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THE CONFLICT
OF
LOVE AND HONOR

*The Medieval Tristan Legend
in France, Germany and Italy*

by

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for my parents

DIE BEIDE EIN TRIUWE UNDE EIN LIP
GOT UNDE DER WERLDE WAREN

PREFACE

The legend of Tristan and Isolt, posing the basic human conflict between an overpowering passion and the demands of morality and honor, offered a rich fund of material for medieval writers. They told the story in various forms for various reasons. Some condemned the love, others exalted it. For one, Tristan is a great hero, destroyed by a passion he cannot control; for another he is an artist inspired by a love that is mostly pain; for another, a knight caught between his love and loyalty to an unworthy king.

In this study, I have concentrated on five medieval versions of the Tristan story – the poems of Béroul, Eilhart, Thomas, and Gottfried, and the prose *Tavola Ritonda* – because they are the most complete of the works that center on Tristan and because they relate many of the same incidents. This enabled me to make a close comparison of the major episodes, to see how each writer manipulated the material that was available to all, how by varying small details, sometimes shifting the order of events, he was able to create a work that was quite different from the other versions but still told the same story. I do not discuss the shorter poems which relate only one incident – the Berne *Folie*, the Oxford *Folie*, the *Chievrefueil* – nor those prose works in which Tristan is one of many heroes whose stories are told within the framework of the Arthurian world and the Grail quest. It is because the Tristan story forms only one part of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* that I have not included Malory in this study, despite the importance of the legend for him. The fact that he places the story of Tristan at the center of his narrative is an indication of its significance. Malory is certainly more interested in the fate of Lancelot and yet he interrupts Lancelot's story to tell Tristan's, at length. Indeed it can be said that for Malory the lust and lack of control Tristan exhibits in his love is at the core of the decay in the Arthurian world.

When I began this study, there was little literary criticism available on the *Tavola Ritonda* or on the poems of Eilhart and Béroul. In the last few years, this situation has, happily, begun to change, although Gottfried and Thomas still receive most of the critical attention. Some comparative

studies had been done of the two French poems and the two German poems, mainly emphasizing the sophistication of Thomas and Gottfried at the expense of Bérout and Eilhart; there had also been stylistic comparisons of Thomas and Gottfried, but no study of all four works, nor of a prose version in relation to the poems. I have not attempted to prove the superiority of one version over another, but simply to see what each writer wished to say with the story and how he went about it. The results will, it is hoped, contribute something to the understanding of the individual works, as well as to a sense of medieval narrative techniques.

From the conception of the project to the late revisions, I was helped immeasurably by the advice and encouragement of Professor W.T.H. Jackson. His critical study of Gottfried's poem, *The Anatomy of Love*, came out too recently to be properly represented in my text, but the influence of his approach can be felt throughout. I am also grateful to the Fels Foundation for a generous grant which permitted me to do the research and to write the first draft.

Columbia University
June, 1972

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INTRODUCTION

THE TRISTAN STORY AND ARTHURIAN ROMANCE

No love story had a more powerful hold on medieval poets than the tale of Tristan and Isolt. Its origins lay in Celtic folk legends of fairies and giants, love-potions, and magic cures, but for the High Middle Ages, it became the classic tale of tragic love and adultery, of conflicting duties and desires. Romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries told and retold the story, adapting basic elements of the plot to very different attitudes towards love and duty.

The enormous appeal of the Tristan story in the Middle Ages and after lies, probably, in the realistic view it takes of love between man and woman and the consequences of that love for society. The view it presents of love, as a force strong enough to take control of the lover's mind and senses and prevent him from discharging his social obligations, is in direct opposition to the courtly ideal of ennobling love as an inspiration to good action within society, which is the norm in Arthurian romance. Though the story of Tristan and Isolt was not originally part of the Arthurian cycle, the problems it presents – adulterous love, the conflict of loyalties – eventually came to dominate the attention of author and reader alike, and to distract from what had been the main theme of Arthurian romance, the development of the individual towards his proper place in society.

In its first literary appearances, the Arthurian court is an ideal setting, non-historical, outside the normal laws of time and space, in which a moral problem can be posed and resolved without the complications of external evils or of chance. The hero's adventures are all related to his problem; they are steps in his movement towards the ideal state of knighthood, social service and fulfilled love. The enemies he meets and overcomes belong to situations which correspond to or contrast with his own, and by defeating them he betters himself.

