The Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd: an Icelandic reworking of Tristrams saga

Summary. The Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd, which is also known as Tristrams saga ok Ísoddar, is an Old Icelandic reworking of the Tristan legend, dating back to the 14th century. In the past, critics analyzed the Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd in relation to its alleged source, Tristrams saga, which is the Old Norse prose translation of Thomas' Tristan; more recently, critics have argued for the necessity of studying this saga in the context of the wider Icelandic and European cultural and literary framework. Following this suggestion, this essay investigates some aspects of structure and style in the Old Icelandic reworking. The analysis of the composition technique reveals that the use of the conventions of various different literary forms which were current in medieval Iceland (such as translated Riddarasögur, original Riddarasögur and Íslendingasögur), has been crucial to the reshaping of the Tristan legend.

1. Introduction

The Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd, also known as Tristrams saga ok Ísoddar, is a prose work written in Iceland in the 14th century and handed down in a 15th century manuscript. It is a reworking of the legend of Tristan and Isolt and its model has been traced to Tristrams saga, a Norwegian prose translation of the Anglo-Norman poem Tristan by Thomas.

In their studies on the Saga af Tristram, Leach, Schach and Kalinke focused on its relation to Tristrams saga, whilst Thomas and Barnes have more recently enlarged the field of comparison by placing the Icelandic work in the literary framework of its time. Leach (1921: 169-198) held the Icelandic work to be a vulgarization of Tristrams saga, written for a less refined audience. Schach (1964: 281) at first deemed it a “clumsy retelling of Tristrams saga based on a faulty recollection of the original”, further distorted by the addition of names and situations from other sources, and as a result an unintentional parody; he later changed his mind and spoke of “a deliberate reply”, of a farcical imitation of Tristrams saga [Schach (1964: 281), (1987: 95)]. Kalinke, noting that the Icelandic reworking has but scarce affinities with the tragic love story we know from the Norwegian translation [Kalinke
(1985: 348)] speaks of an “iconoclastic approach” [Kalinke (1981: 211)], considering the Saga of Tristram a parody of translated Riddarasögur and of Arthurian romance in general; in her opinion, the Icelandic work, by means of distortion and exaggeration of certain motifs, mocks the behavioural patterns put forward by courtly literature [Kalinke (1981: 199-211)].

Whereas Schach and Kalinke see a burlesque purpose, M.F. Thomas (1983: 54) rejects the idea of parody and considers the Icelandic work in the light of the influence of other European traditions; she claims that it is essential to enlarge the field of comparison beyond Tristrams saga and to place the Icelandic work in the wider European context of the Tristan issue as a whole. Finally, Geraldine Barnes (1999: 380) argues that the Icelandic work should be placed in the cultural context of late medieval Iceland and not only compared to the Norwegian translation.

This paper, following the suggestions of Barnes and Thomas, will analyze some structural and stylistic features of the Saga of Tristram, with the purpose of highlighting how and why it strays from the Norwegian translation: the characters, the narrative strategies and analogies in structure and style to genres of Scandinavian literature such as Íslendingasögur, translated Riddarasögur, and original Riddarasögur, will be investigated.

2. The manuscript tradition of the Saga of Tristram

The composition of the Saga of Tristram probably dates back to the early 14th century: the work was handed down in a mid-15th century manuscript, AM 489, 4to, which was a little more recent than the oldest manuscript of Tristrams saga (which was written between the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century). While AM 489, 4to is the oldest and the most authoritative manuscript, two later manuscripts are also extant: NKS 1754, 4to (18th century), a copy of AM 489, 4to, and 2316, 4to (dating from about 1850).

AM 489, 4to is made up of two different manuscripts, AM 489A and AM 489B, bound in a single codex: AM 489A comprises ff. 1-26, originally part of AM 471, 4to, and AM 489B comprises ff. 27-56.1 AM 489, 4to contains

1 There were originally two distinct codices. One of them, AM 489, 4to, contained Hrings saga ok Tryggva, Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr, Saga of Tristram, Ívens saga. The other, AM 471, 4to, contained Barðar saga, Kirjalax saga, Borðar saga Hreðu, Króka-refs saga, Kjalnesinga saga, Kétls saga Hængs, Gríms saga Loðinkinna, Orvar-Odds saga, Viktors saga ok
six sagas, or parts of them. AM 489A contains Barðar saga Snæfellsáss and Kirjalax saga, while AM 489B contains Hrings saga ok Tryggva (the conclusion only), Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr (a translation from French), Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd, and Ívens saga (another translation from French; the conclusion is missing).

A comprehensive view of the manuscript tradition allows us to infer some data: the oldest extant manuscript was written down about half a century later than the oldest Icelandic manuscript of Tristrams saga, during a period, the 15th century, that saw the flourishing and manuscript dissemination of original Riddarasögur. Unlike these latter, however, which were handed down with an abundance of copies over a long time span (until the 19th century), the Saga af Tristram appears to have existed in only one vellum from the 15th century, and in two later paper manuscripts, from the 18th and 19th centuries respectively.

AM 489, 4to is an important witness for two romances which ultimately derive from medieval French works (i.e. the only complete vellum of Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr, and one of the two vellums of Ívens saga) and of a third romance of similar origin (i.e. the only complete vellum of the Saga af Tristram). It thus forms an important link in the transmission and development of the so-called Riddarasögur [Blaisdell (1980: 9)].

3. The translated Riddarasögur

The Norwegian translation of Tristan was commissioned in 1226 by king Hákon Håkonarson “The Old” to a monk named Robert; it is the first in a series of translations from French courtly romances which form a distinct group of works within saga literature, the Riddarasögur (‘sagas of knights’, ‘chivalric sagas’), also called “translated Riddarasögur” since they are translations and must be distinguished from the so-called “original Ridda-

Blávus. The folios containing Barðar saga and Kirjalax saga were then removed (we cannot determine when and why) from AM 471, 4to and added to AM 489, 4to.

