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THE TRANSFORMATION OF HOMOSEXUAL *LIEBESTOD* IN SAGAS TRANSLATED FROM LATIN

By DAVID ASHURST

THE FOCUS OF THIS ARTICLE will be on a series of texts in which one warrior dies clasping the body of a fallen comrade; but before concentrating on that theme I must explain the term *liebestod*, 'love-death', and its currency in relation to the Tristan legend.

Lovers of classical music will recognise the term as the name usually given to an extraordinary passage, at once orgasmic and transcendental, which concludes Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. This opera, for which Wagner wrote both the libretto and the music as was his custom, and which he finished in 1859, was one of the most influential art-works of the nineteenth century. Wagner himself, oddly enough, originally used the term *liebestod* to designate the Prelude of the opera; and he habitually referred to the closing scene as *Isoldes Verklärung*, 'Isolde's Transfiguration', emphasising its erotic mysticism rather than its pathos (Wagner 1987, 489 and 548–59). It was Liszt who borrowed the term *liebestod* for the title of his 1867 piano transcription of *Isoldes Verklärung*; but it is Liszt's title, not Wagner's, which has stuck to the final scene of the opera itself, and so has passed into common usage.

The context and content of the scene are that Isolde has rushed to be by the side of her wounded lover, Tristan, but she arrives too late to share with him more than a fleeting word before he dies. Filled with love and sorrow, Isolde enters a state of ecstasy in which she feels herself to be at one with Tristan; then she sinks down onto Tristan's body, and is dead.

On the basis of this, I take it that the essential characteristics of a *liebestod* are that one dies suffused with love and achieves in death some kind of union with the beloved, embracing his body. And these are precisely the characteristics of the medieval accounts of Isolde's death which are most closely related to Wagner's treatment of the subject: see the account in the Norwegian *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* (NR, 220–23), which is the fullest surviving version of the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman romance of *Tristan* by Thomas of Britain (or d'Angleterre), and its Icelandic derivatives, *Tristrams kvæði* and the *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd* (NR, 237 and 288).

The detailed treatment of the *liebestod* topos in these works, which may be called ‘the Tristan pattern’, would make an interesting study in itself. There is, however, another group of *liebestod* texts, less well known today but quite well represented in Old Norse–Icelandic literature, which embody what may be termed ‘the homosexual pattern’ in respect of its origin, but which I shall call ‘the all-male pattern’ in view of how it is handled in the sagas. It is this other group, stemming from a root more ancient, more venerable and even better known than the Tristan legend, to which I shall now turn.

Virgil's Nisus and Euryalus

What I have called the all-male pattern of *liebestod* originates in the episode of Nisus and Euryalus in the ninth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a précis of which is to be found in *Breta sqgur*. The original Latin passage was hugely popular and prompted several imitations including an extensive one by Statius, which was well known to the Middle Ages. At the height of the twelfth-century Renaissance, Walter of Châtillon produced another imitation of the episode for the ninth book of his *Alexandreis*, and consequently this features in *Alexanders saga*, the Old Norse translation of Walter's poem. *Breta sqgur*, *Alexanders saga* and the *Alexandreis* are the main works which will be discussed below; but first it is necessary to give an account and some analysis of the original passage by Virgil.

Nisus and Euryalus are intensely loving comrades in the Trojan forces which Aeneas leads from Troy to Italy. We first meet them in the context of a foot-race which they run as part of the funeral games for Anchises, the father of Aeneas (Virgil 1934, *Aeneid* V.293–361). They are re-introduced at IX.176, guarding the gate of the Trojan camp in Italy, which has been invested by the Rutulians. Aeneas is away in Pallanteum and it is vital that a message be got through to him. Nisus declares it is his intention to slip through the hostile army under cover of night, while the complacent Rutulians are drunk; Euryalus refuses to be left behind, and soon they obtain permission to undertake the task together (IX.184–313). They set off and cut their way through the enemy ranks, wreaking carnage on their stupefied foes (IX.324–55). Euryalus, whose youth has many times been stressed by Virgil, takes as booty some fine body-armour and a splendid helmet (IX.359–66). Just as the comrades are about to disappear into the woods beyond the army, a contingent of Rutulian cavalry approaches and they are seen: the ‘thoughtless Euryalus’ is betrayed by the glint of his new helmet (IX.367–75). In the ensuing

confusion Nisus almost gets away, but Euryalus, weighed down by his armour, is captured (IX.384–98). Thrown into the greatest confusion of mind, Nisus can now see only two courses open to him: rescue or a ‘beautiful death’ (IX.401). He hurls a spear from the shadows; but this turns out to be a wrong move, for it provokes the Rutulians to threaten Euryalus with instant death, at which point Nisus steps out of cover and offers his own life in exchange for his companion’s (IX.424–28):

tum vero exterritus, amens,
conclamat Nisus, nec se celare tenebris
amplius aut tantum potuit perferre dolorem:
‘me, me, adsum, qui feci, in me convertite ferrum,
o Rutuli!’

Then indeed, frantic with terror, Nisus shrieks aloud; no longer could he hide himself in darkness or endure such agony: ‘On me, on me—here am I who did the deed—on me turn your steel, O Rutulians!’ (Trans. Fairclough)

Amens, ‘frantic, crazy’, is the key word in this, for it reveals the intensity of Nisus’s affection. Here we see no simple heroism but a passion which dictates that the anguish of Nisus’s own death will be preferable to the agony of seeing Euryalus die; but the plea is unavailing and Nisus must watch as Euryalus is put to the sword (IX.431–37). Now there is nothing left for Nisus but to hurl himself recklessly upon his enemies, to kill, to be killed and to join Euryalus (IX.443–47):

moriens animam abstulit hosti.
tum super exanimum sese proiecit amicum
confossus placidaque ibi demum morte quievit.
Fortunati ambo! si quid mea carmina possunt,
nulla dies umquam memori vos eximet aevo.

At this point I shall quote Dryden’s poetic translation because it is so spirited and because it captures a certain ambiguity in the Latin (Dryden 1903, 240):

Dying, he slew; and staggering on the plain,
With swimming eyes he sought his lover slain;
Then quiet on his bleeding bosom fell,
Content, in death, to be revenged so well.
O happy friends! for, if my verse can give
Immortal life, your fame shall ever live.

It is true that the word which Dryden translates as ‘lover’ at line IX.444 is *amicus*, ordinarily meaning ‘friend’, and indeed the word ‘lover’ in late seventeenth-century English could still mean no more than ‘friend’; but it is also true that the word *amicus* in Latin literature is often used to

signify 'male lover' (*OLD*, *amicus* 2.2). The precise nature of the relationship between Nisus and Euryalus will be discussed in more detail below, but enough has been said already to indicate that their bond was close and deeply emotional, since Nisus's frantic appeal for Euryalus to be spared, and his actions following his comrade's death, show that his feelings were of extremely passionate affection. Whatever kind of love it may have been, love it certainly was.

This being the case, the death of Nisus has all the characteristics of a *liebestod* as defined earlier: the dying suffused with longing, the clasping of the beloved's body, the union in death which is symbolised by the act of clasping and which is affirmed by the poet when he promises everlasting fame as a couple to the 'happy pair', as Fairclough renders the phrase *fortunati ambo*. It is the ultimate expression of the relationship which Virgil specifies for Nisus and Euryalus at the start of the episode: *his amor unus erat pariterque in bella ruebant*, 'a mutual love was theirs, and side by side they charged into hostilities' (*Aeneid* IX.182).

That the love shared by Nisus and Euryalus has an erotic element, rather than being just a deeply felt comradeship, is indicated by the heavy and repeated emphasis put upon Euryalus's youth and beauty. In the lines immediately preceding the statement that the pair enjoyed a mutual love, we are told that Nisus was a warrior *acerrimus armis*, 'most eager with weapons' (IX.176), to which is added the following (IX.179–81):

et iuxta comes Euryalus, quo pulchrior alter
non fuit Aeneandum Troiana neque induit arma,
ora puer prima signans intonsa iuventa.

