

Love With Excuse:
Contextualizing Themes in Adaptations of The Legend of Tristan and Isolde

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Abstract

The legend of Tristan and Isolde is perhaps the most influential Arthurian romance apart from Lancelot and Guinevere. It has been retold many times, with each iteration responding to its own unique cultural context as well as adopting varying approaches to the medieval traditions of courtly love. The works of Wagner, Malory, and Gottfried von Strassburg all develop different versions of the same three themes: sexuality, the worthiness of love, and death. These various reconstructions of Tristan and Isolde's story blend syntheses of courtly love and historically contemporary approaches to romance, but all three reinventions romanticize it; while Strassburg and Wagner idealize the love affair, Malory and Wagner also romanticize courtly love and the medieval Arthurian era itself.

Love With Excuse:**Contextualizing Themes in Adaptations of The Legend of Tristan and Isolde****Introduction**

Legends and myths are notoriously inconsistent: they morph and change in the hands of different writers during different eras. What makes a legend or a myth relevant, however, is not their consistency, but the snapshots of cultural thought each iteration of a myth provides as it persists through history. The legend of Tristan and Isolde is one such myth. In Tristan and Isolde's most basic form, Tristan, a Cornish knight, is sent to retrieve Isolde or Iseult, an Irish princess, so she can marry his king, Mark. In most versions, they take a love potion and begin an affair, despite Isolde's betrothal and eventual marriage to Mark. This love triangle inevitably ends in suffering and, in most versions, their deaths. This legend is commonly grouped with Arthurian tales and likely had a significant impact on the development of the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. Tristan and Isolde's story takes many different forms over centuries of retellings, and although many details change, down to the very spelling of their names, the practice of courtly love remains. Although several elements are repeated in each version, such as the lovers' death, the basic truth in each story is this: Tristan and Isolde attempt to pretend their lives do not intersect with the world around them in any real way, and this leads to devastation and tragedy. This thesis will seek to examine how Tristan and Isolde's affair is treated both by medieval writers, such as Thomas Malory and Gottfried von Strassburg, and the more contemporary adaptor Richard Wagner, and display the way elements are adjusted in the retellings of the myth over time to accommodate for different cultural emphases. These three

reinventors of the legend all romanticize it; yet while Strassburg and Wagner idealize the love affair, Malory and Wagner also romanticize courtly love and medieval ideals.

Defining Courtly Love

The difference between romanticizing and idealizing something is subtle but important. When one idealizes something, it becomes perfect and completely satisfactory to some essential need in the human soul. Strassburg and Wagner do this to the love affair between Tristan and Isolde—at their hands, it becomes ultimate and pure, transcending the boundaries of society and even the boundaries of human understanding. The act of romanticizing something is simpler, although no less impactful. Romanticizing is less about transforming the essence of something and more about giving it a sheen or a greater appeal. Malory and Wagner do this to the chivalric past and courtly literature; they are aware of the flaws but wish to predominantly acknowledge the beauty within the tradition of courtly love.

Understanding the story of Tristan and Isolde therefore requires an examination of the concept of courtly love. Defining courtly love is a slippery prospect, although it is necessary to do so, as it is a consistent theme across much of the surviving medieval European literature. Courtly love was a cultural practice designed exclusively for the nobility, for one, as such behavior was forbidden for the lower classes. The predominantly Christian culture of the Middle Ages also complicates courtly love, even within a noble framework; the disregard it holds for marriage means that it stands in opposition to the biblical and cultural ideals of the Christian church, arguably the most prominent political and sociocultural force of that time. The sexuality involved in a courtly love affair is thus debated to this day. While Cherchi writes that courtly love “is primarily a poetry that celebrates a spiritual friendship free from any sexual or erotic

implications” (6), other writers claim, “[courtly] love was an ennobling discipline, not necessarily consummated, but based on sexual attraction” (Wollock 31). Even in a virtuous relationship, the self-control required to maintain such chastity was admirable; while medieval Christian society could not condone a sexual affair, they could encourage preserving one’s morals in the face of desire. The most essential quality to courtly love was longing. If the object of desire (namely, the unattainable woman) was achieved, as through marriage, it was no longer courtly love and thus no longer desirable. Courtly love literature is thus highly romanticized. In the typical narrative of the genre, what keeps lovers from achieving their desire is the medieval ideal of fidelity to king and country. More modern adaptations of Tristan and Isolde’s story never remove this fundamental quality, even though they are not composed within the formal tradition or time period of courtly literature. Within Wagner’s opera, for example, it is clear that “the ambiguity of 'Liebeslust' and 'Lust' articulates a tension between fulfilment and desire that seems particularly appropriate for Tristan und Isolde” (Groos 467). For an affair to function as courtly love, it must live within that tension, as Tristan and Isolde’s does.

Tristan and Isolde’s story also seems to embody the basically honorable qualities of courtly love. Cherchi states that, instead of being a source of sin, courtly love rests on “the assumption that love for a lady is the primary source of moral goodness” (Cherchi 7). Courtly love, at least in the ideal form, was not chaotic; instead, it was a system with order and rules that were intended to be followed religiously. For example, courtly love only applied if the woman was the object to be won: “The model centres on the idea of both erotic and physical danger: a young unmarried man besieges a married, inaccessible woman controlled by the strictest of interdictions—in general, the feudal lord’s wife; to win her heart, he lays at her feet all his

victories and even his own life” (Bodis̄tean 10). Courtly love thus offered men a motivation towards grand sacrifice and achievement, which made the dangers to marital fidelity socially beneficial, although not completely ignorable. The codes at work in medieval society, although highly romanticized, served in theory to curb undesirable behavior; Wollock writes, “it cannot be denied that both chivalry and courtly love draw on systems of masculine (and feminine) honor that underlie gender-based honor concepts still current today” (8). Of course, these codes were often portrayed as more reliably obeyed than they actually were. Even romanticized in this way, with honor so central to the system of courtly love, it could be framed as something advantageous, although it seems morally antithetical to the religious standards of the period. Pure love was an ideal worth striving for, even if medieval writers also understood that attaining that ideal was impossible. Even if the legend is much older than the courtly love movement that figures into the tale at its peak, Tristan and Isolde’s story stands solidly within these traditions. The goal was to represent how their love was good and justifiable, even if most writers primarily excused it through the detail of the overwhelming love potion. Nevertheless, just like the genre of courtly love itself, the story turns a societally condemnable act into something that is simultaneously an elevated ideal and a warning about the power of love.

