



# NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CONVERSION THROUGH MEDIEVAL ROMANCE: THE CASE OF HRAFN GUNNLAUGSSON'S FILM "Í SKUGGA HRAFNSINS" [IN THE SHADOW OF THE RAVEN]

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In director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson's 1988 film, "Í Skugga Hrafnins" [In the shadow of the raven], conversion to Christianity, despite the promise of spiritual salvation and national unification, is inherently a competition for social dominance. In the opening sequence, Gunnlaugsson juxtaposes midshots of the boat's passengers with voice-overed long shots of the troubled boat to introduce three of the four dramatic tensions in the film--religion, environment, settlement, and, later, romance. Here, an extreme long shot shows a Viking longboat violently tossed by a gray sea and barely visible as it sails seemingly without free will into the camera's frame. The dominant contrast of the shot favors the sound of the ocean emphasized by an initial absence of dialogue and musical score. As the film's establishing shot, it presses the uncertainty of human endeavors while honoring the fortitude of man's desire to settle and to explore a world where gods are present in nature and fate is irrevocably tied to unpredictable forces. A frantic seaman sounds the alarm that the boat is off course and approaching a field of drift ice, as the hero, Trausti, dressed in a clerical hooded cloak, appears resolute, holding his book – a sign of Norwegian literacy, religion, and culture. Recalling the biblical voyage of Noah as well as the saga story of Hrafn-Flóki (Raven-Flóki) from Landnámabók, the scene includes the release of a raven by the crew in hopes that it will guide them to Iceland. There is a moment of hesitation and fear as the bird circles the boat before flying offscreen, leading an overjoyed crew who rejoice that they will "follow the raven" home. Hence, "in the shadow of the raven" – an overt sign of Iceland's pagan past and present--the newly-ordained hero brings Christianity to his home simultaneously threatened and protected by a fate that resides in nature, ever-present, everlasting, and ever-changing.

The year is 1077 – a mere seventy-seven years after Iceland's unanimous and peaceful conversion to Christianity at the alþingi (Althing) (Magnusson 137-47; Karlsson 33-43). When Trausti returns to his farm in Iceland from training as a priest in Norway to assume the role of family head,<sup>1</sup> he and his family quickly become embroiled in a conflict with another



clan over legal rights to a beached whale, whose value to the survival of a community, coupled with the occasion of the insult of one hot-headed inhabitant, escalates the pre-existing competition into a blood-feud that tears apart three communities. Trausti's adversary in the dispute is Eirikur, who intends to ally his farm with that of Bishop Hordur by marrying his daughter, Isold, an unmarried mother, to Hjörleifur, the bishop's son. The feud over the whale is nothing less than a battle for survival, as the meat, oil, and blubber of the whale could potentially sustain the farm that claims it throughout winter; the feud necessitates strong family bonds and privileges a code of honor. As tensions mount and Trausti's own spiritual loyalty is tested by loss, danger, and familial and ecclesiastical obligations, he will reluctantly admit that the vast majority of the population remains heathen, becoming Christian only when it is necessary, or as he implies, politically advantageous.<sup>2</sup> When Eirikur is killed in the cross-fire, all attentions turn to Trausti, who, as *goði* of Kross, assumes culpability for the murder, and to Isold, the rightful heir to Eirikur's desirable land and now the focus of the mounting blood-feud.<sup>3</sup>

What is Trausti's obligation as priest, given his mother's need for her eldest son to protect the family, using any means necessary, including bloodshed?<sup>4</sup> As priest, should he defer to his superior bishop (also his adversary)? Should the issue of the whale be adjudicated democratically, by national debate, or should the three clans engage in combat, supposing that might will symbolically make right whether horse is set against horse or man is set against man?<sup>5</sup> As a priest and a member of a warring clan, should Trausti master his attraction to Isold? Or is his love for her the key to peace on all fronts?

