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Courtliness as Morality of Modernity in Norse Romance

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Abstract

The Tristan legend is the quintessential love story of the Middle Ages. From the formative period of its courtly branch, the only extant complete version is *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* (1226). King Hákon of Norway commissioned this and other romances to convince his aristocratic warriors to give up the kinship society ethos of heroic love that directed them to rape their enemies' women. Courtly love sacralized female consent, yet critics have struggled to make sense of which purposes courtliness served. This evolutionary reading of *Tristrams saga* reveals how courtly love not only functioned as an ideological bridge between mating regimes, but also embodied proto-WEIRD psychology, the impersonal prosociality of the new mobile, educated, and transculturally inclusive European individual—as described by Henrich (2020). This ethos would evolve to become the morality of modernity. How it was disseminated exemplifies how fiction can help communities find provisional solutions to problems that cannot be solved definitely.

Keywords: courtly love, chivalry, romance, psychological-institutional coevolution, Church MFPs, feudalism, polygyny

Tristrams saga and other courtly romances have long engendered scholarly confusion and debate. Since Paris (1883) coined the term *courtly love* to describe the sociality promoted by these works, critics have fought over the term's implications. A variety of functions has been ascribed to this ideology and its relationship to consent, gender equality, Christianity, feudalism, and modernity (Elias 1939; Boase 1977; Burns 2001; Wollock 2011). That the Tristan story ends in tragedy is interpreted to reflect a "disdain for the physicality of love-making" (Rikhardsdottir 2017, 49). Similarly focused on these stories' promotion of chastity, critics propose that the lovers' deaths reflect "the destructive power of sexual craving" (Barnes 2011, 64); or, more generally, Western man's quest for passion as a search for death (de Rougemont 1983).

From a political perspective, the lovers' demise is connected to their subversion of "feudal loyalties, kinship relations, and the marital bond" (Bandlien 2005, 192). Singer (1984) interprets their deaths to reflect the Middle Ages' failure to reconcile courtly and religious love. Similarly focused on philosophy, Huizinga (1954) argues that Tristan's fate promotes a "compensatory ideal," one unattainable in the narrative but desirable for the culture from which the story arose. These criticisms engage relevant aspects of courtly love, but an evolutionary perspective helps us understand how chastity, politics, and philosophy combine to promote certain mating behaviors—and also the impersonal prosociality that undergirded feudal Europe, in contrast to the us-versus-them mentality of kinship societies.

Donaldson (1965) engages this perspective, pointing to how romance knights display courtship behavior similar to what he observed among cardinals on his bird feeder. Dronke proposes that courtly love "might occur at any time or place" (1968, xvii). This claim is too broad, as

such behavior is facilitated by certain environments, a point overlooked by critics. An evolutionary approach illuminates why the males of a bird species that mates monogamously for life would act similarly to fictional knights meant to pursue the same pair-bond. In the polygynous kinship societies of King Hákon's ancestors, courtly love would have been a mismatch. They had embraced so-called *heroic love*, the ideology of humanity's feud-ridden agricultural phase, which promoted the idea that "a woman *had* to love the best warrior, even if he had killed her father or husband" (Bandlien 2005, 57).

This ancient rape culture was a mismatch for a feudal Europe in which women came to belong less to a kin group, instead gradually gaining autonomy. Pair-bonding was no longer primarily a commercial contract between related families, but a union of unrelated individuals, both of whom had to consent. Henrich (2020) argues that this transition between Marriage and Family Practices (MFPs) made possible the modern world. Freeing individuals from kin set in motion a psychological-institutional coevolution that, across centuries, transformed individual interiority. Fiction offers access to the mental worlds of those who experienced this revolution in thought and social organization. *Tristrams saga* reads as an attempt at making sense of the environment that arose after Church MFPs had dissolved Europe's tribes through the prohibition of cousin marriage and polygyny, in combination with new rules for ownership and inheritance. The ideal of courtly love emerged in the High Middle Ages when the Church took their MFPs one step further by insisting on female consent in marriage (Bandlien 2005). That this process entailed the most dramatic change to human mating morality since the Neolithic revolution is supported by evolutionary research on the woman-hoarding of Germanic elites (Raffield, Price, and Collard 2017a, 2017b).

Some practices were abandoned with relative ease, such as intensive kinship (Fukuyama 2014), which had been a cultural adaptation to agriculture. Others required centuries of coercion, such as polygyny, which is integral to human mating psychology. Throughout *Homo sapiens*'s agricultural phase, periods of high stratification typically drove strongly polygynous practices. As a consequence of our evolutionary past, our species has a polygynous bias that makes it challenging to convince high-status males that they should mate only with one woman (Chapais 2008; Henrich, Boyd, and Richerson 2012). Neither did *Homo sapiens* evolve for lifelong monogamy, but serial pair-bonding with clandestine extrapair copulation (Gangestad and Grebe 2015; Rosenthal 2017). The Church thus gave Western culture a considerable challenge with MFPs that insisted that lifelong monogamy is the only acceptable pair-bond.