At his side was Euryalus—none fairer among the Aeneadae, or of all who donned the Trojan arms—a boy who showed on his unshaven cheek the first bloom of youth. (Trans. Fairclough)

Other lines referring to the physical attractions of young Euryalus include V.295, V.343–44 and especially IX.433–37, which are rather too lavish for modern taste in the way they linger over his 'lovely limbs' in their death throes. In these passages we see Virgil expressing the Roman (and Greek) ideal of the kind of male beauty which was a suitable object for masculine desire: the fact that Euryalus's beard is not developed, or not fully developed, is an important point and one which was meant to titillate the reader.¹ But Euryalus is clearly not a child: he is a soldier

¹ For an excellent study of the acceptable and unacceptable forms of sex between males in Roman society see Williams 1999. Although I have placed my own emphases and drawn my own conclusions, I am indebted to this book in many ways. The episode of Nisus and Euryalus is treated on pages 116–19.

who has repeatedly gone into battle beside Nisus, and in several lines (IX.252, 376 and 471) Virgil calls him not *puer*, 'boy', but *vir*, 'man'; so we are probably to imagine him as embodying the type of beauty which we can still see figured in the Emperor Hadrian's lover, Antinous, who died when he was about twenty and whose surviving statues, for the most part, show a downy-faced but very muscular youth.

Readers of Latin in the Middle Ages would certainly have been alive to the erotic connotations of Virgil's descriptions of Euryalus, and would have understood the probable state of feelings between the youth and the somewhat older Nisus (who is himself described as a *iuvēnis*, 'young man', in lines V.331 and V.361). They were perfectly familiar with the tradition of classical pederasty because, if for no other reason, they found it quite overtly present in some of the most widely-read and easily available of the classical texts which they possessed: the passage relating to the warrior Cydon in *Aeneid* X.324–27; the second of the *Eclogues* by Virgil (1934, vol.1, 10–15); Ovid's story of Narcissus in *Metamorphoses* (1916, III.339–510); and above all the myth of Ganymede found in *Metamorphoses* X.152–61 and referred to pointedly in *Aeneid* I.28 and V.250–57. By the twelfth century, in fact, the name Ganymede had come to be used routinely in literature as the appellation for any male, but especially a young and handsome one, who favoured sexual relations with other males; it is used in this way in countless love lyrics, invectives, satires and other texts, notably in the very popular debate poem *Altercatio Ganimedis et Helene*, manuscripts of which survive all over Europe (Boswell 1980, 251–60 and 381–89).

Although the relationship between Nisus and Euryalus would have seemed to medieval readers to be unmistakably tinged with eroticism, it has not yet been demonstrated here that it was fully sexual rather than belonging to pederasty of the high-minded aesthetic type. In the Middle Ages the evidence for this subject appeared self-contradictory. In the first place there is the statement which Virgil makes on introducing the pair for the first time, when Aeneas has instituted a foot-race among his men (*Aeneid* V.293–96):

undique conveniunt Teucrici mixtique Sicani,
Nisus et Euryalus primi,
Euryalus forma insignis viridique iuventa,
Nisus amore pio pueri.

From all sides flock Trojans and Sicilians, mingled, Nisus and Euryalus foremost—Euryalus famed for beauty and the flower of youth, Nisus for tender love for the boy. (Trans. Fairclough)

In Virgil's time the adjective *pius* primarily meant 'dutiful'; and with regard to a man's behaviour towards those who were close to him, it meant 'devoted'—hence 'tender' as Fairclough has it (*OLD*, *pius* 1 and 3). The word bears no connotations of chastity. However, by the time the most influential of all commentaries on the *Aeneid*, that by Servius, was being written in the early fifth century the moral climate had changed and the word *pius* had come closer in meaning to our own 'pious'. In commenting on line V.296 and explaining the love which was Nisus's hallmark and claim to fame, Servius (1878–1902) gives the following gloss: *pio—casto, non infamo*, 'chaste, not disgraceful'. Servius's commentary, which was primarily a school text, was copied alongside Virgil's poem over and over again throughout the Middle Ages. Thus medieval schoolboys, encountering Nisus and his partner for the first time, were given the very enlightening information that their love was chaste and not disgraceful. One can imagine them clamouring to know precisely what disgraceful love might be; and no doubt the answer was a revelation to many. Certainly Servius's gloss must have prompted the suspicion, at least, that the love of Nisus and Euryalus was actually *infamus*, *non castus*, despite the schoolmaster's official line. But Servius gets into deeper trouble just a few lines later when Nisus, who is leading the foot-race, slips and falls. As the warrior gets up he trips the man in second position so that Euryalus, in third place, can go on to win the prize. Of the moment when Nisus has fallen and realised that he has lost the race, Virgil says: *non tamen Euryali, non ille oblitus amorum*, 'Yet not of Euryalus, not of his love was he forgetful' (V.334). In this line the word *amor*, used in the plural in this way, means an object of sexual love (*OLD*, *amor* 1.c) and, as Williams (1999, 313 n.83) says, it 'is ordinarily used of one's sexual partner, one's "love" in that sense'.² Servius knows this, admits it and is puzzled by it since for him it contradicts the meaning of the earlier statement that the love was *pius*. His gloss for the line reads as follows: *nunc amorum, qui pluraliter non nisi turpitudinem significant*, 'Now *amorum*, which plural signifies nothing other than a disgrace'. A careful medieval student of the *Aeneid*, therefore, was bound to understand that Nisus's love for Euryalus was explicitly sexual, and it would have been remembered that in IX.182 Virgil insists that the love was mutual; *ergo* they were lovers in the modern sense of the word.

² The *OLD* gloss says only 'the object of one's love, one's beloved', but all the examples of usage which are then given clarify the fact that 'the object of sexual desire' is what is meant. The example from Virgil (*Georgics* III.227), for instance, specifies the relationship between a bull and a heifer.

It must be accepted, however, that one could always insist that the word *pius* implies what Servius says it implies, believe that the relationship between the warriors was a sexless although passionate friendship, and turn a blind eye to the word *amores*. Apart from this one word, Virgil has in fact employed language which is rather discreet, whether by accident or design; and this has proved fortunate for Nisus and Euryalus during the long ages in which disapproval of homosexuality has been almost an article of faith. Were it not for Virgil's reticence it would probably have been difficult for the passage to maintain its great popularity throughout the Christian Middle Ages and every succeeding century up to the death of classical learning in our own day. As it stands, the enduring success of the piece has depended on the fact that one can enjoy all its homo-erotic passion without having to worry too much about the particulars of sex. It is a prime example of a text in which it is possible, as the saying goes, to have your cake and eat it. And the choicest morsel which can be had and eaten is the *liebestod*, that perennial symbol of the ultimate orgasm which is no orgasm at all, the one which unites the lover permanently with the beloved.

The treatment of the subject in Breta sqgur

The bulk of *Breta sqgur* consists of an abridged paraphrase of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, but it begins with a short summary of the *Aeneid* which gives prominence to the story of Nisus and Euryalus.

It is not certain whether the translator or compiler of *Breta sqgur* worked directly from the *Aeneid* in making his summary, or whether he had some intermediary text at his disposal. Nor are the date and place of origin of the entire work known. It is possible that the translation was prompted by the poem *Merlínusspá* ascribed to Gunnlaugr Leifsson, a monk of Þingeyrar (*ob.* 1218 or 1219), and in this case *Breta sqgur* is likely to be Icelandic and from the early thirteenth century; but there is some possibility, at least, that it belongs with the Norwegian translations commissioned by King Hákon Hákonarson (Louis-Jensen 1993, 58). It seems to have been moderately influential: heroic conceptions of King Arthur and his knights deriving from *Breta sqgur* may have influenced the presentation of character in the *riddara sqgur* (Barnes 1993, 532); and it finds a natural place alongside other works of ancient history and lore in the central section of *Hauksbók*, the manuscript compiled by Haukr Erlendsson in the early fourteenth century. The fact that Haukr included *Breta sqgur* in his monumental compilation, and that he placed it where

he did (*Hauksbók* 1892–96, 231–302), indicates that it played a significant role in his world view.