Clearly cultural claims on the hero, both internal and external, conflict in this film: the pagan heroic code of vengeance, familial obligation, and fate is set against Christian mercy, obligation to God, and individual will. The claims are traced against a backdrop of the young nation's attempt to formulate an identity, given the expectation of subordination to a monolithic Church that blurs boundaries and prohibits transgressions. The vexing question of individual loyalties is set in place by means of the catalytic event of the saga family feud (drawn from an older legal system), as complicated by Gunnlaugsson's introduction of the romance plot borrowed unexpectedly from the Arthurian romance tradition of Tristan and Isolde (the Icelandic version of the Tristan legend, *The Saga of Tristram and Ísönd*). The genre of saga naturally recreates historical conflicts (conventionally debated in the Middle



Ages within the genres of saga, epic, and romance) that are complicated in the film by the romance plot's courtly-love context. Specifically, mortal enemies Isold and Trausti are attracted romantically despite Isold's ultimate political, social, and economic power over Trausti's decision-making and his sacrifice of all land rights to her in compensation for her father's loss. The film conjoins romance and saga to symbolize the clash of value systems in Trausti, to represent the vexed identity of a young nation in relation to an older European culture.

Within the context of the saga's legal code of revenge – the eye-for-an-eye code of justice also common to the Old Testament – Gunnlaugsson interlocks clashing legal claims. The film continually reinforces Trausti's right to enact blood-vengeance (in place of wergeld) despite his clerical vows. Trausti's claim begins with a dispute over a whale that has beached itself on his property. Eirikur and his company harpoon the carcass in an attempt to establish it as originally theirs; they then dishonor Grímur – a member of the Kross farm community – by calling him a sodomite. During the skirmish that ensues, Eirikur's men fatally wound Edda (Trausti's mother). The second claim, Isold's, involves the loss of her father. When Trausti refuses to kill Eirikur in revenge for the appropriated property of the whale, dishonored Grímur sheds blood, thereby ensuring Isold's right to exact revenge on Trausti (who the families believe has killed her father). Isold's demand for Trausti's lands succeeds at the Althing because Trausti gives them to her willingly, at which time she makes him her trustee by agreeing to marry him. The bishop and Sigridur then unlawfully seek revenge on Trausti for the loss of bride Isold and her lands. When Isold dies through Sigridur's treachery, Trausti also has a claim against Sigridur and the bishop. Trausti's third and last claim occurs when bishop, Sigridur, and their frustrated son, Hjörleifur, attempt to murder Trausti three times. During the third attempt, Hjörleifur demands that the men meet in the sauna to reconcile their grievances in accord with the ancient ways. The proposal appears to argue for reconciliation both between the two men and between the film's competing religious and cultural claims on Trausti. In addition to the cup of peace Trausti offers Hjörleifur at the bishop's alter, he is promised that the meeting in the sauna will “heal all wounds.” But in place of a pagan healing ritual, Hjörleifur treats Trausti to a near deadly boiling. Thus, Trausti is undeniably justified in killing Hjörleifur.



Against this revenge backdrop there is set the Christian concept of peace and reconciliation as based on love and sacrifice and represented first by Trausti and then by Isold, who understands his vision of universal peace. First, Trausti refuses to fight Eirikur and throws the knife in the ground instead of at Eirikur. Next, he cedes all his land to Isold, even though he did not kill Eirikur. Third, he forgives the bishop and Sigridur and invites Hjörleifur and his parents to his wedding. Fourth, even after the bishop's fatal attack on Isold and himself on their wedding night, he forgives Hjörleifur in the church and offers him the cup of peace. Fifth, he goes along with Hjörleifur's offer of the sauna as a healing site for the ritual of reconciliation. Only then does Trausti kill Hjörleifur, when it is clear Hjörleifur has tried to kill him and violated the peace offering. Learning peace from Trausti, Isold, who initially believes Trausti has killed her father and accepts her duty to kill him, is won over to peace even before she recognizes his innocence.