The scope of this pattern is limited. It can only deal with a problem which can be resolved, an excess of some kind that can be counteracted so that the knight achieves a perfectly balanced state. A problem which has no easy solution, a conflict between equally valid responsibilities or feelings, strains the conventions of Arthurian romance. The Tristan story

offers such a problem: a conflict between Tristan's loyalty to his uncle and liege, which involves social responsibility, and his love for Isolt. The conflict arises because Tristan's love for Isolt is not just an ennobling inspiration, it is also a physical passion that demands fulfilment and destroys prudence. Love, which should guide the knight in the right direction, instead gets in his way. This presents a crucial paradox: without honor in the world a man cannot be a perfect lover, but without love a man is not a complete knight.

Why does this paradox exist? Because love between man and woman cannot be a purely spiritual phenomenon; there is always the danger of the physical impulse asserting itself and taking control. Then love, for all its ennobling powers, becomes an anti-social force. The only way out of the dilemma is death, so instead of a moral comedy, we have a romantic tragedy.

The element of psychological realism inherent in the Tristan story is an unsettling one for the Arthurian world which does not allow for such a problem, and is therefore not a satisfactory literary vehicle. Chrétien himself came to see the limitations of Arthurian conventions and eventually rejected them in favor of the Grail world, a sphere which seems to ignore secular values and problems altogether. But this offers no better a solution than the Tristan story; it too is a denial of life on earth, or at least of the possibility of achieving an ideal in this life which is the goal of Arthurian romances. Both the Grail story and the Tristan story (and its echo in the Lancelot-Guinevere love), are absorbed into the Arthurian cycle in the prose romances where the two tendencies they embody combine to destroy the Arthurian world, literally, as they have already destroyed its literary function as a center of ideal values.

The story of Tristan and Isolt originated in Celtic sagas and folklore just as the Arthurian stories did, and like them, it was reshaped and retold in the twelfth century, when the romance genre dominated vernacular literatures. The life-span of Arthurian romance as a serious poetic genre dealing with individual moral problems was not long. After the time of Chrétien and Hartmann, the material retained its popularity but the treatment changed. The prose romances are more heavy-handed in their moralizing and, at the same time, reckless in the addition and reduplication of incident; they are at once more didactic and less subtle. And, most important, they are all-encompassing; they bring all the available material into one loosely unified tale. When they set the Tristan story in the Arthurian world, they can no longer avoid the implications of a love that is blatantly physical and adulterous, or keep the effects of such a love distinct, and they must allow it to destroy that world.

Arthurian romance, in the form we know it, originated in the late

twelfth century as a result, perhaps indirect, of Geoffrey's *Historia*, which introduced Arthur and Arthurian legend to the learned world.¹ Romance began to develop and historiography to decline, perhaps, as Hanning thinks, because the interest of twelfth-century historians was essentially anti-political. They emphasized human causation, psychological motivation, the conflict between personal desires and national destinies, rather than the unfolding of providence through history towards the salvation of mankind. These interests led to a genre which treated the individual's personal problem without any concern for the over-all plan, a genre which removed restrictions of time and space, as well as of historic necessity, in order to present a moral problem and resolve it within one individual without the complications of accident or chance, without the action of external forces.

Along with the psychological and ahistorical nature of romance, there is another aspect relatively new in medieval literature – the idea of love as a motivation to good action. Again there may be explanations for the occurrence of this idea, first in Provençal literature and spreading thence through western Europe, in the social fact of women as patronesses of the arts, custodians of the fief, and so forth.² Certainly the Christian doctrine of charity would create an atmosphere receptive to such a concept. Whatever the source, it is a factor in romance. Instead of the destructive nature of woman's love that is emphasized in classical and early Christian writing, we begin to have a force for good, an inspiration to action and virtue without which no hero of romance can function properly. The transition from one kind of love to the other can be seen in the classical romances, of which the *Enée* offers a good example in the contrast between Dido's destructive love, which holds the hero back from his destiny, and Lavinia's, which contributes to its fulfilment.