2 That the translation was commissioned by the king from Brother Robert is stated in the prologue of Tristrams saga in the manuscript AM 543, 4to, dating from the 17th century. Brother Robert lived in the monastery of Lyse, near Bergen, which was the seat of the Norwegian royal court. An Abbot Robert is mentioned as translator of Elis saga, also commissioned by Hákon and written a little later than Tristrams saga. This Abbot Robert is probably the same person as Brother Robert, who had in the meantime advanced in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

3 Chansons de geste were also translated, for example Elis saga is the translation of Elie de St. Gilles.
rasögur”, which are later, original creations, though they were greatly influenced by the translated ones. Tristrams saga, Elis saga, Ívens saga, Möttuls saga, Parcevals saga, Válvers Báttr and the Strengleikar are products of Hákon’s cultural activity and were probably all translated by Brother Robert. The translated Riddarasögur, however, were not unaffected by the influence of native literature; the translations were executed in the 13th century, a time when a large number of Íslendingasögur (‘sagas of Icelanders’, also called “family sagas”) were being written down; around 1220 Snorri was composing Edda and Heimskringla [Mitchell (1959: 462)].

The introduction of this translated literature to Norway was part of Hákon’s political programme. Under his rule the crown became stronger and the king strove to claim a place among European monarchies; the translations represent Hákon’s endeavour to make Norway conform to the great courts of his time, where chivalric literature was flourishing. Hákon’s model was the Plantagenet court in England; indeed, commercial and cultural relations between Norway and England were thriving and they probably advanced the knowledge in Norway of the literature written in French which was prospering in England under the patronage of the Angevin kings and their barons. English influence was strong in literature, architecture and church affairs [Helle (1968: 107, 109)] and the majority of the manuscripts of the romances which were then translated probably came from England, including the Tristan of Thomas [Leach (1921: 152)].

4. The original Riddarasögur

This activity of translating French romances lasted just as long as Hákon’s reign [Togeby (1975: 183-185)]. The translated works themselves, however, lived on in Iceland, where they were copied over a span of more than six centuries [Kalinke (1982: 36)]. The majority of manuscripts containing translated Riddarasögur are Icelandic copies of Norwegian originals, ranging from the 14th to the 18th century; as these copies are geographically and

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4 These sagas reveal affinities in their vocabulary: see Hallberg (1971: 114-138); Blaisdell (1974: 134-139); Hallberg (1975: 1-17).
5 The 13th century was a period of growth for trade in the North Sea and the market for Norwegian dried fish was expanding; Bergen, the seat of Hákon’s court, was the main trading centre for dried fish. Norway imported cereals, fabrics and other handmanufactured articles from England, and exported fish and fish by-products, timber, furs and falcons.
6 Only Icelandic copies are extant of Tristrams saga, Ívens saga, Möttuls saga and Válvers Báttr. As for the Norwegian manuscript tradition of translated Riddarasögur, we have some parchment fragments and the codex de la Gardie 4-7.
chronologically removed from the Norwegian translations of the 13th century, it is not easy to determine how much of the text handed down in these manuscripts is the actual work of Norwegian translators and how much is that of Icelandic copyists. The question of omissions must be considered in light of the fact that Robert’s translation is no longer extant. Indeed, we only have manuscripts which are later Icelandic copies, so that, compared to the French originals, omissions and differences may be, in part at least, due to the taste of Icelanders who were accustomed to the style of the sagas.

The style of the saga form tends towards economy: there is little description and chiefly action, dialogues are limited in number and concise, narratorial intervention is scarce and, with regard to subject matter, the psychology of love is almost absent. The text of Tristrams saga, when compared to its model, appears to have been influenced by these characteristics of the Íslendingasögur, which were in fact being copied down in parchment in the very same years when manuscripts of the translated Riddarasögur were being produced [Boyer (1995: 1520)]. It is also possible that the saga style affected the texts at the moment of their translation in Norway.

In the 14th century, the translated Riddarasögur in Iceland contributed to the shaping of the original Riddarasögur, which were influenced both by the chivalric subject matter of the translated works and by stories based on Scandinavian subjects known as Fornaldarsögur [Weber (1986: 426)]. The original Riddarasögur contain a great number of narrative elements borrowed from various sources, both written and oral, rearranged in a new structure. The influence of translated Riddarasögur is remarkable above all in terms of the setting, which is courtly society.

4.1. Tristan in the Saga af Tristram

In the Saga of Tristram, Tristram is portrayed as the typical perfect knight. This portrayal was taken from translated Riddarasögur and had become a

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7 And the question of additions: for example, the prayer of the dying Ísodd to God in Tristrams saga.
8 The Fornaldarsögur are the ‘sagas of ancient times’ and are also called “mythical-heroic sagas”. The most remarkable difference compared to Fornaldarsögur lies in the courtly influence which permeates the original Riddarasögur; moreover, the atmosphere in the Fornaldarsögur is often tragic, but this is never the case in the original Riddarasögur. The Fornaldarsögur hand down a corpus of legendary traditions which has the function of a “legendary history” of Iceland; this aspect distinguishes them from the original Riddarasögur. In any case, the subject matter of both genres involves marvellous happenings.
rhetorical stereotype in the original *Riddarasöger*, where the knight is described as a youth of noble birth, a skillful and brave warrior, handsome and courageous. The Icelandic Tristram does not shine for his learning, and while Thomas’ hero is a talented musician and blessed with great eloquence, the skills of the Icelandic Tristram are rather of a physical and martial nature. In Eilhart’s version as well Tristan is first and foremost a warrior9 and it was probably the influence of the Germanic epic tradition that induced Eilhart to emphasize Tristan’s martial exploits.