Courtly love was an ideological step away from the polygynous ethos of heroic love, one that would be succeeded by companionate, romantic, and confluent love, the latter being the mating ethos of convenience that informs today's Western relationships (Figure 1). On the

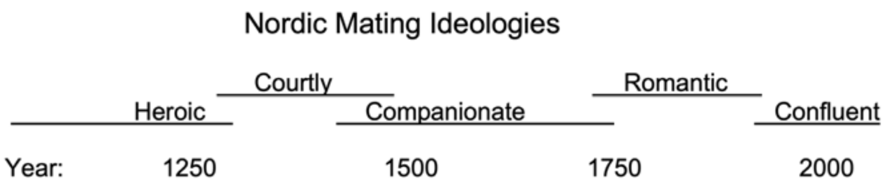

Figure 1. These terms and periods are approximations that conceptualize the evolution of Western mating after Church MFPs dissolved Europe's polygynous kinship societies. Sources: Bandlien (2005); Boase (1977); Giddens (1992); Henrich (2020); Posner (1994); Singer (1984, 1987). Copyright © 2022 by American Psychological Association. Reproduced and adapted with permission.

outskirts of civilization, in a land torn by civil war, King Hákon Hákonarson decided to employ fiction to bring Norway onto this path of modernization. Late Christianization made these descendants of Vikings the last Germanic tribes to be pulled into the Henrichian coevolution. While some Europeans had lived under the Church's intensifying regime since the fourth century, only around the turn of the millennium did clergy begin to coerce reluctant Norsemen.

Stories imbued with courtly ideology arose in the subsequent century when psychological modernization had already taken hold further south (Bynum 1980). King Hákon thus faced greater resistance from his aristocratic warriors whose cultural memory had a more recent experience with kinship society morality. The innovative, highly successful monarch (r. 1217–1263) seems to have understood how made-up tales can be a cultural tool for updating the beliefs of a moral community, and thus for changing their behavior. These environmental factors make investigating the effect that the Tristan legend and other expressions of courtly ideology had on the Norse a particularly illuminating case study. The region's contemporary sagas offer insight into how Norse mating behavior transforms in the aftermath of *Tristrams saga*—scholars agree that King Hákon's commissioning of romances contributed to Norwegians of all classes adapting to Church MFPs (Bandlien 2005; Kalinke 2011; Orning 2013; Rikhardsdottir 2017).

For this process of modernization, psychology and institutions related to mating were of paramount importance for several reasons, one of which is that controlling people's access to copulation and pair-bonding provides an ideological crowbar. I will argue that medieval romances were infused with courtly love not only to promote a culture of consent. When people need to update their beliefs, a clever strategy can be to use fiction to convince men that these new prosocial tenets prescribe how best to gain access to female sexuality. Males of most species tend to respond eagerly to such incentives. My reading of *Tristrams saga* will show how courtly tenets align with Henrich's description of the new, proto-WEIRD European individual (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic)—one of mobility, education, and transcultural inclusiveness. Medieval romances featured knights and maidens in royal and aristocratic milieus, but embodied values that would transform the mating morality—and overall sociality—of all segments of society.

This was not a conscious intention of romance authors and translators. Processes of cultural evolution can work with remarkable efficacy without a single individual being aware of their actual workings. Those who decided Church MFPs did not know what these would lead to (Henrich 2020). Neither did the medieval aristocrats and clerics who argued over heroic versus courtly love understand the full implication of their debate. Applying Henrich's framework to *Tristrams saga* helps us untangle their preconscious influences. The following analysis also adds support to Henrich's theory by uncovering how the new European psychology is reflected in works earlier than those he references. How courtly love, a proto-modern morality, was generated and disseminated through romances—and later, ballads—exemplifies how fiction can help a community unite around provisional solutions to perennial challenges, such as mating.

Restraining Polygyny

Tristrams saga is the only extant complete version from the formative period of the courtly branch of the romance of Tristan and Iseult, "the quintessential love story of the Middle Ages" (Rikhardsdottir 2017, 43). The common branch, originating from the works of Béroul and Eilhart, turned a Celtic legend into medieval entertainment. In the same period—the late twelfth century—Thomas of Britain was first to infuse the narrative with the MFP-aligned ideology of courtly love (Finlay 2004). Only a quarter of his work is extant. Building on

Thomas, Gottfried von Strassburg wrote an early 1200s masterpiece but never completed it.

