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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
Master of Arts in English Literature
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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. Surlles, 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 *Tristan*, 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 of 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 *Tristrans 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 Beroul'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 Hélie 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.

MARK AS UNCLE: Mark and Tristan

Introduction

In his *Cligés*, Chrétien de Troyes refers to Tristan as King Mark's nephew, 'li nié le roi Marc' (2750). In all the Tristan texts, he draws his identity repeatedly from his relationship with Mark. Before he has established his reputation as warrior, minstrel, or hunter, his claim to kinship with the King of Cornwall gives him both status and the right to defend Mark's realm as his near-relation by entering into combat with the Morholt. The kinship bond between these two characters, carrying the dual demands of affection and loyalty, is crucial to the Tristan story. The complex relationship between Mark and Tristan, based on a powerful mélange of feudal obligations, blood ties, and genuine comradely affection, is developed prior to Tristan's love affair with Mark's wife. Thus the essential conflict between love and honour that exists at the heart of the Tristan texts depends on how strongly each author establishes this bond before ever Iseult makes her entrance.

While the early Tristan poems unflinchingly emphasise the importance and strength of the bond between uncle and nephew, the author of the *Prose Tristan* and Malory diminish it by portraying a Mark who receives far more love and loyalty from his nephew than he returns to him. In the prose works, Tristan's betrayal of the kinship bond, so valued by feudal society,³² becomes more acceptable when the bond is first devalued by Mark's treachery. By portraying Mark as unworthy of his nephew's love, the raw confrontation between Tristan's loyalties to his only living relation and his loyalties to his love, which is so evident in the poems, is substantially weakened. His legitimate bond with an uncle who is treacherous, deceptive, and murderous can provide no real competition for his illegitimate bond with his uncle's wife.

In the prose works, Mark's realm has been subsumed fully into Arthurian Britain, and matters of inheritance are no longer a pressing problem. In the poems, the future security of Cornwall, which is crucially threatened by Mark's lack of a legitimate son, makes Tristan's right to inheritance a vital issue. Roger Pensom has identified Bérout's text as the site of an essential conflict between the dominant inheritance

³² For a discussion of the complex concept of feudalism, see Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society*, and Fredric L. Cheyette's *Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe*, especially 12-62.

system dictated by feudal primogeniture, and the Celtic principle of matrilineal/cognatic descent.³³ This tension exists within all four of the early Tristan poems, where Tristan's position as Mark's favoured heir is a cause of serious conflict within the court. Mark is a childless king, and Tristan has a right to inheritance as his younger male relative who has proved his value in protecting the realm by endangering his own person in combat. However, Tristan's claim to kinship is through the female line, as the son of Mark's sister Blanchefleur; it does not sit easily with the feudal structures that Mark and, in turn, his barons represent.

Mark's close relationship to Tristan, and the problems of inheritance that this kinship carries with it, add considerably to the complexity of the basic love triangle plot. In marrying Iseult, Mark places a bar between Tristan and his inheritance of Cornwall; in sleeping with Iseult, Tristan muddies the waters both for his own future prospects and for any children that Iseult might bear. In their blind disregard for the sanctity of kinship bonds, with the additional threat to legitimate inheritance that their affair implies, the poems underline that their love must exist in opposition to the social order that King Mark represents. It is only by radically changing the characterisation of Mark into a villain who consistently violates kinship bonds to the extent of murdering several members of his own family that the prose authors can reasonably unite the approval of society with their adulterous lovers.

Kinship

The tragic love of Tristan's parents provides both prequel and parallel to the central part of the story, foreshadowing Tristan's own tragedy. The young Rivalin, Tristan's father, comes to King Mark's aid against a foreign threat, and wins his sister from him, just as the young Tristan will later come to his aid against the Irish Morholt, and win his wife. Unfortunately, the story of the young Mark, Blanchefleur, and Rivalin is missing from the surviving manuscripts of Bérout and Thomas of Britain, but the essential narrative is unlikely to differ greatly in substance from the versions presented by Eilhart and Gottfried.

³³ Roger Pensom, *Reading Bérout's Tristan*, 17.

Eilhart treats the story of Blankeflur and Rivalin with characteristic narrative economy. Mark is introduced as a mighty king whose realm is threatened by outside forces in the form of an aggressive and predatory Irish lord. Rivalin, King of Lohenois, described simply as ‘ein koning riche’, is one of the foreign warriors who comes to his aid, and serves him as a vassal because of his desire for Mark’s sister, named Blankeflur. Eilhart’s description of their courtship is remarkably concise; Rivalin is wounded, wins her favour, lies with her, and carries her off once the war with Ireland is over. Made ill by the sea-journey, she dies giving birth to Rivalin’s son, and is greatly mourned. Mark’s reaction to this train of events is not recorded here, but the brief narrative given presents a rather unorthodox wooing of a king’s sister, while the matter of Tristrant’s illegitimacy poses an interesting question when tension later arises over his position as Mark’s heir.

The *version courtoise* takes this stark narrative of Tristan’s beginnings, which simply provides a tragic conception for Tristrant to match his tragic ending, and turned it into a grand love affair of secret passions that prefigures the central love story. Gottfried characterises Rivalin, here the lord of Parmenie, as a very young and rash knight, lacking in either moderation or self-control. Without any given motive, Rivalin’s first recorded action is to attack his neighbour Duke Morgan, to whom he owes feudal allegiance for one of his territories. This is his first rebellion against the feudal order; his second lies in his elopement with his new lord’s sister, an action taken without Mark’s permission. Eilhart presented Tristrant’s father as a king, helping a young Mark in time of invasion, but in Gottfried’s version, Mark is clearly Rivalin’s superior in rank. King Mark rules all of Cornwall and England, Cornwall by hereditary right and England by merit; Rivalin comes as a young knight to his court, hoping to learn polish and gain honour by serving him. Mark welcomes him with all honours, his generous reception of the boy reflecting his greatness. Mark, ‘the good, the courteous and magnanimous,’ holds the position given in later texts to Arthur, as the great ruler of Britain to whose court young knights come flocking to prove themselves.

Because of this disparity in rank, Rivalin’s love for Mark’s sister is kept a secret from the King. As the *Tristrams saga* explains, it must be concealed from Mark that ‘sá hinn ungi riddari ok nýliga komandi til hirðar Markis kóngs hefði slíka ætlan ok vilja til

svá ágætrar ok náskyldrar hans frændkonu' (41).³⁴ Their secret love is as doomed as their son's will be; in a disturbing metaphor, Gottfried describes the young Blanche-flor and Rivalin as limed birds, fatally ensnared by their passion. Soon after they discover their mutual affection, an enemy invades Mark's land, and Rivalin is hurt fighting for Mark: 'sin vriunt der künic Marke / der clagete in also starke, / daz er durch nie dekeinen man / so nahe gende clage gewan' (1155-58).³⁵ Blanche-flor, lamenting even more, goes secretly to the wounded Rivalin, and in their grief and pain, Tristan is conceived.

Blanche-flor is aware of the penalties of bearing an illegitimate child; firstly, she fears, Mark will put her to a shameful death, or secondly, disinherit her and deprive her of both status and property. It is interesting to see that Blanche-flor ranks the loss of her honour and inheritance rights as a worse fate than the loss of her life. She is rightly concerned for the prospects of a child without any legal links to his father, and that Mark's own honour will be tainted by her sexual misbehaviour. In many ways, Mark's sister resembles his future wife; she has broken the rules of behaviour for royal women, and is afraid both of Mark's public shame and of his royal rage. Her solution is to run away with Rivalin. After Rivalin has been prompted by advice from his lieutenant Rual le Foitenant, she is married according to Christian rites in the presence of Rivalin's kinsmen and vassals, which legitimises their elopement and confirms the feudal rights of her child. Rivalin then dies fighting Duke Morgan over his territories, Blanche-flor dies in childbirth, and the infant Tristan, now in considerable peril as the sole heir to his father's disputed lands, is left to be raised by Rual as his own son. Rual proves to be a wiser ruler than Tristan's natural father, settling the conflict with Morgan by a diplomatic surrender that will preserve Tristan's land until he is of age to claim it.

Mark next enters the story after some fourteen years have passed, when Tristan has entered adolescence and comes to his court as a young and untried man, passing under a false name in the best heroic tradition. Eilhart's Tristrant goes willingly to his uncle's court to win greatness there, and deliberately chooses not to capitalise on his relationship to the King; Gottfried's hero, under the illusion that he is Rual's natural son, is kidnapped by Norwegian merchants and arrives by chance in Cornwall, as unaware as Mark himself of their kinship. Eilhart's version comes closer to the reality

³⁴ 'such a young knight, newly arrived at his court, harboured such intentions and desires for such a noble, close relative.'

