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Zwîvalaere:
King Mark as a Site of Conflict
in the Tristan Legend.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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zwîvalaere: a waverer; a doubter;
one who is in two minds;
a man divided.

Abstract

This thesis examines the shifting portrayals of the character of King Mark in six medieval Tristan texts. Over a period of three centuries the depiction of Mark slowly deteriorates from the noble king presented by the early poems to the treacherous and malevolent villain found in Malory's works. Betrayed by both his nephew and his wife, Mark's character has tragic possibilities which can detract from the sympathetic portrayal of the central lovers. In their illicit passion, Tristan and Iseult violate feudal, familial, and emotional bonds with Mark; if the lovers are to retain their honour, Mark must seem worthy of betrayal. Tristan's disloyalty is lessened when his uncle becomes a murderous violator of kinship bonds; Iseult's infidelity becomes understandable when her husband becomes vicious and lustful; and the lovers' subversion of Mark's authority becomes acceptable when his kingship is shown to be corrupt.

As uncle, husband and king, Mark is portrayed as trapped by his circumstances; while the lovers accept their doom passively, Mark is an individual waging a futile war against fate. Like Tristan, he is constantly torn between love and honour, between his public duty to uphold the social order and his private desire for Iseult. As the site of moral and social conflict, Mark is arguably the most interesting and problematic character of the Tristan legend.

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INTRODUCTION

King Mark of Cornwall has been described rightly by scholars as ‘the most problematic figure’ in the Tristan legend.¹ Many studies of the early Tristan poems have seen him as a foolish, cruel and indecisive cuckold, ‘a character undeserving of admiration’,² while others have seen him as the heroic and blameless victim of circumstance, ‘a dignified and noble character’.³ The Mark of the courtly versions has been described variously as a lustful and weak-willed waverer,⁴ as a noble and suffering figure, and as ‘a friendly, gentle - even timid - person’.⁵ Open to many interpretations, the characterisation of the cuckold king has also been frequently attacked as inconsistent.⁶ From the confusion of these disparate critical opinions, Mark emerges as a troubling figure; he is repeatedly betrayed by the protagonists, who are also the two people he loves and trusts most in the world. His very real wrongs threaten to direct the audience’s sympathies away from the lovers to himself; even today, scholars refer to him as ‘this most moving character.’⁷ To simplify the moral tangle of the Tristan legend, the portrayal of Mark’s character steadily deteriorates from the wronged and noble warrior of Eilhart von Oberg’s twelfth-century *Tristrant*, to the flawed figure of Gottfried’s thirteenth-century *Tristan*, until he appears as the treacherous and cowardly epitome of villainy in Malory’s *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*.⁸

Even though Mark is almost as important a character as the two protagonists, there are surprisingly few studies focusing directly on the cuckold king, although many Tristan scholars have commented in passing on the steady deterioration of his portrayal, on the wild inconsistencies they find within certain texts, and on the difficulty of reconciling his good qualities with his more repellent actions. Furthermore, analysis of Mark’s character tends to suffer in those character studies which principally focus on Tristan. ‘Mark scholarship’ is restricted mainly to a few brief studies that examine

¹ A.T. Hatto, Introduction, 26.

² Barbara Nelson Sargent-Baur, “Love and Rivalry in Béroul’s *Tristrant*,” 300.

³ John Edward Kerr, “The Character of Marc in Myth and Legend,” 37.

⁴ W.T.H. Jackson, “Gottfried von Strassburg,” 150.

⁵ William C. McDonald, “Gottfried’s Version of the Ovidian Husband Figure,” 257.

⁶ For example, see Fanni Bogdanow’s “Theme and Character: The Two Faces of King Mark,” where she argues that ‘the most striking feature of the presentation of King Mark in the successive romances of Tristan is the lack of consistency in the King’s behaviour,’ 89.

⁷ Diana Tyson, “Some Thoughts on the Character of King Mark in Béroul’s *Tristrant*,” 75.

⁸ The key characters’ names are spelt differently in each text; I have chosen to use the appropriate variations when discussing a specific text, and to use the forms ‘Mark’, ‘Tristan’, and ‘Iseult’ when referring to the characters generally.

