

RIDDARASÖGUR, FORMALDARSÖGUR, AND THE PROBLEM OF GENRE

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The existence and the use of the terms *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* to designate two different groups of sagas have forced a good part of imaginative Icelandic literature into a terminological straightjacket that has effectively precluded appreciation of the interrelationship of the works subsumed under these designations. The *a priori* assumption of scholars that there exists a generic distinction between *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* and that the works subsumed by either designation constitute a homogeneous corpus has led to study of either group without reference to the other. Margaret Schlauch's *Romance in Iceland*, published nearly half a century ago (1934), is a notable exception.

Both appellations *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* are descriptive, each of a different narrative aspect. The term *riddarasaga* focusses on the social standing of the protagonist, his membership in the nobility; the term *fornaldarsaga*, on the time during which the events took place, that is, in a distant past. Since most *riddarasögur* also tell of events in a distant past albeit in non-Scandinavian countries they could just as well take their name from the time of action and be called *fornaldarsögur suðrlanda* or *fornsögur suðrlanda*. Indeed, the latter is the entirely appropriate title of Cederschiöld's edition of translated and Icelandic *riddarasögur*¹. By analogy, since the protagonists of many of the sagas that have come to be known as *fornaldarsögur norðrlanda* also belong to the nobility, albeit a Scandinavian nobility, many of the *fornaldarsögur* could also be called *riddarasögur norðrlanda*. Neither social class nor time of setting suffices to create generically distinct literary groups, however. Nonetheless, the two traditional designations not only continue to suggest distinct literary genres but also fairly definite groupings of sagas. The terms have entered literary histories and handbooks and have indirectly contributed to a certain compartmentalization of research as far as Icelandic romance is concerned.

The designation *riddarasögur* is venerable; it is attested in medieval literature. In *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, for instance, the author uses the term to refer to translations of Greek and French fiction that had been commissioned by Hákon Magnússon (1299-1319), the grandson of Hákon Hákonarson: "hann lét venda mörgum riddara sögum í norænu ór girzsku ok franzeisku máli"². In the *Stökkju rímur* which derive from *Möttuls-saga*, in turn a translation of *Le mantel mautaillié* we are told that reports of great

deeds by King Arthur and his knights are said to have given rise to the *riddarasögur*: "Riddarasögur rísa af því: rekkar kvómu þrautir í"³. The younger *Mágus saga* mentions *Flóvents saga* and *Þiðriks saga* the one deriving from French, the other from German heroic epic in the same breath as the *riddarasögur*: "Því þat gjöra spakir menn, at þeir vilja heyra þær frásagnir, sem þeim þíkkir kátligar til gamans, svo sem er Þiðreks saga, Flóvenz saga eðr aðrar *riddarasögur*..."⁴. To judge by these references to *riddarasögur*, medieval literary critics presumably intended to denote tales of foreign origin, be they romance or heroic epic, devoted to the deeds of a non-Scandinavian chivalric class. Modern literary critics and historians have extended the term to include Icelandic imitations of the translated *riddarasögur*. The exact nature of what constitutes derivation from this group as opposed to derivation from the *fornaldarsögur*, for example has as yet to be determined.

Unlike use of the term *riddarasögur*, use of the term *fornaldarsögur* for another group of sagas is not of medieval but rather modern, nineteenth-century origin. The name derives from the title of Rafn's three-volume edition of sagas entitled *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, and is reserved chiefly for the sagas in this edition⁵. With some notable exceptions, modern critics and historians have come to perceive these sagas as constituting a genre, a saga type distinct from the *riddarasögur*. In her study of the *fornaldarsögur*, Helga Reuschel came to the conclusion, "daß der Name [*fornaldarsögur*] wirklich wesensähnliche Werke zusammenfaßt und einen Sagatyp umschreibt"⁶. Similarly, Einar Ól. Sveinsson characterized them as "en af hovedgrupperne inden for sagalitt[eratur]" in his article "Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda" in the *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*⁷. Other scholars have followed suit.