Earliest Versions of Tristan and Isolde

As with many legendary tales, Tristan and Isolde’s beginnings are almost impossible to clearly trace. The story of doomed lovers caught in a deadly love triangle is quite old and repeats across many cultures. Adjacent to Tristan and Isolde’s place in myth are the Irish lovers Diarmuid and Grainne, with the hero Fionn mac Cumhaill in King Mark’s role, and most famously, Lancelot and Guinevere and Arthur in the Arthurian tradition. The origin of these

stories is uncertain because it is impossible to identify which came first or which is most strictly 'factual,' if any. Much like the characters' own complicated affairs, the repetitive nature of these stories makes a tangled web across literature and history. It is clear that there is something intrinsically appealing about these tales, perhaps for their tragedy as much as their romance. Gottfried von Strassburg, writing in the 13th century, understood the complexity of Tristan and Isolde's history even then, saying, "I am well aware that there have been many who have told the tale of Tristan; yet there have not been many who have read his tale aright" (5). Strassburg's sentiment that his version was definitive would go largely unheard, of course, as the story had been and would be retold by hundreds of voices across multiple countries, eventually becoming as culturally resonant to medieval Europe as *Romeo and Juliet* is to the modern world. There are many Tristan stories in many different European languages; medieval authors like Beroul or Thomas of Britain composed their own versions of the doomed romance, while Gottfried von Strassburg translated his own, unfinished version of the latter and Malory incorporated the basic tale into his larger *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485). Most authors throughout history that treat Arthurian legend in their works include some reference to the doomed lovers—Marie de France included them in a lai, whose opening lines acknowledge the many forms the tale has taken:

I am pleased to recount a lay
I've heard and also read of the way
Tristram and the queen were brought
down together by love, which ought
to offer pleasure but also can
bring pain and death to woman and man. (*Chevrefoil* 1-6)

There is even limited evidence of Tristan's existence in the *Mabinogion*, the earliest known collection of Welsh prose, where he is simply named as "Trystan the son of Tallwch" (*Mabinogion* 6), a knight who approaches Arthur to enter his service.

These many different versions are all important to acknowledge within the broad, complicated history of the Tristan legend, but three in particular remain culturally important—namely, those of Gottfried von Strassburg, Thomas Malory, and Richard Wagner. Strassburg's version is, if only subconsciously, the most influential of these three, as "it is nearly impossible to separate the reception of Gottfried's version of the Tristan/Isolde legend from the modern use and treatment of the complete myth" (Müller 286). Beyond that, however, Malory's is the most prominent name to integrate Tristan and Isolde with Arthurian legend, and Wagner's opera represents the major movement of the myth into the modern world. These three and their influences on each other are primarily responsible for the legend's modern significance. Despite the appeal of the legend, as evidenced by the many versions and reproductions across history, a closer study of these three versions reveals that it has been tweaked and adapted for cultural relevance over time, enabling it to survive while still maintaining a level of romanticization or idealization of the romance or the past.

The Characters

The three adaptations of the legend discussed in this thesis all take slightly different approaches to characterizing the members of the love triangle. Although Strassburg's version is incomplete, the version he was translating includes two Isoldes, both of whom Tristan loves, although differently. Isolde of the White Hands, different from Isolde the Fair (King Mark's wife), is a jealous woman, while Isolde the Fair is much more similar to Malory and Wagner's

versions—the ideal object of courtly love and the ideal medieval queen. The love potion features prominently in this story, as well. Strassburg writes that they fell in love almost against their wills, as they only found each other in their souls after the consumption of the potion (155). Mark and Tristan are heroic figures in Strassburg's version: Mark is suspicious but not overtly aggressive and violent, while Tristan's achievements are chivalrous and good. The division between the king and his knight is thus tragic in its own way, as they are uncle and nephew and devoted to each other, similar to Lancelot and Arthur. Strassburg writes upon their first meeting: "Now when Tristan first saw [King Mark], he took a liking to him more than to all the rest. His heart singled him out, for Mark was of his own blood" (45). The love between Tristan and his uncle is emphasized repeatedly throughout the story to lend depth to the tragedy, and Mark's own love for Isolde is equally emphasized. In short, Strassburg's adaptation attempts to create an actual love triangle, wherein all three parties respect and love one another deeply. Although Tristan and Isolde's love is heavily idealized within the story, Strassburg makes the relationships between all members of the love triangle genuinely ideal in their own ways. The positive portrayal of all three characters is an important aspect of the tragedy; although Strassburg uses the love potion to justify and idealize Tristan and Isolde's passionate love, he does not ignore the anguish their love causes in the lives of his characters.

Wagner's adaptation, directly sourced from Strassburg's, is almost identical in characterization, although modernized and changed to fit the stage. Although the entire piece is condensed in comparison to Strassburg's prose, Wagner still emphasizes the loyalty between Mark and Tristan; upon being told by Melot of Tristan and Isolde's affair, Mark exclaims, "Has Tristan deceived me? If so, what hope have I that Melot is true?" (Wagner 80). Although Isolde

shows little love for Mark in comparison to other versions, Wagner still positions Mark as a figure deserving of pity, if only for his faith. The love triangle's narrative is also condensed in the opera, with characters such as Isolde of the White Hands cut out while characters such as Melot, Tristan's friend and loyal knight to Mark, are expanded. Zuckerman writes, "[Wagner] reduced the group of conspirators against Tristan to one man, and he cut out entirely the 'other' Isolde (of the White Hands). All the subplots and extra narratives were eliminated, leaving him with the barest and most believable elements of the legend" (14). This condensation enabled Wagner to integrate a smaller cast and evade the sprawling quality of the medieval poetic narratives, making the piece more performable and also more compelling. In many ways, Wagner's adaptation is what has lingered in the Western cultural subconscious; while the average person might recognize Tristan and Isolde by name, fewer would know that there were up to three Isoldes in some early versions of the tale. Although the accelerated pace of Tristan and Isolde's romance makes it feel less intimate than Strassburg's, it enables Wagner to elevate the power of their love to something that transcends time.