When King Hákon decided to use literature to Europeanize Norse culture, his first commission was a translation of Thomas's work. According to the extant sources—which scholars find credible—a "Brother Robert" turned Thomas's French verse into Norse prose. This presumed Anglo-Norman friar cut long philosophical and psychological passages, but mostly followed the original narrative. Icelandic scribes ensured that his work survived to the modern era. Although the earliest complete manuscript is from the seventeenth century, older fragments and other evidence contribute to a scholarly consensus on the surviving text being "a rather conservative version" of Robert's work (Jorgensen 1999, 26; Finlay 2004).

The story of Tristan and Iseult—names that in Norse translation became Tristram and Ísönd—concerns the adulterous love between a Cornish knight and an Irish princess. The extremely competent young man escorts the exceptionally attractive princess to her marriage with his uncle, King Markis. Tristram and Ísönd's drinking of a love potion meant for the newlyweds results in years of mad love behind the king's back. Despondent, the protagonist marries a princess with a similar name, Ísodd, who causes his death after learning of his love for Ísönd. Only in the afterlife are the eternally beloved united, symbolically through how trees "sprouted from each of their graves and grew so tall that their limbs intertwined above the gable of the church" (*Tristrams saga* 1999, 223; hereafter *TS*).

This sentimental ending has been explained as a consequence of transmission preferences. Romances with happy endings were not retold as eagerly as the Tristan legend, Singer argues, as its "tragedy of hopeless love speaks to a level of our being that distrusts the wish-fulfilments" that characterize many similar tales (1984, 121). I will argue that Tristram's death is better understood as an inevitable punishment for his transgressions against one of the most imperative tenets of the post-kinship-society age: that even the most superior of men should only have one mate.

Antiquity's social orders seem to have been marked by a "female shortage" and elite woman-hoarding (Engels 1980; Siegfried 1986; Clover 1988; Wicker 2012; Obladen 2016). Courtly love promoted sexual egalitarianism, but it was a hard sell to insist that each individual only has the capacity to form one acceptable pair-bond—and that this bond should last for life. The reward was a "special ecstasy" that would result from an exclusive "spiritual dedication" of reciprocal sexual and emotional fidelity (Singer 1984, 27). Such unity of dedication aligned with the era's commitment to only one God and one feudal lord. In the opening chapters of *Tristrams saga*, we are introduced to how lifelong monogamy and impersonal prosociality are both underpinned by chivalrous ideals.

Tristram's father, Kanelangres, is drawn to the moral center of this fictional world: the court of King Markis. In this beacon of merit and transcultural inclusivity, the importance of kin bonds is greatly reduced. Markis's court treats "with honor and with utmost comradeship all those gallant men who come to them and who wish to be with them." This is a new Europe in which competition for talent draws from a larger pool: the entire Christian world. The narrator conveys how counterintuitive it still must have felt for many not to grant privileged position based on parochial affiliation. When Kanelangres joins Markis's retinue, the king places him and his knights "in a high position over and above his own knights." The narrator finds it necessary to encourage such Henrichian prosociality, emphasizing that Markis "gained by doing so a wealth of good luck and marvelously good fortune" (*TS* 31).

After the Church dissolved kin groups, individuals had to take greater responsibility for creating their own life, through mate choice, neolocal residence, voluntary association with non-kin, and professional pursuit. A new residentially mobile class emerged, of warriors,

monks, craftsmen, merchants, lawyers, clerics, and other educated professionals (Henrich 2020). Markis's court reads as a representation not only of the era's royal administrations, but its charter towns, guilds, and universities. The more old-school Kanelangres's *bildungsjourney* offers an insightful portrayal of the psychological evolution necessary for individuals to succeed in this new environment. For these fictional men—with a status that would have lent itself to polygyny—the narrative offers female mating preference as a means for transformation. In the courtly milieu, women must be wooed in a manner that aligns with chivalrous ideals. Being formidable in martial arts is still paramount, but bachelors must also learn to court unmarried women by using sophisticated social skills. Everything is staged so that females can cast verdict on male performance. When Markis throws a grand feast, he invites "all distinguished men . . . and, of course, their daughters" (*TS* 33).

Kanelangres is the worthiest of men in knightly contests, which earns him the love of the king's sister. The saga's prelude becomes his test for navigating the courtly mating market, which his love obsession motivates him to do to an exceptional extent. His romantic journey parallels the era's political journey that turned "independent feudal magnates into polite courtiers at the absolutist court" (Orning 2013, 116). The narrator seems cognizant of how mate attraction can be a strong motivator when a changed environment requires that people reprogram their moral algorithm. Love is portrayed as a deterministic force that individuals are mostly powerless to resist; Markis's sister "knew her feelings to be impetuously determined by her love for [Kanelangres]" (*TS* 39). The concept of courtliness thus compels two new life strategies: (1) behavioral adaptation to live up to Europe's new ideal of impersonal prosociality, which entails social universalism based on merit and the transformation of non-kin females into self-determining subjects; and (2) the pursuit of only one mate meant for an exclusive lifelong bond.

