WOMEN IN LOVE HISTORIES

Carmen del Rocha Weiss Cifuentes

Wonderful but Sometimes Cruel Love Tales beyond the Centuries

feat. Tristan, Isolde, King Mark of Cornwall, Justinian, Theodora, Procopius of Caesarea, El Cid, Ximena, Etienne de Castel, Christine de Pizan, Philippa, Geoffrey Chaucer, John of Gaunt, Katherine Swynford, Raphael Sanzio, Margherita Luti

... and Its Intriguing Dangerous Splendour

INTEGRAL

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#6

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The Sad-Sad-Sad Romance of Tristan and Isolde

The young Tristan ventures to Ireland to ask the hand of the Princess Isolde for his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall, and, having slain a dragon that is devastating the country, succeeds in his mission. On the homeward journey, Tristan and Isolde, by misadventure, drink the love potion prepared by the Queen for her daughter and King Mark. Henceforward, the two are bound to each other by an imperishable love that dares all dangers and makes light of hardships but does not destroy their loyalty to the King. Tristan is also called Tristram or Tristrem and Isolde may be named Iseult, Isolt, or Yseult**.** They are the principal characters of a famous medieval love-romance, based on a Celtic legend (itself based on an actual Pictish king). Though the archetypal poem from which all extant forms of the legend are derived has not been preserved, a comparison of the early versions yields an idea of its content.

The greater part of the romance is occupied by plot and counterplot: Mark and the courtiers seeking to entrap the lovers, who escape the snares laid for them until finally Mark gets what seems proof of their guilt and resolves to punish them. Tristan, on his way to the stake, escapes by a miraculous leap from a chapel on the cliffs and rescues Isolde, whom Mark has given to a band of lepers. The lovers flee into the forest of Morrois and remain there until one day Mark discovers them asleep with a naked sword between them. Soon afterward they make peace with Mark and Tristan agrees to restore Isolde to Mark and leave the country. Coming to Brittany, Tristan marries Isolde of the White Hands, daughter of the Duke, “for her name and her beauty”, but makes her his wife only in name. Wounded by a poisoned weapon, he sends for the other Isolde, who alone can heal him. If she agrees to come, the ship on which she embarks is to have a white sail; if she refuses, a black. His jealous wife, who has discovered his secret, seeing the ship approach on which Isolde is hastening to her lover’s aid, tells him that it carries a black sail. Tristan, turning his face to the wall, dies, and Isolde, arriving too late to save her love, yields up her life in a final embrace. A miracle follows their deaths: two trees grow out of their graves and intertwine their branches so that they can not be parted by any means.

The archetypal poem, which has not survived, seems to have been a grim and violent work containing episodes of a coarse and even farcical character. Two adaptations, made in the late 12th century, preserved something of its barbarity. About 1170, however, the Anglo-Norman poet Thomas, who was probably associated with the court of Henry II of England, produced an adaptation in which the harshness of the archetype was considerably softened. A mellifluous German version of Thomas’ adaptation, by Gottfried von Strassburg, is considered the jewel of medieval German poetry. Short episodic poems telling of Tristan’s surreptitious visits to Isolde at King Mark’s court appeared in the late 12th century. Of these, the most important are two versions of the *Folie Tristan,* in which Tristan is disguised as a fool, and the *Luite Tristan,* in which he appears as a minstrel. During the 13th century the story—like Arthurian legend—was embodied in a voluminous prose romance. In this, Tristan figured as the noblest of knights, and King Mark as a base villain, the whole being grafted onto Arthurian legend and bringing Tristan and King Arthur’s knight Sir Lancelot into rivalry. This version, which recounts innumerable chivalric adventures of a conventional type, had superseded all other French versions by the end of the European Middle Ages, and it was in this form that Sir Thomas Malory knew the legend in the late 15th century, making it part of his *Le Morte Darthur.* A popular romance in English, *Sir Tristrem,* dates from approximately 1300 and is one of the first poems written in the vernacular.

The story and character of Tristan vary from author to author; even the spelling of his name varies a great deal, although “Tristan” is the most popular spelling. Nevertheless, there are two main traditions of the Tristan legend. The early tradition comprised the French romances of Thomas of Britain and Béroul, two poets from the second half of the 12th century. Later traditions come from the vast Prose *Tristan* (c. 1240), which was markedly different from the earlier tales written by Thomas and Béroul.