Finally, Thomas Malory's tale, unlike the others, utilizes comparisons to Arthurian heroes to depict Tristan, Isolde, and Mark. The characterization of the latter three figures is altered to better distinguish them from the other Arthurian characters: "Malory, through conscious efforts of style, characterization, and auctorial irony, separates the heroes functionally in his *Morte*: Lancelot's adventures he relates to the growth of Arthur's rule of justice and mercy; Tristram's, to the gradual displacement of that rule by a system of brute force" (Fries 606). Malory's version of the tale serves to villainize Mark and severely coarsen Tristan, removing each of them from idealized past versions to better emphasize the goodness of Lancelot,

Guinevere, and Arthur. While in other versions, their affair is simply caught and punished, Malory has them depart from Mark's kingdom to live in Lancelot's castle for a significant amount of time, making their affair much more public. The end of the story is summarized thus: "Sir Tristram brought again La Beale Isoud unto King Mark from Joyous Gard, look what befell on the end, how shamefully that false traitor King Mark slew him as he sat harping afore his lady La Beale Isoud, with a grounden glaive he thrust him in behind to the heart" (Malory chapter VI). Mark's direct killing of Tristan in this tale is different from the other two, where the doomed lover dies of other wounds. The characters often feel drowned by the events of the story; although Tristan's sprawling narrative consumes much of *Le Morte*, his constant interaction with other Arthurian characters and Malory's inclusion of distracting side plots means that his primary narrative is difficult to track amidst the chaos. Still, while Malory does not make an ideal out of the romance itself, he uses Tristan and Isolde to romanticize something else, namely the chivalric Arthurian past.

Malory: Tristan as Arthurian Knight

In comparison to other versions and to the rest of *Le Morte* itself, Tristan's role in Malory's epic is often challenging to ascertain due to the narrative's ungainly form. Malory's determination to compile stories about King Arthur meant that Tristan was made a piece in a larger framework; instead of being the protagonist of his own tale, Tristan was just another player in the Arthurian legend. The generally assumed theory that Tristan was a narrative precursor to Lancelot is undermined in Malory's version of the story, which positions them side by side. Although Malory places Tristan and Isolde within Arthurian canon, he primarily uses them as a foil to Lancelot and Guinevere, although not in a way that flatters Tristan and Isolde.

The pair's seeming lack of interest in moral considerations in Malory's story is notable: "the couple express no regret for their adultery, no self-consciousness at Marc witnessing their final declarations of love for each other" (Traxler 180). Much of Mark's constant rage in *Le Morte* is driven by Tristan's unabashed interest in a number of married women the king himself is interested in, including, of course, Isolde, Mark's own wife. Once again, this lack of integrity is deliberately composed by Malory to better contrast the love triangle of Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur. While the latter triangle is consumed entirely with courtliness and good behavior, all deeply respecting and loving each other and eventually separating for the good of the others, Tristan and Isolde "die unapologetically, locked in one final passionate embrace, their very togetherness a testament to the self-absorption that contrasts so starkly with the decisions of the Logrian trio" (Traxler 181). While other adaptations make Tristan and Isolde's inseparability admirable, Malory judges it to be tragic and selfish all at once. This is not to say Malory is exempt from the romanticization inherent in courtly literature. He still romanticizes the Arthurian past and the chivalric tradition; even if he does not attempt to turn Tristan and Isolde's romance into something ideal, he still puts a sheen of beauty over things that should otherwise be ugly. To Malory, their love affair is much more realistic; although they may think they are aiming for pure love, their affair falls apart almost inevitably under the pressure of experience. Although Tristan and Isolde's treatment in *Le Morte* is dissonant with the traditions of courtly love, the extensive time he devotes to their tale enables Tristan to enjoy more complex characterization: "While Lancelot's rise to the top of the Arthurian world had been as quick and as conventionally Arthurian as his tale, Tristram's rise—long, difficult, and counter to the Arthurian oath - requires a long and complex narrative to do it justice" (Fries 608). Arthurian

legend revolves around ideals, and Malory's Tristan helps establish these, although unconventionally. He was not written to be the ideal knight himself, nor was his romance with Isolde meant to be the ideal romance, but their existence guides the reader towards this ideal through inversion. If Tristan and Isolde's love is not good and pure in itself, their affair and demise can at least guide the reader towards some greater truth. Malory's narrative makes Tristan a real person as much as it makes Mark a flat villain, but this portrayal was eventually largely forgotten in favor of heroic idealization.

Wagner: Tristan and Isolde Modernized

The influence of Wagner's contemporary philosophical and cultural surroundings is key to understanding his famed operatic adaptation of the legend. There are many elements of the legend changed in Wagner's adaptation; although he largely based his libretto on Strassburg's prose version, he transformed his predecessor's themes of death and love into something more pervasive. Wagner's Tristan and Isolde are portrayed as doomed and tragic from the beginning rather than lovers tested through their suffering. Although the opera was composed centuries after the foundational forms of the tales, "Wagner was convinced that he alone was presenting the real and genuine meaning of the medieval stories" (Müller 288). His confidence, eerily similar to Strassburg's own, was not poorly placed; his opera was extremely influential, down to the popular spelling of Tristan and Isolde's names to this day. Wagner's opera helpfully divides the story of Tristan and Isolde into three thematic sections: "the first, love potion (Liebestrank); the second, love night (Liebesnacht); and the third, love-death (Liebestod)" (Müller 289). Thus, Wagner efficiently condenses the sprawling legend into these three moments; an entire love affair is summarized through falling in love, being in love, and dying in love. One significant

aspect of Wagner's adaptation is the lovers' deaths. Instead of surviving and being separated, as some older versions of the tale have it, they both die at the end of the opera. Malory's and Strassburg's endings are similar, but death is present in Wagner's libretto from the very beginning. Roger Scruton points out, "In each of these [three] moments Tristan and Isolde vow to die and attempt to do so; only in the last do they succeed" (35), Tristan from his wounds and Isolde from a broken heart. This death is necessary for the conclusion of their love as, "Wagner completes the thought that is adumbrated by Gottfried—that they can indeed escape, but only through death" (Scruton 30). The influence of Wagner perhaps led to most people assuming such stories end in death, as with Romeo and Juliet, whereas many older versions of love-triangle romances typically choose a "fate worse than death" (i.e., separation).