In Arthurian romance, we are concerned with love only for its effect on the hero. The lady, by withdrawing her love, awakens the knight to his

¹ There is little doubt that the material was already known, orally, through Breton minstrels, but something gave it the prestige or the relevance to be taken up by poets like Chrétien and given a serious turn, and that something was most likely Geoffrey's work. It may be, as Jackson says (*The Literature of the Middle Ages* [New York, 1960] 83), that Geoffrey wished to give the English a figure from their past who could rival the increasingly popular figure of Charlemagne in twelfth century song, or, as Hanning suggests, that Geoffrey had to retreat into the remote past to reconstruct an earlier phase of the rise-and-fall cycle of British history as he conceived it, a phase which other historians had not treated (*The Vision of History in Early Britain* [New York 1966], chap. V). Perhaps both motives lie behind Geoffrey's interest in Arthur.

² Jackson, 94 ff. This is not the place to go into the vexed question of the origins of courtly love. For a survey of the theories, see K. Axhausen, *Die Theorien über den Ursprung der provenzalischen Lyrik* (Marburg, 1937).

inadequacy or imbalance, and when he has corrected that, she signals his achievement by restoring her favor. It is tantalizing to see in this situation an extension of the love described in the most analytical of the Provençal and German lyrics, in which the woman is the mirror or reflection, the ideal of the man; she awakens his self-awareness and leads him to strive to attain that ideal in himself.³ In the *canzon*, such attainment is impossible and to consummate the love means to risk loss of the ideal, a shattering of the mirror; in the romance, which is not a 'realistic' genre, the hero can finally attain his ideal. He falls in love or wins the lady towards the beginning of the story; their union in some way awakens him to consciousness of a defect, or leads to some dissatisfaction with himself, and the union is disturbed while he works out his problem and restores his balance. Then he can return or be reconciled with her, because he has achieved in himself the ideal she represents.

This pattern works only so long as the ideal she represents is satisfactory. Once the poet loses his faith in that — and he must, eventually, since it is essentially a limited ideal — or finds himself with an ideal which conflicts with the society in which the hero moves, the romance is no longer capable of easy resolution. Chrétien alternates, in his romances, between a serious attempt to reconcile the ideals of courtly love with social responsibility and marriage, as in *Erec and Enid*, and a satiric presentation of the unrealistic conventions of love-service, as in *Cliges*. He evades the problem in *Yvain*, and in *Lancelot* he seems undecided between the serious and the satiric approach. Certainly he ridicules Lancelot's devotion, but at the same time he makes of him a nobler figure, more humble and self-sacrificing than his other heroes. Chrétien was apparently not able to resolve his own feelings about this story so he left the romance to someone else to finish. Finally he turned to a knight with no previous Arthurian connections, who had been brought up in the wilderness, and led him into and then beyond the Arthurian world to a more spiritual world. He seems to have replaced the love-ideal with the Grail quest, which allows for a similar psychological restoration, but presents no secular conflict. The fact that the Grail quest demands some sort of rejection of the Arthurian world points the way to the gradual disintegration of Arthurian romance as a viable form for the treatment of ethical problems.

It was the Tristan story, reflected in the Lancelot-Guinevere love, that showed up the basic defect of Arthurian literary and ethical conventions. In it we have a love closer to the lyric type: the woman is the man's creation and his ideal; she is educated, molded by him, and therefore his

³ For a detailed analysis of the lyric concept, see F. Goldin's *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (Ithaca, 1967), on which my ideas about the function of the lady in romance are based.

possession spiritually, but she is at the same time not available to him within society. To serve and possess her, to attain his own ideal, he must turn his back on other obligations and commitments. He is, in other words, trapped between two responsibilities, two desires, two ideals, both valid; he cannot solve his dilemma because to serve one he must deny the other. The problem is further complicated by the fact that without the perfection of love he cannot be an ideal knight, and without being a responsible knight, he cannot be the ideal lover. The problem is insoluble, the two demands are incompatible, and thus the conventions of Arthurian romance cannot work. Once one suspects that a man may have more than one ideal, or that his ideals are in conflict, one has to give up the possibility of the happy ending in life. One either chooses death, as in Tristan, or rejects the world, as in the Grail stories, which is a kind of death in its denial of life on earth.⁴ And it is inevitable that the two should come together, in the prose romances, and bring about the total destruction of the secular ideal, the Arthurian world.