³⁵ 'His dear friend Mark lamented him with a heart-rending vehemence he had never felt before for any man.'

of twelfth-century arrangements for young noblemen, according to Georges Duby's research.

The bachelor hero ... left his father's house as a boy to be a kind of apprentice in the house of another, very often that of his mother's brother. This practice arose out of the customary inequality of rank between husbands and wives in the aristocracy. The maternal and usually superior line, by taking these boys in as soon as they reached the age of reason, strengthened its hold on the bearers of the ancestral blood born of another family.³⁶

Whether he arrives by design or accident, Tristan's arrival and subsequent welcome at his maternal uncle's court reflects a common medieval societal practice. In most versions of the story, Mark has another nephew living at his court, known as Andret, who appears as a jealous enemy of his better-loved cousin. Eilhart observes disapprovingly that his fondness for evil is so great that kinship does not matter to him. Andret never appears to be a possible heir for Cornwall; he seems to be an aimless troublemaker, without status or role at the court beyond his claim to kinship with the King. As his parentage is never given, it is possible that Andret is an illegitimate offshoot of Mark's family, which might explain in part his malice towards Tristan. Because of their close relationship, Mark is forced to listen to his suspicions, but while he cannot ignore him, their relationship is a prickly one at best in the poems. It is only in the *Prose* that Andret's character becomes more fully rounded as the advisor that spurs his uncle on in treachery.

In Eilhart's work, Mark welcomes the anonymous Tristrant with all the generosity of a great monarch, and is duly impressed by his nephew's skills. Gottfried goes a step further in depicting the relationship between Mark and Tristan as springing from a deeper root than simple admiration and companionship. The bond between these two men, who are both unaware of their close kinship, is represented as both powerful and innate.

nu Tristan den künic sehen began,
er begunde im wol gevallen

³⁶ See Georges Duby's work on medieval marriages, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 221.

vor den andern allen;
 sin herze in sunder uz erlas,
 wan er von sinem bluote was:
 diu natiure zoch in dar. (3240-45)

(Now when Tristan first saw the King, he took a liking to him more than to all the rest. His heart singled him out, for Mark was of his own blood – instinct drew him towards him.)

Mark is similarly drawn towards him:

der sach in gerne und was sin vro,
 wan in truog och sin herze dar
 und nam sin gerne und ofte war (3396-98)

(The King liked to see him and was glad to have him, since he was drawn to him in his heart.)

The strength of the bond between maternal uncle and nephew is emphasised in earlier medieval literature. Beowulf faithfully serves his uncle Hygelac, Roland is greatly beloved of his uncle Charlemagne, Gawain holds an esteemed position in Arthur's court as his favourite nephew, and the bond between each uncle and nephew is strengthened by the vassalic tie. In Bérout's poem, the importance attached to this relationship is emphasised by the excuses Iseut gives Marc for displaying such affection towards Tristan:

Sire, jos tien por mon seignor,
 Et il est vostre niés, ç'oi dire.
 Por vos l'ai je tant amé, sire. (424-26)

(Sir, you are my lord, and he is of course your nephew; for your sake I have loved him, sir.)

In the episode where Marc spies on the lovers from a pine tree, Iseut claims for the eavesdropper's benefit that her love for Tristan is a dutiful extension of her love for her husband.³⁷

Por ce qu'eres du parenté
 Vos avoie je en cherté.
 Je quidai jadis que ma mere
 Amast molt les parenz mon pere;
 Et disoit ce, que la mollier
 N'en avroit ja son seignor chier
 Qui les parenz n'en amereit. (71-77)

(Because you were his relative, I held you very dear. I recall that in the past my mother loved my father's family a great deal, and she said that a wife does not love her husband very much if she does not also love his relatives.)

As Pensom has observed, 'it is clear that she is speaking for a society that attached a strong affective value to the maternal uncle/sister's son relationship.'³⁸ Bell and Farnsworth have both argued in their separate works on the German epic and the French *chanson de geste* that the strength of these literary relationships can be seen as a surviving legacy from earlier Celtic matrilineal kinship structures.³⁹ Despite the fraught nature of the relationship presented by this fragment, a strong bond still exists between uncle and nephew. Tristan may call down the vengeance of God readily upon the meddling barons, but never upon his uncle. Dinas points out to Marc that if he should have Iseut killed, an enraged Tristan may wreak vengeance upon his vassals and lands, yet Dinas is not concerned for Marc's personal safety: "Vos estes oncle et il tes niés: / A vos ne mesferoit il mie." (1104-5).⁴⁰ It is as simple as that.

In the German poems, Mark assumes the role of Tristan's dead father, by right of succession; he is described as his 'unverwande vater.' Their bond is strengthened

³⁷ Gottfried's lovers also exploit the kinship bond by using it as a pretext for their obvious affection: 'nobody had any idea that their words or acts were inspired by any affection other than what came from the close kinship which all knew existed between Mark and Tristan, with which they trafficked dishonestly and won their sport by cheating.' (Hatto, 212.)

³⁸ Pensom, 16.

³⁹ See Clair Hayden Bell, *The Sister's Son in the Medieval German Epic: A Study in the Survival of Matriliney*, and William Oliver Farnsworth, *Uncle and Nephew in the Old French Chansons de Geste: A Study in the Survival of Matriarchy*.

⁴⁰ 'You are his uncle and he your nephew; he will not harm you in any way.'

further by the mystical paternity that the act of conferring knighthood creates.⁴¹ Malory's work emphasises the strength of this bond that can, when necessary, compete successfully with familial loyalties, as seen in the example of the young Gareth's loyalty to Lancelot. Lancelot himself eventually refuses to war against 'that noble kyng that made me knyght.' In Eilhart's work, Tristrant's identity is only revealed *after* his uncle has made him a knight solely on the basis of his merits rather than through any obligation of kinship, and even then Tristrant only gives his parentage under duress, when the Morolt demands that the champion of Cornwall possess royal blood equal to his own. His declaration is both formal and public;

sie was von adele wol vri
 Blankeflûr die mûtir mîn.
 mîn vater heizzet Rivalîn
 von Lohenois bin ich geborn
 und bin Markes swestir son. (633-36)

'Blankeflur, my mother, was of free nobility, and my father's name is Rivalin. I was born a prince of Lohenois and am the son of Mark's sister.)

Mark is caught by mixed emotions:

dô wart dem koninge beide
 liebe und ouch leide:
 liebe, daz he daz weste
 daz he was ein son sîner swestir;
 sô was im inniglichen leit
 daz her die grôzin erbeit
 sô junger wolde grîfen an. (637-43)

(the king was both pleased and pained; pleased to know that it was his sister's son, deeply pained that he, so young, wanted to brave such great peril.)

In a lengthy dialogue, Mark does his best to reason with Tristrant and cajole him away from a combat that he believes must be fatal to a young and untried knight. At last

⁴¹ See Beverly Kennedy's work on knighthood for a discussion of the importance of a knight's 'fader in knyghthode', *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 131-3.

Mark grows angry, and refuses outright to let him fight. But his reaction, springing from a worthy affection for his nephew, would deny his kingdom a sorely needed champion. His private inclination to save his beloved Tristrant is at odds with his public duty to provide Cornwall with an opponent for the Morolt in order that conflict may be settled with a minimum of lives lost. But Tristan has fortunately tricked him into a binding vow that Mark as a honourable man is forced to keep. Trapped by the obligations of his own honour, he has no choice but to give in.

In his grand revelation scene, Gottfried, faced with the difficulty of Tristan's own ignorance of their relationship, must have Rual le Foitenant suddenly arrive in Cornwall to disclose his foster-son's true parentage. Listening to the story of his sister's death, Mark is reduced to tears. Blanche-flor had earlier feared his vengeful rages, but another side of his personality is now revealed, as he grieves deeply for her, and promises to replace Rivalin as father to his orphaned nephew. Tristan's first and only request of his new father is that he may be knighted. Unlike Eilhart's Tristrant, he does not trick Mark into sending him as the Cornish champion against the Irish knight, but publicly challenges Morold to single combat before the King and all the Cornish lords. As a honourable knight, there is now no way out for Tristan; Mark does not even attempt to dissuade him. But Gottfried's Mark also places his personal love for Tristan above his public duty towards his realm:

ern haete keinen trost dar an,
 ezn waere Tristandes tot,
 und haete gerne jene not
 iemer umbe den zins geliten,
 daz der kampf waere vermiten. (6526-30)

(He was sure that Tristan would die and would gladly have gone on suffering the other hardship of the tribute, if only the duel could be waived.)