Through the twelfth century, Norwegian culture had been dominated by heroic love. The civil war that had raged from 1130 was no exception from Bronze and Iron Age warfare in that it allowed men to acquire the women of their defeated enemies. While some earlier scholarship has suggested that antiquity's "female shortage" empowered women (Kress 1993; Lundström and Adolfsson 1995), Viking archeologists Raffield and Price, along with evolutionary anthropologist Collard (2017a, 2017b), make a convincing case for the strong Norse woman being mostly one of myth. Selective female infanticide in combination with widespread polygyny do make women rare and valuable, but usually in a way that leads to their commoditization and loss of agency. Henrich, Boyd, and Richerson (2012) substantiate how kinship society MFPs result in negative attitudes toward women being perpetuated and socially legitimized. Powerful women did exist, but most Norse females "faced bleak prospects" (Raffield, Price, and Collard 2017b, 197).

Ívens saga, another romance translation likely commissioned by King Hákon, dramatizes these older MFPs and how the chivalrous knight should liberate women from such oppression. Sir Íven earns renown from freeing 300 commoditized maidens who are in a castle "as slaves until a knight might come along who freed us" (1999, 87). After his stay with Markis, Kanelangres lives up to such ideals. When he must return to his own kingdom, he declares, "Now, choose for yourself, my love, and consider what you want most." His truelove "understood his good intentions and his wish to take her with him to his homeland, or, if she preferred to remain there, then he would do as she wished, then she felt him to be above reproach, since he so honorably would do as she desired" (*TS* 47).

Kinship society polygyny had encouraged high-status males to continue risk-seeking, status-elevating behaviors to acquire additional females. Such mating markets drive social instability, short-term planning, and a cultural psychology of zero-sum thinking (Henrich

2020). *Erex saga*, probably also translated during Hákon's reign (Bandlien 2005, 218), infuses this morality into its antagonistic forces. Sir Erex earns King Arthur's praise after annihilating a line of powerful men who abduct or violently compete for women who are committed or unwilling to grant consent. That several of these villains are earls or kings is not coincidental; we get the impression that powerful men use their resources to acquire sexual access to females. In *Erex saga*, these men face death unless an epiphany, that "God has shown His justice to us," makes them realize that it is unwise to "shame and disgrace" women (1999, 243). In *Tristrams saga*, Kanelangres is too much of a protagonistic force to pursue multiple females, yet the narrative sends him to his death after not having concluded his bachelor period in time to protect his kingdom.

The New European Individual

Kanelangres dies in battle and his wife after giving birth. Their son, Tristram, is raised by a foster father who understands what the new era requires. He ensures that the boy learns "the knowledge of books . . . the seven liberal arts and . . . a great many languages [plus] seven different stringed instruments" (*TS* 51). Tristram becomes "the epitome of the courtly chivalric gentleman" (Jaeger 1985, 5). His defining traits are "good nature, generosity . . . courtly conduct, intelligence, common sense, and valor." This superior outcome makes his foster father look past fitness concerns of prioritizing resources for one's closest of kin. He invests in Tristram, the obvious talent, by giving him "the most costly clothing, fine horses, and all kinds of luxury goods, giving him everything that was choice and highly prized. At this his sons became angry" (*TS* 51).

While romance heroes are considered amalgams of cleric and knight (Frappier 1959, 149), the Tristan character is infused with such boldly clerical traits that they "take command in the delineation of character" (Jaeger 1984, 62). Romance authors—generally clerics themselves, albeit worldly ones (Kjær 1990)—posit the values of clerics as the alternative to the old warrior class's heroic code. Tristram's martial superiority is a given, but his book learning and music let him get ahead. Even barbaric Norwegian merchants understand the value of this new European individual. When Tristram is the only one learned enough to communicate with them, they end up abducting him, as "they would stand to gain from his knowledge and learning, and furthermore, if they wanted to sell him, then they would get a lot of money" (*TS* 53).

God is on the side of Tristram; a storm sends their ship to where Markis still reigns. The first people he meets also belong to the mobile class—two pilgrims greet him courteously. Everyone's opening word is "friend." Tristram's words, actions, and "splendid clothing" signal that he is to be viewed as an in-group individual, in spite of the pilgrims being from Venice. The author gives the impression that when the new European unmoors from his native shores, he can place his trust in God and fellow Christians. Many North Europeans may have been brought up in less civilized surroundings, yet they need not harbor fears of cultural inferiority—not even when meeting Venetians. Diversity is a boon for everyone; when Tristram encounters royal hunters, they show remarkable appreciation for his bushcraft. He learns their way of cutting up game, but when they see his "excellent and courtly craft," they immediately adopt his method, as "we prefer your custom to ours" (*TS* 57–61).