All of these elements incorporated by Wagner are old concepts transformed into something modern and relevant. Like Malory, Wagner presented a version of medieval history with a romanticized sheen, and like Strassburg, Wagner turned the romance of Tristan and Isolde into something beyond human reckoning, but he did so within a modern context rather than a medieval one. Wagner was a Romantic composer, and "[r]omanticism involved a new interest in the past, preferably the medieval past" (Leerssen 222). His opera's version of the medieval is highly sentimentalized, sharing little with history except the aesthetic effects and the story itself, which is still adjusted for the present day. It attempts to maintain some of the narrative tropes of medieval writing; Dailey argues that, "[d]issatisfied will, unfulfilled longing, and chivalric love all manifest themselves in Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*. These three aspects of the impassioned romance between the lovers Tristan and Isolde lead opera, music, and the Romantic era into the ambiguous and ever-striving Modern era" (1). Although, as stated previously, these

three elements are older even than the legend's written form, Wagner still turns them into something new.

Death, in the opera, is not just a tragic end, but rather the destruction of individual identity. Tristan and Isolde's choice to die with each other rather than live separate lives changes them on a fundamental level: "[i]n the world of death Tristan and Isolde dissolve into each other as one, without distinction, individuality, or singularity, without name" (Polka 244). Wagner's opera was composed for a modern audience, not a medieval one, moving it away from the typical Tristan and Isolde story. He "wrote for an audience of the future . . . who would think of themselves as enlightened, and whose enlightenment demanded literal explicitness" (Zuckerman 15). Thus, while older stories were allowed to linger and sprawl, Wagner sought to provide his audience with the most potent form of the myth possible, without letting go of the Romantic, all-encompassing power of emotion. Wagner's portrayal of the story therefore moves it out of medieval literature into the modern tradition quite effectively, forcing the viewer, listener, or reader to grapple with questions of identity and individuality beyond the moral questions and tragic consequences of the situation.

Sexuality in Each Adaptation

Sexuality, or the lack thereof, is one of the most important aspects of courtly love. Defining a medieval love affair as courtly love thus requires some element of chastity and unfulfilled desire, as "[t]his kind of love is paradoxical, and the only thing that was recorded about it is its chastity. It is not devoid of sensuality, but in the deepest forms of desire there is also the fear that reaching the goal will also weaken the desire itself" (Bodiștean 12). How, therefore, does this element play out in these three distinct versions? Interestingly, while

Malory's version does not make an ideal out of the affair, it does admit that "[f]ulfilment of love is the death of love; as well as the death of creation" (Bodishteian 13). Tristan's love for Isolde is less important to Malory's narrative than King Mark's terrible personality. Tristan and Isolde's affair is not secret; rather, it is recognized and even encouraged by the greater cast of Arthurian characters simply due to their hatred of Mark. There are elements of unreachable desire in the piece, such as a moment where "Sir Tristram remembered him of his lady, La Beale Isoud, that looked upon him, and how he was likely never to come in her presence" (Malory chapter XXX). Still, Tristan's prediction here does not hold true, as Tristan is reunited with Isolde for quite some time, fulfilling his desire. Malory writes that "Sir Tristram sent a letter unto La Beale Isoud, and prayed her to be his good lady; and if it pleased her to make a vessel ready for her and him, he would go with her unto the realm of Logris, that is this land" (chapter LI). Thus, Tristan and Isolde essentially run away from Mark, finding refuge in Lancelot's castle.

The life Tristan attempts to have with Isolde, who he has loved since he was young, ends up less appealing when properly realized. The lovers eventually return to Mark's domain after three years in Lancelot's, and seemingly continue their affair, as "that traitor king slew the noble knight Sir Tristram, as he sat harping afore his lady La Beale Isoud, with a trenchant glaive" (Malory chapter XI). Tristan is thus cast as an eternally dissatisfied character, never able to achieve what he actually desires because it does not exist. Malory's adaptation holds to the courtly narrative concept that, when desire is achieved, it becomes less appealing than it was as an unconsummated ideal. On the surface, this conclusion suits Malory's Christian cultural context. After all, in medieval Europe, "Christian love was sanctioned by priestly approval and presented as a step toward salvation" (Bonneuil 260). It would be the natural conclusion, under

this system, for Tristan and Isolde's unsanctioned, adulterous relationship to fail emotionally and socially. More than making a commentary on his culture's morality, however, Malory seems to be making some comment on the unattractiveness of stability. Although it is not stated outright, it seems to be true that Tristan and Isolde grew bored with their relatively peaceful life; by returning to Mark's domain, their affair gained excitement once more. Malory would have understood that courtly love was hinged on how "the emotional and social tumult introduced by courtly love presents people with reasons to live, combats to devote a life to: it allows the aristocratic group to define its identity" (261). When Tristan and Isolde leave Mark's kingdom for the relative safety of Lancelot's, this emotional and social tumult disappears, and with it, interest equally diminishes. There is nothing idealized in Malory's version of their relationship; if anything, it functions more as a warning about the fleeting nature of passion.