In both versions of this episode Mark's affection for his nephew is underlined when he acts as Tristan's squire, arming him personally:

dô hîz der koning her vore tragin
 sîn stêlîne harnas,
 daz im harte lîp was,

und gap ez hêren Tristrande.
 mit sînen koninglîchin handin
 wâpente her den jungeling.
 daz wârin gar vrûntlîche ding!
 dâ wart die grôze lîbe schîn. (750-58)

(Then the king ordered that his steel armour (of which he was very fond) be brought, and he gave it to Sir Tristrant; he armed the youth with his own royal hands. These were very friendly acts, and showed his great affection)

The personal gifts of the King's own horse, armour, and sword convey with them the authority to act as Cornwall's defender.

After the combat, when Tristrant's wounds begin to reek, only Mark, Tinas the good steward, and the faithful Kurneval are willing to tend him. As Tristrant is sent to sea, the focus is once again on Mark's emotions:

dem rîchen koninge Markin
 nî sô leide geschach:
 do he sînen lîben nebin sach
 von dem stade vlîzen einen,
 sîne rûwe was nicht cleine:
 mit weinenden ougen,
 solt ir mir gelouben
 sach der koning nâch sînem nebin. (1140 - 47)

(Nothing so painful ever happened to the mighty king. His grief was not little when he saw his dear nephew floating away alone and you can believe me, followed him with tearful eyes.)

Eilhart returns repeatedly to Mark's reactions, and they give an additional depth to the story, as Tristrant's physical distress is matched by his uncle's emotional distress in losing him.

Curiously, although Gottfried has previously portrayed Mark as a surrogate father, in his love and concern for Tristan during the Morholt episode he is likened to a woman:

Der guote künic Marke
 dem gie der kampf so starke
 mit herzeleide an sinem lip,
 daz nie kein herzelosez wip
 die not umb einem man gewan. (6521 - 25)

(Good King Mark was so deeply distressed by this duel that the timidest woman could not have suffered so much for a man.)

Ferrante observes that '[t]here are overtones of an affection that is not altogether paternal throughout this scene, as there had been when Tristan first came to Cornwall,'⁴² while Gruenter points to 'die erotische Anziehungskraft' between the King and his nephew.⁴³

When Tristan returns safely from Ireland, he is welcomed with full ceremony and warmth; as Gottfried writes, 'wan daz ez aber in beiden / ze vröuden und ze liebe kam' (7376-77).⁴⁴ This happy ending will be the last one for the Mark-Tristan story. After the bride-quest, Iseult will intrude fatally into their bond, and set them in opposition to each other. Their lost closeness will haunt the poems as an inevitable fatality of Tristan and Iseult's love.

Inheritance

The fateful bride-quest, which will lead to Mark losing his nephew to Ireland for the second time - and to Iseult permanently - springs directly from the pressing problems of inheritance within the poems. Mark finally submits to feudal pressures at a crucial moment in agreeing to take a wife, Tristan sets out to disinherit himself by bringing back a bride whom his uncle does not actually want, and the jealous barons are actually aided in their object of separating uncle and nephew by Tristan's own eagerness for adventure, and by Mark's well-intentioned desire to avoid conflict. It is also ironic that Tristan takes up this challenge to prove both his honour and his loyalty for the King,

⁴² Joan M. Ferrante, *The Conflict of Love and Honour*, 29.

⁴³ Rainer Gruenter, "Der Favorit. Das Motive der höfischen Intrige in Gottfrids *Tristan und Isot*. Ein Vortrag," 116.

⁴⁴ 'Only it turned out happily and pleasantly for them in the end.'

when the successful completion of his quest in bringing Iseult to Mark will be his first great betrayal of both his honour and his uncle.

In Gottfried's poem, Mark's first action upon learning Tristan's identity is to recognise the boy publicly as his heir. Tristan himself only asks his powerful uncle for knighthood, but Mark's way of showing his love is to share with him his wealth and land, promising that 'dar zuo wil ich dir stiuere geben: / min lant, min liut und swaz ich han, / trut neve, daz si dir us getan' (4460-62)⁴⁵ and that 'Tintajel muoz iemer sin / din triskamere und din trisor' (4481-82).⁴⁶ Eilhart's Tristrant must prove himself against the Morolt before Mark considers making him his heir, but the conferring of inheritance rights is again presented as an act of love.

Dem koninge wart he sô lîp,
 daz he dorch sînen willen nît
 êlîches wîbes wolde plegin.
 he dâchte daz he den degin
 wolde ze eime sone hân
 und daz her im undirtân
 sîn rîche wolde machen. (1337-43)

(He was so dear to the king that, for his sake, the latter did not want to marry but wished to have the young man as his son, and he would make his realm subject to him.)

By offering Tristan a greater future in his mother's land than awaits him in Lohenois/Parmenie, Mark is also attempting to strengthen Tristan's ties to Cornwall, and to himself.

Despite Gottfried's intentions of writing a story to elevate and inspire true lovers, practical matters of property, land and wealth feature prominently in the first half of his narrative. Tristan must return to Parmenie between his knighthood and his battle with Morold to gain the possession of his father's legacy. The land of Parmenie - its fortified cities and fine castles - is described in loving detail, and once Tristan has been acknowledged as its rightful lord, his first action is to distribute fiefs among the ruling men to cement his claim to the land. The reason for Blancheflor's marriage in

⁴⁵ 'I will give you this revenue: my land, my people, and all that I have shall be at your disposal.'

⁴⁶ 'Tintajel shall always be your abundant treasure-house.'

church, in the presence of all Rivalin's vassals, becomes clear when Duke Morgan challenges Tristan's right to inheritance by claiming that he was born out of wedlock. Tristan succeeds in defeating Morgan as his father could not; rightful vengeance gives his cause a moral weight beyond the mere acquisition of territory. Yet Tristan's traditional role in the legend is as a landless knight who is entirely dependent on his uncle's generosity, not as the independent lord of rich lands.⁴⁷ It is as 'lantlose Tristan',⁴⁸ his prospects of future fortune resting on Mark's promises, that he returns to Cornwall to combat Morold.

It is clear in Bérout's *Tristan* that his hero lives an insecure existence, relying on Marc's affection to provide for him, though there are no indications in the text that he has sworn fealty to his uncle as his vassal. In the eavesdropping scene, he complains of his poverty to Iseut. Marc has confiscated his arms and his horse, and he cannot pay his hotel bills. Pensom concludes that his role is simply that of a landless 'soudoier', whose entire social identity is dependent on his uneasy relationship with the man whom he is cuckolding. This lack of a feudally acceptable identity springs directly from 'the conflictual double identity of the King who is, on the one hand, cognatically bound to Tristan in his kin-identity as Blancheflor's brother, and on the other, the apex of a feudal pyramid whose integrity depends critically on the agnatic principle of primogeniture.'⁴⁹ Marc's entirely natural desire to place his much-loved sister's son on the throne of Cornwall after him sits uneasily with the pressures of a twelfth-century feudal system that equated stability of power and coherence of territory with the rigid practice of primogeniture.

These pressures are embodied by the barons of Cornwall, who are placed in opposition to Tristan throughout the four poems. Before the revelation of his identity, Mark's favouritism towards him poses no real threat to the barons; he is an apparently landless boy, of unknown family. But then he is not only revealed as Mark's nephew, he also successfully defends Cornwall's safety where the barons had, to their great dishonour, failed (Bérout, 848-52). From the barons' point of view, Tristan has gained a dangerous monopoly of the King's favour; his popularity equals the loss of their power. In Bérout's poem, the 'felons' attempt continually to separate nephew from uncle by informing Marc of Tristan's affair with the Queen. While they are entirely

⁴⁷ Malory prefers to have Tristram independent of Mark, and to this end has Tristan's father and stepmother give him all 'their londys and goodys' when he first returns from Ireland.

⁴⁸ 'landless Tristan'

⁴⁹ Pensom, 18.

correct about Tristan's betrayal, Tristan is also correct when he claims (for the hidden Marc's benefit):

Or voi je bien, si con je quit,
 Qu'il ne voudroient que o lui
 Eüst home de son linage. (123-25)

(Now I see clearly and understand that they do not want him to have any of his kinsmen with him.)

The extent of the feud between Béroul's barons and Tristan is serious enough that three of them swear to withdraw to their castles and wage war against Marc if he does not banish Tristan. It is this ultimatum, threatening Marc with the loss of his sovereignty over his lands, that forces him into setting the trap that will catch the lovers literally red-handed.