At Markis's court, people uphold that "no custom was more beautiful or more glorious than the one Tristram had learned in his country" (*TS* 61). After he has shown off his harp skills, the king trusts him so much that Tristram is invited to play in his quarters until the king falls asleep. Importantly, he is "accepted as one of the court due to his skills" (Wilms 2009, 6); that Tristram is Markis's nephew is discovered later. The author further dramatizes the reduced importance of kinship when Tristram's foster

father shows up, "clothed in rags." We learn that "one might be from a good family and possess good manners, but if one was nevertheless poor, one would find few at court willing to help him" (*TS* 65).

Tristram's innate qualities and courtly upbringing make him Markis's favorite. After he has won the kingdom his father lost, Tristram takes it upon himself to free Markis' realm from paying tribute to the Irish. He succeeds, but incurs an injury through poison that only the Irish queen knows how to heal. Tristram places his faith in God whose storm sends him to her. While hiding his identity as their enemy, Tristram's harp skills and courtly behavior let him climb the social hierarchy, so much so that "the beautiful and graceful Princess Ísönd . . . was very eager to see him and something of his varied talents." The queen cures Tristram, while the princess is put under his tutelage "to learn to play the harp first and then to write letters and compose poetry." He is so effective in teaching Ísönd that "throughout the kingdom her fame and renown grew because of the wide ranging knowledge that she had learned by paying attention to him" (87).

The clerical skills and values that define the feudal ideal are thus made independent of gender. Romances promote the idea that European culture should be further civilized through education, starting with royal and aristocratic elites, but made possible by those who disseminate the era's knowledge and mores through courts, universities, monasteries, and other pan-European networks. Such practices transformed cultural and individual psychology. Henrich explains how the new European individual grew more autonomous, which required a new sociality. Singer places courtly love in this context, viewing "courtliness as the acquisition of those polite and equilibrating gestures which enable human beings to communicate without intruding upon each other's privacy" (1984, 28). King Hákon had *Konungs skuggsjá* (King's mirror) written to spread such insights into how royalty, merchants, warriors, and other classes should think and act in order to get along and ahead in the new world. After a line of romance translations, Hákon's courtly manual spells out his ideological ambitions for medieval Norsemen. Kjær (1990) regards *Konungs skuggsjá* as the culmination of his civilizing efforts.

Hákon himself, according to *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, had learned to read at age seven, but when religious song was added to his education, his foster father, an earl, protested against such overly clerical activities (1887, 11). Perhaps Hákon chose to have Thomas's Tristan translated first because he found intellectual kindred in the story's protagonist and enlightened royals. The saga aligns itself with the mobile classes, positing that good feudal rulers know that these have to be accommodated for one's realm to prosper. The Irish queen is upset when Tristram has to return home, complaining that "this is what comes of aiding a foreigner; now you will leave us for the sake of your friends just when we wish to have you most." Still, "we will not keep you here against your will" (*TS* 89). She is not the only royal who has to adapt; even King Arthur is powerless to resist the open markets of a feudal Europe. In *Parcevals saga*, Arthur "is sad because a great many of his knights have gone away to various other strongholds where they feel it is more comfortable to be" (1999, 113).

Courtship in Monogamous Mating Markets

Markis's nobles represent the old era's parochialism and zero-sum thinking. Instead of realizing how fortunate they are to have on their side someone as superior as Tristram, they view him as a threat. The nobles arrange for him to secure Princess Ísönd as Markis's wife, to ensure an heir so that Tristram never becomes their sovereign. With twenty of King Markis's best guardsmen, Tristram sets sail. In the Irish harbor, the narrator engages one of Hákon's more immediate ambitions with the romance translation: "to change the behavior of his *hirð*" (Bandlien 2005, 218).

Hákon's grandfather, Sverrir Sigurðarson, had won the realm in 1184 and attempted to change

the mating morality of his warriors. Passing on their enemy's land and women to his own *hirð* was still a given, but Sverrir wished to avoid the conflicts that often ensued when his men raped women during peace. When idle—like Tristram and his crew ashore—Sverrir's warriors tended to get drunk and take other men's women. In a speech against drunkenness, the king encouraged his men no longer to use their martial superiority for personal gain, as they should be "ferocious as lions when there is war," but "as lambs in peacetime." In his contemporaneously written saga, Sverre's immediate predecessor is criticized for being a heavy drinker and womanizer (*Sverris saga* 2007, chapters 104, 98).

Since a Norwegian archbishopric had been established mid-century, the Church had worked hard to "improve morals in Norway, especially the king's morals" (Bandlien 2005, 183). The woman-hoarding of kings produced troves of illegitimate children who competed for kingship. Primogeniture and legitimacy had not yet been made custom, so royal sex practices fueled the civil war that would last until Hákon won peace in 1240. Sagas attest to how kings typically had a plethora of sex partners, until Sverrir whose saga mentions no extrapair copulation. On his deathbed, the chaste king swore that he had no illegitimate sons (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 193).