As there is still no critical edition of *Breta sögur* I shall quote and comment on the *Hauksbók* redaction, which has the virtue of being complete in its own terms even though it is somewhat abbreviated, as are nearly all the texts which Haukr chose to work on. Since it is important to see all of the little that the Old Norse summary preserves of the Nisus and Euryalus story and to judge its tone, and since copies of *Hauksbók* are not easy to come by, I shall quote the episode in its entirety (*Hauksbók* 1892–96, 235):

Þeir váru tveir menn í borginni er fyrirsjástir váru ok mestir kappar í liði Eneas. Hét annarr Nisus en annarr Eruleus. Þeir veljask til at ríða út af borginni ok segja Enea þenna ófrið. Þeir herklæðask nú ok fara leyniliga út af borginni, ok er þeir kómu í herinn váru margir víntrukknir ok sofnaðir. Þá brigðr Nisus sverði ok hogggr á tvær hendr, ok svá it sama gerir Eruleus, ok drepa nú mikinn fjölda riddara ok fara svá út af herinum. Ok svá margan mann hofðu þeir drepit at þeir vissu eigi sjálfir tölú á, ok svá váru þeir móðir at nálíga máttu þeir eigi ganga. Ok þeim sigri er við brugðit víða í bókum, er þeir fengu þá. En er þeir kómu út af herinum ok morna tók ok ljóst var orðit ok morginsólin skein á hjálma þeira, sáu þeir mikinn her ríða í móti sér. Þar var sá hofðingi fyrir er Volcens hét. Hann ætlaði til liðs við Turni. Hann sér þessa tvá riddara ok kennir á vápnum þeira at þeir eru af Trójumönnum. Nisus sækir nú undan ok til skógs; en Eruleus var þungfærr, ok komask þeir millim hans ok skógsins ok sækja nú at honum alla vega. En hann versk sterklíga; ok af því at ekki má við margnum, þá drepa þeir hann. Ok er Nisus sér þetta, hljóp hann ór skóginum ok hogggr á tvær hendr svá at ekki festir við. Hann hrýðr sér gøtu fram at hofðingja þeira Volvent ok lagði hann með sverði í gegnum, ok allar eru hans hendr blóðugar upp at oxl. Nú sækir svá mæðin í líkam hans af sókn ok sárum at hann má eigi standa. Kemr hann nú þar at, sem félagi hans var fallinn, ok leggsk á hann ofan ok mælti, ‘Minn góði vinr Eruleus, í einum stað skulu vit dauða þola!’ ok var þar saxaðr.

There were two men in the fortification who were the most prudent heroes, and the greatest, among Aeneas's troops. One was called Nisus, and the other Euryalus. They volunteered to go out from the fortification and tell Aeneas about this conflict. They put on their armour and went secretly out from the fortification; and when they got amongst the enemy forces there were many men drunk with wine and asleep. Then Nisus drew his sword and struck to right and to left, and Euryalus did the same, and they killed a great number of knights; and thus they went out from among the army. And so many men had they killed that they themselves did not know the number. And they were so weary that they could hardly walk. And that victory, which they won then, is widely celebrated in books. But when they came out from among the army and dawn broke and it had grown light and the rising sun shone on their helmets, they saw a large contingent riding towards them. A chieftain called Volcens

was in command there. He was intending to join forces with Turnus. He saw these two knights and knew by their weapons that they were Trojans. Nisus now tried to get away and to the wood; but Euryalus was weighed down, and they got between him and the wood and attacked him from every direction. And he defended himself vigorously, but because there is no winning against great odds they killed him. And when Nisus saw this, he ran out of the wood and struck to right and to left, so that nothing latched onto him. He cleared himself a path straight to their chieftain Volcens and ran him through with his sword, and his arms were all bloody up to the shoulder. Now weariness from fighting and wounds assailed his body so that he could not stand. He came to where his companion had fallen and laid himself down on him and said, 'My good friend Euryalus, in one and the same place shall we two suffer death.' And he was cut to pieces there.

The first point to be made about this version of the Nisus and Euryalus story is that, although it may appear almost ridiculously short by comparison with the space which Virgil devotes to it, by the standards of the *Breta sǫgur* summary it is actually a long passage. In the *Aeneid* the episode occupies 274 hexameters out of a total of 9,896 (ratio 1:36); in Finnur Jónson's edition of *Hauksbók*, the episode fills 26 lines of prose out of a total of just 247, excluding chapter headings, for the entire summary of the epic (ratio 1:9.5). Aeneas's affair with Dido is the only other episode from the *Aeneid* to be given extensive treatment, and it is even longer at 46 lines of prose (ratio 1:5.4). Other important episodes such as the funeral games or the visit to the underworld are dropped from the *Breta sǫgur* account altogether and the author contents himself with a lightning-fast précis of the military and political machinations between Aeneas and Turnus in Italy. The conclusion which may be drawn is that the author's prime objective is to convey the essential 'facts of history' (however he understood such concepts, since the 'facts' involve several short interventions by pagan deities) and he is not willing to turn aside or linger over anything except the epic's two love stories. The sheer length, then, of the Nisus and Euryalus episode would have marked it out for an Old Norse audience as a purple passage which in some way corresponds to or balances, or contrasts with, the love story of Dido which has already been narrated.

Unlike the *Aeneid*, the summary does not put the episode forward as a love story: there is no introductory reference to Nisus's devotion, nor is there any reference at all to Euryalus's youth and beauty. Instead we are presented with two standard-issue heroes who are distinguished from their peers only by the fact that they are the doughtiest among the Trojan forces (which in Virgil's account they certainly are not) and by the fact that they are *fyrirsjástir*, 'most prudent'. This adjective is probably

applied to them simply because they see the need to get Aeneas back from Pallanteum; it hardly squares with the romantic hot-headedness displayed by Virgil's 'happy pair'.

The Old Norse author, furthermore, is true to the *Aeneid* in saying that it was Nisus who began the slaughter of the drunken Rutulians, but he has lost all overt sense of the ethical dubiousness of the act, which Virgil underlines by referring to it as *furtum*, 'a secret action, a trick' (*OLD furtum* 2 and 3; *Aeneid* IX.350), and by having Nisus himself call it *fraus*, 'an offence, an instance of deceit' (*OLD fraus* 3 and 5; *Aeneid* IX.428; see Farron 1993, 4–10). The act is instead noted as being one which 'is widely celebrated in books' (*er við brugðit víða í bókum*). This comment probably has its origin in Virgil's promise to bestow everlasting fame on the partners (IX.446–47); but as Virgil places it, this promise, together with the praise which it implies, is specifically on account of the heroic *liebestod* which the warlike lovers undergo, and it is bestowed on them despite the undercurrents of criticism concerning their military exploits. Far from presenting a love story at this point, therefore, the Old Norse author seems to have taken something which affirmed the transcendent worth of heroic love, and turned it into praise for grim butchery. This is a drastic alteration to Virgil's story, and it is a surprising one because there is evidence that thirteenth-century audiences in both Norway and Iceland, like Romans of the classical period, were aware of a moral prohibition against night attacks even in military operations. In the Norwegian *Fagrskinna* (1985, 343), for example, Erlingr jarl skakki refrains from leading his troops under cover of darkness in an assault on Sigurðr á Reyri, stating that such an attack would be *níðingskapr eða morðingja verk*, 'villainy or an act of murderers', and making the following declaration:

Skulum vér heldr hafa þat ráðit, er oss er kunnara, at berjask um ljósa daga með fylkingu ok stelask eigi á menn um nætr.

Rather we must hold to that course which is more familiar to us, to fight in formation by clear daylight and not to creep up on men by night.

Snorri Sturluson (1941–51, III 387) includes a version of the same speech in the Icelandic *Heimskringla*. Similar ideas also lie behind an Old Norse passage which derives ultimately from classical sources, in which Alexander the Great is faced with overwhelming odds at Arbela and his men urge him to minimise the disadvantage by launching a night attack; Alexander replies, *Þetta er þjófa siðr ok laðrúna, er þér biðið oss gera*, 'This which you are asking us to do is the custom of thieves and robbers' (AS 1925, 67^{18–19}). In view of these texts it is all the more interesting that

the author of the *Breta sqgur* epitome has presented the night attack by Nisus and Euryalus as something which is celebrated. It is unlikely that he was being sarcastic. Was it his actual intention, then, to deflect Virgil's praise away from the *liebestod* because such praise was odious to him or to his audiences? Probably not. If such was his intention, then he chose to use a means which would certainly have struck a wrong note with some of his audiences some of the time. It is most likely, therefore, that he simply remembered Virgil's praise and made a clumsy attempt to scotch any criticism of the night attack by invoking the authority of 'books'; and this would fit with his other attempts to shelter his heroes from blame, which will be mentioned below.