The conflict of ideals seems to be coupled with a sense of the evil inherent in the real world. It is only in the Tristan story, or those modeled on it, that one is faced with evil figures, external enemies:⁵ the jealous barons in Béroul, Thomas, and Gottfried; the envious cousin, jealous ladies, and treacherous king in the prose versions. In Chrétien, it is only in the Lancelot story that the hero confronts a figure of pure evil, Meleagant.

Arthurian romance cannot cope with the problem of conflicting ideals or loyalties, or with the consequences of the passion that underlies romantic love. For Arthurian conventions to operate properly, one must believe that worldly honor can be achieved without damage to one's soul; that honor in the world and morality are not only compatible but inseparable. This is a difficult belief to maintain in the face of reality. Life offers situations in which a man is forced to choose between two loyalties, and that often means he has to betray one in order to preserve the other. There is no comic or simple solution to this problem. The Grail solution denies the lower for the higher, but that is not satisfactory for mankind;

⁴ Wolfram, in his *Parzival*, attempts to reconcile the various worlds a knight might be expected to serve. He makes the Grail a life of service to God, but has the Grail king marry and have children to carry on his work, and send his men out to work in the world. Wolfram succeeds in producing a happy ending for his hero without letting him sacrifice the world, but to do so he has to create a Utopian world which, unlike the Arthurian world of Chrétien, has no real application to life. It is too perfect, too neatly contrived; and its solution is to make man's goal in life a missionary one, a good solution perhaps, but not universally applicable and therefore no solution to the problem Chrétien was dealing with.

⁵ Normally the hero's opponents in romance, whether knights or giants and dragons, represent obstacles in the hero which he must overcome in order to achieve his proper state. They are not external evil.

what it does is leave the lesser sphere to degenerate and thus increases the chasm between secular and spiritual life, while the exponents of the higher grow further and further removed from the world – first Perceval, then Galahad, who leaves the world altogether by dying soon after he completes the quest.

The Tristan story, which incarnates the problem in its most forceful form, does not offer a solution; it presents the problem as a tragic one, incapable of solution. Insoluble perhaps for the same reason Walter von der Vogelweide suggests in “Ich saz uf eime steine”: *ere, varnde guot*, and *Gotes hulde* cannot exist together in one heart because *untriuwe* and *gewalt*, the evils of the world, get in the way of peace and justice. In the Tristan stories, fate and the treachery of others create the impossible situation for the lovers. The presence of evil in the world around them distinguishes their story from Arthurian romance, as does the ambivalent attitude towards love. Love is not just an inspiration to action but also a sensual force, symbolized by the potion, which, if not controlled, can destroy the lover and those around him. This, too, is a more realistic concept; that romantic love can be an ideal or inspiration, but that it cannot, or can rarely, be limited to that, and once it gives way to passion, it can be a force for evil.

The complex view of love, and the acknowledged presence of evil make it impossible to treat the Tristan material within Arthurian conventions. The story had existed apart from them, at first, but the superficial similarities of content, a knight's moral struggle and his love, caused it to be drawn in and, eventually, to destroy the host. In the earliest versions we have of Tristan, the poems of Béroul, Eilhart, Thomas, and Gottfried, Cornwall is not a part of the Arthurian world, but has some contact with it. Arthur appears to give his sanction or the measure by which the love or lovers are judged. He is present at Isolt's ordeal, in Béroul, to give the highest earthly witness to her innocence, which God manifests through the trial. Eilhart, who deplores the effect of the love on his hero, uses Arthur's court only as a refuge for Tristan after he has left Isolt and is attempting to live as a proper hero, actively engaged in adventure. Gawain, Arthur's nephew and all a hero and nephew should be, is Tristan's companion; the two fight together until Mark's court arrives and Tristan cannot refrain from visiting Isolt. He is caught in a trap of scythes laid around Isolt's bed, and is wounded. To protect him from discovery, all of Arthur's knights wound themselves in a trumped-up battle. Thus, instead of the Arthurian world giving its sanction to the love and acknowledging it as an ideal, the world is momentarily endangered by it. This is Eilhart's point: an all-consuming passion is destructive of a knight's honor and social function, no matter how innocent the object of it.