Strassburg's adaptation is more concrete about Tristan and Isolde's sexual and romantic encounters than Malory's. That their relationship is sexual is extremely clear, as Strassburg writes that "[w]henver the occasion suited they had their fill of what lovers long for" (Strassburg 163), going on to say that while Isolde's lost virginity "made them very wretched" (163), they still "had their will together many, many times" (163). The love potion renders them helpless in each other's presence, and they make little effort to avoid their feelings. On Isolde's marriage night, her maid Brangane substitutes for her in Mark's bed to maintain the illusion of her mistress's virginity, and then Isolde sleeps with him later; curiously, to Mark, "one woman was as another" (Strassburg 167) and he notices no difference. Isolde and Tristan continue their affair in secret throughout Strassburg's narrative, separated and reunited at different times, with Mark growing more and more suspicious each time. Mark's constant interference prevents

Tristan and Isolde from achieving peaceful bliss, as “his eye was always on them” (Strassburg 217). Unlike in *Le Morte*, Strassburg’s narrative seems to approach the genre of courtly literature with some irony, recognizing the inherent absurdity of the genre in a culture with an extreme response to unchaste behavior. After all, in medieval Europe, “adultery, especially that form of adultery in which a knight or vassal seduced the wife of his lord, could hardly be construed as chivalric or ‘courtly’: it was regarded in medieval law as a form of treason on a level with regicide” (Jeffrey 520). Like Malory, Strassburg recognizes that the thrill of subverting cultural expectations is what makes courtly love appealing. He offers no pretenses about Tristan and Isolde’s sexuality, nor does he overtly question the morality of their relationship. In his story, their love—both emotional and physical—is both powerful and good, and his audience is not invited to question these qualities. In Strassburg’s cultural context, presenting sexuality as an inevitability is a dramatic departure from the standard. Yet he seems to argue that if the love between two people is so tremendous, then societal boundaries and standards, even the extreme standards of Christian medieval culture, cannot keep them from each other.

Wagner, although separated from the era of courtly love, was nonetheless influenced by it, particularly considering his interest in the medieval. The nature of operatic performance ensures that Tristan and Isolde’s affair is chaste in appearance, but references are made throughout to their frenzied desire for each other, brought about by the love potion. There are some lines in the opera during their tryst that have an erotic undertone: “Are these thine eyes? Is this thy mouth? And here is thy hand, and here is thy heart!” (Wagner 65-66). The use of gaze and touch in the language of the opera conveys the intensity of their desire. Even if Tristan and Isolde never consummate their relationship in the technical sense, Wagner’s constant references

to their eyes indicates their lust. The references to eyes and glances begin before the love potion is even consumed: “Wagner’s Isolde tells in her autobiographical narration how she had refrained from killing the sick Tristan because of the way he looked into her eyes” (Zuckerman 14) and continues throughout. Although it was a love potion that brought them together, their eyes and gazes seem to be what keeps them together. As their tryst ends, they sing to each other rapturously, “my eyes are gone from me, blinded with loving thee” (Wagner 71). The power of their relationship is not purely emotional; it is just as driven by the physical, even if Wagner focuses on signifying the perfection that can be achieved through transcendent emotional experience.

Wagner also cleverly uses day and night to separate Tristan and Isolde’s reality from the masks they wear in front of Mark’s court. Light is clearly portrayed in a negative perspective, since it is the visible force that keeps them from intimacy; after the love potion is consumed, they utilize a torch as a symbol for when it is safe to be together. Light indicates that it is not safe, while darkness indicates that Tristan should join Isolde at the castle. Although Brangana begs, “Put not the torch out, danger’s bright beacon” (Wagner 63), her pleas are disregarded and Isolde extinguishes the light, creating an artificial safety even when danger has not passed. Wagner portrays the lovers as impatient for the darkness; Tristan sings, “O but this light! The light, the light! O how long it burned!” (67). Once again, the imagery here demonstrates how disconnected from reality Tristan and Isolde are; although the light makes things more real, they would rather live in a world of darkness, where they can envision and enact their own truth. The light is also thematically connected to Mark, as Isolde sings, “What the dusk torch of night gave thee, thou must give back to the imperial sun, back to the royal day—that I may shimmer there in desolate

splendor!” (68). Day and light are allied with Mark, while night and darkness are connected to Tristan. However, the advent of day and the death it brings are seen as positive forces, in that they will bring about some permanent conclusion: “Day and Death—can they together win us our love!” (73). Like Strassburg, Wagner prevents Tristan and Isolde from metaphorically staying in the night or staying in their bliss; the sun will always rise, exposing them to the harshness of the world they live in and the choices they’ve made. Although the theme of realized love is consistent in the myth as a whole, Strassburg and Wagner take different approaches to how they portray it:

As cast by Gottfried (and in all medieval versions), the lovers and their love are censored, repressed, and finally defeated by the structure and rules of the society in which they are living, which is to say feudal society. Wagner’s version on the other hand strives to demonstrate that love per se cannot be fulfilled perfectly within the limits of the world, but only by escaping to the other world, to the mystical night, to nirvana. (Müller 288)

This disconnection from reality ruins them, in some way, as “their ultimate loyalty is not to society, but to their love” (Davidson 29). Truth means nothing to the lovers, for they have created their own. Society means nothing because they have established themselves as separate entities. Even when Brangana sings, “dost thou not grasp the truth?” (Wagner 122), her call for Isolde to return to reality is unheeded, and Isolde dies, choosing Tristan over everything else. Although Wagner and Strassburg both idealize Tristan and Isolde’s relationship, representing their emotional and physical passion for one another as something better than their expected lives can offer, Wagner plainly establishes their passion as conflicting with reality. He does not, however, say that their idealistic passion is unworthy for it.

The Role of Women

Whether the beloved Isolde or the longsuffering Brangana, women are a necessary piece of Tristan and Isolde's legend. The lady in a courtly love narrative is worthy of adoration, even if her unfaithfulness makes her flawed, and Isolde perfectly represents this complex, paradoxical idealization. Isolde is the ideal; she is representative of all that is good, while simultaneously serving as the reason everything in Mark's kingdom falls apart. Without Isolde, there would be no story. She is inseparable from the narrative. Strassburg's adaptation is fascinating in this regard, as it includes three separate characters with the name of Isolde. The contrasts and comparisons between these three women provide much of the tension in the story; Tristan, unwittingly most of the time, is slung between them and their desires. Although all three Isoldes in Strassburg's translation play different roles in Tristan's life, they are bound by more than just name. The fact that Tristan is entirely reliant on them for his very survival means that, "when examined in light of the hero's dependence on the goodwill of all three Isoldes, mother Isolde, daughter Isolde, and rival Isolde appear to be bound in a tacit, though involuntary, complicity" (Altpeter-Jones 11). The protagonist Isolde's own feelings towards Tristan are complex in both Strassburg and Wagner's adaptations; although she claims to hate him and intends to kill him at the beginning of the opera, she also sings, "O my loved one! O my lost one!" (Wagner 10) before the love potion has had a chance to take effect. Tristan's life hangs in the balance of her approval in this way; her anger with him spurs her plot to kill him. This represents the larger reality of women's role in courtly literature: "[i]f women are now confined to intimate affairs, they nonetheless possess the power to grant or withhold their favors, while men must face perilous trials and ordeals and take the risk of declaring their love" (Bonneuil 257). The love of women in

medieval literature is made unattainable except through extreme danger, and women control how far men must go to achieve their favor and love. Although Isolde the Fair is seemingly helpless to the contract of marriage and the effects of her love for Tristan, this reality—that Tristan's very life is held in the hands of these three identically-named women—provides evidence that women hold significant power within the narrative.