In this saga of revenge Gunnlaugsson embeds romance by using the trope of a supernatural love potion so that the combined narrative of both genres obscures the protagonists' free will. While in some continental versions of Tristan and Isolde fate proves cruel to the lovers, in Gunnlaugsson's version the saga's feuds leads to tragedy because of the conflict of values among the principals. Indeed, the romance plot is introduced through violence when Trausti first approaches Eirikur's burning farm in a desperate attempt to stop the unbridled anger of Grímur, who seeks to murder Eirikur. When Trausti finds Isold unconscious and seeks to revive her, a nurse unknowingly offers Trausti the love potion given to Isold by her witch mother – the one possession Isold has rescued from the fire. As Isold awakens and realizes that the man she holds as her father's murderer has shared the potion with her, she recoils in disgust, fearing that she will be bound to love him. The crucial events that follow are generally ignored by film critics and scholars (for example, Cowie and Ryan), who are quick to judge Trausti for his sudden infatuation with Isold. Trausti, seeking reconciliation before law and God, confronts Isold in his mother's church, but Isold is consumed by hatred and attempts to murder Trausti in revenge for her father's death. As Trausti tackles Isold, he finds himself inexplicably enthralled by passion. Without knowing what he says, the only response he can muster are the words "for a thousand years." Gunnlaugsson uses the love-potion motif to humanize his hero, metaphorically removing the clerical cloak to reveal the man, rather than the hero, beneath. Trausti is given the opportunity to exercise free will, and he does regain



control of his passions – a feat perhaps even more impressive considering the irrevocable influence of the potion.

What evidence exists that Gunnlaugsson was consciously using the romance of *Tristan and Isolde*? In the Tristan story, Tristan, nephew of King Mark of Cornwall, is sent to Ireland to fetch Isolde for the king, and on the way back he shares a love potion with her that makes them fall madly in love. The relationship is doomed from the beginning because it has to be kept secret; its passion and intensity spell out disaster for the lovers, both of whom die. Gunnlaugsson's names for the lovers, Trausti and Isold, most likely taken from Tristram and Ísönd in the Icelandic saga, utilize nearly all the letters of Tristram in "Trausti" and those of "Ísönd" in Isold. However, it is possible that "Trausti" may be related to "Drustan" (of Scottish origin, originally Pictish), as King Mark's is to "March" (see Matthews and Stead). Tristram of the *Tristrams saga* is said to be named from the sadness attending his birth because his conception, painful birth, and sorrowful life resulted from the secret love between his mother, the king's sister Blensibil, and his father, the stranger Kanigres, that ended in death: *trist* means "sorrow," and *hum* means "man" (Jorgensen 49). But Gunnlaugsson may have deliberately disassociated his main character from the sad Tristan by identifying him as a loyal son and lover – trustworthy (note that the name "Trausti" means "trustworthy") – and as a beloved product of a seemingly shameful union between a slave (his mother) and her much-loved heathen mate.<sup>6</sup> The new kind of love offered by Trausti is indeed faithful above all else – and "trust" is a word mentioned in conjunction with the first appearance of Trausti, in the boat bound for home at the film's opening.

Assuming that Gunnlaugsson did use the Tristram and Isolde story consciously – in an e-mail sent to Jessica Weinstein on 2 March 2002 he acknowledges as the source only his grandmother's story, relayed to him when he was five, of a magic potion – how did the Tristram and Isolde story find its way to Iceland? According to Marianne E. Kalinke, there were seven French romances translated from Old French to Old Norse in the early thirteenth century as well as one translated into Old Swedish in the early fourteenth century and three Icelandic adaptations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; all but two were "known as sagas" (vii). The saga, a genre rarely associated by the nonspecialist with the medieval romance, can also refer to the genre that came to be linked with works of continental fiction (by means of Norway) for which Icelanders "evinced a predilection," according to Kalinke.