The Tristan of the tradition is a warrior as well as a lover; he performs deeds which call to mind the deeds of Germanic heroes. There are characters that made Tristan familiar to the Scandinavian audience, not so much as a lover but rather as a dragon slayer, like Sigurðr, and as a giant slayer, like Þórr [Boyer (1995: 1525)]. In particular, there are many similarities between Tristan and Sigurðr: both were conceived by a dying father, both are outsiders in a society where they appear at first as saviours, and where, however, they both bring about disgregation; both are dragon slayers and warriors who perform heroic deeds; both incur the envy of the milieu into which they have entered; and, finally, both obtain the best bride for their kings, through disguise and deception [Gillespie (1990: 156)]. Although the design of king, bride and helper who wins the bride for his king is traditional and widespread, only in the stories of Sigurðr and of Tristan is the outcome tragic, since the helper (Sigurðr, Tristan) actually proves fitter for the bride than the king. In the *Saga af Tristram*, the tragic tone has disappeared since here Tristan does not experience any sense of moral dilemma from his adulterous relationship with his uncle’s wife, and afterwards he consummates his own marriage with the second Ísönd begetting a son. Tristan’s progeny is an innovation which helps to construct an epilogue in the fashion of the *Íslendingasöger*, where narratives usually end with mention of the descendants’ exploits; as a consequence, Tristram appears here as the founder of a prominent family, like a character from *Íslendingasöger*, instead of the tragic lover of tradition (in all the other versions Tristan has no children).

In the *Saga af Tristram* Tristram is involved in an episode (not found in the Norwegian translation) in which he acts like a typical figure of the original *Riddarasöger*, the so-called kolbítr. The kolbítr is a lazy and slow-witted lad with flaws such as a lack of speech who, in the end, however, turns out to be

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9 There are some features of Eilhart’s Tristan that make him very different from Thomas’s Tristan: for example, his not well-pondered decision to marry the second Ísolt, his saying that he has left her a virgin because she mistreats him, and his decision to consummate his marriage just to tease his lover.
more clever and more valiant than anyone else. Tristram is sold to the pirates and his obstinate silence enrages them; to compel him to speak, they beat him savagely and then shave and tar his head. The shaving of the head was a common practice in medieval Scandinavia for the purpose of stigmatizing slaves and criminals and it is often depicted in the original Riddarasögur; Tristram’s head is shaved here to mark his fall in rank. The episode can also be read in relation to versions of the legend that belong to the “common” branch of the Tristan tradition. In the German poem Tristrant by Eilhart, Tristan receives a head injury in battle and is therefore shaved because of his wound; in the Folie de Berne, a poem in French written down in the 13th century, Tristan, in his madness, cuts off his hair. The shaved head is a motif that was most likely suggested by versions of the story other than the Norwegian translation and its inclusion in the Icelandic reworking may have been prompted by the presence of analogous situations in the original Riddarasögur.

Tristram himself acts ruthlessly when he instigates a slaughter on board the ship bound to Ireland, bringing about the death of all the men of the crew. This massacre is not found in Tristrams saga, the alleged source of the reworking. In Schach’s opinion (1960: 344), the episode is aimed at lowering Tristram’s stature, with the purpose of criticising the futility of courtly literature. Wanton cruelty, however, is common in the original Riddarasögur; the slaughter Tristram instigates on board and the maltreatment he suffers at the hands of the pirates are typical instances of the gratuitous and grotesque violence which permeates them, and Fornaldarsögur as well [Barnes (1999: 390)].

These episodes give a picture of Tristram which does not fit the one portrayed by Thomas; it also clashes with the conventional laudatory portrait sketched out at the beginning of the saga. As often happens in the original Riddarasögur, characters which are at first described as compassionate and generous turn out through their actions to be cruel and ruthless. In the Icelandic reworking and in the original Riddarasögur, this contradiction is pro-

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10 The kolbítr is a figure which originated in folklore.
11 Tristram’s temporary mutism recalls that of the hero of the original riddarasaga Sigurðar saga þögla, who in his youth was thought to be unable to speak. Naturally, he later becomes the most valiant knight of all.
12 In the Middle Ages the shaved head was associated with the lowering of social dignity: monks shaved their heads as a sign of humility and criminals were shaved as a mark of their degradation in society.
13 While Tristrams saga belongs to the “courtly” tradition.
14 No reason is given in the saga for this carnage; it is probably a blind motif.
duced by the juxtaposition of ancient customs and the new more refined manners postulated by the translated *Riddarasögur* [Barnes (1999: 393)]. The *Saga of Tristram* is concerned only with the martial, exterior aspects of chivalry and takes no interest in ethical issues; the annulment of Tristram’s interior dilemmas is typical of the indifference of the original *Riddarasögur* to ethical concerns which are, on the contrary, the focus of most European courtly literature.

4.2. The female characters and the concept of love

As is usual in many original *Riddarasögur*, the *Saga of Tristram* contains a dispute for succession to the throne, when Blenzibý rises in arms against the new king Móródd, her own brother. Blenzibý is Tristram’s mother15 and in the Icelandic reworking she is endowed with qualities which are typical of the so-called *meykongr*, a figure peculiar to the original *Riddarasögur*, which are peopled by two types of female characters. On the one hand, we have the passive ones, who are given in marriage by male relatives, fathers or brothers, to recompense friends and benefactors, to appease enemies or to seal pacts: this is the case of Ísodd Svarta (Tristram’s wife) and of Ísodd herself. On the other hand, we find women who have sovereign power in their own kingdoms and who are military leaders. These women very often have a misogynous turn of mind; they belong to the literary type known as the *meykongr*, ‘maiden king’.16 Blenzibý is not misogynous but she does wage war and she wants to rule as a king rules; her *meykongr*-like nature, which is aggressive and commanding, emerges openly in her dialogue with Pollornis:

