the continental romances, the giant Urgan in Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*. Samson's hands bring to mind the fair and fine hands and fingers of a noble knight, a knight who engages in tournaments and duels on horseback.

The description of Samson continues for another ten sentences, now shifting toward his inner qualities—his virtues and character. We learn that he was friendly and humble to all men, wise and penetrating of thought, had great foresight, and was generous and munificent. He was valiant, never afraid of any man, and he won all his battles. He made solid promises and stood by his decisions. On account of all of his virtues, he was well liked by his friends and greatly feared by his enemies, even if they only knew him from hearsay. When his accomplishments were praised, he listened but never spoke and never boasted, and he served his lord, Earl Rodgeir well. Here, too, we find characteristics we certainly would not expect from a giant but rather from a good retainer and also a knight who serves his lord well, stays true to his oaths and promises, is generous, and humble, and an outstanding fighter on horseback.

Yet, Samson is a giant and, as the prologue of *Þiðreks saga* unmistakably explains, to be considered a representative of the olden days—in which, by nature, only a very tall man has the strength needed to carry and use strong and heavy swords, helmets, and armor that, in turn, guarantee success in battle. These *stórr* [tall] men go back to the beginnings of time:

Þat segja flestir men, at fyrst eftir Nóaflóð váru men svá stórir ok sterkir sem risar ok lifðu marga mannsaldra. En síðan fram liðu stundir, urðu nokkrir men litlir ok ósterkir, sem nú eru. Ok svá langt er frá leið Nóaflóði, þá urðu þess fleiri ósterkari, en inir sterku men gerðust þá fáir í hundraðs flokki.

[Most men say that at first, after Noah's flood, men were as large [*stórir*] and as strong as giants [*risar*] and lived many generations. But since that time passed, some men became smaller and weaker, as they are now. As the time since Noah's flood passed, more and more men became weak and the strong men made up a group of less than a hundred.]<sup>21</sup>

Even though (the prologue continues) people grew smaller, they continued to be eager to gain riches and honor, and for this reason they fought great battles.

En þá Þiðrekr konungr var ok hans kappar, þá var langt liðit frá því, er manfólk þvarr, ok fáir váru þeir í hverju landi, er haldizt hafi at aflinu.

[But by the time King Þiðrek and his champions lived, a long time had passed during which manhood waned, and there were few in every land who had maintained their strength.]<sup>22</sup>

There is no reason to go into detail about the idea put forth here that the earliest inhabitants of the North were giants, as this idea is also present in many other Scandinavian sources, such as Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* and a number of royal genealogies.<sup>23</sup> According to Norse mythology, the giants are the primeval beings and ancestors of the pagan gods, just as they are part of the forces that bring about the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök.<sup>24</sup> In *Þiðreks saga* the physical attribute of being extraordinarily tall and thus of giant or almost giant size is used as a praiseworthy attribute of the hero. Extraordinary height is an outward sign of extraordinary heroic abilities and of origin in the cultural sphere of the North, just as the ideal body of the king in Snorri's *Heimskringla* is tall, well-proportioned, and fair.

In *Þiðreks saga*, each introduction of one of Þiðrek's champions opens with the hero's physical traits and then moves on to his inner qualities and disposition. This is especially true in the section known as the *Heldenschau* [presentation of the heroes] where the champions attending Þiðrek's feast are individually introduced and, in many cases, reintroduced, in great detail. Here, the descriptions also add even more detail concerning each champion's weapons, armor, and coat of arms. With the exception of the somewhat ambivalent character Heimir, Þiðrek and his champions are all described as being very tall in size, but, unlike the ancestors of some of them, they are—and this is an important distinction—no longer giants themselves. Þiðrek and his champions are described as *mikill vexti* [grown tall] or *mikill maðr* [a tall man]. The attribute of tallness is usually combined with the character's great strength, as *mikill maðr ok strengr* [tall and strong man]. In the *Heldenschau* section, the adjective used to describe the heroes' physical height changes to *hár* [tall]; the heroes are said to be *hár ok vel vaxinn* [tall and well shaped] or *háligr at öllum vexti* [tall in their entire stature]. The good and praiseworthy champions additionally feature broad shoulders and an overall stout build, such as, for example, Gunnar who has broad shoulders and a broad face. However, he also has a fair complexion and fine hands and feet and well-proportioned legs and arms, indicating that, though tall and broad as the heroes of old, he also conforms to the norms of the 'new' hero who most likely was modeled after the ideal of the courtly knights in the imported romances.<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, the eponymous hero Þiðrek, whose body is described in this way:

En er hann óx upp, þá var hann svá mikill maðr vexti, at varla fekkst hans maki, þess er hann var eigi risi. Hann var langleitr ok réttleitr, ljóslitaðr ok eygðr manna bezt ok nokkut skolbrúnn. Hár hans var lítit ok fagrt ok liðaðist allt í lokka. Á honum var ekki skegg, svá gamall maðr sem hann varð. Hans herðar váru svá miklar, at tveggja álna var yfir at mæla. Hans armar váru svá digrir sem mikill stokkr, en harðir sem steinn. Fagra hönd hefir hann. Um midjan er hann mjór ok vel vaxinn, en hans mjaðmir eru svá digrar ok lær,



at hverjum manni þykkir furðamikil, hví þann veg má maðr skapaðr verða. Hans fætr váru fagrir, vel vaxnir. En kálfinn ok fótlegggrinn er svá digr, at vel mátti eiga einn risi. Hans afl er svá mikit, at engi maðr veit, ok nálíga sjálfr hann fær þat varla reynt.