Mark's behaviour in a certain episode of a specific text. Frederike Wiesmann-Wiedemann, in her "Mark: From Victim to Villain", and Robert L. Surles, in his "Mark of Cornwall: Noble, Ignoble, Ignored," have treated briefly some of the themes of this study, but a comprehensive analysis of the steadily worsening portrayals of Mark, which must span several languages and centuries, deserves more attention than the nature of these articles allow. This study is a comparative analysis of Mark's character in six key texts: Béroul's *Tristan*, Eilhart von Oberg's *Tristrant*, Thomas of Britain's *Tristan*, Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*, the French *Prose Tristan*, and Thomas Malory's *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*.⁹ It is not my intention to make judgmental comparisons between the texts, as Eilhart's work in particular has suffered in scholarly comparisons to Gottfried's poem.¹⁰

King Mark makes his earliest appearance in the Welsh triads, as 'March ap Meirchion', husband of Essylt, and uncle to Drystan, who successfully defends his pigs from a thieving King Arthur.¹¹ Traces of his Celtic origins remain in his name; 'March' means 'horse' in Welsh, Breton, and Cornish, and Béroul's Marc is described as possessing horse's ears.¹² Most scholars accept the theory that the Tristan legend is Pictish in origin; Schoepperle identified a number of distinctive Irish motifs in the romance, and compared it with analogous Irish legends.¹³ King Conchubar lost his young bride Deirdre to Naisi, and King Finn lost his wife Grainne to his much-loved nephew, Diarmid. Mark certainly belongs with these kings, as an older man married to a young bride who chooses to elope with one of his young warriors into a forest wilderness. His role as a middle-aged cuckold king can be seen as reflecting certain

⁹ I have chosen to use Norris J. Lacy's edition of Béroul's *Tristan*, and my translations are adapted from Lacy's work (New York: Garland, 1989). I have taken my German text for Eilhart's *Tristrant* from Franz Lichtenstein's edition (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1973), and adapted J.W. Thomas' lively translation (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1978.) I have relied heavily on A.T. Hatto's splendid translation for both Gottfried and Thomas' poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), taking the original texts from Friedrich Ranke's edition of *Tristan*, Bertina Wind's edition of *Tristrant*, and from the Carlisle fragment as published by Michael Benskin, Tony Hunt and Ian Short in *Romania* 113, "Un Nouveau Fragment du 'Tristan' de Thomas." (1995). I have principally worked with the first two books of Renée L. Curtis' three-volume edition of the *Prose Tristan*, based on manuscript C, which was chosen by Curtis as the most representative of the many *Prose* manuscripts. Unfortunately, this edition lacks the crucial ending of the romance, so I have also referred to Philippe Ménard's nine-volume edition, which is based on manuscript A. Due to the scarcity of English translations of this work, the translations of the *Prose* quoted in this study are my own. I have used Vinaver's classic edition *Malory: Works* for my analysis of the *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*, but I have decided against translating Malory's prose.

¹⁰ Frederick Whitehead in his "The Early Tristan Poems" criticises Eilhart's 'complete lack of psychological motivation,' 140.

¹¹ Rachel Bromwich, "The Welsh Triads," 48.

¹² For a detailed discussion of this peculiar characteristic, see Helaine Newstead's "King Marc of Cornwall," 246-253.

¹³ See Gertrude Schoepperle's *Tristan and Isolt: A Study of the Sources*.

insecurities about the aging warrior in a heroic culture where youth and prowess were valued highly. Padel, however, attacked the Pictish theory as resting on scanty evidence; examining the many details of Cornish tradition in Bérout's *Tristan*, he concluded that the early Tristan legend came to France from Cornwall.¹⁴ Finally, Newstead has argued cogently that Welsh, Cornish, Breton and Irish mythology all contributed to the story before it reached the poets of twelfth century France.¹⁵

Most scholars are in agreement that Bérout, Eilhart, Thomas, and the author of the *Prose Tristan* drew their works from a common source, written around 1150, which is no longer extant.¹⁶ Eilhart von Oberg's *Tristrant* presents the earliest complete account of the legend, and is believed to follow the *estoire* most closely in terms of narrative content. Three early manuscripts from the end of the twelfth-century contain Eilhart's work in a fragmentary form, while several fifteenth century manuscripts, including a Czech translation, contain the complete narrative, and it has been possible for scholars to piece together Eilhart's original text with reasonable accuracy. However, scholarly opinion is split as to both the origins and the originator of the work, though most agree that Eilhart von Oberg composed the poem sometime between 1170 and 1190. His poem presents a Tristan story with few courtly refinements, with the savage bones of the Celtic original very close to the surface. This is the story of Tristrant as warrior and epic hero, nephew to a great warrior king, who is tragically interrupted in his quest for greatness by his love for his uncle's wife. *Tristrant* lacks the psychological detail and courtly intrigue of his French contemporaries' works, but there is an overwhelming sense of an inscrutable fate at work in the lives of the lovers, of an enigmatic force working towards their destruction.¹⁷ Eilhart's Mark, also a victim of these forces, has been characterised by scholars as either a cruel tyrant, or the noble representative of 'everything that is good and proper.'¹⁸ The truth lies somewhere between the two extremes, and August Closs at least found 'a convincing unity in the character of Mark; here Eilhart surpasses Thomas and Gottfried.'¹⁹