These Old French romances (several by Chrétien de Troyes) were “translated” into Old Norse,<sup>7</sup> most likely at the request of Norwegian royalty,<sup>8</sup> the most famous and influential of which was Thomas d’Angleterre’s *Tristan*, which became *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*.<sup>9</sup> Icelandic redactors copied these Old Norse “translations” (they are really not translations; scribes apparently revised freely).<sup>10</sup> Although *Tristrams saga* is important in the history of the transmission of the Tristan legend in Europe, in Iceland – despite its shortcomings as an imitation of the style and culture of French romance – it is the most influential of the translations in regard to “indigenous Icelandic romances,” Icelandic sagas, and their recreations.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, two topoi of the medieval romance are reconfigured in *Shadow*: specifically, the magic love-drink the lovers share by accident (as in other continental versions of Tristan) and the recasting of Isold as an unwed mother, as Gunnlaugsson puts it in that previously mentioned e-mail to Jessica Weinstein, “to get away from the frustrating virginity and make her a woman with her own will.” In the Icelandic saga, set in Brittany, the queen’s powerful position lends itself to the courtly love relationship of the outsider Tristram and the domina Isönd – indeed, the love between the two principals is key, as the prologue announces: “Written down here is the story of Tristram and Queen Isönd and of the heartrending love they shared.” (Jorgensen, *Tristrams Saga ok Ísöndar*, in Kalinke, 28, 29). But in Gunnlaugsson’s version, although Isold becomes powerful, she is neither a queen nor involved in a courtly love relationship in which the female beloved is passive.

In a sense, Gunnlaugsson demonstrates the impinging of the romance’s courtly love ambience on the saga, not only by the device of the magic potion (also found in Thomas’s romance), but also by the ingenious solution of the granting of all lands and goods and therefore power to Isold – making her Trausti’s “queen.” The romance’s courtly love is translated in the film into a new kind of democratic married love between equals, one that is strong enough to allow for the dominance (social, economic, political) of Isold over Trausti. Here, the Icelandic ideal of the democratic *alþingi* is transferred to the microcosm of the relationship between Trausti and Isold. Loving Trausti, initially so close to his mother and later, after he meets Isold, bound by his love for her, seems always to be motivated by a sense of fairness. However, like Tristan, who comes from South Wales or Cornwall rather than from England, Trausti, because of his education as a priest in Norway, is an outsider.



In the creation of his female characters, especially Isold, Gunnlaugsson borrows general elements from Icelandic family saga, *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>12</sup> The matriarchal *Laxdæla saga* (c. 1250-70), which covers one family's history between c. 890 – c. 1030 and which some editors surmise may have been written by a woman, may have influenced Gunnlaugsson's portrait of Isold, who in her ability to take charge and wield her own will resembles the strong *Laxdæla* women Unn the Highminded, Thorgerd, and Gudrún Ósvífsdóttir, among others.<sup>13</sup> Although Old English and Old Norse women often served in a conventional role as peaceweaver through marriage between conflicting tribes (see Chance, esp. chap. 1), here Isold is the negotiator, not (as it seems at first) the object of the negotiator. Like the matriarch Unn, Isold arranges wise marriages (at least for herself, if not for other family members) and assumes the right to claim and to distribute land.<sup>14</sup> Like Thorgerd, "a very remarkable woman" (Arent 58), Isold insists that her suitor obtain her consent for the marriage instead of her submitting to the men's negotiations. Neither woman seems to object to marriage with a bondswoman's son, perhaps because they are both the daughters of slaves.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Isold's position between two men, Trausti and Hjörleifur, recalls the case of Gudrún Ósvífsdóttir, who is torn between Kjartan and his foster brother, Bolli. Isold's mistreatment (ultimately a misjudgment) of Trausti parallels that of Gudrún, who confesses, "To him [Kjartan – or is it Bolli? The antecedent is unclear] I was worst whom I loved most" (Arent xxxii and chap. 33).<sup>16</sup> Both Gudrún and Isold are wise women who provide counsel to their men. And yet, unlike Gudrún, who exacts vengeance on Kjartan because he marries the gentle Hrefna, Isold remains faithful to Trausti. Isold's ability to arbitrate and to love (bolstered by the love potion) ensures her ability to forgive and move beyond her grievances.

Gunnlaugsson quite literally sets his version of Tristran and Isolde, "I Skugga Hrafninsins," "in the shadow of the raven," that is, in the Icelandic saga-context of the gods, which the raven signifies, both in Celtic stories and in Old Norse mythology, or more specifically, with Ódinn, the hanging god, the god of poetry. The opening sequence ends with the image of a boat following a raven to recall the glory of the Age of Settlement as Iceland is "discovered" for a second time. But the raven's image also marks the ominous story of two lovers that ends in death. Throughout the film ravens are pictured on the whale as it progresses through the stages of plunder and appropriation, until only bones remain. Yet, the old pagan magic and fatalism of the gods is clearly seen diminishing. For example, Trausti burns his father's temple to Odin as he paradoxically dons Odin's mask in a display of power and history meant to force Grímur



into submission. Trausti demands reconciliation take place at the foot of the bishop's own altar, not at the point of the sword after he has reluctantly defeated Hjörleifur in hand-to-hand combat.