[When he had grown up, he had grown so tall that he scarcely had his match, unless it was a giant. He was long-faced and regular of features, light in color, and had the best eyes of all men, somewhat brown (swarthy) in color. His hair was light and fair and fell in curls. He had no beard, no matter how old he got. His shoulders were so broad that they measured two ells across. His arms were as stout as a great trunk and as hard as stone. He had fine hands. In the waist he was slender and well formed, but his hips and thighs were so stout that everyone thought it very strange how the man had been shaped. His legs were fair and well shaped. And his calves and ankles were so stout that they could have belonged to a giant. His strength was greater than that of any other man, but he rarely tested it.]<sup>26</sup>

As the saga remarks, the stature of Þiðrek is quite unusual. He is as large as a giant and, as we learn a little further down in the description, ‘En þeir, er eigi sét höfðu Samson konung, þeir hyggja, at eigi hafi verit skapaðr þvílíkr maðr sem Þiðrekr um alla hluti’ [those who had not seen the chieftain Samson believed that there had never been another man in the entire world who was shaped in the same way as Þiðrek] and yet, unlike his grandfather, Þiðrek no longer is a giant. Moreover, Samson’s dark and hairy appearance is replaced with Þiðrek’s light, blond, and almost hairless (that is, beardless) appearance. Þiðrek is extremely tall, has very broad shoulders, arms that are as strong as tree trunks, stout thighs, calves, and ankles—all features that he inherited from Samson—and at the same time, he has a fair complexion and a light-colored face with regular features, good eyes, fair hands, a slender waist, and fair and well-shaped legs. In short, Þiðrek displays the physical characteristics that distinguish him as the descendant of the great giant-sized heroes of old and in particular of Samson, who is described in such great detail at the beginning of the saga. Yet his body also displays an affinity to the ‘new’ man: the ideal king Snorri described and—maybe even more so—the knight as known from continental romance literature. This new man has a body that is well-proportioned, slender, and characterized by lightness. Þiðrek’s awkward shape, on which the saga explicitly comments, must be understood as an outward sign of the merged cultures of the heroic age and the new chivalric culture found in the saga and in the translated *riddarasögur* in general.

Similar observations can be made throughout the saga. A particularly striking example is the description of Viðga, son of Velent and grandson of the giant Vaði risi. The latter is introduced in the saga as being not like human men since he is the son of a mermaid and a king.<sup>27</sup> The grandson of this giant, Viðga, is described as ‘allra manna þeira hæstri’ [the tallest of

men], who, as the saga explicitly stresses, ‘sem eigi váru risar kallaðir’ [are not considered giants].<sup>28</sup> ‘Hann hafði hvítt hár sem gras þat, er lilja heitir’ [He had hair as white as the flower called the lily]; his facial hair and body hair were ‘hvítan sem snjó’ [white as snow]; his eyes were keen. He was neither long-faced nor broad-faced. Everything was ‘við sik’ [well-proportioned] and ‘ok var þó mikit ok all óllu fagrt ok harðligt’ [yet he was large and the fairest and hardiest in all respects]. His shoulders were both thick and broad. He was moderately slender and his limbs were ‘allra manna bezt limaðr’ [the best shaped of any man]. He was ‘réttvaxinn ok at öllu var hans vöxtr svá, at allir sögðu, at engi maðr hefði sét kurteisara eða tiginmannliga’ [upright in growth and overall his entire shape was such that everyone said that there was no one more courtly or more distinguished].<sup>29</sup>

Noteworthy in this description of Viðga is the poetic language used. Metaphors comparing a person’s hair color to the lily and the whiteness of the snow are much better known from descriptions of female characters, especially in the romances. This almost effeminate description of the grandson of a giant provides a stark contrast to, for example, the use of the metaphor of the crow to illustrate Samson’s swarthy appearance. Like Þiðrek, Viðga’s physique signifies his heritage and at the same time begins to conform to the imported ideal of the chivalric male body. As mentioned earlier, these new aspects seem to concentrate mainly on the shape of the limbs, which are, like Viðga’s, fair, well-proportioned and agile. We also find an overall tendency toward a more slender body, especially in the waist, and an overall fair complexion and regular features. The hero’s overall tall size and broad and stout shoulders, however, designate him as a successor to the line of the old heroes of prehistoric times mentioned in the saga’s preface and represented in the saga by the heroes’ grandfathers.

The author of *Þiðreks saga* makes it quite clear that he carefully distinguishes between the physique of the champions living in Þiðrek’s day and that of the giants they encounter. These giants, which the tall—but no longer giant-sized—heroes face in battles, are not described as *mikill maðr* [tall man] or *hár* [tall]; instead they are *stórir* [tall] with thick legs, like the tall men of ancient days mentioned in the saga’s prologue. This adjective *stórr* [tall] is only used to describe the tall men mentioned in the saga’s prologue, the giants of prehistoric times, as well as the four giant brothers—Eðgeirr, Aventrod, Viðolf mittumstangi, and Aspilian—who live during Þiðrek’s time. *Stórr* is never used to describe the exceptionally tall size of the saga’s champions; they are *mikill* or *hár*.