Several more points of contact and divergence between the Old Norse and the Latin texts are worthy of note. The author of *Breta sqgur* has chosen to make an incidental feature of the light gleaming on the comrades' armour, and here, for a moment, this plainest of plain prose deviates into beauty while the sun rises; but the details are different from those of Virgil's story. In Virgil the dawn has not yet broken although it is near (IX.355), and Euryalus is not captured in the open and in the light of day but in the wood where he has grown bewildered through fear, and because it is still dark (IX.384–85, see also 373 and 378). In Virgil, too, the men are betrayed specifically by Euryalus's helmet, the gaudy one stripped from a Rutulian corpse (IX.373–74), whereas in the Old Norse version the *hjálmar* (plural) of both men receive the rays of the sun, and the motif is reduced to nothing more than a visual image with no narrative function since it is by then light enough for Volcens to see the two men and to recognise that their equipment is Trojan in appearance. The theme of taking booty has been omitted altogether unless it is implied by the word *þungfærr*, 'weighed down', which is applied to Euryalus, who actually is encumbered by the armour which he has claimed for himself in Virgil's story (IX.384–85); but if this is the implication, the issue has not been explained at all satisfactorily, and in any case the word *þungfærr* could be rendered as 'enfeebled', thus avoiding all allusion to Euryalus's burdens. All the changes listed in this paragraph could be explained as the result of an imperfect recollection of Virgil's text; but it should be noted that they are consistent with each other in that they all serve to blur the differences between Nisus and Euryalus, and to shield Euryalus from accusations of being foolhardy, childishly attracted to flashy gear, and not very brave once he is separated from Nisus—in other words, of being less than an adult hero. Much the same purpose is served by the statements, not found in Virgil, that Euryalus defended himself vigorously and was killed because there is no winning against

great odds. The impression which it seems the Old Norse author wished to create, therefore, is of two equal and blameless warriors who meet their deaths purely because of a stroke of bad luck at sunrise.

Doubts about this impression, however, may already have arisen for an Old Norse audience in connection with the night attack, as discussed above, and further doubts would surely emerge at the point where Nisus, having seen Euryalus die, abandons his mission to Pallanteum and embarks on an act of vengeance which is bound to result in his own death. Unlike Virgil, the Old Norse author has given no psychological motive for this dereliction of duty; but saga literature often forces readers to supply their own answer to the question of motives. In this case it may be thought that the demands of vengeance for a comrade are paramount and that the act of Nisus in killing Volcens, being so very heroic, justifies itself; even so, one cannot altogether suppress the thought that Nisus has been described as 'most prudent' (*fyrirsjástr*) and yet the Trojans in their fortification are now in deep trouble without their leader, whom Nisus had specifically volunteered to go and get. Add this to the matter of the night attack, together with some puzzlement, perhaps, over why this episode is being told at such length, and the questions about the author's narrative strategy and his moral judgements begin to mount up.

At this point things take an unexpected turn when it is said that the mortally wounded Nisus sought his companion and lay down on top of him (*leggsk á hann ofan*), a statement which accurately renders the Latin of *Aeneid* IX.444 and which specifically expresses one of the components of a *liebestod*. It is surely significant that this statement is retained with perfect accuracy when so much else has been jettisoned or misrepresented. But would it prompt an Old Norse audience to recognise a *liebestod*? And if not, what did people think Nisus was doing?

In considering these questions it should be pointed out first of all that the idea of one man choosing to lie on top of another on the battlefield was probably less surprising or suggestive to some Old Norse audiences than it may be to a modern reader. There are at least two other texts in which something of the sort is mentioned, and this fact raises the possibility that there was an Old Norse tradition in which one warrior covers another with his body. In *Víga-Glúms saga* (1960, 40), when Glúmr and his followers fight the men of Espihóll, we read the following: *Svá bar at, er Glúmr hopaði, at hann lá fallinn, en þrælar hans báðir lögðusk á hann ofan ok váru þar stangaðir spjótum til bana*, 'It so happened, when Glúmr moved backwards, that he lay sprawling, but both his thralls laid themselves down on him and were stabbed to death there with spears.'

As one would expect, given that the work belongs to the genre of the sagas of Icelanders, the author makes no comment on the action of the thralls; but it is obvious that they are motivated by loyalty to their master and by the desire to protect him—in which objective they are entirely successful, since Glúmr promptly gets up and carries on fighting. The second text which partly parallels the events described in *Breta sögur* is a passage in *Sturlunga saga* recounting the death of Sighvatr Sturluson at the Battle of Orlygsstaðir in 1238. The author of the passage, Sighvatr's nephew Sturla Þórðarson, tells how his uncle, cowed and weary but not yet badly wounded, asks Kolbeinn ungi to discuss a settlement with him; but nothing can come of it because of the action which immediately follows (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, I 434):

Pá hljóp at Einarr dragi ok hjó í höfuð Sighvati, ok var þat ærit banasár, en þó unnu þá fleiri menn á honum. En er Sighvatr djákni sá þetta, þá lagðisk hann ofan á nafna sinn ok var þar veginn.

Then Einarr dragi ran up and struck Sighvatr on the head, and that wound was sufficient to be fatal; and yet more men then attacked him. And when Sighvatr the deacon saw this, he laid himself down on his namesake and was killed there.

Like the author of *Víga-Glúms saga*, Sturla has not seen fit to comment on the motives which impelled Sighvatr the deacon to perform the act which is described, but once again it is obvious that the main objective was to protect a fallen superior: even though Sighvatr Sturluson had received a fatal wound, he was still alive and was still being attacked at the moment when his namesake tried to cover him. A high-minded desire to give protection, at any rate, is the motive ascribed to Sighvatr by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1953, 69–70); and we have no basis for speculation about any other motives or emotions which the deacon may have experienced, since he is introduced in the saga only a few pages before the passage recounting his death, and Sturla tells us almost nothing about him.

The *Sturlunga saga* passage is especially interesting because it purports to be an account of a real event which happened within the author's lifetime and involved one of his close kinsmen. There is no particular reason to doubt that Sighvatr the deacon actually performed something like the action described by Sturla; nevertheless it is clear that Sturla's description is formulaic. Here are the key phrases again from *Breta sögur*, *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Sturlunga saga* (in that order):

[hann] leggsk á hann ofan . . . ok var þar saxaðr.
[þeir] lögðusk á hann ofan ok váru þar stangaðir.
lagðisk hann ofan á nafna sinn ok var þar veginn.

They all share a variant of the phrase *leggjask á e-n ofan*, ‘to lay oneself down on someone’, followed by a passive construction including the word *þar*, ‘there’, and a past participle which in two cases out of the three specifies penetration by weapons. Now here again is the death of Nisus as described by Virgil (*Aeneid* IX.444–45) with my own translation based on Fairclough’s but arranged so as to reflect the Latin word order as much as possible:

tum super exanimum sese proiecit amicum
confossus placidaque ibi demum morte quievit.

Then he flung himself on top of his lifeless friend and there, pierced through and through, at length found rest in quiet death.

These lines contain a little more than do the Old Norse phrases quoted above, but it is notable that they share several features with them: the clause *super amicum sese proiecit*, ‘he flung himself on top of his friend’, corresponds to the phrase *leggjask á e-n ofan*, and it is followed by a passive construction (as well as an active one) which includes the word *ibi*, ‘there’, and the past participle *confossus*, ‘pierced through and through’. The parallels, it seems to me, are too close to be coincidental, and I therefore conclude that all three Old Norse passages are dependent on Virgil’s text, whether directly or otherwise. Since this is not the place to begin a discussion of possible borrowings between the three Old Norse works, suffice it to say that the verbal formula which underlies all three passages derives from the *Aeneid*; and this is the case irrespective of whether or not Old Norse society actually had a custom in which one man lay on top of another who had fallen in battle.