We argue that Gunnlaugsson depicts Trausti's mother, Edda, as an older, more cautious version of Isold to compensate for the limited conversation that takes place between the lovers. For instance, Isold, like Edda, has learned spirituality through individuality rather than through catechism. As Edda lies dying in her son's arms, she realizes that the church she has built is merely a symbol and her long-suppressed Christian beliefs cannot efface the love she has experienced with her heathen husband. Her fate has had a purpose; she has Trausti. She confesses, "I have experienced so much. I was taken as a slave by a heathen man who gave me you. Despite all I have been through I still miss him and love him. The god who created the sun has always been my god and he has listened to my prayers. Whether he is called Christ or Odin is of no importance."

Likewise, the violent dismissals of Christianity by the younger and more spirited Isold subside when she recognizes the uncompromising belief in love that underlies Trausti's understanding of Christ's message. For Trausti, Christ's love is as personal as his love for Isold. Gunnlaugsson presses this comparison by mirroring the couple's language before the viewer. When Isold expresses her vision of harmony to Trausti ("Every great deed a man does is merely a dream of love [...] and now you have me and I have you. Can we wish more than that love seals peace upon the whole land?"), her words echo Trausti's attempt to alleviate his mother's fear of Isold's unpredictability: "The sacred work of Christ was a single dream of love, the love of all mankind, but also the love of one woman alone."

Hence, *two* marriages, not one, weave the medieval romance plot and the saga revenge plot into one narrative. The first marriage, consecrated by the ancient blood pact between Trausti and Isold, represents the protagonists' choice to accept fate. The act of blood union is voluntary and unwitnessed. The second wedding is a carefully mediated religious ritual between God and the communities who bear witness. Here, the individuals are actors, spokespersons performing roles designed to usher the stray sheep of their communities into a single fold. Both Isold and Trausti recognize the importance of public witness and re-education through example. Now acting as a *goði* with all the responsibility entailed in functioning as chieftain and leader of men, Trausti resumes the dominant public role,



exclaiming, “I wish that this marriage through the mercy of God may confirm the reconciliation and friendship between our families. For this reason, I offer peace to all, even to those who have opposed me earlier. I hope that everyone has come here with good intentions towards all both in word and action and that the conflict in our land is now over.”

Isold’s imminent death is designed to test the spiritual mettle – again, trustworthiness – of the lover/priest. Will his convictions survive the loss of Isold? Or will he repeat his father’s destiny, living and dying by the sword? Trausti makes two attempts to reconcile with Hjörleifur for the good of their communities; however, the self-absorbed and insecure Hjörleifur understands only personal loss and shame. How fitting that Hjörleifur’s final attempt to kill Trausti in the sauna utilizes a force as volatile and as unyielding as he is. Significantly, the eruption of the geyser signals Trausti’s transformation and when he holds his knife we know that he has become a type of soldier of Christ. He kills and forgives not out of revenge, but out of necessity, when his repeated attempts at peace fail and his enemies continue to betray and attack him.

The influence of false icons and false worshipers must be eradicated to protect the innocent represented by Sol, who appears in the field of steam near the geyser to reassure us that Trausti has changed, but that he still serves God and his community. Gunnlaugsson imagines an Iceland on the verge of becoming a nation, but his heroes are visionaries, not politicians, and neither religion nor the Icelandic legal system is capable of implementing law and enforcing it. Still, the film looks past its paradoxes to end on a note of hope. The film’s focus on environmental and human destruction emphasizes the constant social change and transition that occurred during the Settlement Era. Sol inherits the history of her people, and as Trausti predicts, she will “let the dream of love become a light in the darkness.”