Despite the traditional division of imaginative Icelandic literature into *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* which in no small measure presumably derives from the fact that the former group is foreign in origin, the latter indigenous, scholars have persistently noted certain similarities between some of the later *fornaldarsögur* and the *riddarasögur*, as well as considerable overlapping between the two literary categories. E.F. Halvorsen pointed out that the *riddarasögur* have much in common with the *fornaldarsögur* and that the former are distinguished primarily in that their main characters are not Northern⁸. No clear distinguishing features such as structure or style have as yet been adduced for the sagas assigned to either group. In fact, E. Ól. Sveinsson and E.F. Halvorsen concurred in their respective articles on the *fornaldarsögur* and the *riddarasögur* in the *Kulturhistorisk leksikon* that borderline cases exist that could belong to either group, such as *Vilmundar saga víðutan*, *Þjalar-Jóns saga*, *Hrings saga ok Tryggva*, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, *Ála flekks saga*, and *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*⁹. Halvorsen expressed dissatisfaction with the designation *riddarasögur* for the translated sagas and their Icelandic derivatives, but

pointed out that the alternatives "romantic saga" and *lygisaga* are no more definitive, since either could just as well describe most of the *fornaldarsögur*¹⁰.

The earliest attestation of the term *lygisaga* is in *Þorgil's Haflíða*, where King Sverrir is reported to have deemed such *lygisaga* as *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* (which is included in vol. II of Rafn's edition of *fornaldarsögur*) most amusing¹¹. The implication of the remark would appear to be that Sverrir particularly enjoyed works of fiction. Subsequently, medieval authors tended to use the word *lygisaga* pejoratively, in order to characterize sagas considered to be incredible, that is, fantastic; authors of works that we today might label *romances* or *fornaldarsaga* repeatedly include *apologiae* in which they deny that their creations are prevarications¹². A number of modern critics and historians have preferred to use *lygisaga* as a generic term, some to designate the indigenous *riddarasögur*¹³, others to designate the "fictitious development" of the *fornaldarsaga*¹⁴. Still others have included indigenous *riddarasögur* as well as *fornaldarsögur* under the single appellation *lygisögur*. Jónas Kristjánsson noted at the Liège Colloquium of 1972 that the tendency to use the disparaging term *lygisögur* both for the "later Romantic Sagas [*riddarasögur*]" and... "Legendary Sagas [*fornaldarsögur*]" bears witness to the close relationship of these sagas. Some lie on the borderline, and there is mutual influence between the two groups¹⁶. At the Fourth International Saga Conference Hermann Pálsson pleaded eloquently for an unprejudiced examination of the *fornaldarsögur*, and pointed out that "most of them belong, formally at least, to the romance tradition of medieval Europe, and for that reason it would be a mistake to try to draw a sharp dividing line between them and the "*riddarasögur*"¹⁷. His point is well taken.

The designation *riddarasögur* for one group and *fornaldarsögur* for another group of sagas suggests not only the existence of two distinct genres but also an essential homogeneity for the works subsumed under the respective categories. Such a homogeneity exists for neither *riddarasögur* nor *fornaldarsögur*. From a Continental literary perspective the term *riddarasögur*, that is, chivalric sagas, or sagas of knights, is misleading as a generic designation because it connotes only translations and adaptations of the *romans courtois*, the courtly romances. Among the works traditionally classified as *riddarasögur* we find, however, translations of generically distinct sources. There are not only courtly romances, but also *chansons de geste*, Breton *lais*, and pseudo-historical works. The *riddarasögur* thus encompass works deriving from heroic epic, courtly romance, and Latin historiography. In his essay on genre in the Middle Ages, Hans Robert Jauss suggested the "commutational test" (*Kommutationsprobe*) as a means to determining generic differences. He remarked on the "Unvertauschbarkeit der Personen zwischen Chanson de geste und höfischem Roman.... Helden wie Roland oder Yvain, Damen wie Alda oder Enide, Herrscher wie Charlemagne oder Artur wurden trotz der

allmählichen Angleichung des Heldenepos an den Ritterroman in französischer Tradition nicht aus einen in die andere Gattung gebracht"¹⁸.