Beyond just Isolde, Wagner's adaptation of Brangana, Isolde's servant, places a woman in a position of power, not by status, but through her eerie foresight. Brangana is the only character with seemingly complete knowledge of what is happening and control over the events—she warns Isolde of Melot's betrayal (59) and prepares the love potion, seemingly purposefully, to change Isolde's desires. She even predicts that their love affair will end badly, as she claims, "sorrow is coming" (72) after their tryst. This could, of course, be a play on Tristan's name, which, in more modern versions, means 'sorrow' or 'sadness.' Regardless, Brangana's unwitting ability to manipulate events places her in an interesting position of power. While in the opera, Tristan's loyal servant Kurwenal is left to rage helplessly against the passage of events, Brangana is given insight before the tragedy even happens. It is not surprising that women, particularly Isolde, have so much influence over the story's events. Isolde is the crux of the story and the ultimate being worthy of love. Although she dies at the end, she is still relatively untouchable within the story. While Tristan faces danger and death from outside forces, Isolde chooses her own fate, dying out of love rather than laid low by another character's anger. Wagner and Strassburg may both idealize the romance, but it is clear that Isolde's presence is the reason the romance is worthy of this treatment at all. Her presence forces the reader to question

the ideals at work: if Isolde is so pure and so worthy of love, is there any choice but to love her in the story, even at the risk of destruction and death?

Death in Each Adaptation

Death is obviously another key theme in most versions of Tristan and Isolde. Although, in keeping with the older traditions of forbidden love, some stories end with separation, the three versions discussed here all end in the death of both lovers. In Malory's version, Tristan, after giving Isolde back to Mark, is brutally killed at the hands of the vengeful king while singing, and "La Beale Isoud died swooning upon the corse of Sir Tristram, whereof was great pity" (Malory chapter XI). Although most adaptations end in violence, Malory's is specifically portrayed without redeeming beauty or value. Just as their relationship lacks idealization, Malory's depiction of their death is equally stark. Mark's hatred of Tristan in Malory's version is based on jealousy and treachery, with little redemptive quality, especially considering his desire to hurt Tristan motivates him to claim Isolde: "King Mark cast always in his heart how he might destroy Sir Tristram. And then he imagined in himself to send Sir Tristram into Ireland for La Beale Isoud" (Malory chapter XIX). Arthur's knights comment on Tristan's death almost offhandedly in Malory's adaptation. There is an inevitability to their death. Everyone within the story is aware of this reality, the knights in particular; at one point, Lancelot confronts Mark and says, "'Ye say well,' said Sir Launcelot, 'but ye are called so false and full of treason that no man may believe you. Forsooth it is known well wherefore ye came into this country, and for none other cause but for to slay Sir Tristram'" (Malory chapter XXII). Mark's hatred of Tristan, founded upon their contested love of an earlier lady, is clearly foreshadowed within the tale to have no other possible outcome. His repeated attempts throughout to kill Tristan make the ending less of

a surprise, although no less a tragedy; it is the natural ending to the story, given the choices the characters make. Tristan and Isolde's death is not even a conclusion to Malory's story; the larger narrative continues beyond this, developing other characters and pursuing other plots. Through this, the story "becomes [a narrative] not of conclusion, finality and death, but of process, continued action and lack of closure" (Saunders 280). Malory is not idealizing their relationship; if he were, their death would be front and center in *Le Morte*. Instead, they become a fragment and a warning; their fate is the logical outcome to an affair in medieval culture, and Malory sees no need to develop it into anything more. Just as their romance is merely a piece in his romanticization of chivalric times, their death is little more than a footnote in the overall story.

In contrast to this rather practical version of the story, Strassburg and Wagner both end their versions more dramatically, which is more in line with the expected tradition. Death, in these adaptations, becomes a freeing force; it may be a tragedy to the reader, but Strassburg and Wagner comprehend the force of death as something almost positive. If the lovers cannot be together in life, they can at least be together in death. This is a common theme throughout courtly love literature: "Isolde's readiness to snuff out her life in order to realize her love in the transcendent realm of night thus represents the culmination of an extensive tradition" (Groos 476). As with Malory's version, death is an assumed inevitability to the story Tristan and Isolde spin for themselves, but it is portrayed much more ideally. While the death of Tristan and Isolde in Malory's story is senseless and built on the hatred of an outside party, the lovers choose it in Strassburg and Wagner's adaptations: "the association of love and death is no metaphor; rather [Tristan] has a literal, 'anti-metaphorical' understanding of the fatal nature of love, and so once he has fallen in love, he knows he has entered the space between two deaths" (Gaunt 4). Death is

foreshadowed from the beginning of the opera in particular, as Isolde, preparing a potion that will end their lives, says, “Vengeance and death—death to us both!” (Wagner 23). The mix-up of the potions, however, turns her hatred of Tristan into passionate love. In some ways, he does “drink his atonement” (35) as Isolde demands, as the effects of the love potion end up killing them both anyway. The love potion has blurred the lines between life and death. After consuming it, Isolde cries, “O tell me where I am! Am I still living?” (53). In these two versions of the story, as opposed to the approach Malory takes, death and life are balancing forces. The balance makes the story compelling, as “[t]here is no true comedy whose story of love is not tempered by the presence of death in life. There is no true tragedy whose story of death is not tempered by the presence of love” (Polka 250). Neither life nor death is directly evil, and neither life nor death is directly good. It is significant that death is considered the answer to their problems almost immediately in the opera; it is not a last resort or some sort of tragedy, but rather the reasonable conclusion to their overwhelming passion. Both Strassburg and Wagner recognize that Tristan and Isolde’s relationship cannot survive in their cultural moment; either their love must diminish and succumb to societal expectation, or they must die with it. Once again, their relationship exists within an impossible tension. If it is worth living for, it must be equally worth dying for.