Sol – both the classical and Icelandic name for the sun, source of light and truth, -

is at once a diminutive of her mother and the continuation of the lovers’ vision. Sol’s very conception signifies Isold’s “dream of love,” since her mother, fearing Eirikur’s disapproval, chose not to reveal her father’s identity. A single child’s simplicity allows the film to offer a glimpse of a future that will forgive the past. The brief exchange between father (both priest and adoptive father) and child pivots the film’s delicate balance between romantic and religious love:



- T: “Grandad is not dead. He has just gone away to Jesus.”
- S: “Is Jesus dead?”
- T: “Jesus believed in love. Therefore he had to die, so that we should have eternal life.”
- S: “ Can Grandad come back?”
- T: “No but he will always be with you.”
- S: “ How?”
- T: “Jesus gives everlasting life: he who believes in love shall live forever.”
- S: “Does Mama believe?”
- T: “Yes.”
- S: “Do you?”
- T: “I love your mother.”

It is Trausti’s final answer that troubles the meaning of the exchange: Christ’s love is at once the love of humankind and the love of one woman. Hence, with Isold’s visage standing in for the Virgin Mary (or is it Mary Magdalene?), head bent on the altarpiece at Kross, Gunnlaugsson reconciles all three competing claims on his hero – religion, love, and family.

So what are we to make of the film’s ubiquitous “thousand years”? Is it a reference to the length of Trausti and Isold’s magical love (and hence a topos of the medieval romance); a reference to the length of time it has taken Christianity to reach Iceland, or a message of hope: a prayer for lasting peace and unity forged by a common religion and common law and maintained through mercy and reconciliation? The film’s movement toward unity and conversion suggests that all three possibilities are inherent and necessary components of the text. The omnipresent voice-over literally freezes Trausti and Sol to consecrate, even mythify, the image of father and daughter bound together not by blood but by love and the re-education that occurs through true spiritual and social conversion. Our attentions return to the present, no longer a part of Gunnlaugsson’s Viking vision, and in this present we recall the words of Iceland’s National Anthem that have left impressions throughout the film. Iceland’s thousand years, in Gunnlaugsson’s vision, is both a proud recognition of unity and a prayer for the continuation of peace.



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Also, because Iceland had no rigid class system, literacy and book ownership were not restricted to any one class. For instance, a school founded in north Iceland at Holar in the twelfth century was known to include women and even a church carpenter, Thorodd Gamlason (Magnusson and Palsson 35).

<sup>2</sup> “Iceland was almost totally heathen for a hundred years after its first settlement.” See Lacy 13.

<sup>3</sup> “[P]ersons called *goðar* (sing. *Goði*) played a central role in the governing system of Iceland also in Christian times. The word is obviously related to *guð/goð*, which means “god,” and seems to indicate that their office originated in a religious role. Some scholars would object that there is no proof of any such role for the *goðar* in Iceland, whatever the origin of their occupational name. But . . . the simplest, and therefore preferable, interpretation of the sources is to assume that the governing system of Iceland grew up around persons who simultaneously had religious and secular tasks and were referred to as *goðar*” (Karlsson 19).

<sup>4</sup> See Byock.

<sup>5</sup> “To earn good renown the saga hero had to show the utmost sensitivity to any slight that might besmirch the honor of himself or his family. Should his enemies try to injure him or his relatives, by deed or even only by word, it was his duty not to forgive and forget but to demand and obtain satisfaction, in order to restore the respect in which society held him.



Usually this could be done within the framework of the law of the land. But if for any reason the law could not give him satisfaction, the hero was expected to exact personal vengeance for the wrong done to him or those near to him.” See Fell 15. On the concept of honor, see also Hallberg 98-100, 113.

<sup>6</sup> The edition used is the bilingual edition of Kalinke, but see also Schach.

<sup>7</sup> The French titles translated into Old Norse include Thomas’s *Tristan*, which became *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*; Chrétien’s *Yvain, Perceval* and *Erec et Enide*, which became *Ívens saga*, *Parcevals saga*, and *Erex saga* (with the *Lai du cort mantel* known as *Möttuls saga* or *Skikkju saga*, “The Saga of the Mantle”). See Kalinke, vii.