Bérout's poem also dates from the second half of the twelfth century, and his narrative is similarly based on the putative archetype. Unfortunately, the manuscript containing his work has survived in poor condition, missing leaves from both the

¹⁴ O.J. Padel, "The Cornish Background of the Tristan Studies," 68-73.

¹⁵ Helaine Newstead, "Origin and Growth of the Tristan Legend," 124-25.

¹⁶ Joseph Bedier, *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas*, II, 168 - 78; Schoepperle, 5-10.

¹⁷ J.W. Thomas, Introduction, 4-10.

¹⁸ Frederike Wiesmann-Wiedemann, "From Victim to Villain: King Mark", 53.

¹⁹ August Closs, Introduction, xxxi.

beginning and the end. Knowledge of the author remains as fragmentary as the text, and the possibility of multiple authors has been suggested. His poem, together with Eilhart's *Tristrant* and the *Folie Tristan de Berne*, is referred to by scholars as the *version commune*, but though his narrative resembles Eilhart's in basic content, his tone is a very different matter. Bérout's *Tristran* often has the quality of a fabliau; his lovers are laughing, bawdy tricksters, who take a 'childlike, almost malicious pleasure' in their deception of Marc.²⁰ Bérout's characterisation of Marc is much debated. Past studies have found him guilty of being too easily deceived, too readily influenced, and too swiftly enraged, though more recent analyses have taken a more sympathetic view; Atkinson, for example, has pointed out that Marc is presented consistently within the text as a blameless party, a decent man who is wronged by both the lovers and his barons.²¹

Thomas of Britain's *Tristran* only survives in a fragmentary form, but is still valuable for the purposes of this study. While Thomas based his poem on the same putative archetype as Bérout and Eilhart, he produced a radically different version of the Tristan legend, known as the *version courtoise*. Works belonging to this branch, based on Thomas' *Tristran*, include the *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*, the Norse *Tristrams saga*, the English *Sir Tristram*, and Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*. I have not used Bédier's worthy effort at reconstructing Thomas, preferring to concentrate on the extant fragments. These now include the Carlisle fragment of 154 verses, found in 1997 in the abbey of Holm Cultram in Cumberland. Though partly mutilated, these verses contain the episode of Marc's wedding night, and are invaluable in proving that Thomas did not have his Marc drink the love potion, contrary to all previous scholarly assumptions.

It is clear that Thomas refined the earlier version to suit courtly tastes, omitting or softening many of the more repellent episodes from his poem, and he explored in exquisite detail the emotions of the characters. He portrays Marc more as a suffering lover rather than as a wronged king, though he made Marc the ruler of both England and Cornwall. Whitehead argues that 'the character of Mark is softened, and made more sympathetic.'²² But Surles is also correct in asserting that 'it is the version of Thomas which "opens the door" to a later (and completely differing) version of King Mark.'²³ His most famous literary successor, Gottfried, 'perceived that such a figure harboured

²⁰ Norris J. Lacy, Introduction, xiii.

²¹ J. Keith Atkinson, "Vengeance in Bérout's *Tristan*," 38.

²² Frederick Whitehead, "The Early *Tristan* Poems", 140.

²³ Robert L. Surles, "Mark: Noble, Ignoble, Ignored," 61.

tragic possibilities',²⁴ and changed the character of his Mark accordingly to prevent his audience's sympathy being directed away from the lovers.