Sverrir's promotion of new MFPs seems not to have changed "warrior morals to any great degree" (Bandlien 2005, 60). Sagas dramatize how powerful men continued routinely to rape women well into the thirteenth century, as heroic ideals persisted. From the mid-twelfth century, courtly and other mating ideals had entered into the region. Contradictory European influences set in motion a cultural discourse that *Tristrams saga* engages. The story therefore resonates with Sverrir's speech against warrior drunkenness when the narrator emphasizes that Tristram's idle warriors "ate and drank and played various games, but they transacted no business, rather amusing themselves most cheerfully with courtly conversation among well-mannered knights" (*TS* 97).

While Markis's guardsmen stay out of trouble, Tristram must find a way to make Ísönd marry Markis. Since males can run off, leaving the females to bear the burden of childrearing, women are driven to elicit a credible investment in the pair-bond. Under a courtly regime, women themselves have to ensure this investment. In romances, the literary device for doing so is to have the bachelor-knight prove his devotion by putting his life in danger in contests against knights, or in battle against enemies, giants, dragons, or other monsters. Ísönd rejects her father's steward who takes credit for the dragon Tristram had slain. She interprets the steward's lack of courage in his pursuit of her to mean that he only "pretended to love her" (*TS* 101). That Tristram becomes deadly sick from dragon poison is the type of costly commitment that romances reward.

Such dynamics of self-sacrifice and chivalry prompted Donaldson (1965) to compare courtliness to the behavior of monogamous animals. If a female only seeks a genetic contribution, she is incentivized merely to accept sperm from the male who has proved himself superior. Such "heroic love" is found among more than 90 percent of mammalian species (Hrdy 1999). For the few pair-bonding mammals, females seek to elicit a credible commitment and proof of social compatibility. There is also an element of mate ranking in female commitment demands. Ísönd scolds the steward for not understanding that "if I loved all of those who would declare their love for me . . . I would be a sorry soul indeed" (*TS* 111). Tristram tops her ranking after slaying the dragon. He also earns a more carnal admiration, as when he bathes "she gazed upon his handsome countenance with loving eyes" (*TS* 113).

Tristram falls by the king's feet in submission, letting the royals know his true motivation: to win Ísönd for King Markis. That the Irish king agrees to this, which in *Tristrams saga* is motivated by political concern, is perhaps a narrative remnant from the Celtic legend. Thomas did not change the legend in a manner that lets this part of the story, too, uphold true love and female

agency as the highest ideals. That a worldly hindrance like politics gets in the way aligns with Huizinga's concept of courtly love as a "compensatory ideal." In this mythical past, the favored practice is that women get to choose their mates, but environmental demands may still make even the truest of loves unattainable.

Between Heroic and Romantic

En route to Cornwall, Tristram and Ísönd accidentally drink the potion meant to ensure lifelong love between Markis and Ísönd. This condemns "them both to a life of sorrow and trouble and anxiety caused by carnal desire and constant longing" (*TS* 121). The following years provide abundant drama through the young lovers' sneaking around behind Markis's back. In the common branch of the Tristan legend, the potion's effect usually wanes after three years. Folk psychology likely informed this duration, as modern divorce statistics show a cross-cultural peak after three to four years (UNSD 2012). Fisher (2016) hypothesizes that *Homo* feelings of romantic love adapted to the reproductive cycle of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. This strong emotion needed only to last until a couple's offspring could progress to communal rearing among the forager band (Tylor 1889; Friedl 1975).

With Tristan's courtly branch being put in service of Church MFPs, the beloveds find no respite after three years. Neither does a solution exist to their predicament. Singer points to how literature of this era attempts to reconcile human nature with Christianity's new demands for love. Tristram's fate is an example of "medieval humanism's failure to achieve an adequate synthesis between naturalistic and religious love [which] was followed by relatively more successful attempts in later centuries" (1984, xiii).

The protagonist seals his fate, I argue, when he abandons his truelove after years of clandestine copulation. In a faraway land, he marries Princess Ísodd "for fun and pleasure [and to] forget Ísönd" (*TS* 169). These word choices seem informed by the author's plan to cast clear judgment on pair-bonding for "rebound" purposes. A gold ring reminds Tristram of what the new era requires. He concludes that "I cannot live with her carnally without breaking my word and putting my humanity to shame." The very essence of being human is thus connected to sexual fidelity. When Ísodd makes advances in bed, "his reason restrained his desire" (*TS* 171). He explains to her furious brother that "to [Ísönd] I have surrendered my desire so completely that I am unable to love Ísodd" (*TS* 193).