The saga takes the idea that the outer physical characteristics of the hero, and especially his size, symbolize his heroic qualities and the cultural sphere to which he belongs even further. Heimir for example (that odd and unreliable character who becomes Þiðrek’s first champion but turns out to

be a troublemaker and ambivalent character throughout the saga—he goes into exile in the wilderness, becomes a monk, returns to the world to slay a dragon, and eventually raids his monastery and kills his brother monks) is one of only two characters in the saga who are explicitly not said to be tall but instead *skammvaxinn* [short]. Heimir's body is short and so are his limbs and hands, which are short, thick, and stout, because, one may argue, Heimir does not conform to the new way and the ethos displayed by Þiðrek and his champions.<sup>30</sup>

As this brief discussion has illustrated, the physiognomy of the hero in *Þiðreks saga* represents a conscious shift away from the heroic warrior ideal of the dark, giant-sized Nordic man of prehistoric times mentioned in the prologue, to the still tall and stout but also slender and well-proportioned, fair, and overall much more light and noble-looking new hero. As Heinrich Beck argues, 'in Þiðrekr's life span the heroic age itself comes to a conclusion because at the end of his life he can find neither giants nor heroes that are deemed worthy to fight.'<sup>31</sup> Indeed, *Þiðreks saga* takes its reader through the life of Þiðrek and his champions, all of whom are the descendants of the giant-sized heroes of the heroic age, and it shows us the beginning of the new, knightly culture. This interpretation of the saga strengthens the theory that the saga was in fact compiled in Norway, maybe indeed at the court of King Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–1263). Moreover, as much as it is an extensive collection of heroic tales, it also shows the influence of the new courtly literature from the continent that began to be adapted for the Scandinavian audience starting in 1226 with Brother Robert's translation of Thomas' *Tristan*.<sup>32</sup> As we shall see next, the influences have gone both ways, however, since the Scandinavian adaptations of the continental romances contain clear evidence that the physical size of a character mattered to the audience in the North to such an extent that the adaptors of the romances altered the source texts to conform to these cultural norms.

#### EREX SAGA

<P>at er upphaf þessara frásögu, at Artús kóngr sat í sínum kastala, er Kardigan hét. Þat var páskatíð ok helt þá enn virðuliga sína hirð, sem vanði hans var til, svá at engi þóttiz sét hafa slíki kóngsprýði. Með honum váru tólf spekingar hans ok ráðgjafar, er sátu at hans kringlóttu borði. Einn af þeim var sonr Illax kóngrs, mikill kappi í riddaraskap, friðr sýnum ok íþróttamaðr mikill, eigi ellri en hálfþrítugr, er saga þessi gerðiz. Hann hét Erex.

[At the beginning of this story King Arthur was at his castle, which was called Kardigan. It was Eastertide and once again he then held a splendid court as was his wont, so that no one thought he had ever seen such royal splendor. With him were his twelve wise men and counselors who sat at his Round Table. One of them was the son of King Ilax, a great champion in knighthood, handsome

in appearance and a man of great accomplishment, no more than twenty-five years old when this saga took place. His name was Erex.]<sup>33</sup>

Thus opens the Norse adaptation of Chrétien's romance of *Erec et Enide* which, in its extant Icelandic form, presents us with a drastically reduced and modified account of the romance. The Icelandic redactor deleted most of the descriptions of characters, equipment, clothes, and horses found in the French source, leaving us with this very brief introduction of the romance's main protagonist, Erex, who is merely described as handsome in appearance.<sup>34</sup> The saga does not contain any surprises when it comes to the depiction of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table since such descriptions are entirely absent, so that the reference to Erex's handsome appearance is nearly the only description of a male hero's physique in the entire saga.<sup>35</sup> There is one exception, however.

In Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, Erec twice encounters the knight Guivret le petit [Guivret the Little]. In their first encounter, Guivret sees Erec approach in front of his castle and rides out to challenge him to a joust. At this point he is introduced:

De celui savrai ge bien dire  
qu'il estoit molt de cors petiz,  
mes de grant cuer estoit hardiz. (ll. 3664–66)

[About this man I can tell you the truth: that he was very small of stature, but very courageous of heart.]<sup>36</sup>

In *Erex saga*, on the other hand, Guimar is introduced as a tall and strong knight:

Af þeim kastala ríðr út einn riddari svá stórr ok þrekkligr, at Erex þóttiz engan annan þvílíkan sét hafa.

[A knight rides out of this castle, so large and strong that Erex thought he had never seen one like him.]<sup>37</sup>

And, as if in accordance with his new body size, Guimar does not merely challenge Erex to battle for passing through his lands as he does in Chrétien; in the saga the now large and strong Guimar lays claim to Erex's wife Evida:

‘Þú, riddari,’ segir hann, ‘fá mér þína fríða unnustu, þvíat þat sómir vel <at> hún skuli mín vera, ok hana vile k gjarna fá ok þár lífit leggja á.’

[‘You knight,’ he says, ‘give me your beautiful beloved, because it is quite fitting that she be mine, and I desire to have her and will stake my life on this.’]<sup>38</sup>

These are the words and demands of a fully grown man and knight because, unlike a dwarf, only such a man would be considered appropriate as a spouse to Evida. By changing the size of Guivret/Guimar, the saga author modifies the character into an appropriate opponent for Erex to prove his knightly

valor and he transforms the ensuing fight into a duel of two equal opponents over the right to possess Evida.