*Síðan kallaði kóngsdóttir til sín Pollornis sendimann sinn: “Ek hefi sét í dag,” sagði hún, “þann mann at ek hefi eigi litit hans jafningja, ok þér satt at segja, þá hefi ek svá mikla ást felt til hans, at ek má fyrir engan mun annat, en nú þegar í stað verð ek at senda þik til fundar við Kalegras, ok bið hann koma til mín, ok seg at ek vil hafa ást hans.” Pollornis svarar: “Frú, þú munt vera drukkin, er þér mælið slika fólksku, þar sem hann hefir gert yðr svá mikinn skaða, at hann hefir drepit Plegrus riddara, win yövvarn, er fyrir skömmu settuð þér höfðingja yövars hers. Liz mér hitt ráðliga, at ek féra ok drepa hann ok féra [ek þér] höfuð hans; er þá vel hefnt vårs mans.” Hún svarar: “Ef þú ferr [ekki] eptir því, sem ek mæli fyrir, þá skaltu sporna hinn hæsta gálgu,*

15 She is called Blancheflúr in Thomas’ poem, and Blensinbil in the Norwegian translation.
16 On the literary cliché of the *meykongr* see Wahlgren (1938); Kalinke (1990); Francini (2004).
Then the princess sent for her page Pollornis: “I have seen today,” she said, “the man whose equal I have never seen, and to tell you the truth, I then fell deeply in love with him that, as a result, now, at this moment, I can act in no other way than to send you to meet Kalegras. Ask him to come to me, and say that I desire to have his love.” Pollornis replied: “Lady, you must be drunk since you say such foolish things, seeing that he has done you so much harm in that he has killed the knight Plegrus, your friend, whom not long ago you appointed as commander of your army. It seems a better idea to me that I should go and kill him and bring you his head. Then our man will be properly avenged.” She answered: “If you do not act in accordance with what I said before, you shall dance from the highest gallows as soon as the sun reddens the woodlands in the morning, or you shall have another kind of death, the worst that can be experienced in all England.”

As we can see, when Blenziblý falls in love she is not tortured by the inner pangs she experiences in Tristrams saga; on the contrary, she is resolved to claim her beloved as opposed to offering herself and her love to him. This alteration in her character may be due to the influence of the literary conventions of the Íslandingasögur, where the inner lives of the personages are almost never described and their personalities and emotions are revealed only through their behaviour. As a result, the maiden’s overpowering feelings, which are described by reporting her psychological toilings in Tristrams saga, are instead given expression in the Icelandic work through her overbearing manners.

Blenziblý had fallen in love with Kalegras while watching the fight from above in which he kills her previous lover and then the two retired to her bower for three years; there is no hint in Tristrams saga about the killing of the lover and about these three years of uninterrupted love-making. The sudden passion for the knight who has killed the princess’ lover has probably been inspired by the lady’s instant fancy for her husband’s killer in Ívens Saga, the Norse translation of Chrétien’s Yvain. The motif of the long retirement from the world spent in love-making has probably been taken from another translated riddarasaga, Erex Saga, the Norse translation of Chrétien’s Erec. Blenziblý has catalysed the rewriter’s attention, since her char-

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17 Kölbing (1978: Saga af Tristram, ch. 3).
19 In the Icelandic reworking Kalegras is the name of Tristram’s father, while the form is Kanelangres in the Norwegian translation.
acter has undergone considerable changes and a great deal of motifs from other sources have been attached to her figure. Ísodd also acts like Blenzibly when she reveals openly to Tristram that she is attracted by him; her straightforwardness in dealing with men is common among the meykongr-heroines of the original Riddarasöguð.20

The picture of love given in the Icelandic reworking is a radical departure from Trístrams saga; the conflict between love and honour, already played down in Trístrams saga, disappears almost completely in the Saga af Trístram, where love is not an ethical value but rather a further demonstration of the excellence of the knight, as is the case in the original Riddarasöguð. In any case, love plays a major role in the original Riddarasöguð, while love and women scarcely occupy any place in Íslendingasöguð, where few women are mentioned and only thanks to their remarkable characters rather than to the feelings of love they may kindle in men: a love relationship is never the central theme in Íslendingasöguð.

In the course of time, the legend of Tristan and Isolt has undergone many accretions and alterations; its basic theme is nevertheless an adulterous passion, which may have been perceived as an oddity when the story first appeared in Scandinavia. Norse ethics were in fact centred on lineage (Old Norse ætt), so while a woman could also have been viewed as a love object, her main task was nevertheless the continuity of the clan. As a consequence, Trístrams saga and its picture of love may have appeared revolutionary and strange to the typical Scandinavian mind of the time. The Icelandic work dilutes this unconventionality by underplaying the relevance of love in the life of the protagonist and by shaping the subject matter according to the rules of a more familiar literary tradition. After all, the Saga af Trístram, like the original Riddarasöguð, does not relate a love story but rather a martial and dynastic triumph. The romantic relationship, which is the core of Thomas’ Tristan, is only a part of a wider narrative frame in this saga, which is non-tragic in its essence and narrated not so much because there is an interest in the love relationship, but rather with the purpose of praising the merits and martial prowess of the hero.

5.1. The narrative technique

The discrepancies between Trístrams saga and the Icelandic reworking are so numerous and substantial that it has been questioned whether the Norwegian translation is the real direct source [Bibire (1985: 70)]. The Saga af

20 For example, Sedentiana in Sigurðar saga höglía.
Tristram is considerably shorter than the Norwegian translation. The monologues and the characters’ introspections, already reduced in the translation, have been almost completely omitted in the reworking, which takes some key characters and most of its situations from the Tristan story, but inserts them into a new narrative frame; figures and motifs, extrapolated from other sources and traditions, both written and oral, are recombined in a different structure, thus following a practice of contamination which is typical of the original Riddarasögur. The borrowing of names and motifs from different sources concurs with the shifting of the focus of the story, since some narrative elements of the Tristan story have been voided of their original meaning through the use of other models, as in the case of Blenziblý, who is modelled on the meykongr figure.