The sources of some forty translations of continental imaginative literature- I am counting the *Strengleikar* individually- are to be sought in diverse genres, even sub-genres. For example, of some nine romances transmitted to the North, four are Arthurian, namely *Erex saga*, *Ívens saga*, *Parcevals saga* with *Valvens þáttur*, and *Tristrams saga*. To these four courtly romances employing the *matière de Bretagne* can be added translations of three Arthurian *lais*: *Möttuls saga* (which might also be classified as a *fabliau*), *Januáls ljóð*, and *Geitarlauf*. In all, some twenty-four pieces of short fiction were transmitted to the North, including translations and analogues of Boccaccio's *novelle* (in the younger *Mágus saga*), the French *fabliaux* (in *Sigurðar saga turnara* and *Möttuls saga*), and tales in the *Gesta Romanorum* (*Amícus saga ok Amílius*, the younger *Mágus saga*).

The *chansons de geste*, from which such works as *Karlamagnús saga*, *Ellis saga*, *Flóvents saga*, and *Mágus saga* derive, differ considerably in content, spirit, and form from romance and *lai*. To be sure, the divergent metrical forms of *chanson de geste* and *roman courtois* were levelled by being translated into prose. Nonetheless, the content and structure of the translated *riddarasögur* are variegated, the result of substantial differences in the nature of the heroic quest and in the motivation for the protagonists' extraordinary deeds. The same can be said for the Icelandic imitations of the translated sagas.

In some sagas the hero is guilty of a transgression and the plot is generated by his efforts to rehabilitate himself as, for example, in the Arthurian romances *Erex saga* and *Ívens saga*, and in the Icelandic *Dámusta saga*. In others the plot devolves from a feud between the protagonist and his superiors, for example, in *Flóvents saga* and in *Mágus saga*. In still others the focus is on the hero's participation in the struggle between Christianity and heathendom, as in *Ellis saga* and *Mirmanus saga*. Then there are *riddarasögur* in which the action stems from the usurpation of a throne, as in *Adonias saga* and *Bærings saga*. In yet other sagas the victim of a spell must be liberated, for example, in *Jóns saga leikara* or in *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, or an abducted relative must be found, as in *Valdimars saga* and *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*. In those romances where the erotic element prevails, the hero's actions may be motivated by a relationship with a fairy mistress, as in *Januáls ljóð*, *Partalopa saga*, and *Gibbons saga*; by his pursuit of an obstinate woman, for example, *Klárus saga*, *Nitida saga*, and *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, or his competition against rival suitors, as in *Sigurðar saga fóts*, *Sáius saga ok Nikanors*, and *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*. In short, the homogeneity suggested by the designation *riddarasögur* is illusory. To consider the Norwegian translations of foreign fiction of a piece generically and their Icelandic derivatives as nothing but variations of a single master pattern- Finnur Jónsson's simile of the kaleidoscope comes to mind¹⁹ is to ignore the considerable diversity in a

rather large corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic fiction.

Similarly, the sagas known as *fornaldarsögur* since Rafn's day are a heterogeneous group ; they include sagas with historical as well as ahistorical protagonists all of whom are depicted, however, as living in ancient heroic days. Scholars have proposed a tripartite classification of the *fornaldarsögur* : heroic-mythical sagas, viking sagas, and adventure sagas. The last group has also been designated *Märchensagas* by German scholars²⁰. Hans-Peter Naumann expressed reservations regarding the last category, however. He pointed out that for all its common features, the extent of the supposed sub-genre "Abenteuersaga" is as uncertain as is its demarcation from other indigenous saga forms²¹. Indeed, the "adventure" sagas have also been referred to as "romantic" *fornaldarsögur*, thus implying a relationship to the Icelandic *riddarasögur*. A recent attempt by Ruth Richter-Gould to demonstrate that the *fornaldarsögur* "have a distinctive narrative structure which in addition to stylistic considerations sets them apart from other Old Icelandic literary genres"²² is unconvincing and unacceptable, since the structural elements isolated as supposedly distinctive features of the *fornaldarsögur* are also present in many of the *riddarasögur*, translated as well as Icelandic. The structural pattern discerned for the *fornaldarsögur* is in fact the pattern of romance : "1. Introduction, 2. Hero's youth, 3. Motivation for departure, 4. Adventure cycle or plot including contact with helper-donor figure, and 5. Concluding elements" (p. 424). According to Northrop Frye, "the element that gives literary form to the romance [is] the quest" :

The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages : the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures ; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die ; and the exaltation of the hero²³.