In accordance with these earlier changes, the second meeting between Erex and Guimar, which comes at the very end of Erex's adventure cycle, is entirely reworked as well. In Chrétien's romance Erec and Guivrez meet again, do not recognize each other, and engage in a joust in which Erec loses to the little, dwarf-sized knight. In the saga however, Guimar immediately recognizes Erex and Evida, who are in fact his relatives, and takes them under his and his sisters' care.<sup>39</sup> In short, in the saga, the protagonist Erex does not engage in battle with a man who is called 'little' and who is described as being of very small stature and, even more importantly, he does not lose to a dwarf-sized creature in his penultimate battle.

#### TRISTRAMS SAGA

A similar alteration to a secondary character's physical size occurs in the Norwegian *Tristrams saga*. Here again a secondary romance character who is explicitly designated by his name as being of very short stature has been transformed into a tall man. In the Fragment Douce of Thomas' *Roman de Tristan*, Tristram encounters a knight who introduces himself as Tristran le Naim [Dwarf Tristran].

Il respunt: 'Ceste novele aim.  
Jo ai a nun Tristran le Naim.  
De la marche sui de Bretagne  
E main dreit sur la mer d'Espaine.  
Castel i oi e bele amie:  
Autretant l'aim cum faz ma vie.' (ll. 943–48)

['This is pleasant news for me,' answered the other. 'I am called "Dwarf Tristran." I am of the Marches of Brittany and live hard by the Sea of Spain. I had a castle there and a fair mistress whom I love as much as life.']<sup>40</sup>

This second Tristram is fatally wounded in the very battle in which the protagonist Tristram obtains his own poisonous and ultimately mortal wound.

Toward the end of the Norwegian *Tristrams saga* the dwarf Tristram, just like Guivrez le petit in the Norse *Erex saga*, has been transformed into a tall knight. In this case the character retains his name, *Tristram dvergr* [Tristram the Dwarf], but an explanation of the name is given in due course:

'Ek em einn riddari, byggjandi hér í landamæri á Bretlandi, ok em ek kallaðr Tristram dvergr—röngu nafni, þvíat ek em manna mestr—ok var ríkr í einum kastala, ok átta ek fríða frú ok ríka, ok mikit unna ek henna.'

[‘I am a knight and live here on the border of Brittany. They call me Tristram the Dwarf, a misnomer, since I am a very large man. I was powerful and lived in a castle with a beautiful, wealthy lady whom I loved very much.’]<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, the first time Dwarf Tristram is mentioned in *Tristrams saga*, we learn that he was *mikill maðr* [a large man], *vel vaxinn* [well-proportioned], and *hinn fríðasti* [exceedingly handsome].<sup>42</sup> This description is unique to this saga. It is absent in Thomas’ French romance where, besides his name, no detail is revealed regarding the second Tristram’s body height. In the saga, this *manna mestr* [very large man]—who, after all, is the namesake of the saga’s hero—is no longer a dwarf but a man whose size warrants Tristram’s friendship. Without this change to Tristram the Dwarf’s stature, the saga’s hero Tristram would obtain his mortal wound in a battle fought in assistance of a dwarf and that, it seems, was unacceptable for the Norse audience.

The Norwegian *Tristrams saga* not only explicitly transforms the character Tristram the Dwarf into a fully grown man, it also strengthens the emphasis on the significance of the giants that are defeated by Tristram and, as the saga points out, before him by King Arthur. The giant-slaying episodes in *Tristrams saga* have been analyzed previously in detail by Geraldine Barnes and Adrian Stevens. Both argue that the saga’s emphasis on Arthur’s ability to slay giants establishes the legendary king as a praiseworthy counterpart to the powerless King Markis of *Tristrams saga*.<sup>43</sup> Here the saga correlates to its continental source, for, as Stevens argues (and Barnes quotes), ‘[t]he true significance of Mark’s reign as Thomas defines it is that it is inferior because it is post-Arthurian: the age of Mark, in stark contrast to the age of Arthur, is an unheroic age presided over by an unworthy king.’<sup>44</sup> As ‘the heroic double of Arthur,’ Tristram in *Tristrams saga* is the only one capable of stepping into Arthur’s footsteps.<sup>45</sup> This is made explicit when he slays a nephew of the beard-collecting giant whom Arthur famously defeated before him (chap. 71). Deviating from Wace’s account, the saga adds that king Arthur had fought with great valor, that he saved the countries of kings and noblemen, and took revenge on the giant for his arrogant and malevolent behavior.<sup>46</sup> Tristram commits a comparable deed when he defeats Morhold (chap. 26–28) and then again later, when he slays the giant Urgan (chap. 62). In both instances he releases a king and his retainers from tyrannical demands for tribute. As Barnes argues, the details of Tristram’s killing of Morhold, the ‘raking off [of] his opponent’s beard and hair...prefigures Arthur’s killing of the arrogant, beard-collecting giant.’<sup>47</sup> Both Barnes and Stevens provide convincing arguments and there can be little doubt that we ought to understand Tristram as the true successor of King Arthur and thus, of a time in which the kings were still great heroes capable of slaying giants. This reading finds additional support in the fact that *Tristrams saga* not only depicts Morhold as ‘giant-like,’ as

Barnes maintains, but that the saga actually strongly suggests that Morhold looked and behaved just like a giant, as I shall now show.<sup>48</sup>

In the extant continental sources transmitting the Morolt fight previous to the saga, Eilhart von Oberge's *Tristrant* and Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*, Morolt is introduced as a man of extraordinary vigor. Gottfried, for example, informs us that

Môrolt, als uns diu wârheit  
ie hât gesaget und hiute seit,  
der haete vier manne craft,  
diz was vier manne ritterschaft. (ll. 6878–81)