This being so, it is significant that in *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Sturlunga saga* the formula has been used for a situation from which the erotic element found in Virgil’s text is completely absent, and in which the motive for lying on the fallen man is clearly that of protecting him. In that particular context the action does not call for extra comment either by the saga writer or by a character in the story, and this may reasonably be taken to imply that people were familiar and comfortable with the literary motif. It is possible, therefore, that the author of *Breta sögur* was counting on the same familiarity on the part of his audience, and expected that the motif would not in itself prompt speculation about the erotic element which is actually present in his Latin source; but the situation which the author is handling is different from that of the other two sagas because Nisus cannot be motivated by a desire to protect his comrade. Euryalus, in the *Breta sögur* account, is already dead by the time Nisus rushes out of the wood and starts rampaging through the enemy ranks. In

the absence of the protection motive the author has clearly felt that some explanation was required, as may be deduced from the fact that he has allotted Nisus a speech which is not found in Virgil: *Minn góði vinr Eruleus, í einum stað skulu vit dauða þola*, 'My good friend Euryalus, in one and the same place shall we two suffer death.' As explanations go, this one does not go very far, since a man can surely be said to die in the same place as another without actually lying on top of him; but it is sufficient to establish affection and intentionality on the part of Nisus. Bland though the phrase 'good friend' may be, it is enough to tell us that a well-established bond existed between the two men; and the subsequent part of the speech must be empty if it does not imply that Nisus actually wanted to die in the closest possible contact with Euryalus because of their bond. Thus the speech gives the audience an insight into Nisus's motive for lying on top of his friend, which would otherwise be lacking if the Virgilian formula were understood in the same way as in the other two sagas where it occurs. The emotional desire to die in the closest physical contact with the object of one's affection, however, is the very essence of love-death (if we are prepared to use the word 'love' to mean an intense affection which is not necessarily sexual, or not recognised as such); and if this point is grasped, the episode becomes a kind of love story after all. Having recognised the *liebestod*, the reader can now give a better-informed answer to the earlier question of why Nisus abandons his mission and turns back to face death against impossible odds: certainly his action involves heroism and revenge, but it can now be seen that it must also involve some kind of love. And now one can see more clearly the ways in which the account parallels and contrasts with the love story of Dido, the only other episode which is narrated at such length.

Perhaps it would be wisest to leave the discussion of the Nisus and Euryalus episode in *Breta sögur* at this point, but the question is bound to be raised whether a medieval reader of the Old Norse passage who did not know the Latin original could possibly suspect the relationship between the warriors of being sexual, given that it involves a strong love. The answer is yes, for it so happens that a later passage in *Breta sögur* indicates that its audience did not find it unthinkable for a doughty warrior to be lovingly attracted to other men. In the section of the work which paraphrases Geoffrey of Monmouth there is a brief account of Malgó, the highest achiever among the kings who succeeded Arthur; we are told that Malgó reconquered many of the lands which had paid tribute to Arthur—including Iceland—*en karlmenn þýddisk hann en eigi konur, ok því varð guð honum reiðr*, 'but he made love to men and not

women, and for that reason God became angry with him' (*Hauksbók* 1892–96, 295). Although the passage still adds up to a condemnation of Malgó's tastes, the phrase *karlmenn þýddisk* is a refreshingly low-key and no-nonsense form of expression by comparison with the source's reference to the *sodomitana pestis*, 'sodomitical plague' (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1929, 504), and it suggests an awareness of forms of homosexuality which may differ from the pattern of classical pederasty.³ It is therefore quite possible that some medieval readers of the Virgilian section of *Breta sögur* suspected that Nisus and Euryalus were sexual partners; but there is nothing in the episode itself to prompt this thought. Quite the contrary. The author has clearly tried to strip away the erotic details of Virgil's story and in doing so he has got himself into difficulties; and yet, despite this, he was not willing to forego the *liebestod* or to omit the episode altogether. What he wanted, it seems, was a story in which the intense but presumably non-sexual love of comrades is suddenly revealed at the end; and to secure this he has added a speech which ensures that a thoughtful reader will not mistake the *liebestod* for something else, such as a sacrifice of the type made by Sighvatr the deacon. He was not a great artist and has made a muddle of many things, but surely he was clear-sighted in this; for the *liebestod* is the true *raison d'être* of the episode and the key to a proper understanding of it.

Walter of Châtillon and Alexanders saga

Given the great success of the *Aeneid* and the Roman taste for colourful deaths in literature, it was inevitable that there would be imitations of the Nisus and Euryalus episode. The most significant of these, prior to Walter of Châtillon's medieval re-working of the theme, is the one in the *Thebaid* (1928, X.347–448) by Statius (c.45–96 AD), who tries to outdo Virgil by having not one but two pairs of devoted friends play out the *liebestod* theme within minutes of each other.

The long glories of Statius did not stretch to an Old Norse version of his work, but they were well known to Walter, who wrote a Latin epic on the life of Alexander the Great at some time in the 1170s. Walter's poem, the *Alexandreis*, is a chronicle epic the main model for which is Lucan's *Civil War* (*Pharsalia*), and the main historical source for which is the

³ For an interesting comparison, see the treatment of Malgó (Malgus) in Layamon's *Brut* (1963–78), Caligula text, lines 14379–99. Layamon goes far beyond both Geoffrey and Wace in his praise for Malgus and in his description of the king's trend-setting activities. Many thousands of beautiful women leave Britain because they find themselves surplus to requirements.

prose *History of Alexander* by Quintus Curtius. It was an immense success, and was soon translated into five vernacular languages including Old Norse.

The Old Norse translation, *Alexanders saga*, is a masterpiece in its own right and is not quite like anything else in the language. It was made at some time in the thirteenth century, possibly for King Hákon at the request of his son King Magnús in the winter of 1262–63, when Brandr Jónsson was in Norway to be consecrated Bishop of Hólar.

In the *History of Alexander* VIII.xiii.12–16 (Curtius 1946), Walter found a brief account of a skirmish on an island in the River Hydaspes. Alexander's army is stuck on one side of the river while the Indian King Porus waits to do battle on the other. During the standoff, young men from both sides swim across to test their mettle against each other; and during one such encounter two Macedonian youths distinguish themselves brilliantly but then get killed when Indian reinforcements arrive. Prompted no doubt by the reference to two youths, Walter spies his chance to work up a Virgilian piece along the lines of the Nisus and Euryalus episode, adding an erotic element which is completely absent from Curtius's account.

Walter begins his story with a passage which announces that he will diverge significantly from Virgil besides echoing him (*Al.* IX.77–81):

In castris Macedum, res non indigna relatu,
Corporibus similes animisque fuere Nicanor
Et Symachus, quos una dies, ut creditur, una
Ediderat terris. par militiae labor ambos
Parque ligabat amor.

Within the Macedonian encampment—
a matter worthy to relate—two men
alike in body as in soul, Nicanor
and Symachus, were thought to have been born
upon a single day. Love bound them both
with equal force, as did the work of war.

(Trans. Townsend, 151–52)

Here Walter has taken immediate steps to distance himself from the classical pederastic tradition, since he insists that there was no age difference between the two youths; instead he aligns his heroes with the medieval tradition of friendship which produced the romance of Amis and Amile, who were baptised on the same day, died on the same day, and looked so similar that they were mistaken for each other. Having done so, however, Walter immediately makes a very obvious reference to the relationship of Nisus and Euryalus in declaring that Nicanor and

Symachus were mutually bound by love and the work of war, echoing *Aeneid* IX.182 quoted above, which says of Virgil's heroes that 'a mutual love was theirs and side by side they charged into hostilities'. As discussed earlier, it was not entirely clear to people in the Middle Ages that Nisus and Euryalus were sexual partners, although it was very obvious to readers that there was an erotic element in the relationship; consequently it is difficult for us to know to what extent Walter's allusion eroticises the relationship of his Nicanor and Symachus. Given the juxtaposition of the allusion with the preceding comments about the two men being the same age, it is perhaps safest to say that at this point Walter has prompted a thought but has carefully left ambiguous the type of love which the two men share. Later, however, he grows more boldly suggestive, as will be seen; but he never resolves the issue unequivocally.

The author of *Alexanders saga* partly condenses and partly expands this material, translating its conventions into social norms which are frequently represented in Old Norse literature (AS, 131⁶⁻¹¹):

Ungir menn tveir váru í her Alexandri. Annarr hét Nicanorr en annarr Simacus. Þeir váru jafnir at aldri, vaskleik ok at vexti. Langt fóstbræðralag hafði svá rammliga bundit þeira félagsskap at hvárgi þóttisk af öðrum mega sjá, hvatki sem fyrir þá var lagt.