While death is a powerful force in each adaptation, the power of life is evident in the ability of certain characters to control who lives and who dies. Interestingly, while Malory positions this power in the hands of men, Strassburg and Wagner place it firmly in the hands of women. This is particularly evident in Strassburg’s version, where “[t]he female power to withhold a cure from the ailing male becomes particularly evident in the episode that leads to

Tristan's death . . . Tristan, now married to Isolde of the White Hands and again suffering from a poisonous wound, asks to have Isolde the Fair called to cure him" (Altpeter-Jones 11). As stated previously, if women are the desirable ideal object in a courtly love story, they inherently possess significant narrative power. Women hold the power over life; they choose who lives and who dies based on their presence. Even though Isolde was ready to kill Tristan to avenge her former lover, she claims that "into my eyes he looked; his helplessness touched me—the sword that slew Morold fell from my hands. His wounds I healed instead" (Wagner 21-22). Isolde, however, is unable to do this twice, and Tristan dies in her arms, not from her lack of ability, but from her lack of presence. In the opera, Tristan's excitement (which leads him to rip the bandages from his wounds) and Isolde's slowness in arrival doom him, while in Strassburg's version, Isolde of the White Hands' deliberate lie—namely, that Isolde the Fair is not coming to save him— is what spells Tristan's tragic end. Thus, although "women are far more frequently fashioned as healers who alone can remedy the wounds of love and restore the ailing male lover's health" (Altpeter-Jones 8), they are also positioned as potential killers. Isolde the Fair, desirable and paradoxically perfect, inadvertently ruins relationships and ends lives. Thus, death is equally a way to mark the difference between the sexes: "Tristan and Isolde have entirely separate deaths that are inscribed with a multitude of signs that clearly mark them out, dialectically to be sure, as vivid symbols of the masculine and feminine as the nineteenth century understood them" (Deathridge 145). The very music of the opera differentiates the two deaths at the end. Isolde's death is an entirely separate affair from Tristan's; first, she dies of no mortal wound, but dies almost of her own choice. Second, although Isolde's death is undoubtedly a transcendent affair, the operatic moment makes her "sound homesick for the absolute" (145). In her moment of

death, Isolde is oblivious and delirious, but still aiming for something real, something Wagner implied she could only find through death.

Love as Redemptive

Whether or not Tristan and Isolde's love is actually a redemptive, positive force remains in question in any adaptation. Most versions leave the answer to this question in suspense, as in almost every account, God's will is aligned with Tristan and Isolde's affair, meaning that "[t]raditional assessments of virtue and sin are complicated and sometimes overturned, with the lovers praised for their cleverness in escaping punishment" (Lacy 6). It can be quickly said that Malory's adaptation, as has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, does not esteem their affair as particularly worthy; while Tristan is certainly a better match for Isolde than Mark, he is morally no better than Mark in many ways, making their love affair less redemptive and cosmic and more practical and human. In Chapter XIV of *Le Morte D'Arthur* in particular, one can see that Tristan is not the most monogamous of knights. Even after he meets Isolde, he still cavorts with the wife of another knight, who Mark also desires for himself. Tristan's love for Isolde, while powerful, is not idealized in *Le Morte*. She is simply another woman that turned his head, another woman that he claims as his own. Interestingly, however, Malory does include references for how much Isolde loves Tristan, even if the piece is somewhat lacking in Tristan's reciprocation; at one point he writes, "[Isolde] knew Sir Tristram above all other" (Malory chapter LXXV). If pure, good love emerges from their affair, it is Isolde's doing, but it still does not rise to the level of any sort of ideal. The idealized understanding of love is more at work in Lancelot and Guinevere's love affair, perhaps because of the role of Arthur; since Arthur is the exalted king, it must also be true that Lancelot and Guinevere are good and pure in their own

actions. Mark, on the other hand, earns no redemption, and by extension neither does Tristan. Although it is said that “[Tristan and Isolde] made great joy daily together with all manner of mirths that they could devise” (Malory chapter LII), and there are many references to their abundant love for one another, Malory does not indicate that their love is somehow able to transcend expectations or boundaries. That Arthur and the knights support Tristan and Isolde comes more from their personal hatred of King Mark, rather than a recognition of the couple’s actual, genuine love. To Tristan and Isolde personally, their love is worth everything, but Malory makes it clear within the context of the entire story that it is not.

Wagner’s retelling does take Tristan and Isolde’s love to the cosmic level. Forces beyond human agency are at work; the ideal is witnessed in each interaction between the lovers. Wagner’s account releases Tristan and Isolde from culpability even without the love potion’s influence, as this transcendence means “[s]uch love is not altogether guilty; only, it is not made for this world” (Bodiştean 27). Death thus becomes a part of love; if their love is ideal and cosmic, Tristan and Isolde are bound together by forces stronger than life. Isolde’s death reveals this redemptive quality to the audience, as “[i]n the opera it is not Tristan, but, rather, Isolde who discovers how to redeem their love through self-renunciation. As she divulges this revelation to the audience, she sings about the ‘way out of the futile struggle between presence and pastness’ through renouncing their love for each other through self-destruction” (Dailey 6). Although the opera largely conveys the goodness of their affair, some would argue that the senselessness of their deaths does anything but. Robert Raphael, for example, contends that the redemptive aspect of Tristan and Isolde’s affair is nonexistent due to the destruction of their selfhood in the process.