The difficulty lies in that while Tristan certainly possesses a legitimate claim to Cornwall, it is not as strong or powerful as his right to his father's lands. For the lords of Eilhart and Gottfried, Mark's maternal nephew clearly does not have a conclusive right to his position as Mark's heir, as they bitterly begrudge him the honours and distinctions heaped upon him. The objecting lords in Eilhart's work also happen to be 'des koninges nêste mâge'⁵⁰ who have their own claims to the throne. Gottfried's barons stoop to accusing Tristan of using witchcraft to achieve his own ends, and the hostility that surrounds him at his uncle's court is so strong that Tristan lives in a constant fear that his uncle's lords will have him murdered. In desperation, he threatens to leave Mark's court, and voluntarily give up his place as Mark's heir:

e ich sus angestliche
 elliu künicriche
 wolte haben ze miner hant,
 ich waere e iemer ane lant. (8429-32)

(I would rather always be landless than rule the whole earth in such fear!)

⁵⁰ 'the king's closest kinsmen'

It is only when threatened with losing his nephew again that Mark pays attention to his barons' demands; they want the perceived insecurities of Tristan's inheritance replaced by the security of primogeniture. Mark must take a wife. Eilhart's Mark seizes on the pretext of the swallow's hair as a way of avoiding this marriage and protecting Tristrant's rights, announcing that he will only marry the anonymous lady to whom the hair belongs. His plan is foiled by fate, but his reasoning for swearing this preposterous vow seems sound:

sie sîn mîme neben haz
 dar umme daz he bederwe is,
 doch bin ich selbe des gewis,
 daz es im nicht moge geschadin.
 he sal doch mîn rîche habin,
 daz sie im werden undirtân. (1396-1401)

(They hate my nephew because he is so capable, but I'm sure this won't harm him. He shall have my realm anyhow, and they will become his subjects.)

Gottfried does not romanticise the marriage between Mark and Isolde, which is arranged for them by Tristan and King Gurmun of Ireland. It is strictly an economic and political arrangement, in which Isolde is sold in return for peace between the two countries, for the price of a dead dragon. For her share in the matter, Isolde receives the crown of England and the land of Cornwall as her dower, while, as the barons have earlier pointed out, Mark can expect to possess Ireland one day when her father dies. When her marriage is formalised upon meeting Mark in person, she is officially given Cornwall and England, with the proviso that should she bear no children, Tristan will inherit. It is a small sop to Mark's conscience. In breaking his vow never to marry and threaten Tristan's place as his heir, he has been the first to betray their bond.⁵¹ It is one of the ironies of the story that it is only because of Tristan's affair with Iseult that he retains his primary rights to inheritance, for Mark is condemned by their adultery to childlessness. His earlier promise becomes a prophecy; he will have no heir but Tristan.

⁵¹ Chretien, in his *Cligés*, emphasises this betrayal of the nephew by the uncle; King Alis has sworn a solemn vow to his dead brother not to marry so that Cligés will inherit. Cligés, however, is a paternal nephew, Alis' older brother's son, and under feudal law his claim is much stronger than Tristan's.

The problem of inheritance which acts as a constant pressure on the King of the poems is considerably diminished in importance by the *Prose Tristan's* author. He was writing in a different century, and in a very different time. The tensions of the twelfth century, caused by a rapidly narrowing feudal definition of inheritance which emphasised the importance of a strict agnatic line of descent, had diminished by the mid-thirteenth century. A wide cast of characters from the Arthurian legends replaces the few core characters of the poems; less than an eighth of the *Prose* text is devoted to the traditional episodes of the Tristan story. Camelot has replaced Tintagel as the geographical heart of Tristan's world, and the future security of Cornwall is no longer an all-important issue. Most importantly, the King of Cornwall is now a profoundly untrustworthy character; he is vindictive, treacherous, cowardly and mercurial in his moods. As in the poems, he publicly declares Tristan his heir, but the new narrative context of this promise makes it a hollow one.

In both Gottfried and Eilhart's versions, Mark makes Tristan his heir before Tristan goes to Ireland to find Mark a wife, and he does so in genuine affection for his nephew, and in gratitude for his efforts against the Morholt. But the *Prose* introduces at this point of the story the episode of Count Segurades, in which both Marc and Tristan fall in love with the same married woman, who displays a rather tactless preference for Tristan over his royal uncle. Marc's initial affection for the nephew he has personally knighted turns to a vicious jealousy, and he devises a plot to have Tristan killed by sending him to Ireland on an errand to win him a bride. The motivation behind the bride quest has been substantially changed from the original story.

Tristans, ce dit l'estoire vraie, se restresist volentiers de ceste chose s'il / poïst, mes il l'avoit juré devant tant preudomes que dou retrere estoit nianz. Et por ce s'en test il atant; et neporquant il conois qu'ill i est envoiez por morir, car li rois, ses oncles, savoit certainement qu'il n'estoit en nul leu dou monde tant haïz mortelment com il estoit en Illande por l'amor del Morholt qu'il avoit ocis.

(I§398)

(Tristan, it is truly said, would have voluntarily withdrawn from this affair if he could, but he had sworn an oath before many nobles so that he could not withdraw. And for that reason, he was silent; and nevertheless he understands that he is being sent to die there, because his uncle the King knew

for a certainty that there was nowhere in the world where he was hated as mortally as he was in Ireland, for love of Morholt whom he had killed.)

Constrained to obey by his feudal ties and his public vow, Tristan can only hope to win his uncle's shifting favours again through his great deeds. As Marc's jealousy and dislike have only been exacerbated so far by the stories of his previous great deeds in Ireland, it seems a thin hope indeed.

In fact, Marc is enraged by Tristan's successful return, and is forced to feign joy at seeing him again. His favour only returns to Tristan on the morning after his wedding night. Successfully fooled by the bed-trick into believing that he has found Iseut to be a virgin, Marc has one of his mercurial changes of heart, greeting him affectionately before all the barons.

“Tristranz, biaux niés, or voi je bien et conois vostre leauté! Bien m'avez gardé Yselt. Et por cesti servise vos ferai je mon chambellan, et vos otroi après moi la seignorie de Cornoaille.” (II§486)

(Tristan, fair nephew, now I see fully and understand your loyalty! Well have you guarded Iseut for me. And for this service I will make you my chamberlain, and award to you after me the lordship of Cornwall.)

This is an acclaimed and popular gesture, but a hollow one in the light of its timing. Marc has just married a young noblewoman who, he must presume, will bear him legitimate heirs to supplant Tristan. At this point, it must seem unlikely to Marc that he will ever need to fulfil his promise.

Iseult, however, will never bear a child, and the possibility of offspring, either by her husband or by her lover, is never even raised within the Tristan texts. As with Guinevere, her passions render her barren - and Mark childless. Duby observes that ‘bastardy was too serious a matter to be treated lightly even in literature’.⁵² In her work on the place of women in the *Morte d'Arthur*, Edward notes the curious barrenness of the adulterous queens, and argues further that “[m]arriage, in Malory, has nothing to do with succession, possibly because the Arthurian world is known to be coming to

⁵² Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 222.

annihilation.”⁵³ Malory omits entirely the bed-trick and Mark’s subsequent promise of ‘la seignorie de Cornoaille’ to his nephew, and when Andret tries to steal Tristram’s inheritance he seeks the lands in Lohenois that Melyadus has deeded to his son, rather than any possible rights in Cornwall. Malory can ignore the question of inheritance that so preoccupied the early Tristan poets because, in his schema, Cornwall is now a corrupt kingdom, without a future.

Betrayals

Tristan’s first betrayal of his uncle is easily explained by the poets: he takes his uncle’s future wife to bed under the compulsion of the love potion, which effectively removes both his free will and his culpability in the matter.⁵⁴ His second, and perhaps greater, betrayal lies in bringing his lover as wife to his trusting uncle, but there is no magical excuse for this action. Gottfried lays the blame on Honour and Loyalty, in what Hatto dismisses as ‘probably the poorest piece of work in the story.’⁵⁵ While aboard the ship, these two allies were vanquished by Love, but it appears that this defeat was simply a first battle in the lengthy war waged within Tristan. While the Tristram of the *Tristrams Saga* dreams of sailing away with Ísönd, it never seems to occur to Gottfried’s lovers that they might elope together, or even confess all to Mark before he marries Iseult. They simply turn their minds to the worrying problem of Mark’s wedding night, and to plotting the first of their many deceptions.