Again, the doomed lover and failing husband is wounded by poison. This time, only Ísönd's herbal knowledge can save him. When she learns that he has not cheated on her with his wife, that "he is in every respect your faithful beloved," Ísönd sets sail. Meanwhile, an eavesdropping Ísodd has learned that Tristram "loved another more than her." By lying to Tristram that Ísönd is not coming, Ísodd makes it so that "he surrendered his spirit and died." When Ísönd finds his body, she begs for God's mercy, "then she lay down on the floor and kissed him and placed her hands about his neck. And there she died" (215–23).

God's hand guides the plot in this conclusion, too; a ten-day storm had kept the beloveds apart. Lack of wind prevents Ísönd from coming ashore while Ísodd enacts her revenge on Tristram for having a secret mate. Only when he is dead does the wind pick up to let Ísönd finalize the tragedy. These interventions suggest that the characters are pawns in a game that does not allow an acceptable pair-bond between Tristram and Ísönd.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, European thought had not yet spawned the synthesis that Singer finds in Renaissance literature. Late medieval companionate love would promote a pragmatism that courtly love lacks, upholding "the mutual responsibility of husbands and wives for running the household or farm" (Giddens 1992, 43). Later romantic

love would further empower European individuals to negotiate their copulation and pair-bonding with less kin interference (Apostolou 2010). Courtly love's ideological betweenness makes the love potion, the relationship between love and sex, and a line of contradictory elements in *Tristrams saga* hard to bring together in a coherent interpretation. Lewis (1936) argues that four characteristics—humility, courtesy, adultery, and the religion of love—unite in a "systematic coherence" that defines a sentiment that characterizes the era's literature. What the purpose of this coherence is, he does not suggest.

The often contradictory perspectives of Tristan criticism attest to how challenging it has been to make sense of courtly love. A critical trend has been to overemphasize philosophical examination rather than to investigate what drove the biggest social change since the Neolithic revolution. Henrich's study suggests that it was not primarily the previous centuries' "ignorance and poverty" that prevented Europeans from embracing polite courtship. Nor was this transition driven by philosophical progress that made "man able to begin thinking consecutively about ways of harmonizing sexual impulses with idealistic motives" (Singer 1984, 29, 36).

An evolutionary perspective brings our attention to how radical of a break it was to transition away from kinship societies' heroic love. When aristocrats finally embraced courtly love, they themselves may have felt—as Elias (1939) posited—that this was an effective strategy for distinguishing themselves from lower social groups. Yet focusing on how cultural phenomena tap into evolved features of the human mind, such as status drive, mostly produce proximate explanations. The studies of Henrich (2020) and Raffield, Price, and Collard (2017a, 2017b) suggest that this era's primary concern was to restrain the woman-hoarding of powerful men. How men and women should solve their pair-bonding challenges in the sexually egalitarian environment of a modernizing Europe was left for later literature to discuss more coherently.

This sacralization of monogamy leads me to interpret the circumstance around Tristram's death as means of engaging the sin of having multiple mates. When the superior young male chooses to marry for fun and pleasure, the narrative must punish him. It is fitting that his scorned spouse effectuates his demise. Additional instances of copulation for fun, pleasure, or strategy likely also inform the sins that Ísönd begs God's mercy for, such as when she coerced her female attendant into having sex with men for worldly reasons (*TS* 121, 201). *Tristrams saga* may not have told thirteenth-century Norsemen how to make love last a lifetime. But the romance strongly warns against entering into holy matrimony without the appropriate motivation.

A Step toward Gender Equality

The scholarly consensus is that King Hákon's commissioning of romances affected Norse culture (Jaeger 1985; Bandlien 2005; Glauser 2005; Kalinke 2011, 14; Orning 2013, 116; Rikhardsdottir 2017, 56). As the thirteenth century progressed, an ideological transition made it no longer "heroic" to rape women to dominate one's enemies. Sexual assaults continued, but deprived of this cultural justification. In this monogamous environment, facilitated by a stronger state and loosening kin bonds, females were viewed less like commodities and more like individuals. Women who engaged in extrapair copulation could see their honor reduced, but less so that of their father or husband. As long as one was sufficiently clandestine, short-term mating need not reduce a woman's mate value to a significant extent (Bandlien 2005, 87–88). *Möttuls saga* proposes that since nearly everyone cheats, it is better not to know. The narrator encourages that "no one say anything but good about women, because it is more fitting to conceal than to reveal something, even though one may know the true state of affairs" (1999, 29).

By the mid-fourteenth century, Norse commoners, too, had internalized the

righteousness of female consent. Suitors should first earn a woman's will to marriage before formal courting commenced. This did not mean that females earned exclusive right to wield the power of sexual selection; a doctrine of double consent meant that parents and daughter should agree (Apostolou 2010). In practice, much coercion continued, but Church MFPs provided young women with considerable leverage (Bandlien 2005).