Tristan and Isolde lose their capacity to be individuals when they are caught up in their affair. He argues:

In [the opera] the metaphysical dream of love as a realm of everlasting value becomes subjected to what may well be the most thorough-going scrutiny and dissection ever known, with the expected result that the transcendental vision of the lovers is un-masked for what it is: a complete illusion, a deceiving and destructive 'wave' that ultimately submerges their identities and engulfs their lives, exactly as with Siegfried and Brunnhilde. (Raphael 117)

This discussion thus necessitates a clearer definition of the word 'redemptive'. If redemptive means valuable and worthwhile, the basic interpretation of most versions of the story would position it as redemptive. If it means justifiable, then the inclusion of the love potion in most versions, which excuses Tristan and Isolde from the typical moral restrictions of the day, would equally prevent them from condemnation. Raphael sidesteps this by arguing that, in a modern context, their thoughtless pursuit of passion makes their affair unforgivable, even if morality is set aside. Further, in medieval European culture, "[t]he Church hierarchized the moral value attached to the emotion of desire, disqualifying some desires, such as greed or carnal desire, and placing Godly fervor above sensual desires" (Bonneuil 259). Thus, the medieval Christian traditions surrounding the story of Tristan and Isolde support Raphael's conclusion. According to courtly love's basic rules, the knight and the lady were supposed to deny themselves their passion. By succumbing to desire, Tristan and Isolde's affair immediately loses redemptive potential.

Similarly, it can even be questioned in any version whether or not Tristan and Isolde were even in love at all. If “in their desire for death the lovers feel more fully alive than ever” (Deathridge 143), then personal feelings for one another are not necessary to achieve this bliss. They are simply two people having an affair for the fun and excitement of it. The deeper meaning of the story is rubbed out with this interpretation—as people have been cheating on each other for centuries with much the same motive—and the chivalric quality of courtly love is thereby negated. Their deaths in each other’s arms becomes less an act of love for the other and more a move born out of their desperation to escape the status quo. The introduction of the love potion also changes the entire story; if Tristan and Isolde were really helpless to the effects of the magic, the reality of their love becomes something entirely contrived, and the fact that this path ends in their death means that the origins of their love cannot truly be good at all. In the opera, while Tristan’s servant Kurwenal is loyal enough to reunite the lovers, he dismally recognizes the illusory quality of their affair, singing, “listen what those fair dreams, listen what love has done, for him the noblest knight. Ah! Dream so fair—what hast thou done!” (Wagner 102). Upon learning about the potion, even Tristan sings, “O the bliss born of illusion! The hallowed joy made out of dreams!” (54). While in Strassburg’s adaptation the love potion is a very literal thing, drawing Isolde out of hate and plunging her into love when they, “casually thirsty, drink the potion by mistake” (Zuckerman 15), Wagner turns the potion into something more sublime. The love potion in the opera is more representative of their affair’s inevitability (15). Thus, Wagner legitimizes their love while simultaneously delegitimizing it; by obscuring the magical aspect and making the love potion more of an idealized force in itself, he turns their affair into something technically avoidable. Although the argument against Tristan and Isolde’s love is

certainly interesting, Wagner's opera, which ties Tristan and Isolde together on an almost metaphysical level, ultimately acknowledges their affair as real. Tristan and Isolde's overwhelming love is clearly idealized, if only for the sheer power of their emotional experience of one another. The perfection of their love for each other corrects all wrongs; love potion or not, Wagner gives his audience two people so drawn to one another, whether in hatred or in love, that to be anything but together is death. Their relationship is permissible because Wagner turns it into something eternal. Tristan and Isolde aim for a transcendent, idealized love. They desire the ideal because they are human. They fail to achieve it for the exact same reason.

Tristan and Isolde's love is not the only love at work in the opera. While in Malory's adaptation, Mark declares, "I may not love Sir Tristram because he loveth my queen and my wife, La Beale Isoud" (chapter LI), Strassburg, and by extension Wagner, show how Tristan is uniquely bonded to King Mark, as his nephew and/or loyal knight. Thus, their relationship is strained by Tristan's affair, just as Mark's respect and fondness for Isolde is as well. Tristan's loyalty to Mark is what encourages distance between him and Isolde at the beginning of Wagner's adaptation; when she demands his presence, he insists, "But should I leave the helm, how could I steer the ship safe to King Marke's land?" (Wagner 14), symbolically declaring Mark more important than Isolde in that moment. The eventual affair is shown to hurt Tristan as much as Mark, as he begs for his uncle to "Ask me not to tell what thou dost ask me—that canst thou never know" (84). This is what makes the love triangle, in the purest form, a triangle; all three members respect and are devoted to the other two, creating the ultimate tragedy—any choice each member makes hurts that individual as well as another. The division comes when the idealized nature of the affair is revealed, dividing the loves in the trio in half, as "If the lovers'

love belongs to the miraculous, it is transcendent, tenebrous and abyssal, the other kind of love belongs to the type of logical relationships, it is earthly and motivated, basically born out of respect” (Bodiștean 21). The idealized love of Tristan and Isolde cannot coexist with the earthly love Mark holds for each, and inevitably, the entire affair falls to pieces. The theme of love is thus tenuous in any adaptation. While all three writers acknowledge Tristan and Isolde’s love as legitimate in their own works, the modern reader, much like Mark himself, might have a difficult time making sense of the idealization Wagner and Strassburg attempt to achieve.

Conclusion

Tristan and Isolde’s love is complex and often paradoxical, but there is something inherently compelling to it, as the legend has taken hundreds of forms across history through the voices of hundreds of writers. Throughout history, it has been portrayed as a chosen inescapability, an admirable betrayal, a hopeful tragedy. This paradox is key to the story’s appeal—Tristan and Isolde represent the pure desperation of humankind for ideal love to exist and simultaneously the broken realization that it cannot. Three of the most significant adaptations of the tale, namely Wagner’s, Strassburg’s, and Malory’s, have served to create the story most people imagine today. Malory’s version contextualized Tristan and Isolde permanently within Arthurian legend, Strassburg created a version that both imitated and utterly disregarded the standards of courtly literature, and Wagner introduced the emotional, Romantic aspect to the story. All three take the paradoxes and turn them into art, with Malory and Wagner romanticizing the Arthurian Middle Ages and Strassburg and Wagner sidestepping the moral complications of the affair to present it as a sublime ideal, a love worth destruction. Regardless of the differences between each writer’s adaptation, Tristan and Isolde’s romance remains

significant for the impact it had on later romances, such as Guinevere and Lancelot, and for the constant motif of forbidden love as captivating, if only because it is uncontrollable.

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