Iseult is actually the first to betray her kin for the other’s sake, and she does so without the excuse of a magic potion. As the Morholt is her maternal uncle, their kinship is a direct parallel to Mark and Tristan’s relationship. Eilhart’s fierce Isalde hates Tristrant for taking her uncle’s life and honour, while Gottfried has Morold’s sister and niece mourning him with a deep sorrow that contrasts sharply with Gurmun’s practical vexation at the loss of a valuable knight. Yet, when given the chance to revenge her uncle’s death on the wounded Tristan, she fails at the critical moment. Gottfried, troubled by the idea of a murderous Isolde, manages to find this failure to be the virtuous proof of her gentle womanly nature (which is rather prompted by her

⁵³ Elizabeth Edward, “The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*,” 48.

⁵⁴ Hatto, 7.

⁵⁵ Hatto, 25.

mother's timely intervention). Her hatred of Tristan is eventually overcome by the love-potion, but the uncomfortable fact remains that while Tristan is sleeping with his uncle's wife, Iseult is sleeping with her uncle's killer.

The love-potion may be capable of fending off the demands of honour and loyalty, but it provides no immunity for future attacks of guilt. Once the effects of the love potion have worn off for Bérroul's lovers, Tristran is assailed by regrets for that which he has lost. Lacy points out rightly that the lovers' repentance is both shallow and insincere; they rapidly revert to form once Mark has restored them to favour.⁵⁶ Even so, in Tristran's materialistic list of lost privileges and luxuries the loss of his uncle's love strikes a note of pathos: 'Tant m'amast mes oncles chiers/ Se tant ne fuse a lui mesfez!' (2170-1).⁵⁷ Thomas has his Tristran list his sufferings in his final death-bed message to Ysolt; 'Perdu en ai tuz mes parenz, / Mun uncle le rei et ses genz...' (1229-30)⁵⁸ His great love has been purchased at a high cost, and the loss of Marc makes up the greater part of this final reckoning. But in both the *Prose Tristan* and the *Book of Sir Tristram*, the ritualistic expressions of regret and guilt present in the poems are missing. There is little point in Tristan mourning at length the loss of a kinship bond that was destroyed by Mark's jealousy and hate long before he began his affair with Mark's wife.

The *Prose Tristan*, notorious for its rambling length and narrative complexity, in many ways simplifies and smooths over the essential conflicts of the Tristan legend. By changing the King's character dramatically for the worst, Marc becomes the key violator of kinship bonds rather than his nephew, who now seems more sinned against than sinning. The essential opposition of familial loyalties and personal desires that is a key theme of the Tristan poems is largely lost from the much-altered story presented by the *Prose*. Tristan displays a steady, constant loyalty towards his uncle that contrasts sharply with Marc's returned treachery. Similarly, Tristan's affair with his uncle's wife seems much less of a betrayal when compared to Marc's constant murderous plotting against his family.⁵⁹

The *Prose* author reworks many of the key episodes of the Tristan legend, including the episodes of Tristan's birth and childhood. He introduces a lengthy description of Tristan's ancestors, tracing his lineage back to the son of Joseph of

⁵⁶ Lacy, xvi.

⁵⁷ 'My uncle would have loved me so much if I had not betrayed him so badly!'

⁵⁸ 'I have lost all my kinsmen, my uncle, the King, and his people.'

⁵⁹ Bogdanow, 100.

Arimathy, who rebels against his father in choosing his own wife, and then kills his brother while defending her. Property may not be important to the author, but lineage certainly is. Marc and Tristan come from a long line of violent nobles who desire forbidden women, and are willing to kill to win them. After many generations, the young Marc is introduced as King Felix's son, the eldest of two sons and four daughters. By setting Marc in a familial context, the *Prose* author can establish him long before Tristan's arrival as a betrayer of kinship bonds. Marc kills his younger brother Pernehan 'en treïson' for daring to reproach him (and rightfully) on the matter of the Irish tribute,⁶⁰ after Mark has given away their young sister to the Irish. Mark is not safe company for those of his relations who possess integrity (Andret is safe enough.)

The traditional names of Tristan's parents are altered from Blanche flor and Rivalen to Elyabel and Meliadus, apparently to suit the author's preference.⁶¹ Malory adheres closely to his source in naming them Melyodas and Elyzabeth. In the prose versions, there is no great outside threat to Mark's realm when Meliadus is introduced; Mark himself now poses the greatest danger to Cornwall. Meliadus simply arrives, pledges him his service, and then marries Elyabel, who possesses 'merveilleuse biaute'. Under the influence of the *Prose Lancelot*, the plot then changes substantially from the basic Tristan narrative. The heavily pregnant Elyabel must venture into the forest in an attempt to rescue Meliadus, who has been unfortunately kidnapped by a besotted enchantress whilst on a hunting expedition. In the forest she gives birth prematurely to Tristan, naming him Tristan 'quant por tristece ies en terre venuz',⁶² and then dies. As in the *version commune*, Tristan's father survives to raise him, but in the prose works he marries again.

The introduction of Tristan's nameless stepmother, 'la fille au roi Hoel', is an innovation of the *Prose* author that Malory also adopted, which substantially emphasises the precariousness of kinship loyalties within these two texts. In the best tradition of wicked stepmothers, she is 'mout bele, mes ele estoit mout malicieuse et envoisiee'⁶³ - a feminine version of the fair-seeming Mark. In addition to her malicious nature, the new queen has a very concrete motive for seeking the seven-year-old Tristan's death. He stands in the way of her own infant son's right to Loonois.

⁶⁰ 'En tel maniere ocist li roi son frere en treïson.' I§241

⁶¹ Curtis, *Tristan Studies*, 12-13.

⁶² 'because in sorrow he came into the world'

⁶³ 'very beautiful, but she was very malicious and jealous.'

Inheritance is once again a key issue within the Tristan story, and Malory explains the situation with simple logic:

Than was she hevye and wroth that hir chyldrine sholde nat rejoyse the contrey of Lyonesse, wherefore this quene ordayned for poyson yong Trystrams. (230)

The plot goes awry; in the *Prose*, the baby is fed the venomous drink by a maid; in the *Book of Sir Tristram*, her eldest child ‘drank frely, and therewith the chylde suddaynly braste and was dede’ (230).

The treachery that the queen extends towards her husband’s son rebounds with nasty poetic justice upon her own. Undeterred, she attempts to poison Tristan again, but is found out by Meliadus, who condemns her to death. The young Tristan’s extraordinarily kind forgiveness of his stepmother’s treacheries - to the point of intervening with his father to save her life - sets the pattern for his future behaviour with Mark. In saving his stepmother’s life from his father’s judgement, Tristan is defending the familial bonds that she has ignored with such fatal consequences. Malory writes that ‘afftir that kynge Melyodas wolde never have ado with hir as at bedde and at bourde. But by the meanys of yonge Trystrams he made the kynge and hir accorded...’ (230) Tristram here successfully repairs his father’s family to the point where the queen ‘ever loved hym and gaff him many grete gyfftes’ (231); Mark, however, will never respond to Tristan’s forgiveness in this ideal way. This happy ending is not present in the *Prose*, where Melyadus is assassinated when Tristan is only twelve, making the realm of Looines an unsafe place for him as heir once again.

Both prose authors minimise Tristan’s betrayal by emphasising both his loyalty for his uncle and his love for Iseult before he ever drinks the potion. While there has been considerable critical debate surrounding the ambiguous sentiments of Gottfried’s Tristan and Isolde prior to the love potion,⁶⁴ the author of the *Prose* clearly has his Tristan falling in love with her before he drinks the potion,⁶⁵ during his first visit to

⁶⁴ Joan Ferrante argues in her comparative study, *The Conflict of Love and Honour*, that ‘Thomas and Gottfried take pains to suggest some feeling, or at least an unmistakable tendency towards love between Tristan and Isolt before they drink the potion’ 40. I would disagree, as reading evidence of subconscious desire into those paragraphs which refer explicitly to Tristan’s kindly indifference and to Isolt’s hatred towards Tristan as her uncle’s killer seems to be an interpretation that depends too heavily on modern concepts of psychoanalysis. I would agree with Hatto that Gottfried fully intends to portray the potion as the first and powerful catalyst of their love.

⁶⁵ For a full debate on the role of the potion in the *Prose Tristan*, see Renee L. Curtis’ *Tristan Studies*, 19-23.