<sup>8</sup> The date of 1226 signals the first translation of continental literature into Old Norse, as noted in *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, when King Hákon Hákonarson the Old of Norway (who ruled 1217-63) asked Brother Robert to translate Thomas’s *Tristan* into Norse, cited in the text of *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* edited and translated by Jorgensen, in Kalinke 28, 29. Then, nearly a hundred years later, Queen Eufemia (the German wife of Hákon’s grandson Hákon Magnússon, who reigned 1299-1319), had translated the romance of *Yvain* into Swedish. We know that most romances were translated during Hákon the Old’s reign because the prologues of three other translations mention him as a royal patron – *Strengleikar* [Stringed Instruments], a collection of lais that includes two Arthurian lais, *Geiterslauf* and *Janual 2*; a translation of Chrétien’s *Yvain*, *Ívens saga*; and a translation of *Lai du cort mantel*, *Möttuls saga* (Kalinke, vii). Possibly the other two romances of Chrétien, what are now called in Old Norse *Parcevals saga* and *Erex saga*, most especially, the former, were also translated at the royal Norwegian court (Kalinke, viii). The former may have been a revision of a translation by an Icelandic redactor who had wanted to translate the “laconic style of the Icelandic sagas” as part of a program of chivalric education at the Norwegian court.

<sup>9</sup> The texts used are “Icelandic adaptations of the presumed Norwegian translations” (Kalinke ix). Of the three texts using the Tristan legend, “The most popular translated text was *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, to judge by the pervasive presence in indigenous Icelandic romances – and even in some Sagas of Icelanders – of names, motifs, and situations borrowed from the Tristan legend. It also inspired two recreations, a saga, and a ballad” (Kalinke ix). Nevertheless, differences between the originals and the translations are apparent: the



fourteenth-century *Tristrams saga* “is characterized by exaggerations and distortions at times so severe as to be parodistic” (Kalinke ix). Most Tristanlike in spirit is the medieval ballad, *Tristrams kvæði*.

<sup>10</sup> Icelandic scribes revised their texts constantly; in addition, what have been called “translations” are really closer to adaptations. Closest to the originals are the two lais. However, all extant mss. are Icelandic and later, even though the texts date from Hákon’s reign. The first was *Tristrams saga*, of which only seventeenth-century paper copies now exist, as is the case with *Erex saga* (Kalinke vii).

<sup>11</sup> Kalinke states that “*Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* played a significant role in the history of Tristan material in Europe: it is the sole complete representative of the Thomas d’Angleterre branch of the romance” (viii-ix). In Iceland, nevertheless, Kalinke continues, “The translators of the longer romances, especially *Tristrams saga*, have been faulted for their apparent inability to convey the stylistic and psychological nuances of the French romances. They have been criticized for their failure to understand French, for their unwillingness to transmit all but the basic plot, and, overall, for having failed to comprehend the courtly world depicted in the French romances” (ix).

<sup>12</sup> According to Jochens (4), there were generally three kinds of sagas written down beginning in the thirteenth century: sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), mainly Old Norse in their mythology [*Laxdæla Saga*, *Gísli saga*, *Njálssaga*]; kings’ sagas (*konungasögur*), both Old Norse mythological and Christian, tracing Norwegian royalty from legendary ancient times to the mid-thirteenth century, exemplified by Snorli Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* [Sphere of the Earth]; and contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*), about Christian society in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, exemplified by the *Sturlunga saga*. This seems to leave out the bishop’s sagas, for example

<sup>13</sup> See Arent. For studies of women in Norse society, as opposed to literary constructions of women, see Jesch; also Jochens.

<sup>14</sup> Widows could “give men answer” if they had property. See Arent 13.

<sup>15</sup> When Ólaf (Ólafur) comes to woo Thorgerd, he declares, “You perhaps find it bold of a bondwoman’s son to sit down beside you and presume to talk to you.” She replies (ignoring the reference to class differences and leaping to their gender differences as male and female),



“You no doubt mean that you have done more daring things than talk with women” (Arent 57).

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