[Morolt, as truly has been known for a long time, had the strength and chivalry of four knights.]<sup>49</sup>

Gottfried calls Morolt *sêre starke* [very strong] (v. 5873), and *der starke von Írlanden* [the strong one from Ireland] (v. 5951). Tristan looks for someone who has the courage to stand up to Morolt and does not fear *Môroldes groeze und sîne craft* [Morolt's size and strength] (v. 6125). Gottfried's Morolt is an outstanding fighter and a very strong and, as the last verse suggests, tall man, but he is not a giant. On the contrary, Gottfried praises him as a worthy opponent for the young Tristan, who 'an muote, an groeze, an craft / ze vollekomenen ritterschaft / daz lob in allen rîchen truoc' [courage, size, and strength, which are befitting perfect knighthood, are praised everywhere] (vv. 6511–13). He is known to fight by all rules of knighthood, as he has done many times: 'ich weiz wol, daz er kunde / dô unde z'aller stunde / ze kampfes und ouch ze vehthe / nâch rittores rehte / sînem lîbe vil wol mite gân / er haete es ê sô vil getân' (vv. 6515–20).

*Tristrans saga* on the other hand, places great emphasis on the size of Morhold. Every time he is mentioned in the saga, his extraordinary height is stressed. Already in his first introduction we learn that 'Á Írlandi var einn ríkr kappi, mikill ok illgjarn, sterkr ok grimmr marðr' [he was a powerful man from Ireland, huge and mean spirited, a strong and savage man] (*Tristrans saga*, p. 74). A short while later, Morhold's size provides the reason why no one would oppose his demand to pay tribute: 'þvi þeir vissu, at hann var hinn harðasti, grimmr ok drjúgr at afli ok í vápnaskipti, djarfr í atreiðum, mikill at vexti' [Everyone knew him to be a harsh man, fierce in using his power and adroit in battle, bold in fighting on horseback, and huge in size] (p. 74). Once Tristram refuses to pay tribute and with this refusal gravely angers his opponent, Morhold's large size is stressed once more, this time in conjunction with much more detail concerning his physical appearance:

Þá stóð Morhold upp ok sýndiz rauðr í andliti, mikill at vexti ok digr í limum, allr hinn sterkasti, ok talaði þá hárrí röddu ór digrum barka.

[Morhold got up, his face red; he was large in stature and strong limbed, the strongest of men, and he responded in a loud voice from his thick throat.]<sup>50</sup>

Morhold then arms himself, ‘hann á bak einum miklum hesti’ [mounts a large horse], carries an extraordinarily heavy and large shield and rides off to meet Tristram in battle (p. 78). Morhold’s large stature is emphasized yet again at the beginning of his duel with Tristram:

Morhold var mikill vexti, sem sagt er. Hann hræddiz engan mann né riddara í heiminum. Hann var bróðir Írlands dróttningar.

[As has been told, Morhold was of huge stature and feared no man and no knight in the world. He was the brother of the Queen of Ireland.]<sup>51</sup>

The references to Morhold’s large size continue also during the battle scene: ‘Morhold var þungr ok mikill ok reyndr í miklum ok hörðum orrustum’ [Morhold was heavy and tall and seasoned in many hard battles] (p. 80).<sup>52</sup>

The Morhold in *Tristrams saga* does not behave in a knightly manner, as Gottfried’s Morolt does. Instead, he is very large and heavy, harsh in interaction, shouts with a loud voice, and is easily enraged. In this he much more resembles the other giants than the other knights in the saga. Urgan jötni [the giant Urgan], for example, runs up to Tristram during their fight ‘ok æpti hann þá hann ógurligri röddu’ [and shouts at him in a terrifying voice] (pp. 155–6). He then raises his iron club into the air ‘ok æpti hann þá hann ógurligri röddu’ [and in a great rage he threw it with all his might] (p. 157). The same scene repeats later in the fight, when Urgan again attacks ‘ok kastaði járnstafnum at honum af mikill reiði ok öllu afli’ [in a terrible rage, throwing his iron club at him (Tristram) with great force] (p. 158). In addition to their exceptional size, the giants in *Tristrams saga* all share a predilection to become enraged. Morhold shares this behavior, Urgan displays this tendency, and so does the giant Moldagóg, ‘undarlíga mikill ok hinn vaskasti’ [who was incredibly large and very bold] (p. 176), and who is enraged when Tristram trespasses in his hunting forest.<sup>53</sup>

Morhold very much resembles the saga’s other giants in size and temper, though he is not called a giant nor does he fight with the giants’ weapon of choice but instead in knightly fashion on horseback and with his sword. After all, Morhold is Isoldé’s uncle and casting him outright as a giant seems impossible. By stressing over and over again that Morhold was exceptionally tall and unruly however, the saga author moves him in very close proximity to the other giants, thus adding another heroic deed to Tristram’s accomplishments, and placing him firmly in a line with King Arthur, as Stevens and Barnes have previously suggested. There is a noticeable difference between the two giant-slayers in *Tristrams saga*. King Arthur shares a predilection to become enraged with the giants he slays: ‘Sem Artús kóngur fregna þetta, þá reiddiz hann af öllum hug’ [When King Arthur heard this message (that the giant



wanted to collect his beard) he flew into a rage].<sup>54</sup> Tristram, on the other hand, remains very controlled and calm during his battles. As Arthur's successor in spirit, Tristram also fights giants, but he is so refined in his courtliness that he keeps his cool, because in the character of Tristram the heroic ideal represented in the figure of King Arthur merges with the new courtly hero, as is also the case in the thirteenth-century Þiðrek in *Þiðreks saga*.