Ireland. But lacking the magical compulsion of the potion, Tristan remains loyal to his obligations to his uncle despite his personal desire for Iseut. Malory's Tristram also falls in love with La Beale Isode on his first visit to Ireland, 'for she was at that tyme the fayrest lady and maydyn of the world', and displays a suitably knightly devotion towards her. Isode's love is described with more warmth; she first develops 'a grete fantasy unto hym' when he teaches her to harp, but it is only when he proves himself to be a knight of 'worship' that she truly loves him. Their mutual affection is not enough to shake Tristram's loyalty to his uncle. King Anguish tells him openly that he would prefer Tristram himself to marry his daughter, but Tristram is inflexible: 'Sir, and I dud so, I were shamed for ever in this worlde and false of my promyse.' (257)

In the *Prose*, Tristan's loyalties have been tested and found unshakeable, until the moment that the potion gains hold. Then 'Tristranz pense a Yselt et Yselt a Tristan. Toz est obliez li rois Mars.'⁶⁶ (II§445) Moreover, let 'li rois Mars quiere a soi une autre feme, car ceste veust Tristan avoir'.⁶⁷ As in the poems, physical consummation follows shortly after the discovery of each other's hearts. The *Prose* states explicitly twice that Tristan 'fait de li ce que il veust et li tost le non de pucele'⁶⁸ (II§448), and that 'Tristranz a Yselt despucelee'⁶⁹, leading to the dilemma of the wedding night.⁷⁰ When Tristan fears for Iseut's life in the *Prose*, enough has already been revealed of Mark's character to make his concern a valid one.

Ores qu'en ferons nos quant nos la metrons avec mon oncle et il ne la troverra pucele? Il la fera maintenant destruire, et a nos en savra mal gré qui l'avons ensi malement garde. Et certes je l'aim de si grant amor que se je la veoie metre a mort por nul mesfait, j'en ocirroie mon oncle et moi meïsmes, car après la mort m'amie ne querroie je ja vivre un sol jor. (II§484).

(What shall we do when we give her to my uncle and he finds her not a maiden? He will have her destroyed immediately, and he won't be grateful to us for we have badly guarded her. And certainly I love her with a great love, so that if I

⁶⁶ 'Tristan thought of Iseut, and Iseut of Tristan. King Mark was entirely forgotten.'

⁶⁷ 'King Mark now seek another wife, for she would have Tristan.'

⁶⁸ 'does as he desires with her and takes from her the name of maiden.'

⁶⁹ 'Tristan has deflowered Iseut'

⁷⁰ Andreas Capellanus writes in his treatise *On Love* that 'when a woman is taken in marriage by her husband in the belief that she is a virgin, once the fact of her depravity is discovered she will ever remain an object of hatred and contempt to him; and this causes her rejection... Hence the woman's ill-fame swells immeasurably, and she is an object of abuse to all,' (P.J. Walsh) 179.

were to see her put to death for any wrongdoing, I would murder my uncle and myself also, because I would not ever wish to live a single day after the death of my love.)

The picture Tristan paints is sufficiently grim to justify the measures that the lovers take. By this logic, in deceiving his uncle through the bed-trick, they are saving all three lives from a catastrophic chain of events; it can almost be seen as a moral action. It provides them with a more sophisticated excuse than the *version commune* furnishes for the episode in which Tristrant lies with Isalde in the same room where the King is bedding Brangene.

dez was die meiste trugene
 die Tristrant î getete...
 ... daz enwas nichein untrûwe.
 wen he ted daz âne sînen dang:
 der vil unsêlige trang
 hâte ez dar zû brâcht. (2838-45)

(This was the greatest deceit of which Tristrant was ever guilty, but it was not disloyalty, for it was done against his will: the fatal potion had brought it about.)

In the poems and the *Prose Tristan*, the deception of the bed-trick reflects badly on all the participants. Malory dares to ignore the episode altogether. His Sir Tristram displays an inviolable integrity even after the potion has been drunk; he does not betray his uncle by bedding Isode until Mark has first betrayed him. This considerably reduces the power of the potion, but enhances the strength of Tristram's loyalty to his entirely undeserving uncle. As Kennedy has observed, they 'remain true to Mark until he no longer deserves their loyalty, having tried to murder them both.'⁷¹ Isode therefore comes to Mark a virgin, and the entire bed-trick scene, which harks back to a much earlier version of the legend, can be omitted entirely from Malory's story.

Tristram is therefore represented as Isode's devoted knight and champion, loving her with an ideal 'synles' affection, until the fatal episode when Andret spies them talking in a window and tells Mark of his suspicions. On these weak grounds,

⁷¹ Beverley Kennedy, 169.

Mark denounces Tristram as a ‘false traytoure’ and attacks him with a sword while he is unarmed; shortly afterwards, he attempts to have Isode burnt as an adulteress when she fails a test of fidelity designed by the trouble-making Morgan la Fay. Their loyalty and restraint has gone entirely unrewarded. Soon afterwards, Tristram begins to visit Isode at every opportunity, and is discovered by Andret ‘naked a-bed with La Beale Isode.’ Tristram’s resolution has finally failed, but at this point the focus has been placed so repeatedly on Mark’s treachery that Tristram’s is greatly diminished in consequence.

Nor does honourable Arthurian society seem to attach any reproach or stigma to the lovers’ betrayal of Mark. It seems to be taken for granted that Mark, who is notorious for his treachery and cowardice, has forfeited all claims to Tristram’s loyalty. When in Malory’s *Book* Tristram accepts the promises of friendship that Mark gives publicly to him at Arthur’s court, and faithfully agrees to return with his lord to Cornwall, the good knights Sir Lancelot, Sir Lamerak and Sir Dynadan all oppose his leaving ‘for well they wyste that kynge Marke wolde sle or destroy sir Trystram’ (375). The entire Arthurian court enters into mourning for eight days after their departure; they are aware that Tristram’s tie to Mark (and to Mark’s wife) is endangering his life.

Public sympathy clearly lies with the lovers who, despite their widely known affair, are still seen to possess the quality of ‘worship’ that the vicious Mark so sorely lacks.

“Hit is pité,” seyde sir Lameroke, “that ony suche false kynge cowarde as kynge Marke is shulde be macched with suche a fayre lady and a good as La Beale Isode is, for all the wo[r]lde of him spekyth shame, and of her grete worschyp as ony quene may have.” (355)

As Kennedy points out, ‘when Tristram and Isode decide to flee from him to live openly together in Arthur’s kingdom, they are welcomed by that honourable society with open arms’.⁷² Not only does Lancelot, Tristram’s parallel, offer the lovers Joyous Garde for a home, but King Arthur also gives the elopement his tacit approval. Such a public move is unthinkable in the world of the Tristan poems, where the lovers are constantly preoccupied with hiding their affair from both Mark and society at large. Any public exposure of their actions threatens to jeopardise their social standings and their very

⁷² Beverley Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte d’Arthur*, 171-72.

lives, exposing them to the condemnation of treason. In contrast, in Malory's work the word 'treson' is mentioned most frequently in connection with Mark's actions, with its wider meaning of treachery or murder. Societal outrage is aimed at Mark rather than at the lovers, for his character is now the greater violator of society's rules.

Tristan's murder is prefigured by the murders of Mark's brother, Bodwyne, and Mark's nephew, Alexander the Orphan, who suddenly appear late in the *Book*. Bodwyne, who is well-loved by his people, successfully defends them from a Saracen invasion, and destroys an army of forty thousand men. This combination of popularity and prowess is sufficient to engender Mark's murderous jealousy, and his train of thought - from jealousy to rage to plans of murder - has a familiar ring to it.

Whan kynge Marke wyste this he was wondirly wrothe that his brother sholde wyne suche worship and honour. And bycause this prynce was bettir beloved than he in all that contrey, and also this prynce Bodwyne lovid well sir Trystram, and therefore he thought to sle hym. (388)

Mark stabs Bodwynne with a dagger at a family dinner. Bodwyne's son, Alexander, escapes to grow to manhood, but is slain 'falsely and felonsly' by his uncle before he can come to Sir Arthur's court and meet Sir Lancelot; his death is clearly a tragedy of lost potential. His short story, interpolated into that of his more famous cousin, serves to underline Mark's deadliness to those closest to him.