Some names are taken from other chivalric sagas: for example, Tristram’s maternal grandfather is King Philippus, a name commonly used for kings in the original Riddarasögur. Tristram is brought up by Biring, whose name recalls the hero of Bærings saga, another original riddarasaga. In the Saga af Tristram the Irish courtier who falsely claims to have killed the dragon is called Kæi, a name that belongs to the Arthurian cycle, where Kæi is one of the knights of the Round Table. Not only names, but also motifs from other works and traditions are included in the narrative: Blenziblý claims the sceptre; Tristram instigates a slaughter among the crew on the ship bound to Ireland; the story begins two generations before the birth of Tristram, with the mention of his maternal grandparents; and after Tristram’s death the saga briefly relates the deeds of his son and grandchildren.

A narrative element which is common in Family sagas but is even more typical of the original Riddarasögur is the so-called “epic triad”, which is widely used in the Saga af Tristram: Kalegras and Blenziblý retire to their love-making for three years; Kalegras dies three nights after Blenziblý has reached his death-bed; the sword fragment is hammered into Tristram’s skull during the third attack by Engres; queen Flúrent gives Tristram three ships; Tristram communicates Mórodd’s message to Flúrent and Ísodd after three nights; Ísodd is offered thrice to Tristram (by her mother Flúrent, by herself and by king Mórodd) and is thrice turned down by him; the two lovers prolong the sea voyage to Mórodd’s court for three months; Bringven substitutes Ísodd in the marital bed for three nights; the king puts the lovers to the test thrice to be sure they are guilty; Ísodd Svarta gives birth to Tristram’s son after three years of marriage; and, finally, Ísodd survives Tristram for three days.
5.2. The analogies with Íslendingasögur

The opening chapter of the Saga af Tristram has affinities with Íslendingasögur, where the first sentence usually gives some brief information about the time in which the story takes place and about the characters who first appear in the narrative. This structure can be found in many of the original Riddarasögur: for example, in Sigurðar saga Turnara, Valdimars saga, Sigrgards saga ok Valbrands, Sigrgardss saga frækna and so on. The other type of incipit in the original Riddarasögur does not involve a presentation of the characters but rather explanations about the literary origins of the tale [van Nahl (1981:13)].

Another parallelism that links this saga to the form of the Íslendingasögur is that about a quarter of the story takes place before the birth of the eponymous hero, while in Tristrams saga the events which involve Tristan’s parents are narrated more briefly. The Saga af Tristram shows an interest in genealogy which is typical of Íslendingasögur, for the narrative begins with the mention of Tristram’s grandparents, then relates at length the vicissitudes of Tristram’s parents and, in the conclusion, the fortunes of Tristram’s son and grandchildren are mentioned as well. The genealogical knowledge communicated in the introductive and final parts has a specific function in Íslendingasögur, since it singles out the families involved in the conflict and locates this conflict in Icelandic history, with reference to the past through the mention of the ancestors of the characters, and to the future with the mention of their prominent descendants [Hume (1973: 600)]. In the Saga af Tristram this type of beginning and ending are by now mannered structures, since they do not retain their original function of conveying knowledge about real ancestors of real Icelanders.

The saga begins like an Íslendingasaga and, delineating the fortunes of the hero’s progeny, it also ends like an íslendingasaga; the conclusion, however, includes elements typical of the original Riddarasögur, which generally end with a wedding, or even more than one. The wedding that Tristram’s son, Kalegras, celebrates with the daughter of the Emperor of Saxland provides the happy ending which is typical of the original Riddarasögur; at the same time, it fulfills the structure requirements of Íslendingasögur.

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21 There are three kinds of endings in the Íslendingasögur: 1) the saga relates the rest of the life of the main character (e.g. Egils saga); 2) the saga tells of the main character’s descendants or other remarkable relatives (e.g. Grettis saga); 3) the saga focuses on the descendants of other characters (e.g. Hrafnkels saga). The conclusion of the Saga af Tristram falls into type 2 (like Grettis saga).

22 Saxland is the name used in original Riddarasögur to indicate German-speaking countries.
gasögr, since the story ends with an epilogue which briefly recounts the fates of Kalegras Tristramsson and his children. The Íslendingasögur tend to close with traditional formulas such as “this story ends here” [van Nahl (1981: 22)], whose function is to signal that the tale is a concluded whole and not only a part whose completion has been lost. The Saga af Tristram, on the contrary, ends with the statement that “there is a great saga” about the children of Kalegras Tristramsson. Some Fornaldarsögur are linked together by family ties between characters, for example Grímur of Gríms saga Löðinskinna is the son of Ketill of Ketils saga Hængs and the father of Örvar-Oddr of Örvar-Odds saga. This never occurs in the original Riddarasögur, but family ties do exist between the characters of the original Riddarasögur and the characters of the Fornaldarsögur, for example Vilmundr of Vilmundar saga (an original riddarasaga) is the son of Bósi of Bósa saga ok Herrauðs (a fornaldrasaga).

5.2.1. Stylistic features of the Saga af Tristram

The style of the Saga af Tristram shows similarities to the Íslendingasögur. The Icelandic reworking dates back to the 14th century, one hundred years after the beginning of the Íslendingasögur’ scribal period, a period extending to the 14th century and beyond. It is therefore natural that the Íslendingasögur affected the style of the Riddarasögur in general, and the style of the Saga af Tristram in particular. Tristrams saga, when compared to the Íslendingasögur, is written in a redundant style; compared to the style of European courtly literature, however, it reveals a certain degree of laconicism, a liking for litotes, and the tendency to abridge the lengthy monologues and detailed description of the feelings of the characters, which is altogether missing in the Icelandic reworking.