After defeating the Irish knight Morholt, Tristan travels to Ireland to bring back the fair Iseult (also appearing under various spellings) for his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall, to marry. Along the way, they ingest a love potion which causes the pair to fall madly in love. In the courtly version, the potion’s effects last a lifetime, but, in the common versions, the potion’s effects wane after three years. In some

versions, they ingest the potion accidentally; in others, the potion's maker instructs Iseult to share it with Mark, but she deliberately gives it to Tristan instead. Although Iseult marries Mark, she and Tristan are forced by the potion to seek one another, as lovers. While the typical noble Arthurian character would be shamed by such an act, the love potion that controls them frees Tristan and Iseult from responsibility. The king's advisors repeatedly endeavour to have the pair tried for adultery, but the couple continually use trickery to preserve their façade of innocence. In Béroul's version, the love potion eventually wears off, and the two lovers are free to make their own choice as to whether to cease their adulterous relationship or to continue.

As with the Arthur–Lancelot–Guinevere love triangle in the medieval courtly love motif, Tristan, King Mark and Iseult of Ireland all love each other. Tristan honours and respects King Mark as his mentor and adopted father; Iseult is grateful that Mark is kind to her; and Mark loves Tristan as his son and Iseult as a wife. But every night, each has horrible dreams about the future. Tristan's uncle eventually learns of the affair and seeks to entrap his nephew and his bride. Also present is the endangerment of a fragile kingdom, the cessation of war between Ireland and Cornwall (Dumnonia). Mark acquires what seems proof of their guilt and resolves to punish them: Tristan by hanging and Iseult by burning at the stake, later lodging her in a leper colony. Tristan escapes on his way to the gallows. He makes a miraculous leap from a chapel and rescues Iseult. The lovers escape into the forest of Morrois and take shelter there until discovered by Mark. They make peace with Mark after Tristan's agreement to return Iseult of Ireland to Mark and leave the country. Tristan then travels to Brittany, where he marries (for her name and her beauty) Iseult of the White Hands, daughter of Hoel of Brittany and sister of Kahedin.

The earliest surviving versions already incorporate references to King Arthur and his court. The connection between Tristan and Iseult and the Arthurian legend was expanded over time, and sometime shortly after the completion of the Vulgate Cycle (the Lancelot-Grail) in the first quarter of the 13th century, two authors created the Prose *Tristan*, which fully establishes Tristan as a Knight of the Round Table who even participates in the Quest for the Holy Grail. The Prose *Tristan* became the common medieval tale of Tristan and Iseult that would provide the background for Thomas Malory, the English author who wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur* over two centuries later.

In the Prose *Tristan* and works derived from it, Tristan is mortally wounded by King Mark, who strikes Tristan with a lance from Morgan le Fay while Tristan is playing a harp for Iseult. The poetic versions of the Tristan legend offer a very different account of the hero's death. According to Thomas' version, Tristan was wounded by a poison lance while attempting to rescue a young woman from six knights. Tristan sends his friend Kahedin to find Iseult of Ireland, the only person who can heal him. Tristan tells Kahedin to sail back with white sails if he is bringing Iseult, and black sails if he is not. Iseult agrees to return to Tristan with Kahedin, but Tristan's jealous wife, Iseult of the White Hands, lies to Tristan about the colour of the sails. Tristan dies of grief, thinking that Iseult has betrayed him, and Iseult dies swooning over his corpse. Several versions of the Prose *Tristan* include the traditional account of Tristan's death found in the poetic versions.

In French sources, such as those picked over in the English translation by Hilaire Belloc in 1903, it is stated that a thick bramble briar grows out of Tristan's grave, growing so much that it forms a bower and roots itself into Iseult's grave. It goes on that King Mark tries to have the branches cut three separate times, and each time the branches grow back and intertwine. This behaviour of briars would have been very familiar to medieval people who worked on the land. Later tellings sweeten this aspect of the story, by having Tristan's grave grow a briar, but Iseult's grave grow a rose tree, which then intertwine with each other. Further variants refine this aspect even more, with the two plants being said to have been hazel and honeysuckle.