Malory does clearly value kinship bonds for their role in holding Arthurian society together, but he also shows them to be a potentially double-edged sword. When followed blindly, without recourse to reason, familial loyalties are shown to be highly destructive to the peace and security of Arthur's world. Gawain, the leader of what T.H. White termed 'the Orkney brood', splits the Round Table fatally when he embarks on a blood-feud against Lancelot, who has slain Gawain's much-loved brothers in error. Arthur, in choosing his nephew Gawain's side rather than that of his best knight Lancelot, makes a crucial mistake; in making his nephew and son Mordred regent simply because of their blood tie, he makes another. Tristram's blind loyalty to his uncle, while on one level morally commendable, seems to be even more of a regrettable error than his affair with his uncle's wife. His place is not with his uncle, nor even with his lady (who can be a distraction from Tristram's adventures), but with his fellows of

the Round Table. In the *Book of Sir Gareth*, the young Sir Gareth turns wisely away from the familial loyalties that threaten his honour:

For evir after sir Gareth had aspyed sir Gawaynes conducions, he wythdrewe himself fro his brother sir Gawaynes felyshyp, for he was evir vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther: and that hated sir Gareth.
(224)

Where kinship bonds are more destructive than beneficial to personal honour and social harmony, loyalties must be re-thought. Mark may be Tristram's uncle, but by Gareth's reasoning, Tristram owes him nothing.

There is one exception to the general sanction that the Arthurian world extends to the lovers, and that condemnation exists implicitly in the defence of Tristram spoken by the saintly Percival to Mark. In their brief conversation, Percival chides Mark for imprisoning Tristram, and Mark retorts with his one solid reason for his failing to love his worthy nephew the way that he ought: 'I may nat love sir Trystram, bycause he lovyth my quene, La Bealle Isode.' Percival defends Tristram as entirely honourable, and in doing so, is of course entirely wrong.

'Sey ye never so more! For ar nat ye uncle unto sir Trystram? And by youre neveaw ye sholde never thynke that so noble a knight as sir Trystram is, that he wolde do hymself so grete vylany to holde his unclys wyff. Howbehit,' seyde sir Percivale, 'he may love youre quene synles, because she is called one of the fairest ladyes of the worlde'. (414)

Percival, second only to Galahad in holiness, has in all innocence pointed out Tristram's guilt. Despite Mark's appalling behaviour, he is still uncle to Tristram, Isode is still his wife, and Tristram's love is far from 'synles'. In Eilhart's work, the final tragedy centres around the bitter misunderstanding between uncle and nephew, but in Malory's *Sir Tristram* the tragedy is not so much that his uncle stabs him in the back, but that by dying so ignobly, he will never reach the Grail and fulfil his full potential.

Conclusion

Kinship and inheritance issues underpin the central conflicts of the Tristan legend. If the story of Charlemagne and Roland is a celebration of the close bond between maternal uncle and nephew, the story of Mark and Tristan describes the slow decay of this bond. The lost closeness between uncle and nephew, set up at the beginning of the narrative, haunts the central love story. When Eilhart's Mark first catches the lovers in bed together, his anger and sorrow is directed at Tristrant, not his wife. Bérout's King desires in his rage to have Tristran burnt first. But after their exile in the forest has dulled his wrath, when Tristran comes secretly to his window in the night Marc's immediate and heartfelt response is to frantically call his errant nephew back to him: "Por Deu, beaus niés, ton oncle atent!"(2473).⁷³ The final speech he gives in Eilhart's text over the lovers' grave is a painful elegy of regret for his lost relationship with his nephew. In the poems, while Mark readily asserts his rights over his wife, it is his nephew's betrayal that he feels more acutely.

The tragedy of Tristan and Iseult is then in some danger of becoming the tragedy of Tristan and Mark. Gottfried, aware of this possibility, has his noble Mark becoming slowly corrupted into a weak and sensual waverer from Isolde's first entrance, so the natural bond between the hero and his uncle cannot pose a threat to the central bond between the hero and his lady. The prose works, by turning Mark into a villain, lessen Tristan's betrayal, but even here, some remnants of the earlier and worthier character linger. Even the prose Kings, with their history of viciousness towards their kin, initially welcome the boy Tristan with a generosity and affection that is only corrupted when a beautiful woman - Segurades' wife - comes between them. Yet, even when the love between them disappears, they remain bound together by their love for the same woman, and by the kinship bond between them, which cannot be dissolved even by betrayal and treachery.

⁷³ 'In God's name, fair nephew, wait for your uncle!'

MARK AS LOVER: Mark and Iseult

Introduction

It has long been considered a tragedy by medievalists that Chrétien de Troyes' version of the Tristan legend is lost to us. It might have been of particular value for this study of the relationship between Mark and his wife, for when Chrétien refers briefly to this work in the introduction to *Cligés* he calls it the story of 'roi Marc et d'Ysalt la Blonde'.⁷⁴ Tristan is not even mentioned. To the reader accustomed to references to the story of Tristan and Iseult la Blonde, or more frequently, to the story of Tristan alone, Chrétien's curious phrasing raises a number of questions about his lost work. It is tempting to speculate, especially in the light of the attacks Chrétien makes on the adulterous Tristan relationship in *Cligés*, that he might have presented a version of the story more sympathetic to the cuckolded husband. Using the heroine of *Cligés* as his mouthpiece, he wholeheartedly condemns Iseult's behaviour in taking both Mark and Tristan to her bed. Fénice manages to avoid her husband's embraces by the aid of a magical anti-love potion, but Chrétien's solution is hardly a realistic one. Lacking such convenient devices, the unconsulted brides of arranged marriages were given the choice of either forgetting their lover or betraying their unwanted husband.⁷⁵ Once she has drained the love-potion, even this choice is removed from Iseult; Mark must be betrayed.

Mark only becomes a highly problematic character once Iseult has made a cuckold of him. While the Tristan poets have little difficulty developing a cohesive character for him in the first part of the story, his portrayal begins to suffer from inconsistencies as soon as Iseult becomes his wife. The problem lies with his status as a betrayed husband. Cuckolds are traditionally comical figures in fabliaux: peasants, bourgeois, or petty knights who can be easily mocked for their stupidity.⁷⁶ The cuckolding of a king, however, is deeply unfunny. It is a matter of treason. Mark therefore occupies a traditionally comic role within a tragic story, and his cuckold status is, moreover, essentially incompatible with his royal position. William MacDonald has

⁷⁴ *Cliges*, (5).

⁷⁵ Peter S. Noble, *Love and Marriage in Chrétien de Troyes*, 36.

⁷⁶ Raymond Eichmann, *Cuckolds, Clerics, & Countrymen*, 4-12.

identified Gottfried's Mark as sharing many of the classic characteristics of the Ovidian husband figure - lustful, foolish, and easily deceived - but he also argues that Gottfried gives Mark a psychological depth that goes beyond Ovid's cuckold.⁷⁷

The portrayal of the cuckold King is further complicated by the fact that in all six texts Mark truly loves Iseult. The depth and quality of this love may certainly be questioned - especially in those texts where he is characterised as a villain - but it is repeatedly affirmed that he loves her *more than himself*. Betrayed by his beloved nephew, and in love with a wife who rejects his affection, Mark's situation poses the distinct threat of drawing the sympathies of the audience away from the lovers. Furthermore, as Iseult's husband, Mark has the weight of church and society on his side. When, in Eilhart's text, a disillusioned and enraged King denounces Tristrant's love as an 'obele minne',⁷⁸ on the simple grounds that it is wrong for any man to have joy or sorrow with another man's wife, his words carry a terrible conviction. Stripped of all secrecy and seen through the eyes of the man they have hurt most, their love can seem both disloyal and wrong.

It is necessary therefore for the Tristan poets to right this moral imbalance by portraying the wronged King as occasionally cruel, unjust, obtuse, and weak-willed. Many of the inconsistencies in their portrayal of Mark can be attributed to their need to portray him as a worthy king, but *not* worthier than Tristan of Iseult's love. The *Prose* author gave up the effort entirely when he chose to turn Mark into a villain, smoothing away the moral complexities of the first Tristan texts into a more simplistic world where good and evil, prowess and cowardice, honour and treason are placed in uncomplicated opposition to each other, rather than intermingled within the central characters. The cuckoldry of the cowardly and treacherous King Fox is still no laughing matter, but there is now little chance of Mark's love for his wife stealing any sympathy away from Tristan; it is impossible that Iseult should requite it.

Husband

It is inevitable in all six texts of this study that comparisons should arise between Iseult's relationship with her lover and her relationship with her husband. A poet

⁷⁷ W. MacDonald, "King Mark: Gottfried's Version of the Ovidian Husband Figure?," 255-69.