Whereas Tristrams saga, like the other translated Riddarasögur, has a predilection for long and ornate sentences and tends to imitate Latin syntax, the prose of the Saga af Tristram, favouring the use of brief and concise sentences and leaving out psychological details, tends to the economy which is typical of the Íslendingasögur. As for dialogues, in Tristrams saga we find magniloquent and rhetorical utterances, in opposition to the íslendingasaga-like conciseness of the direct speech of the Icelandic reworking; and, moreover, it must be remarked that the most commonly used rhetorical figure is the litotes, which, again, is a typical feature of the ‘sagas of Icelanders’.

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23 E.g.: “Ok lýkr hér nú frásögu þessari”, “Lýkr hér sögu Grettis Ásmundarsonar”, and so on.
The description of the characters in the Saga of Tristram draws on the stereotypes of the original Riddarasögur, but also on the patterns of the Íslendingasögur, according to which the characters are fleshed out with few words, while in the original Riddarasögur they are portrayed with a profusion of adjectives. A rhetorical device of Tristrams saga is the practice whereby the name of a newly-introduced character is not revealed immediately, but rather is told only at the end of the description of the character, or even later. In the Saga af Tristram, on the contrary, a new character is always introduced by telling his/her name, as is usual in the Íslendingasögur. In addition, the description of the external world is as succinct as the Íslendingasögur style demands, while the original Riddarasögur depict a rich, colourful and exotic world, with numerous descriptions of precious, luxurious and shining things.

In Tristrams saga the omniscient narrator organizes events in a temporal continuum by means of logical connections which are expressed syntactically by subordination; this means that the sentences, like the events, follow one after the other in a relationship which is not only temporal, but also resultive and causitive. The Icelandic work, on the contrary, relates the sequence of events by means of independent, coordinate clauses, whose relation to each other is temporal and signalled by adverbs. The most recurrent adverb, in the Icelandic reworking, as well as in the Íslendingasögur, is þá ‘then’, which does not connect events and clauses, in a logical sequence, but rather in a purely chronological manner, conveying as a result a sense of “objectivity” [Schosmann (1985: 198)].

The Saga of Tristram relates the story in a “fragmentary” or “desultory” way, in the stylistic fashion of the Íslendingasögur, so that events are not chronicled moment by moment from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. Instead, we find well calculated omissions in the sequence of facts. Rossenbeck (1970: 62) defines this stylistic feature of the Íslendingasögur “fragmentarische Erzählen in wohlberechneten Sprüngen”. An example of this technique is the way the Saga of Tristram relates the “ambiguous oath”: the text says only that before the oath the two lovers met on a street, without revealing that on this occasion Ísodd gave instructions to Tristram on how to behave during the oath; after the oath has taken place, the real identity of the beggar is not disclosed by the narrator, who leaves to the reader the task of inferring that the beggar was Tristram in disguise.

For the most part, the differences between Tristrams saga and the Saga of Tristram are differences of literary genre, since the Icelandic reworking was
influenced by the style of the Íslendingasögur to a greater extent than the Norwegian translation. These formal differences are felt most in terms of the content; indeed, the preponderance of action and the lack of introspection and psychological struggle in the Saga af Tristram are connected to the borrowing of style from the Íslendingasögur.

5.3. From translated Riddarasögur to original Riddarasögur

Some of the translated Riddarasögur or, rather, some of their Icelandic manuscripts, have undergone changes and accretions that bring them closer to the form of the original Riddarasögur. In the Icelandic manuscript Stockholm 6, 4to (15th century), a first hand copied the text of Elis saga (a translation of the chanson de geste Elie de St. Gilles) from the Norwegian manuscript de la Gardie 4-7 while another, more recent and less expert hand added a long conclusion in which Elis marries Rosamunda, thus providing the typical happy ending of an original Riddarasaga. Parceval’s saga is another case where elements suggested by the conventions of the original Riddarasögur have been attached to a translated work: Parceval’s saga is the translation of Chrétien’s Perceval and survives only in the Icelandic manuscript Stockholm 6, 4to, where, in a final addition, Parceval meets Blankiflúr again and marries her. The comparison between the 14th century Norwegian parchment fragment and the two 15th century Icelandic manuscripts of Flóres saga (which is the translation of Floire et Blancheflor) reveals that the Icelandic manuscripts contain an abridged text; in addition, the Saga af Tristram, which is part of AM 489, 4to, one of the Icelandic manuscripts of Flóres saga, is much shorter than the Norwegian translation.

The original Riddarasögur rearrange motifs from heterogeneous sources but, unlike the translated ones and the Fornaldarsögur, they do not make use of pre-existent stories; the only exceptions are the Saga af Tristram, which reworks the Tristan subject matter, and, perhaps, Mágus saga [Bibire (1985: 65)] and Vilmundar saga við utan. Mágus saga is one of the oldest original Riddarasögur, dating back to about 1300. It has been suggested that its source is the chanson de geste Renaud de Montauban [Glauser (1983: 269)]. Around a narrative core, perhaps taken from this foreign source, various narrative elements from other sources can be identified: the breach of three prohibitions,24 magic spells, the search for a bride of equal rank and dignity, and

24 The “epic triad” is very frequently used both in Mágus saga and in the Saga af Tristram; it is often found in the Íslendingasögur.
a meykongr-like figure at the beginning of the story (as in the Saga af Tristram). Mágus saga may be, like the Saga af Tristram, a reworking of a foreign work. Vilmundar saga is a riddarasaga dating from the 14th century; the first part tells how Vilmundr grew up with his parents in isolation from the rest of the world and then went to the court of the king of Garðariki, where he behaved at first like a naively ignorant fool (like Perceval), but proved himself a valiant knight in the end. According to Margaret Schlauch (1934: 165-167), this section of Vilmundar saga has been shaped on Chrétien’s Perceval or its Norwegian translation, the Parcevals saga.