#### CONCLUSION

The few examples from the *riddarasögur*, though taken from a very limited corpus, reveal that defeating dwarfs, being defeated by dwarfs, and assisting dwarfs were apparently considered problematic for the Norse adaptors of the continental romances. Dwarfs are not considered appropriate opponents and a hero, as is the case in *Erex saga*, can certainly not be defeated by a dwarf. *Þiðreks saga* contains multiple examples that illustrate how dishonorable it was to fight—and, even worse—be defeated by dwarfs. For example, when the giant Vaði leaves his son Velent as an apprentice with two dwarfs, he leaves no doubt that nothing is more dishonorable than being defeated by a dwarf:

‘þá tak þetta sverð ok ver þik vel ok drengliga. Betra er þat en vera myrðr af tveim dvergum. Ok þat vilda ek, at frændr vári segði, at ek hefða heldr upp alit son en dóttur.’

[‘Take this sword and defend yourself bravely. That is better than being murdered by two dwarfs. I would have our kinsmen say that I raised a son rather than a daughter.’]<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, young Þiðrek's very first opponent in the saga is the dwarf Alfrek, whom Þiðrek grasps around the neck and pulls up onto his saddle. In his attempts to save his life, the dwarf tells Þiðrek that he can help him to a great treasure and the sword Naglhring which is in the possession of Hildir and Grimr, who are both of extraordinary strength. He points out that Þiðrek would win much greater fame by seeking such possessions through bravery than by “taka minn inn skamma bók ok inn lága legg” [‘taking my short body and short bones’].<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, Þiðrek lets go of the dwarf, whose defeat would not bring him any honor, and turns to his next opponents, Grim and Hild, the former being a strong berserker and the latter being troll-like and skilled in magic.<sup>57</sup>

While fighting and, even worse, being defeated by dwarfs is dishonorable, defeating giants (and dragons) on the other hand, is presented as one of the most heroic deeds possible; a deed that the legendary King Arthur was able to perform and the knightly hero of *Tristrams saga* is able to emulate. In a culture whose written and oral literature was traditionally comprised of heroic epic, kings' sagas, kings' praise poetry, and the myths of the pagan gods, this finding is hardly surprising. Accordingly, the authors of *Tristrams saga* and *Erex saga*

altered their continental sources so that the knightly protagonists Tristram and Erex would meet with opponents ‘mikill at vexti’ [of large stature], who are appropriate and honorable. The same observation applies to Norse descriptions of King Arthur, fictional and historical, as Geraldine Barnes has noted with respect to *Breta sögur* where ‘the historical Arthur appears, not as Chrétien’s *roi fainéant*, but as a powerful and successful warrior king,’ and indeed, in the description of Arthur in the saga, we learn that he was ‘mikill a voxt’ [tall of stature] and ‘hardr ok vapndiafr’ [hardy and brave].<sup>58</sup> In the Norse adaptation, King Arthur’s physical stature obviously matters, though the majority of his introductory description in *Breta sögur*, as is customary in the continental Arthurian sources, turns to his inner qualities, such as his generosity, cheerful and pleasant nature, and his many accomplishments. The same observation holds true for the majority of character descriptions in the Norse adaptations of the continental romances. They tend to focus on the knightly protagonists’ courtly conduct and demeanor, which, as a general tendency, are enhanced in the Norse adaptations as compared to the French sources.<sup>59</sup>

*Tristrams saga*, *Þiðreks saga* and, despite its complicated transmission, most likely also *Erex saga* (at least the original Norwegian adaptation) ultimately belong to the cultural milieu of King Hákon Hákonarsson’s court in Bergen. As this discussion of the physical description of the heroes in *Þiðreks saga* and some of the characters in *Tristrams saga* and *Erex saga* has shown, the Norse adaptations of the continental sources present us with physical traits in such a way that the hero’s and his opponent’s body externally reflects a merging of cultures that took place at the court in Bergen during the middle of the thirteenth century.

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#### NOTES

- 1 I am using normalized spelling for the Old Norse-Icelandic names. Þiðrekr is rendered as Þiðrek, Egill as Egil, etc.
- 2 *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), pp. 9–10. All translations from *Þiðreks saga* are my own. I consulted the following translation: *The Saga of Thidrek of Bern*, trans. Edward R. Haymes (New York and London: Garland, 1988).