There were two young men in Alexander's army. One was called Nicanor, and the other Symachus. They were equal in age, courage and stature. Long-term sworn brotherhood had bound their partnership so firmly that neither thought he could do without the other, whatever they were faced with.

Typically wary of improbable facts, the translator has removed the remark about the two men being born on the same day, and has contented himself with less precise statements about their similarities: his emphasis is on their being equals rather than duplicates of each other. The Virgilian passage has been dropped altogether and replaced with the topos of *fóstbræðralag*, 'sworn brotherhood' or in this case possibly actual 'foster-brotherhood' since it has lasted a long time and the men are still young.

In the sagas of Icelanders, *fóstbræðralag* often enough leads to trouble between the *fóstbræðr* for one reason or another, as in *Gísla saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*; but here the Old Norse translator seems to be using it as a term for the closest possible bond between two men who are not blood-relatives, and he states very positively that the bond has worked out well for Nicanor and Symachus, drawing them together in secure *félagsskapr*. In my translation above I have rendered this word as 'partnership' because, like *félagsskapr*, partnership can imply an association

which is either formal or informal, either loose or binding, either unemotional or charged with emotion. In contemporary English usage it can even specify a sexual relationship, and there is evidence that something of this meaning, with strongly negative connotations, clung to the terms *fóstbræðralag* and *félagsskapr* in thirteenth-century Iceland. This is indicated, for example, by *Fóstbræðra saga* (1943, 151–52 and 259) where the partnership of Þormóðr and Þorgeirr gives occasion for scurrilous insults.⁴ Naturally these negative connotations are not uppermost and the mere fact that two men are involved in a partnership does not usually lead to insults; but the possibility of its doing so is always there, if other factors come into play. In *Fóstbræðra saga* it is probably significant, for example, that accusations of homosexual activity are made against the troublesome Þormóðr and Þorgeirr but not against the more orderly Skúfr and Bjarni, who enjoy long-term *félagsskapr*, own a farm together and eventually dissolve their partnership on amicable terms (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 224 and 257). In *Alexanders saga* the partnership of Nicanor and Symachus should perhaps be viewed as akin to that of the practically-minded Skúfr and Bjarni since the statement that ‘neither thought he could do without the other, whatever they were faced with’ indicates a mutual dependency in confronting the circumstances of life, and also an emotional attachment to each other without which the men’s subsequent behaviour can hardly make sense.⁵ The remark that neither could do without the other, which is not found in the Latin material, has been placed where it is, in fact, to allow us a forward glance towards the closing moments of the story, when each man is faced with a few seconds of life without his partner and can hardly bear the idea.

As in Curtius’s brief story, Nicanor and Symachus plan to skirmish with the enemy. Many other young men in Alexander’s army follow their example, swimming out to an island in the river, engaging the Indians there and killing them all. At this point they could have returned

⁴ We also find the topos of an accusation of homosexuality together with the topos of *fóstbræðralag* in *Gísla saga* (1943, 10 and 22–23); but here the accusation precedes the swearing of brotherhood rather than stems from it. It is noteworthy, however, that the two sagas which describe the ritual of swearing brotherhood (*Gísla saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*) both also involve accusations of homosexuality. This suggests that there was indeed an association of ideas.

⁵ Compare with *Sturlunga saga* (1946) I 232: *Var svá ástúðugt með þeim bræðrum, at nær þóttisk hvárrgi mega af öðrum sjá*, ‘The brothers were on such loving terms that it almost seemed neither could do without the other.’ Here the men referred to are Snorri’s brothers Sighvatr and Þórðr, the sons of

with a great victory and preserved themselves, we are told; but things work out differently (AS, 132⁷⁻¹³):

Þat varð þeim sem gjarnt verður æskunni, at opt verður ofsat til vansa. Þar gambra þeir til þess í eyjunni yfir sigri sínum, at Indíamenn koma at þeim á óvart, miklu fleiri en þeir er fallit höfðu, ok leggja þegar fast at þeim. Ok því at Grikkir váru móðir áðr ok margir mjök sárir, þá hnígr brátt mannfallit í þeira lið.

That happened to them which readily happens to youth, that it often puffs itself up to its own detriment. They crowed over their victory there on the island until some Indians crept up on them unawares—many more than those who had fallen—and at once attacked them fiercely. And because the Greeks were already worn out and many were badly wounded, slaughter soon overwhelmed their forces.

This is based on *Al.* IX.117–120:

nullo contenta modo est temeraria uirtus.
Dumque triumphatis insultant hostibus, ecce
Occulte subeunt plures morientibus Indi.
Hic dolor, hic planctus, Graium Macedumque ruinae.
Within no bounds is rash strength satisfied.
They still exulted over conquered foes,
when, stealthily, more Indians crept forward
to aid their dying fellows. This was grief
and mournful ruin for the Grecian ranks.

(Trans. Townsend, 153)

The Old Norse translator has made several interesting changes to the substance of the Latin. Line 117 has already been transposed to the passage quoted earlier; its place is taken by the statement that youth ‘often puffs itself up to its own detriment’. In both texts, then, it is a species of pride which prompts the men to delay and thus becomes the cause of their destruction; but the Old Norse translator has gone some way towards excusing them on account of their youth, whereas Walter, who makes no reference to their youth in connection with their rash behaviour, straightforwardly censures their overweening heroism. As the saga writer construes the event, the mistake of the young men is in

Sturla; and the passage was written by Þórðr’s son. The context of the quotation is that Sighvatr goes to stay with Þórðr because he has found no happiness (*nam ekki ynði*) in the household which he had established with a man called Oddr dignari. This is the same Sighvatr, by the way, for whom Sighvatr the deacon sacrificed his life by throwing himself on top of him as he was being attacked at Qrlygsstaðir.

line with that of Virgil's 'thoughtless Euryalus' who struts about in a flashy helmet and so gets seen: they are all silly, they are vain, they are cocky—but then they are young. Similarly the saga writer goes on to excuse the fact that the 'Greeks' are defeated in their second fight, and he does so in the same way as the author of *Breta sogur* excuses his Euryalus for being surrounded and killed: the defeat is understandable because the men are exhausted and greatly outnumbered. None of this is in Walter's text; but the translator sets a higher premium on courage than Walter does, even when it is foolish, and so he has added these comments, just as he had earlier added a statement that in the first encounter many of the Greeks fought well but Nicanor and Symachus were *einkum vaskastir*, 'the bravest by far' (AS, 132⁴). These details are important because they show that the Old Norse translator sympathises with Nicanor and Symachus; he does not want to criticise them too severely, for they are very courageous even though their youth betrays them into foolish pride.

Soon enough there are none of the Greeks left standing except the two leaders, and Walter begins to prepare us for his own attempt to outdo the Virgilian *liebestod* (IX.133–38):

ergo uiri, quia iam suprema minari
Fata uident, orant ut premoriatur uterque
Occumbatque prior socioque supersite, cuius
Cernere funus erat leto crudelius omni.
Obiciunt igitur sibi se certantque uicissim
Alterius differre necem.
Since they beheld their final doom approach,
each man now prayed he might be first to die,
falling before his friend: to see his death
seemed crueller to him than oblivion.
Each cast himself before the other, striving
to slow his comrade's end.

(Trans. Townsend, 153)

Here we encounter the same attitude of mind as was displayed by Virgil's Nisus when he stepped out of cover and offered his own life to the Rutulians because he could not bear to see his beloved killed before his eyes; but in Walter's account this attitude is exhibited mutually by both young men, as befits those who are alike in body and soul. Mutuality, in fact, will be the keynote of all that follows in both the Latin and the Old Norse texts.

The Old Norse translator rises magnificently to the moral and psychological complexities of this situation (AS 132^{20–26}):

Ok þá er þar komit at þeir vænta sér ekki undankvámu, þá biðr hvárr annan at fyrri skyli ná at deyja; en svá var ástin heit orðin með þeim at þetta vildi hvárgi qðrum veita, þó at þeir mætti sjálfir ráða at sjá annars dauða. Keppisk æ hvárr fram fyrir annan ok vill qðrum hlífa, en sjálfum sér ekki.

And when it came to the point that they had no hope of getting away, each begged the other that he should be allowed to die first; but the love between them had grown so fervent that neither would grant this to the other, even if they could themselves have resolved to see the other's death. Each continually struggled forward in front of the other and tried to protect the other but not himself.