6. “Version commune” and “version courtoise” in the Saga af Tristram

Conventionally, two branches are distinguished in the Tristan legend: one is the “common” branch, whose representatives are the works by Béroul,25 Eilhart,26 the Tristan en Prose27 and the Berne Folie Tristan;28 the other is the “courtly” branch, comprising the poem by Thomas,29 Tristrams saga, the poem by Gottfried von Strassburg30 and Sir Tristrem.31 Tristrams saga has special importance as the only complete witness of Thomas’ version; however, it also contains non-courtly elements. In recounting the tale of the wounded Tristan who, borne by the sea-current lands in Ireland by sheer chance, the Tristrams saga concurs with Eilhart’s version. In the Saga af Tristram the hero sails in a chosen direction and lands in Ireland on purpose, since he knows that only the Irish royal ladies can heal him, as in the Gottfried’s version, which is a representative of the “courtly” branch.32 In

25 Béroul’s Tristan, in the Norman dialect, was probably composed after 1191. It has survived in fragments comprising 4485 lines.
26 The Tristrant und Isalde of Eilhart von Oberge, in Middle High German, dates from 1175/1180. It has come down to us in early fragments and late (15th century), modernised manuscripts.
27 The Tristan en Prose, from the 13th century, is a French prose romance handed down in a large number of manuscripts.
28 The Berne Folie Tristan (in Old French, 12th century) in its 572 verses relates an episode, already found in Eilhart, in which Tristan, disguised as a court fool, tries to reach Isolt at Mark’s court.
29 Thomas was an Anglo-Norman poet who probably worked at the court of Henry II of England in the period between 1155 and 1170. Only fragments of his Tristan are extant, totalling about 3150 lines.
30 Gottfried’s poem Tristan und Isolt was written in Middle High German around 1210. Of this poem, 19548 lines survive and only the conclusion is missing.
31 Sir Tristrem is a Middle English poem from the late 13th century. It is derived from Thomas’ Tristan.
32 In the Icelandic folktale Tistram og Ísól, Tristan as a new-born baby arrives from the sea in a basket; this basket is perhaps a modification of the “oarless boat”, which belongs to the
the final episode, both in the translation and in the reworking, two plants grow from the lovers’ tombs and interwine their branches. This image is found in Eilhart and in the Tristan en Prose, but not in the “courtly” branch. The last part of Thomas’ Tristan is contained in the manuscript fragments Douce and Sneyd and they do not include the episode of the interwining trees. According to Varvaro (1970: 1062-1063), this motif, as found in Eilhart and in the Tristan en Prose, stems from popular oral sources. The image of the interwining trees is found in Gottfried’s continuation authors, Ulrich von Türheim and Heinrich von Freiberg. The final part of Gottfried’s Tristan is lacking, however; Ulrich and Heinrich based their continuations on Eilhart’s narrative and they probably did not know Thomas’ work [Blakeslee (1986: 130)].

In the episode of the “ambiguous oath” as presented in the Tristrams saga, Ísönd arrives by boat, while Tristram waits for her on the riverbank, disguised as a pilgrim. Ísönd asks him to carry her from the boat to the shore, and in so doing Tristram stumbles and falls on top of her; she is therefore able to swear that no man, except the king and the pilgrim, has ever approached her and she can then grasp the hot iron without burning her hand. In the Saga af Tristram, Ísodd arrives by horseback, but her horse stumbles making her fall in a pool of mud and Tristram, disguised as a beggar, lifts her up; there is no ordeal by hot iron. In this episode, the Saga af Tristram departs from Tristrams saga since it contains elements from the “common” branch. The ambiguous oath as related in the Icelandic saga is similar to the handling of the motif in Spesar þátr [Togeby (1972: 376)] an episode of Grettis saga probably based on the “common” branch of the Tristan legend. In the þátr Þorsteinn, disguised as a beggar, carries his mistress Spes over a muddy pool and falls on her, who can therefore swear the truthful oath that no man has ever touched her, except her husband and that beggar.

Béroul-Eilhart branch but it is also contained in Tristrams saga. The arrival of a child in a basket brought by the waters is common in folktale and literature (Moses in the Bible; Scyld Seefing in Beowulf; Gregory of the medieval legend); it is however the connection of this motif with the request (contained in a writ which is found in the basket) that the baby should be christened with the name “Tristan” that suggests here a derivation of the motif from the Tristan legend.

33 The same image appears in the medieval Icelandic ballad Tristrams kvæði.
34 Bodleian Library MS. Douce d.6.
35 Bodleian Library MS. Fr. d. 16.
36 Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar is the title of an Íslendingasaga whose redaction dates back to 1320/1330. It relates the story of the warrior and poet Grettir. The last part of this saga is the so-called Spesar þátr, which tells how Grettir’s half-brother Þorsteinn avenges his death in Byzantium, where he wins the love of the Greek lady Spes.
In the courtly version and in *Tristrams saga*, the lovers exiled in the forest lead an idyllic life; in the *Saga af Tristram*, on the other hand, the banishment in the forest takes the form of an imprisonment in a cave without food, as is the case in Eilhart, where the life in the woods is an experience of suffering and hardships.37