- 3 Compare Chrétien de Troyes, *Le chevalier au lion*, in *Le Romans de Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Mario Roques, vol. 4 (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1964), vv. 276–91. English translation: Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 298–9.
- 4 ‘En er hann óx upp, þá mátti brátt sjá á honum, at hann myndi verða mjög ljótr ok líkr feðr sínum, svartr á hár. En þá er hann var þrétvetr, þá var hann mikill og sterkr, svá sem þeir sveinar aðrir, er váru sex vetra eða sjau.’ [As he grew up it soon became obvious that he was going to be just as black-haired and ugly as his father. By the time he was three years old he was as big and strong as a boy of six or seven years.] *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1933, rpt. 1988), p. 80. Translation: *Egil’s Saga*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 79.
- 5 *Egils saga*, p. 139; trans. *Egil’s Saga*, p. 128. For a discussion of this passage as well as the appearance of the Norse hero Starkad, see Lois Bragg, *Oedipus borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga* (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), pp. 172–4.
- 6 *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), p. 59. Compare Bragg, *Oedipus borealis*, p. 197.
- 7 Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s ‘Heimskringla’* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 148. See also Lars Lönnroth, ‘Det litterära porträttet i latinsk historiografi och isländisk sagaskrivning: En komparativ studie,’ *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 27 (1965): 68–117.
- 8 Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 147.
- 9 Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 148. Further examples for the physical characteristics of the kings in *Heimskringla* can be found on pp. 146–148.
- 10 For *The saga of Haraldr harðráði*, see Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 4 vols. (Copenhagen, 1893–1901), 3:74–224. Translation from: Snorri Sturluson, *King Harald’s Saga: Harald Hardradi of Norway. From Snorri Sturluson’s ‘Heimskringla.’* trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (London: Penguin, 1966), pp. 68 and 160–1.
- 11 *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2007), chap. 181.
- 12 Compare Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 148.
- 13 Karen Lurkhur, ‘Redefining Gender Through the Arena of the Male Body: The Reception of Thomas’s *Tristan* in the Old French *Le chevalier de la charette* and the Old Icelandic *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*’ (Diss. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2008), esp. pp. 72–4. See also E. Jane Burns, ‘Refashioning Courtly Love: Lancelot as Ladies’ Man or Lady/Man,’ in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), p. 118 [111–34].
- 14 The origin and transmission of *Þiðreks saga* remains a subject of discussion. While it is unresolved whether the saga already had been composed in northern Germany and was then translated in Norway or was compiled in Norway based on oral

- and/or written German stories, there can be no doubt that its subject matter is derived from continental German sources that reached Norway via Low Germany. Summaries of this discussion as well as recent scholarly investigations of the saga can be found in Susanne Kramarz-Bein, ed., *Hansische Literaturbeziehungen: Das Beispiel von 'Piðreks saga' und verwandter Literatur* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996). See also Susanne Kramarz-Bein, *Die 'Piðreks saga' im Kontext der altnorwegischen Literatur* (Tübingen and Basel: Francke, 2002). For a discussion of the bridal-quest narratives in *Piðreks saga* and references to the pertinent scholarly publications, see Claudia Bornholdt, *Engaging Moments: The Origins of Medieval Bridal-Quest Narrative* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 86–119. For a short overview of the bridal-quest narratives' analogies to Arthurian literature, see Marianne E. Kalinke, 'Arthurian Echoes in the Icelandic Sagas,' in *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus' Realms*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 158–9 [145–167].
- 15 'Die gattungsmäßige Zuordnung der *Piðreks saga* schwankt in der Sekundärliteratur. Sie wird einerseits den Fornaldarsögur zugeordnet, andererseits den Riddarasögur.' Heinrich Beck, '*Piðreks saga* als Gegenwartsdichtung,' in *Hansische Literaturbeziehungen*, p. 91 [91–99].
  - 16 For a detailed discussion of the structure of the saga, see Thomas Klein, 'Zur *Piðreks saga*,' in *Arbeiten zur Skandinavistik: Sechste Arbeitstagung der Skandinavisten des deutschen Sprachgebietes: 26.9.–1.10. 1983 in Bonn*, ed. Heinrich Beck (Frankfurt am Main, et al.: Lang, 1983), pp. 487–565. See also Theodore M. Andersson, 'An Interpretation of "Piðreks saga,"' in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd W. Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 347–77; and 'Composition and Literary Culture in "Piðreks saga,"' in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 1–23.
  - 17 Compare Susanne Kramarz-Bein, '*Piðreks saga* und *Karlamagnús saga*,' in *Hansische Literaturbeziehungen*, pp. 194–97 [186–211].
  - 18 Heiko Uecker, 'Nordisches in der *Piðreks saga*,' in *Hansische Literaturbeziehungen*, p. 179 [175–185]. My translation of the original German.
  - 19 *Piðreks saga*, p. 7. See Gert Kreutzer, 'Aspekte des Komischen in der *Piðreks saga*,' in *Hansische Literaturbeziehungen*, pp. 103–4 [100–30]. Since the prologue is absent from the older Norwegian manuscript transmitting the saga, it is debated whether or not it originally belonged to the saga or is a later addition by the Icelandic adaptor.
  - 20 Compare Kreutzer, 'Aspekte des Komischen,' pp. 109–11.
  - 21 *Piðreks saga*, p. 5.
  - 22 *Piðreks saga*, p. 6.
  - 23 In his preface, Saxo Grammaticus repeats the popular belief that giants are responsible for the megalithic remains and the ruins of Roman buildings, a belief we also find in Anglo-Saxon poetry. See *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes Books I–IX*, trans. Peter Fisher, ed. and commentary Hilda Ellis Davidson, 2 vols.