A few later stories even record that the lovers had a number of children. In some stories they produced a son and a daughter they named after themselves; these children survived their parents and had adventures of their own. In the French romance *Ysaie le Triste* (*Ysaie the Sad*), the eponymous hero is the son of Tristan and Iseult; he becomes involved with the fairy king Oberon and marries a girl named Martha, who bears him a son named Mark. Spanish *Tristan el Joven* also dealt with Tristan's son, here named Tristan of Leonis.

There are many theories present about the origins of Tristanian legend, but historians disagree over which is the most accurate.

The mid-6th-century Drustanus Stone monument in Cornwall has an inscription seemingly referring to *Drustan*, son of Cunomorus ("Mark"). However, not all historians agree that the Drustan referred to is the archetype of Tristan.

There are references to *March ap Meichion* ("Mark") and *Trystan* in the Welsh Triads, in some of the gnomic poetry, the *Mabinogion* stories, and in the 11th-century hagiography of Illtud. A character called Drystan appears as one of King Arthur's advisers at the end of *The Dream of Rhonabwy*, an early 13th-century tale in the Welsh prose collection known as the *Mabinogion*. Iseult is listed along with other great men and women of Arthur's court in another, much earlier *Mabinogion* tale, *Culhwch and Olwen*.

Possible Irish antecedents to the Tristan legend have received much scholarly attention. An ill-fated *triantán an ghrá* or love triangle features into a number of Irish works, most notably in the text called *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* or *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne*. In the story, the aging Fionn mac Cumhaill takes the young princess, Gráinne, to be his wife. At the betrothal ceremony, however, she falls in love with Diarmuid, one of Fionn's most trusted warriors. Gráinne gives a sleeping potion to all present but him, eventually convincing him to elope with her. The fugitive lovers are then pursued all over Ireland by the Fianna.

Another Irish analogue is *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*, preserved in the 14th-century *Yellow Book of Lecan*. In this tale, Cano is an exiled Scottish king who accepts the hospitality of King Marcan of Ui Maile. His young wife, Credd, drugs all present, and then convinces Cano to be her lover. They try to keep a tryst while at Marcan's court, but are frustrated by courtiers. Eventually Credd kills herself and Cano dies of grief.

In the Ulster Cycle there is the text *Clann Uisnigh* or *Deirdre of the Sorrows* in which Naoise mac Usnech falls for Deirdre, who was imprisoned by King Conchobar mac Nessa due to a prophecy that Ulster would plunge into civil war due to men fighting for her beauty. Conchobar had pledged to marry Deirdre himself in time to avert war, and takes his revenge on Clann Uisnigh. The death of Naoise and his kin leads many Ulstermen to defect to Connacht, including Conchobar's stepfather and trusted ally Fergus mac Róich, eventually precipitating the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

Some scholars suggest that the 11th-century Persian story *Vis and Rāmin* must have been the model for the Tristan legend because the similarities are too great to be coincidental. The evidence for the Persian origin of Tristan and Iseult is very circumstantial and different theories have been suggested how this Persian story might have reached the West, some suggesting story-telling exchanges during the crusades in Syrian court and through minstrels who had free access to both Crusader and Saracen camps in the Holy Land.

Some believe Ovid's *Pyramus and Thisbe*, as well as the story of Ariadne at Naxos might have also contributed to the development of the Tristan legend. The sequence in which Tristan and Iseult die and become interwoven trees also parallels Ovid's love story of Baucis and Philemon in which two lovers are transformed in death into two different trees sprouting from the same trunk. However this also occurs in the saga of Deidre of the Sorrows making the link more tenuous and ignores the (now lost) oral traditions of preliterate societies, relying only on written records which are known to have been damaged—especially during the Dissolution of the Monasteries—during the development of modern nation states such as England and France.

The earliest representation of what scholars name the "courtly" version of the Tristan legend is in the work of Thomas of Britain, dating from 1173. Only ten fragments of his *Tristan* poem, representing six manuscripts, have ever been located: the manuscripts in Turin and Strassburg are now lost, leaving two in Oxford, one in Cambridge and one in Carlisle. In his text, Thomas names another *trouvère* who also sang of Tristan, though no manuscripts of this earlier version have been discovered. There is also a passage telling how Iseult wrote a short lai out of grief that sheds light on the development of an unrelated legend concerning the death of a prominent troubadour, as well as the composition of lais by noblewomen of the 12th century.