Both *Tristrams saga* and the *Saga af Tristram* show a mixture of “courtly” and “common” elements. The *Saga af Tristram* reveals a knowledge of the so-called “common” tradition, which can be inferred from some details in *Tristrams saga*. It must, in any case, be borne in mind that *Tristrams saga* in its complete form is contained in a 17th century Icelandic manuscript so that many changes may have arisen in the course of tradition, in particular as far as elements of the “common” branch are concerned. Thomas focuses not so much on external events as on the inner feelings of the characters, expressed in lengthy monologues, while Béroul is more interested in the adventure story. Eilhart’s version shows the effects of ineluctable destiny and portrays Tristan chiefly as a warrior; additionally, it relates many stratagems designed to attest to the two lovers’ ingenuity and cleverness. The psychological delineation of the characters in the Icelandic reworking is more similar to that of the “common” branch versions, and to Eilhart in particular, than to *Tristrams saga* and the “courtly” tradition. The affinity of the cultural context explains, in part at least, this similarity in characterisation.38 However, the interweaving of elements from the two traditions, the “courtly” and the “common”, is a result of the typical composition technique of the original Riddarasögur, i.e. contamination which draws on different sources, oral and written.

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37 The Eden-like life in the forest and the episode of the “hall of statues” are found only in the Thomas, courtly branch and are not related in the *Saga af Tristram*; *Tristrams saga* however contains both episodes.

38 Adventure, cunning and martial exploits are the focus of both Eilhart’s *Tristrant* and of the *Saga af Tristram*; the two works mirror the values of a society whose primary concerns were far removed from Thomas’ more refined interest in love and psychology and from courtly “delicacies” in general. The Icelandic aristocracy lacked that feudal ideology mirrored in chivalric values; this ideology was typical of French and English aristocracies and, later, of the German aristocracy at the court of Hermann of Thuringia [Weber (1986: 425)].
7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the particularities of the rewriting in comparison to the translation are to be ascribed to the different cultural milieu and to the use of different conventions of genre.

The Saga of Tristram, like the other Scandinavian works based on the Tristan legend (the Feringian and the Danish ballads and the Icelandic folktale Tistram og Ísodd) are medleys made up of various motifs of the Tristan legend and from other sources. The oral tradition, which tends to expand, combine and embellish its materials must be also taken into account [Schach (1964: 295)].

In Thomas’ Tristan, destiny and death are the primary focus; these themes are also central in Germanic heroic legend and struck a “culturally resonant chord” in the audience of Tristrams saga, first in Norway and then in Iceland [Barnes (1999: 396)]. The ensuing reworkings reflect the conventions of various medieval Scandinavian literary forms. In the rest of Europe as well, in France, Italy and Spain, from the 13th to the 15th century the prose romance is the prevailing form. These prose romances were new conceptions, not simply prose translations since “i materiali tristaniani vengono inseriti in strutture nuove, condizionate da nuove motivazioni” [Varvaro (1967:13)].

The heart of the Tristan legend is a tragic and fateful love which is so strong and exclusive that it violates the most binding social and religious taboos; the plot consists in a series of episodes where the two lovers, with cunning and clever tricks, outsmart the deceived husband and social control. The various Icelandic reworkings follow one or the other of these two directions of interpretation and development: the Icelandic ballad follows the tragic de-

39 This is not the case of the Icelandic ballad, which is monothematic and emphasizes only one aspect, the fatalistic one, of the legend.
40 Additional, older European versions of the Tristan story contain elements of popular legend and folktale, as evidenced by Schoepperle (1913).
41 The rich and varied developments of the legend make it difficult to trace either the relations among the various reworkings or the relations between these reworkings and their sources. For instance, the Icelandic ballad Tristrams kvaði recounts an episode of Tristrams saga which is not found in the Icelandic saga; the names of the characters Ísodd Bjarta (Isolt the Fair) and Ísodd Svarta (“dark, black Isolt”, for Isolt au blanche mains), however, concur with the latter. The works based on Tristan subject matter in Iceland from the 14th century forward reveal a confluence of diverse traditions, elitist and popular, “common” and “courtly”, oral and written, so that the story undergoes radical modifications in plot and characters.
42 ‘The Tristan material is inserted into new structures, which are conditioned by new motivations’.
lineation, while the *Saga of Tristram*, to the contrary, hinges upon the tricks and stratagems of the secret lovers. Undertoning the tragic and fatalistic elements of the story, the Icelandic saga adopts the scenarios of the coeval literature of the original *Riddarasögur*. Like the original *Riddarasögur*, the story which this rewriting tells is an adventure story. Taken in the broader context of Icelandic literature, what appeared as oddity and parody with respect to *Tristrams Saga* is instead narrative and stylistic convention that belongs to a different literary form [Barnes (1999: 384)].

The Tristan subject matter was adopted by different genres in Iceland during the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries [Bonnetain (2003: 148)]; various motifs from the Tristan legend were included in original works and taken up as the subject of ballads and folktales; this was a process that spanned over different genres and that involved translated *Riddarasögur*, original *Riddarasögur*, ballads and folktales. The Icelanders kept the elements which matched their taste and, being similar to elements of their own tradition, were familiar to them (e.g. battles, fights, cunning). The *Saga of Tristram* is a sort of transition between the rewriting of a translated *riddarasaga* and the creation of an original *riddarasaga*: gratuitous violence, disregard for courtly manners and courtly complexities are genre marks, so that the reworking is a product which belongs to a narrative form whose structure, style and ethics are quite different in respect to Thomas’, and even Robert’s courtly code [Barnes (1999: 384)].

The differentiating principle of the various reworkings of the Tristan story is the responsiveness of each culture to certain aspects of the subject. In Iceland, courtly literature was absorbed into entertainment literature because its essential features, such as the ennobling function of love and the ethical duties and moral conflict of the knight were not properly understood. The *Saga of Tristram* adopts an interpretation of the basic Tristan literary theme which is in keeping with the Icelandic cultural milieu of its time.
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