The author of *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*, an Icelandic *riddarasaga*, acted in the capacity of literary critic when he established half a millenium ago two categories of secular fiction concerned with former days. He wrote :

Aðrar sögur eru af ríkum konungum, ok má þar nema í hæverska hirðsiðu, eðr hversu þjóna skal ríkum höfðingjum. Enn þriði hlutr sagnanna er frá konungum þeim, sem koma í miklar mannaunir ok hafa misjafnt ór rétt ; er þar eptir breytanda þeim sem vaskir eru. (pp. 121-22).

He further remarked that many are wont to consider those sagas fiction that relate deeds beyond the normal mortal's ability or realm of experience. His attempt at a literary taxonomy is based both on the character of the protagonists and on the effect the narrative is to have on an audience. In a somewhat unsophisticated fashion the author of *Flóres saga konungs* thus anticipated Frye's characterization of the hero of romance as one "whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified

as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended ; prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him" (p. 33). Keeping the above medieval and modern literary criticism in mind, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards pointed out in their study of *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland* that some of the *fornaldarsögur* like the *riddarasögur* clearly belong to the realm of secular romance. Following Northrop Frye's analysis of types of heroes, they suggested that we might classify the sagas according to the qualities of the hero and the way they are displayed²⁴. I would go further and propose that examination of the hero's quest, as well as motivation for that quest, is necessary if we are to arrive at a more convincing and satisfactory classification and thus at a better understanding of the character and diversity of imaginative Icelandic literature.

Once we predicate our analyses of Old Norse-Icelandic fiction upon acceptance of the theory that genre from the perspective of content is determined less by the accidents of geographical setting or the protagonist's place of birth than by the character of the hero and the nature of the heroic quest, then the traditional, supposedly generic division into *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* begins to vacillate. Certain recurring patterns are common to translated and Icelandic *riddarasögur* as well as a group of younger *fornaldarsögur* known as "adventure sagas" or *Märchensagas* or *lygisögur*. Kathryn Hume pointed out that "knights' sagas and a substantial number of lying and legendary sagas exhibit the structure variously known as the romance or folklore pattern....Typically, a single hero undertakes a quest or a series of tests, and ends by succeeding, marrying, and assuming power"²⁵. A study of the *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* that focusses on narrative types common to both groups would appear to be more fruitful in terms of understanding Old Icelandic fiction than one that limits itself to one literary category (*riddarasögur* or *fornaldarsögur*) to the exclusion of the other. From the perspective of the heroic quest, a predominant type found in both categories is the bridalquest type. This comes as no surprise, since the search for a bride is a universally popular theme, one particularly favored in medieval literature²⁶. Icelandic fiction is no exception.

In the rather large group of Icelandic sagas that belong to the bridalquest type, the search for and successful wooing of the bride constitutes the essential frame for the several secondary quests the hero may undertake. The bridal quest is both the primary motivating force of the plot and the hero's *raison d'être*. The bridal quest finds varied expression in Icelandic romance. The hero obtains the longed-for woman only after having successfully overcome such obstacles as rival suitors, reluctant maidens, and recalcitrant fathers or other relatives. Not infrequently the means to the hero's end are dishonorable : he may resort to force, murder, and abduction in face of rival suitors ; or impersonation, deceit, and

trickery vis-à-vis the sought-for-bride. Although the bridal-quest type is dominant among the indigenous Icelandic *riddarasögur*, it is also represented among the translated *riddarasögur* and the younger *fornaldarsögur*. Over twenty narratives have as their main theme and the plot's primary motivating force the bridal quest.

Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, which has been designated a *fornaldarsaga* since Rain's edition, might be considered the quintessential bridal-quest romance of Icelandic literature. In this one saga the various obstacles the wooer might be expected to have to overcome and the several types of prospective brides found in the aggregate of bridal-quest sagas are depicted in four different wooing expeditions undertaken by two generations of the same family. Here we meet rival suitors, maiden kings, and overprotective fathers. Despite the fact that its protagonists are Scandinavian, and the settings are, if not entirely Scandinavian, then at least Northern, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* belongs to the same literary tradition as such so-called *riddarasögur* as *Gibbons saga*, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, *Nitida saga*, *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, and *Jarimanns saga ok Hermanns*.