- (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), pp. 1:9, and 2:24 n.39. For a discussion of giants in the Scandinavian royal genealogies, see Ulrike Sprenger, 'Zum Superbiaproblem in der *Piðreks saga*,' in *Hansische Literaturbeziehungen*, p. 144 [131–149]. See also Lotte Motz, 'Kingship and the Giants,' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 111 (1996): 73–88.
- 24 Compare Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Cassell, 1995), p. 55.
- 25 *Piðreks saga*, p. 254.
- 26 *Piðreks saga*, pp. 31–2.
- 27 Vaði is probably modeled after the Germanic sea giant Wade, although *Piðreks saga* is the only known instance where this giant is attested as Valent's father. See Bragg, *Oedipus borealis*, p. 155.
- 28 For this and the following description of Viðga, see *Piðreks saga*, p. 246.
- 29 *Piðreks saga*, p. 246.
- 30 Compare *Piðreks saga*, pp. 38–9. The only other character for whom we are given a physical description and who does not adhere to the ideal of the tall body outlined in the saga is King Erminrik's adviser Sifka, who causes much distress, death, deception, and pain. Like Heimir, Sifka is not tall, but he is also not short. Sifka is 'meðalmaðr at hæð' [of medium height] and, unlike any other character in the saga, he has red hair, red facial hair and red body hair, and his entire body is covered with red freckles. Compare *Piðreks saga*, p. 257.
- 31 Heinrich Beck, 'Piðreks saga als Gegenwartsdichtung?' in *Hansische Literaturbeziehungen*, p. 96 [91–99]. My translation.
- 32 See Marianne E. Kalinke, 'Introduction,' in *The Arthur of the North*, p. 2 [1–4].
- 33 'The Saga of Erex,' in *Norse Romance, II: The Knights of the Round Table*, ed. and trans. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), p. 222.
- 34 For a detailed discussion of the saga, see Claudia Bornholdt, 'The Old Norse-Icelandic Transmission of Chrétien de Troyes's Romances: *Ívens saga*, *Erex saga*, *Parcevals saga* with *Valvens Þáttr*,' in *The Arthur of the North*, pp. 112–20 [98–122].
- 35 We do find some detail in the description of Evida's [Enide's] beauty. Compare *Erex saga*, chap. 3, p. 226.
- 36 Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, trans. Carleton W. Carroll, in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler and Carleton W. Carroll (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 82.
- 37 *Erex saga*, p. 242.
- 38 *Erex saga*, p. 242.
- 39 *Erex saga*, p. 252.
- 40 Thomas, *Les fragments du Roman de Tristan, poème du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Bartina H. Wind (Geneva and Paris: Droz, 1960). Accessed on Bibliotheca Augustana, 'Fin du poème, Fragment du manuscrit Douce': [http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/gallica/Chronologie/12siecle/Thomas/tho\\_tri6.html](http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/gallica/Chronologie/12siecle/Thomas/tho_tri6.html). Translation: Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan, With the Surviving Fragments of the 'Tristan of Thomas'*, trans. A.T. Hatto (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 339.

- 41 *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, ed. and trans. Peter Jorgensen, in *Norse Romance, I: The Tristan Legend*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), p. 212 [27–226]. Literally *rögnu* means ‘wrongfully’; Jorgensen renders it as ‘a misnomer.’
- 42 *Tristrams saga*, p. 210. In the later Icelandic *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*, the second Tristram is called ‘hinn komni Tristram,’ [Tristram the Stranger] but no detail at all is given concerning his size. *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*, ed. Peter Jorgensen, trans. Joyce M. Hill, in *Norse Romance, I*, ed. Kalinke, p. 286 [240–294].
- 43 These episodes are most likely modeled after Wace’s *Roman de Brut* and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*; the latter was familiar to the Norse audience through the Old Norse *Breta sögur* [Sagas of the Britons]. Compare Geraldine Barnes, ‘The Tristan Legend,’ in *The Arthur of the North*, pp. 61–76. Adrian Stevens, ‘Killing Giants and Translating Empires: The History of Britain and the Tristan Romances of Thomas and Gottfried,’ in *Blütezeit: Festschrift für L. Peter Johnson*, ed. Mark Chinca, Joachim Heinzle and Christopher Young (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), pp. 409–26. Adrian Stevens, ‘History, Fable and Love: Gottfried, Thomas and the Matter of Britain,’ in *A Companion to Gottfried von Straßburg’s ‘Tristan’*, ed. Will Hasty (Rochester, NY and Woodbridge: Camden House, 2003), pp. 223–56.
- 44 Stevens, ‘History,’ p. 225; Barnes, ‘The Tristan Legend,’ p. 65.
- 45 Stevens, ‘History,’ p. 247. Compare Barnes, ‘The Tristan Legend,’ p. 66.
- 46 Compare *Tristrams saga*, 173; Barnes, ‘The Tristan Legend,’ p. 66.
- 47 Barnes, ‘The Tristan Legend,’ p. 66.
- 48 See Barnes, ‘The Tristan Legend,’ pp. 65, 67.
- 49 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, ed. Rüdiger Krohn (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1990).
- 50 *Tristrams saga*, p. 78.
- 51 *Tristrams saga*, p. 80.
- 52 I altered Jorgensen’s translation from ‘huge and powerful’ to ‘heavy and tall’ since this better correlates with the preceding statements.
- 53 Compare *Tristrams saga*, p. 180.
- 54 *Tristrams saga*, p. 172.
- 55 *Piðreks saga*, p. 86.
- 56 *Piðreks saga*, pp. 34–5.
- 57 *Piðreks saga*, p. 36.
- 58 Geraldine Barnes, ‘Arthurian Chivalry in Old Norse,’ in Richard Barber, ed. *Arthurian Literature VII* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), p. 71 [50–102]. Quote from *Breta sögur*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, in *Hausbók* (Copenhagen 1892–96), p. 287.
- 59 Compare Barnes, ‘Arthurian Chivalry,’ p. 76: ‘The knightly credentials of Íven, on the other hand, are never in doubt.’ All underlying criticism found in Chrétien, especially in his depictions of Arthur’s behavior, are entirely removed and Arthur and his knights appear in a much more praiseworthy light as models of chivalry.