Here in the saga, just as clearly as in the Latin, the selfishness which is at the heart of self-giving love stands revealed; but one could also put this the other way round and say that the Old Norse passage foregrounds the heroic urge to self-sacrifice which may be found even in selfish passion. The complexities stem, in large part, from the moral ambiguity of the term *heit ást*, 'fervent love', which the translator has added to his source material. The end of the episode, as will be seen, suggests a fundamentally positive valuation of the men's love, but here the term *heit ást* could be taken to imply a passionate excess. It results in each man selfishly refusing to give his beloved the very thing that he wants; nevertheless it also has positive results for it leads each man to perform acts of heroism which involve the obligation to protect the other (*hlífa qðrum*). That the translator has used the last expression in place of Walter's phrase *alterius differre necem*, 'to delay the other's death', is significant although the change is a subtle one. Walter's logic is that neither man could bear to see the other's death and so tried to postpone it. The translator's thought, in contrast, is as follows: Even if one man could bear to see the death of his friend (but he probably could not), he still went on defending him. Put in this way it can be seen that the translator has tipped the balance in favour of heroism; but he still implies, as does his source, that the young men's courage may be based partly on the fear of bereavement, just as their self-sacrifice is linked inextricably with selfishness. It is a fine insight into the paradoxes of love.

The young men's dilemma over who should die first is settled for them in an instant when a giant appears out of the Indian ranks and fells them both at a single stroke. In Walter's text the stroke is the thrust of a spear which passes through both men and pins them to the ground, prompting the following remark (IX.142–43): *sic indiuisa iuuentus | Cuspide nexa iacet*, literally 'so undivided youth lay joined by a point (i.e. a spear)'. The sexual imagery of this comment is rather obvious, especially if it is considered that each man had been leaping forward in turn to defend his

partner and that the spear is therefore likely to have penetrated while they were standing one behind the other—*annarr aptar en annarr*, as the famous taunt in *Gísla saga* (1943, 10) has it. Perhaps for this reason (and I can see no other unless it is a matter of textual corruption) all references to the spear have been removed from the passage in *Alexanders saga* (132²⁶⁻²⁹), where the giant strikes the men down with a single blow of a club.

Whether speared or clubbed, the young men are now ready to enact the *liebestod* which concludes the episode and which will outdo those of Statius and Virgil by being double, mutual and simultaneous in its climax. If my wording here suggests mutual orgasm, Walter's lines are hardly less suggestive (IX.143–47):

sed nec diuturnus in ipsa
Morte resedit amor. amplexus inter et inter
Oscula decedit, moriensque sua sociique
Morte perit duplici. resoluta corpore tandem
Tendit ad Elisios angusto tramite campos.

Nor did
their endless love recede even in death.
They passed amidst their kisses and embrace,
each dying doubly in his friend's demise.
At last, relinquishing their limbs, they trod
the narrow path towards Elysian fields.

(Trans. Townsend, 153)

It was mentioned earlier that at the start of the episode Walter may have taken the trouble to emphasise the friends' exact parity in age and other attributes because he wished to distance himself from the classical pederastic tradition. The suggestion remains valid despite the sexual imagery which is eventually used in the Latin; but now it is clear that Walter stressed the men's likeness in body and soul because he also wanted to prepare for this final scene in which the emphasis is on complete mutuality, each man's *liebestod* being the exact image of the other's, and each friend 'dying doubly', as Townsend puts it.

It remains to point out that the *liebestod* in this passage leads explicitly to a union beyond death, and to observe that Walter's happy pair, whatever their faults, are deemed to have been righteous pagans, for they go to the blessed fields of Elysium by a path which is narrow like the way to the Christian heaven (Matt. 7:14).

In a different context (AS 16²¹; Walter 1978, I 492) the Old Norse translator has rendered 'Elysium' as *himinríki*, 'the kingdom of heaven'; but here such a translation would be inappropriate, and he is content to

send his young pagans together *til heljar*, ‘to the land of the dead’, or simply ‘into death’.⁶ He is generous in the send-off which he gives them. Like so much of *Alexanders saga* it is simpler but more real than the Latin, more human, more humane; and in the end it has a dignity to which Walter never aspired. I quote from the point at which the giant has picked up his makeshift club, to the end of the story (AS 132^{28–32}):

Með því lýstr hann þá félagabáða í senn, svá at þeir þurfa eigi fleira, ok veitir á þá leið, þat er þeim þótti mestu skipta, at þeir fara báðir í senn til heljar, ok halda svá sínum félagsskap at hvárr faðmar annan jafnvel þá er þeir deyja.

With that he struck both those companions at the same time, so that they needed no more blows; and in that way he granted what they thought mattered the most, that they went both at the same time to the land of the dead. And they maintained their partnership in such a way that each was embracing the other even as they died.

Just as the sexual imagery of the spear has been removed, so also the kisses have gone. This fact is probably significant for our understanding of the translator’s attitude towards the source text, since kisses *per se* and as tokens of regard were not unacceptable between men in Old Norse society of the thirteenth century. In Sturla Þórðarson’s account of the wedding feast at Flugumýrr in 1253, for example, we are told that Ísleifr Gizurarson sat close to Hrafn Oddsson, *ok minntusk við jafnan um daginn, er hvárr drakk til annars*, ‘and they kissed each other continually throughout the day, when each drank to the other’ (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 483).⁷ In view of this, the fact that the author of *Alexanders saga* removed the kisses which are mentioned in his source probably indicates that he understood them to be erotic kisses, and that he did not wish to present the young men’s love as being of that kind. At the same time, however, he did not belittle or seek to understate their love, for he preserves their final embrace with no less emphasis on its intensity and mutuality; and here it must be remembered that, in the Latin, the comrades had been pinned together and so were almost forced to embrace, but in the saga they must have chosen to do so. The tone of the Old Norse passage, in fact, is chaste and non-sexual throughout, but the passions in

⁶ It should be noted that *hel* does not mean ‘hell, the place of eternal torment’, the proper word for which is *helvíti*.

⁷ That the kisses specified here were ceremonial becomes all the more obvious when it is considered that Hrafn, at this point, already knew about the attack on Flugumýrr which was soon to take place and which actually claimed Ísleifr’s life.

it are very strong: it is 'fervent love' which is fulfilled in this final scene, and so the death which the young men suffer is a true *liebestod*.

It should be noted that the word *félagsskapr*, freighted with its many and varied connotations as discussed above, has been placed strategically in the final sentence as part of the *liebestod* itself. Whatever the nature of the young men's partnership may have been, it culminates in the *liebestod*, while the *liebestod* sets its seal on the partnership forever. And in dealing with this ultimate matter the saga writer goes beyond his source when he declares of the friends that their mutual *liebestod* mattered to them more than anything else, once death had become inevitable. Walter of Châtillon makes no such statement about the young men, but his Old Norse translator understands that this was the consummation they devoutly wished.

Connections and conclusions

The Old Norse texts which are associated with one or other of the *liebestod* patterns are the following: *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, *Tristrams kvæði*, the *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd* (which tells that Ísodd died of grief and was buried at the same time as Tristram, but omits the detail of her dying while clasping his body), *Breta sögur* and *Alexanders saga*. All these were lastingly popular in Iceland and were still being copied by hand as late as the nineteenth century. This fact demonstrates that there was an appetite for stories which culminated in a love-death, whether it belonged to the Tristan pattern or to the all-male pattern derived from Virgil. In the Middle Ages this appetite was felt by both Icelanders and Norwegians: *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* was Norwegian in origin whereas *Tristrams kvæði* and the *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd* are Icelandic derivatives; *Alexanders saga* may have been written for the king of Norway and was certainly copied for him, but it is probably the work of an Icelander; and *Breta sögur* could have originated in either country but is most notably included in the Icelandic compilation, *Hauksbók*, where its theme of colonisation parallels that of the quintessentially Icelandic *Landnámabók*, which is included as well. Furthermore, the appetite for the *liebestod* subject was strong: the prominence given to the Nisus and Euryalus episode in *Breta sögur*, where so much else is completely omitted, shows that a story containing the *liebestod* theme could be chosen in preference to others which modern readers may think more important.