Written in the early thirteenth century, Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* now stands as the classic version of the legend, although only five-sixths of his poem was completed. Once again, little is known about the author beyond what may be deduced from his work. Gottfried claims to be writing for a select group of noble lovers, 'edelen herzen',²⁵ and ambitiously, he attempts to present a 'spiritualised conception ... of what is essentially an anti-social passion.'²⁶ Drawing upon classical and Christian mysticism, Gottfried elevates this passion to a spiritual ideal, developing a cult of love which only elite lovers might join.²⁷ Mark is not numbered among Gottfried's elite, and a noticeable deterioration in the portrayal of his character can be found within Gottfried's poem alone. His Mark changes gradually from his first appearance as a mighty king into a weak husband who wilfully chooses the cuckold's blindness.

Though there is no reason to believe that the author of the *Prose Tristan* had access to Gottfried's work, he was responding to similar narrative pressures when he made his Marc a villain. The thirteenth-century *Prose Tristan* is a startlingly different work to the poems that preceded it. In the past, authorship has been attributed to Luce del Gat and Hélié de Boron, but as both claims have since been greatly disputed, it is safer to refer simply to the *Prose* author. In his work the Tristan legend is fully integrated into the Arthurian world for the first time, and greatly extended by many interpolations; its long rambling narrative includes a succession of knightly adventures, tournaments and quests, which are often have little relevance to the central love story. Vinaver has calculated that the traditional episodes of the Tristan story take up only a fiftieth of the *Prose*'s narrative.²⁸ Though the author has been faulted for the loose and unwieldy structure of the work, he cannot be faulted for lack of originality. His many innovations include the addition of a lengthy history of Marc and Tristan's family, the introduction of the Saracen knight Palamedes as Iseut's unrequited lover, and the complete transformation of Marc's character into a malevolent villain. He also dramatically alters the manner of Tristan's death.

²⁴ Hatto, 27.

²⁵ 'noble hearts'

²⁶ Joan Tasker Grimbert, Introduction, xxvi.

²⁷ I have carefully avoided referring to 'courtly love', as this convenient little phrase has now become a problematic and much-debated concept. Furthermore, W.T.H. Jackson has differentiated between 'Tristan-love' and courtly love in F.X. Newman's *The Meaning of Courtly Love* 71-73.

²⁸ Eugene Vinaver, *Etudes sur le Prose Tristan*, 5.

Although the *Prose Tristan* is treated with little enthusiasm by most modern scholars, it achieved a great popularity in its time, and survives in some seventy-eight manuscripts. I have chosen to work with the Carpentras 404 manuscript, supplemented by MS. A, rather than with MS. 103, the version chosen by Bedier for his comparative study; Curtis has argued conclusively that ‘there was hardly a worst text which Bedier could have chosen’ as representative of the *Prose* tradition than this abridged and much-altered redaction.²⁹ Unfortunately, although Malory certainly used the Second Version of the *Prose Tristan* as a source for his Tristan narrative, his version of the ‘Frensshe booke’ is believed to be no longer extant.

Of Sir Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones* E.K. Chambers once wrote that ‘Malory would have done better to have left the Tristan alone.’³⁰ Even though Malory ruthlessly abridged his source, the *Book* that lies at the heart of his works is notorious for the same unwieldiness that characterises his source. Vinaver has written that ‘in the long and monotonous *Book of Sir Tristram*, Malory found himself defeated by the ingenuity of the French writers.’³¹ Malory also abridged many of the traditional episodes of the Tristan legend, and like Eilhart, he focused on Tristram’s prowess as a knight of ‘worshyp’, rather than his love for Isode. Yet while Isode’s role is much diminished, Mark’s character gained a new importance in Malory’s conception as the enemy of all true knighthood, the villainous embodiment of treachery and cowardice. I have chosen to focus on the *Book of Sir Tristram* as one of ‘a series of self-contained stories’, and have referred to the rest of Malory’s works only when relevant.

It is my intent to follow the shifting character of Mark through a detailed comparative study of these six texts, charting his deterioration as the nature of medieval romance shifts, and examining the moral conflicts and the social tensions that centre on his character. The wide variation in these portrayals of the cuckold king demonstrates the flexible nature of his character which is unrestricted by heroic limitations. Each author is able to adapt Mark’s behaviour and motivations to suit the purpose of their own retelling of the Tristan story. Though his roles are always the same - he is always uncle to Tristan, husband to Iseult, and king to Cornwall - in his many portrayals he can

²⁹ Renee L. Curtis, *Tristan Studies*, 58-65.

³⁰ E.K. Chambers, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 5.

³¹ Eugene Vinaver, “Introduction,” viii.

be both victim and villain, appealing and repellent, consistent and inconsistent, comical and tragic.