The next essential text for knowledge of the courtly branch of the Tristan legend is the abridged translation of Thomas made by Brother Robert at the request of King Haakon Haakonson of Norway in 1227. King Haakon had wanted to promote Angevin-Norman culture at his court, and so commissioned the translation of several French Arthurian works. The Nordic version presents a complete, direct narrative of the events in Thomas' Tristan, with the telling omission of his numerous interpretive diversions. It is the only complete representative of the courtly branch in its formative period.

Preceding the work of Brother Robert chronologically is the *Tristan and Isolt* of Gottfried von Strassburg, written circa 1211–1215. The poem was Gottfried's only known work, and was left incomplete due to his death with the retelling reaching half-way through the main plot. The poem was later completed by authors such as Heinrich von Freiberg and Ulrich von Türheim, but with the "common" branch of the legend as the ideal source.

The earliest representation of the "common branch" is Béroul's *Le Roman de Tristan*, the first part of which is generally dated between 1150 and 1170, and the latter part between 1181 and 1190. The branch is so named due to its representation of an earlier non-chivalric, non-courtly, tradition of story-telling, making it more reflective of the Dark Ages than of the refined High Middle Ages. In this respect, they are similar to Layamon's *Brut* and the *Perlesvaus*. As with Thomas' works, knowledge of Béroul's is limited. There were a few substantial fragments of his works discovered in the 19th century, and the rest was reconstructed from later versions. This being said, Beroul's version is the oldest known version of the Tristan romances and is commonly considered to come the closest to presenting all of the raw events in the romance exactly as they are, with no explanation or modifications. Therefore, Beroul's version is an archetype for later "common branch" editions.

The more substantial illustration of the common branch is the German version by Eilhart von Oberge. Eilhart's version was popular, but pales in comparison with the later Gottfried.

One aspect of the common branches that differentiates them significantly from the courtly branches is their depiction of the lovers' time in exile from Mark's court. While the courtly branches describe Tristan and Iseult as sheltering in a "Cave of Lovers" and living in happy seclusion, thus keeping with the tradition of courtly and chivalric writing, the common branches emphasize the extreme suffering that Tristan and Iseult endure. In the common branches, the exile is a true punishment that highlights the couple's departure from courtly norms and emphasizes the impossibility of their romance.

The French medievalist Joseph Bédier thought all the Tristan legends could be traced to a single original poem, adapted by Thomas of Brittany into French from an original Cornish or Breton source. He dubbed this hypothetical original the "Ur-Tristan", and wrote his still-popular *Romance of Tristan and Iseult* as an attempt to reconstruct what this might have been like. In all likelihood, common branch versions reflect an earlier form of the story; accordingly, Bédier relied heavily on Eilhart, Béroul and Gottfried von Strassburg, and incorporated material from other versions to make a cohesive whole. A new English translation of Bédier's *Roman de Tristan et Iseut* (1900) by Edward J. Gallagher was published in 2013 by Hackett Publishing Company. A translation by Hilaire Belloc, first published in 1913, it was published in 1958 as a Caedmon Audio recording read by Claire Bloom and republished in 2005.

Contemporary with Béroul and Thomas, Marie de France presented a Tristan episode in one of her lais: "Chevrefoil". It concerns another of Tristan's clandestine returns to Cornwall in which the banished hero signals his presence to Iseult by means of an inscription on a branch of a hazelnut tree placed on the road she will travel. The title refers to the symbiosis of the honeysuckle and hazelnut tree which die when separated, as do Tristan and Iseult: "*Ni vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous*". ("Neither you without me, nor me without you.") This episode is reminiscent of one in the courtly branch when Tristan uses wood shavings put in a stream as signals to meet in the garden of Mark's palace.

There are also two 12th-century *Folies Tristan*, Old French poems identified as the Berne and the Oxford versions, which relate Tristan's return to Marc's court under the guise of a madman. Besides their own importance as episodic additions to the Tristan story and masterpieces of narrative structure, these relatively short poems significantly contributed to restoring the missing parts of Béroul's and Thomas' incomplete texts.