Since it fully reveals the nature of the story only at the very end, the narrative strategy of *Breta sögur*, in the Nisus and Euryalus episode,

also demonstrates that medieval audiences were expected, with a little prompting, to recognise the *liebestod* topos even when their appetite for it had not already been whetted by a lengthy and overt lead-in; and having recognised it they could be expected to reevaluate what they had already heard.

The *Breta sǫgur* and *Alexanders saga* episodes which deal with the all-male pattern of *liebestod* show the marked reticence towards sex between men which was to be expected of a Christian society which also had a literary tradition of dire insults based on accusations of playing the so-called passive role in homosexual acts. This reticence, it should be noted, is in contrast with the relative openness about the adulterous, and hence mortally sinful, sex between the man and woman at the centre of the two Tristram sagas. Given the way in which the sexual content is stripped away from the *liebestod* stories in *Breta sǫgur* and *Alexanders saga*, it is not surprising that the verbal formula derived from the *liebestod* in the *Aeneid* came to be used for narratives which contain motifs resembling the *liebestod* in certain external details but which have no erotic connotations at all, such as the account of Sighvatr Sturluson's death at Örlýgsstaðir or the story of the thralls in *Víga-Glúms saga*. But in connection with the episodes in *Breta sǫgur* and *Alexanders saga* themselves, which have the true nature of a *liebestod* in that one man is motivated by sheer affection to die in the closest possible contact with another, probably the most important thing which can be said is this: people seem to have wanted these stories in a largely de-eroticised form, but they were not willing to forego the *liebestod* itself. Even if they did not wish to think or write or read about admirable men whose relationship was sexual, they still wanted stories about pair-bonded warriors who shared death in this particular way.

The emotional punch packed by the *liebestod* topos is difficult to assess as it is delivered in widely different ways in the various sagas. In addition to its reticence about sex between men, *Breta sǫgur* shows a signal reticence towards strong emotion in the case of Nisus; but it allots Dido a long and impassioned message for Aeneas after he has abandoned her and she is considering suicide (*Hauksbók* 1892–96, 232). This difference, however, is possibly a matter of gender roles rather than of squeamishness over one man's feelings for another, since it is very noticeable that Aeneas too remains impassive throughout his untidy affair with Dido; but gender-role expectations which involve phlegmatic men and histrionic women do not apply to the other texts under consideration here. In comparison with Dido, Ísönd cuts a rather dignified

figure of subdued pathos in the version of her *liebestod* found in the Norwegian *Tristrams saga*, where she says a prayer involving a statement of her Christian faith, speaks sadly about her love, lies down, puts her arms round Tristram's neck, and dies (NR, 220–222). The finest of all accounts of her death, in *Tristrams kvæði*, is still more reticent with regard to emotion, making a virtue of its swift-moving ballad narrative, which tells us no more than the following (NR, 237, stanza 24):

Dróttning niðr at líki laut
ok lá þar dauð.

The queen stooped down to his body,
and lay there dead.

In the later *Tristrams saga*, Ísodd, as she is now called, goes so far as to weep over the body of her lover; but we are also told that on this occasion neither men nor women could refrain from tears: *hvárki mátti vatni halda karl né kona* (NR, 288). Here we find a statement typical of the emotionally repressive attitude encountered so often in saga literature, the implication being that people should only express their feelings after trying not to. At its best, an example of this attitude or literary convention can give the reader a pleasantly uncomfortable experience of emotions which are both choked and choking—and this is one of the glories of Old Norse prose; but often it seems like a tedious mannerism, as in the text just quoted. The *liebestod* passage in *Alexanders saga*, by contrast, achieves something rare in Old Norse: a generous and open-hearted pathos. Its author eschews Walter's pyrotechnics in favour of simplicity and dignity, and in doing so he does not at all minimise or stifle the emotions which his two young men feel. His concluding statement that they were embracing each other even as they died is as moving and yet as unsentimental as anything else in saga prose.

In this brief survey of connections and contrasts between the Tristan pattern of *liebestod* and the all-male pattern, I have left till last the difference between them which is most important and most radical. It is one which stems from the literary context of Virgil's story but which is also grounded in the realities of medieval life in Iceland and Norway, for it belongs to one of the social contexts in which deep or even passionate love between men was most likely to flourish in pre-urban societies, namely the army or some other warlike force. Nisus and Euryalus, Nicanor and Symachus are all soldiers; their love is the love of comrades and the death which they all suffer is death in combat. If we may judge from the behaviour of fighting men in the modern world and

from the plethora of medieval texts which depict the loyalties of warriors, the loves and deaths of these literary heroes are fundamentally believable, however heightened the details may be, in a way which the death of Ísönd is not.

What I mean by saying that the loves and deaths of these literary heroes are fundamentally believable is well illustrated by a story, purportedly historical, told by Sturla Þórðarson. It involves the wrecking of a warship which had been on a raiding expedition to Bjarmaland and which was engulfed by waves in the sound off Straumneskinn in 1222. The ship capsized and only three men managed to get out of the water onto its upturned hull. One of them, a man called Jógrímr, got the other two to the safety of a rescue boat which had put out from another ship of the fleet; but at that point he realised that there were no other survivors.

Ok þá lézk Jógrímr eigi sjá Þorstein, félagsmann sinn; ok hljóp þá enn á sund í röstina. Ok þar lézk hann. (Sturla Þórðarson 1887, 71)

And then Jógrímr said that he could not see Þorsteinn, his partner; and then he leapt again into the sound and into the strong current. And there he perished.

This story does not include a *liebestod* and it does not take place on the battlefield, but it demonstrates that in thirteenth-century Scandinavia (as in many parts of the world today) a fighting man could form the strongest possible bond with a particular comrade and could throw his life away for that person. Jógrímr was a courageous and capable man who first of all did his duty towards the other two survivors, one of whom was his leader; but as soon as that duty was done his thoughts turned to Þorsteinn, his partner. This would have been the man who ate with him and shared his sleeping quarters both on the ship and ashore. Most probably they were *rekkingufélagar* ‘bed-fellows’ or *húðfatsfélagar*, terms which are employed synonymously on the next page of the saga, a *húðfat* being a kind of sleeping-bag used by sailors. The important point to grasp is that Jógrímr did not intend to see if he could rescue any more members of the ship’s company, all of whom were lost as a matter of fact; it was for Þorsteinn, and for him alone, that Jógrímr threw himself back into the deadly current and died. It is against the background of a story such as this—sober historical fact for all we know to the contrary—that we must judge the behaviour of Nisus in *Breta sögur* or the two young men in *Alexanders saga*. Judged against this background, neither their love as comrades nor their willingness to die will seem unreal.

In contrast, the love of Tristram and Ísönd has much of the quality of an aristocratic game; this was one of the factors which made it so popular,

of course, but it is a weakness as well as a strength. Furthermore, although neither Tristram nor Ísönd is a truly ideal lover, Ísönd's *liebestod* is idealised in the highest degree: she dies for no reason other than love itself, whereas Nisus dies of the wounds which he has sustained because of his love, and Nicanor is already facing violent death alongside Symachus before their *liebestod* becomes a possibility. In this respect the Tristan pattern, in which love is the sole cause of death, embodies a *liebestod* which is purer and probably superior as seen from the Romantic or specifically Wagnerian point of view, with its emphasis on erotic mysticism. On the other hand, the all-male love-death has the advantage of being not only credible (because it has an efficient cause in the shape of swords and spears) but thoroughly heroic as well. Nisus does not slip passively into death, as Ísönd does, but flings himself into it, avenging his friend as he does so; and Nicanor is able to die in union with Symachus because they have both lived the heroic code up to the very last second, fighting without ceasing in the face of certain death. This is surely a plus for all readers who retain a taste for war, at least in literature. But the important point here is not that these stories are heroic (for many stories are heroic), but that they are stories of heroic love—always granting that we may use the word 'love' for a deep and passionate male bonding which may not include sex, the way in which the author of *Alexanders saga* uses it in fact. The all-male pattern of *liebestod* celebrates the synthesis of heroism and love of that kind. This is why it survived and was wanted in an age and society hostile to homosexuality but quite fixated on the real or imagined mores of warrior bands. In the Old Norse texts as in Virgil, the all-male *liebestod* is the ultimate expression of the bond between fighting men who share a mutual love and rush side by side into battle.

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Note that all quotations from Old Norse have been normalised.

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