Some scholarship has misunderstood this aspect of the feudal transition. Germanic kinship societies did not have matriarchal structures that provided women with an independence that was undermined by Church oppression—quite the contrary. Boase proposes that when courtly love put a woman on a pedestal, she "was scarcely more emancipated than the wife who was her husband's chattel" (1977, 75–77, 128). Such a perspective underestimates the consequences of polygynous mating markets. Females, along with low-status males, were under the yoke of elites. Being a favored wife could entail privilege, but for the troves of women who were relegated to concubinage or sexual slavery, being "raised on a pedestal by an admiring poet" should be viewed as a step in the right direction. Raffield, Price, and Collard conclude that with "the persistence of the dubious and romanticized cliché of the 'heroic' Viking warrior, it is clear that the field would benefit from deeper studies of masculinity" (2017a, 322).

Conclusion

Courtly love was an ad hoc ideology infused into a conveniently available genre that let Europeans discuss how to pair-bond in a radically different environment. Romances with love and chivalric combat had been around since antiquity. The novel elements of courtly ideology were imported from Arabic poetry and philosophy that earlier in the twelfth century had migrated through Spain to Southern France, then to the princely courts up north. Style and character types were adopted, but Europeans exchanged an Arab cult of chastity with a feudalism-aligned love service, mysticism was removed, and the Arab slave girl gave way for women of the leisure class (Boase 1977; Singer 1984).

This merger spawned popular fiction that let Europeans dramatize their "current social problems relating to love" (Bandlien 2005, 192). Once these problems of ideology were solved, "courtly love becomes attenuated and disappears" (Singer 1984, 35). The romance genre itself continued to enthrall commoners for centuries—Icelanders well into the modern era (Driscoll 1977; Ferm et al. 2015). Critics may have found these romances to be aesthetically inferior to the sagas of Icelanders (Mitchell 1991, 8), but judging by manuscript transmission this was "the most popular genre in Iceland through the centuries" (Kalinke 1985, 316).

Written romances met transmission challenges. As these stories helped Norse aristocrats internalize a new mating morality, romance values and norms migrated to the ballad. This format, too, likely developed among the higher classes before being embraced by commoners who did so with exceptional eagerness; Scandinavia has Europe's "richest and most important" ballad tradition (Seemann 1967, xiii; Rossel 1982; Colbert 1989). The Tristan legend made its way to a line of Nordic ballads, the most notable of which is *Tristrams kvæði*. Songs that everyone chimed in on let communities synchronize their beliefs while engaging in ritualistic movement—that is, dance. In the same century as that in which romances were introduced, a dance craze reached the region (Colbert 1992, 50–51). By around 1300, "dancing and other 'wanton folly' [had become] common amusements" (Bandlien 2005, 223). Jonsson argues that the spread and popularity of ballads built on the foundation that was laid by the Norwegian court from the thirteenth century on (1989, 64–72; 1991, 152–55).

As my reading of *Tristrams saga* attests, the ideological discussion engaged by medieval romances and ballads concerned a transition

between both social orders and mating moralities, as these coevolved. Church MFPs were transforming Europe, but were poorly aligned with human nature. When faced with such challenges of ideology, moral communities often turn to fiction. Iser's view on literature aligns with Huizinga's "compensatory ideal," as made-up stories can help communities envision and move toward what they do not yet have (1989, 282). That *Tristrams saga* did not solve the conflict between human nature and ideology need not be viewed as a flaw, as "the greatness of the Tristan legend resides in its delineations of conflicts that *cannot* be harmonized" (Singer 1984, 111). One reason for why so much fiction centers on love is that such stories "serve as problem-solving instruments which enable the human mind to deal provisionally with problems it cannot solve definitely" (De Bruyn 2012, 172).

This is how *Tristrams saga* functioned in the Norse world, as other medieval love stories did across Europe. Fiction helped communities circumvent doctrinal inflexibility and the inertia of tradition, so that what institutional religion "would not even tolerate as a possibility forced itself into the creative, albeit fanciful, fabric of popular romance" (Singer 1984, 101). How even the knightliest of knights, like Tristram, were meant only to have one mate should make it easier for men of lower status to accept the same restriction. The resulting sexual egalitarianism underpinned the modern world (Christakis 2019; Henrich 2020).

This medieval transition attests to how integral mating markets are to our social orders. The cultural effect of romances attests to how powerful of an incentive female sexuality can be when men need to be convinced of the righteousness of a new morality. Whether the Norwegian king was consciously aware of these dynamics we know not. Admittedly, there were "few direct signs of a courtly love culture at King Hákon's court" (Bandlien 2005, 219). Still, the literate reformer seems to have suspected how fiction can influence culture over time. Whether he predicted this outcome or not, Hákon let his people vicariously experience idealized courts whose norms and values over the ensuing generations would inform how Norsemen internalized a new mating morality, as well as the impersonal prosociality of a new Europe.

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