To begin with, there is old King Gautrek's wooing of Ingibjörg to the displeasure of a younger rival, King Olaf. Direct conflict is not generated, however, until after the princess has chosen between the two, to the disadvantage of the younger suitor. The latter attempts to redress what appears to him to be an unwise and unjust decision. He ambushes the bridal party on its return to Gautrek's country. The bridegroom is given two choices: to hand over the girl and all her wealth or to fight. Anyone familiar with both translated and Icelandic *riddarasögur* will recognize the stock figure of the nobleman, highwayman, giant, or berserker who seeks to take another man's wife, daughter, or sister by force, or musters his armed forces against those of an unmarried lady of a castle in order to attain by dint of arms what he cannot by persuasion. We recall Ísönd's abduction by the harp-playing Irishman in *Tristrams saga*, or *Ivens saga* with its *Fjallsharfir* episode, or Klamadius' attack of Blankiflur's castle in *Parcevals saga*, or the several aggressive encounters in *Erex saga* where, as in the opening section of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, the bride herself agrees to the marriage, but the hero must nonetheless demonstrate time and again his right to her as wife, and engage in combat in order to keep her. Or consider *Dámusta saga*, in which the motif of an aggressive rival suitor is given an unusual twist because the hero himself is the unsuccessful suitor. The plot is generated by Dámusti's murder of King Jón of Smáland whom Gratiana, the daughter of the king of Greece and Dámusti's secret love, has married. The saga is a bridal-quest romance, but of a rather unusual type. Against seemingly insuperable odds, Dámusti, the peccable protagonist, does eventually get the girl, but only after divine intervention and assistance have been assured.

The story of old King Gautrek's winning of a young wife which,

incidentally, provides an interesting counterpoint to other less happy May-December alliances, such as in *Guðamars ljóð* is followed by the story of his son's bridal quest. Hrólfr's quest is as difficult as Gautrek's had been easy primarily because of differences in the characters of the prospective brides. Hrólfr is determined to marry Þornbjörg, daughter of the king of Sweden. The princess in question belongs, however, to a long tradition of refractory princesses in Icelandic romance who refuse initially, that is to marry. Among these romances in which the desired woman herself impedes the protagonist's path to success, *Klárus saga*, that is ascribed to Jón Halldórsson (bishop of Skálholt, 1322-39) and supposedly derives from an unknown Latin romance, is the prototype. It belongs to the type called by Erik Wahlgren "maiden king" romance²⁷. At the heart of such sagas is the taming of a haughty and cruel princess. One Icelandic romance after another depicts the basic conflict of *Klárus saga*: a suitor for the hand of a 'maiden' who is "king" is repulsed because she considers herself superior to the male and is afraid that she will lose that superiority should she marry. Through a variety of techniques, male and female attempt to outwit each other. Inevitably the male prevails because he is able to discover the woman's weakness, be that moral or physical. The maiden kings themselves range from obstinate but otherwise quite courtly ladies surrounded by a splendid court to monarchs who are not above mounting a horse and fighting in battle. At first blush they appear more at home in heroic epic than in courtly romance. These nubile maidens are rulers- in the case of Þornbjörg her father has given her complete authority over one third of Sweden- who not only refuse all suitors but also heap scorn and physical as well as psychological abuse upon them. Þornbjörg is finally vanquished by Hrólfr on the battlefield. Other maiden kings are won over by means of trickery and cunning. In *Klárus saga*, for example, the protagonist outwits Queen Serena by appealing to her cupidity. An interesting variant of the maiden-king type occurs in *Dínus saga drambláta*, where initially not only the heroine but also the hero appears impervious to the charms of the opposite sex, and each is determined to outwit and humiliate the other. Despite their initial abrasiveness and coldblooded disdain for their suitors, erstwhile maiden kings eventually soften; despite their insults and deprecation a happy end is finally achieved in marital union. The miniature romance of Hrólfr and Þornbjörg in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* belongs to the maiden-king type: the sexual and military opponents eventually agree to a truce, put aside their differences, and Þornbjörg accepts Hrólfr in marriage.

That the Hrólfr-and-Þornbjörg tale can be identified as a romance becomes evident if one contrasts it with the Helgi-and-Olof tale in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (also to be found in Rafn's corpus of *formaldarsögur*). Initially, the narrative follows the maiden-king pattern of *Klárus saga*. Like Klárus or like Viktor in *Viktors saga ok Blávus Helgi* has to endure the humiliation of having his head shaved and tarred by the woman he proposes to marry.