⁷⁸ 'evil love'

seeking to elevate and praise the illicit love affair must therefore undermine the legitimate marriage. In his thorough studies of marriage in the twelfth century, Duby identifies two kinds of marriage among the nobility of Europe. In the socially approved arrangement, daughters were legally exchanged by their fathers for political or economic advantages, and were usually given to an older man; Mark and Iseult's union clearly falls into this category. Tristan's illicit relationship with her belongs to the second kind, where social order is 'flouted and broken by a free and individual act that eludes all control: the girl gives herself to or is seized by the epic hero.'⁷⁹ In the twelfth century, the growing emphasis on strictly controlled agnatic lines of descent created an under-class of young noblemen, younger sons and nephews, who were denied any prospects of inheritance and had to struggle in competition with more powerful men for the limited pool of heiresses on the marriage market. The Tristan poems, dating from the late twelfth century and the early thirteenth, reflect the tensions of this social context in depicting a struggle between one of the *juvenes* with his powerful kinsmen for the possession of the young wife.

Mark's marriage is presented in the poems as a political alliance that is undertaken for political reasons against his personal inclination. Scholars have noted Iseult's obvious dislike of the arranged match, but it should be noted that Mark himself is also an unwilling party in the matter before he lays eyes on her. Peggy A. Knapp claims that 'although Mark has never laid eyes on his bride-to-be, he is eager for the match and satisfied with it once it has come about'.⁸⁰ In fact, all enthusiasm for the Irish marriage is on the part of Mark's barons, who hope that Tristan's death will result from the errand, and from Tristan himself. Mark himself only exhibits a surface eagerness for marriage in the hopes of appeasing his barons and avoiding marriage altogether. He is presented as a highly reluctant bridegroom, and furthermore, appears to be a confirmed bachelor.⁸¹ He has reached middle years as an unmarried king in a society in which the early begetting of royal heirs was considered vital for national peace and security. It is not surprising that his lords pressure him to take a wife, only that they require the perceived threat that Tristan poses as Mark's heir to prompt them to it.

⁷⁹ Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 39.

⁸⁰ Peggy A. Knapp, "The Potion/Poison of Gottfried's 'Tristan,'" 45.

⁸¹ See Hugo Bekker's *Gottfried von Strassburg's "Tristan": Journey Through the Realm of Eros*, for a discussion of the possibility that Mark's more-than-paternal affection for his nephew has homosexual overtones; he points out here the 'conspicuous absence of women at court,' 80-81.

In Eilhart's text, his close relatives begin to urge him to take a wife immediately after he has settled on Tristrant as an heir. 'Die bestin von dem lande' are united in desiring Mark's marriage, and Mark is finally forced to set a time to answer them: 'wen he enwolde wîbes nît, / ez wêre on leit adir lîp.' (1379-80)⁸² Eilhart portrays him touchingly as a king trapped by the demands of his vassals, as he sits alone in his hall and struggles to find a way out of the situation that will enable him both to stay unmarried, and to keep his beloved nephew by his side. The trick of the swallow's hair vow does not fool the barons, who are aware that 'he wil uns mit listen / von desir rede bringen.' (1424-5)⁸³ Tristrant, however, is successfully deceived, and from the depths of his affection for his uncle, he vows to fetch the lady whom Mark supposedly desires to him, whether she be married or unmarried. It is one of the tragic misunderstandings between the two, and as Eilhart remarks testily, 'Ez was eine grôze kintheit, / daz he sô michel erbeit / bestunt umme den wint.' (1473-5)⁸⁴ Tristrant's youthful eagerness to defend his honour, combined with the wantonness of fate, will force Mark to take a wife he never wanted, and lead Tristrant to lose the honour he prizes so dearly.

Gottfried's Mark displays a similar reluctance for any female companionship, declaring to his barons 'Tristan die wile er leben sol, / so wizzet endeliche wol, / son sol niemer künigin / noch vrouwe hie ze hove gesin.' (8361 - 8364)⁸⁵ Gottfried dismisses the story of the swallow-hair as preposterous; his Mark swears to marry only Isolde of Ireland solely because the actual chances of him having to fulfil this vow seem remote indeed.

den eit tet er niht umbe daz,
 daz im sin gemüete iht baz
 so hin stüende danne her:
 durch die kündekeit swuor er,
 daz es im gar was ungedaht,
 daz es iemer würde zende braht. (8517-22)

(He swore this oath not because his feelings were inclined that way more than any other, but as a subterfuge, never dreaming it would ever come to pass.)

⁸² 'whether they liked it or not, he didn't want a wife.'

⁸³ 'He wants to trick us into letting the matter drop.'

⁸⁴ 'It was youthful folly that he should go to such trouble for nothing.'

⁸⁵ 'while Tristan lives, know it once and for all: there will never be a Queen and lady here at court!'

His despair when Tristan, in vowing to win Isolde for him, falls into the barons' trap is palpable as he cries that he does not want to lose Tristan to the Irish for a second time. As Ferrante has observed, in his eagerness for honour and adventure, Tristan has trapped them both.⁸⁶

The villainous King of the prose works is equally uninterested in marriage. In the *Prose*, Marc's first reaction at learning that Tristan has returned safely with his intended bride is one of absolute rage, though 'neporquant ... fait il semblant de joie' (II§483).⁸⁷ It is only when he sees 'la biauté d'Yselt' that he decides to marry his nephew's find after all. Having failed to achieve his first object in sending Tristan to Ireland, Iseut is considered a worthy consolation prize because of her physical beauty: the *Prose's* Marc is a man who thrives on deceit, and he accordingly values appearances highly.⁸⁸ At the time of the bride-quest, Mark's chief preoccupation is how he might bring about death, rather than engender life. He deliberately chooses Iseult as his bride because he believes her to be an impossible target, and one that will prove fatal to Tristan: 'kyng Marke caste all the wayes that he myght to dystroy sir Trystrames, and than imagened in hymself to sende sir Trystramys into Irelande for La Beale Isode ... And all this was done to the entente to sle sir Trystramys.' (251)

Tristan takes his uncle's place in winning and wooing his bride as he has previously taken his place as defender of the realm. It is thus Tristan who negotiates with the King of Ireland for the disposal of his daughter. Ideally, medieval marriages required the consent of both parties; in practice, the consent of the bride's father mattered far more than the personal wishes of the bride. Paternal approval was a crucial factor in contracting a legitimate union. In the Tristan legend, the way in which the Irish King bestows his daughter reflects the different values that the texts place on Iseult's two relationships.

In Eilhart's text, Tristrant announces without regret that he desires to give Isalde to his uncle as wife, as he is too young to take a wife. The King responds by giving his approval to the match with Mark - and to this match only.

„âne zwîvel her sie habin sol,
wen dû ir leide hâst getân.

⁸⁶ Ferrante, 34.

⁸⁷ 'nevertheless...he pretends to be joyful.'

⁸⁸ Note his previous welcome of the disguised Tristan: 'Il me plect bien que tu remeignes, car tu me sables gentil home.' (I§285, italics mine.)

ouch vorchte ich, ab sie dar an
 gedêchte eteswenne,
 daz ir lichte denne
 nicht lebetet als ez wêre recht.
 zewâre“ sprach her „gût knecht,
 dînem nebin wil ich sie sendin.“ (2246-53)

(Without doubt, he should be the one to have her, for you have caused her much grief, and I am afraid that, if she should begin to brood about this, you two would not live as you should. Good lord, I shall indeed send her to your uncle.)

Gottfried's Tristan freely extols the virtues of the royal marriage, describing Mark generously to Queen Isolde as

...einen edelen künic nimet,
 der ir ze herren wol gezimet,
 schoene unde milte,
 zem sper und zem schilte
 ein ritter edel und uz erkorn,
 von künigen unz her geborn
 und ist ouch danne da bi
 vil richer, danne ir vater si. (10507-13)

(a noble king well-suited to be her lord - handsome and magnanimous, a rare, illustrious knight in the use of lance and shield, born of a lineage of kings and, to crown all, far wealthier than her father!)

Personally, politically, and economically, the match with Mark seems to be ideal. The King of Ireland willingly gives his approval, and in the *Saga*, he takes the further precaution of having Tristram swear on holy relics that the marriage agreement will be binding.

In the prose texts, the Irish King relinquishes his right to dispose of his daughter as he desires to Tristan himself, rather than bestowing her on Tristan as Mark's representative. It is a significant change. Rather acting in defiance of the paternal will, Tristan and Iseult's love has been given his approval. King Angyn bestows her on him, for either Tristan himself or for his uncle; he surrenders his daughter's fate entirely into

Tristan's hands. Malory's *King Anguish* expresses an open preference that Tristram himself will marry his daughter: 'I had lever than all the londe that I have that ye wolde have wedded hir yourself.' Even when Tristram refuses her, he gives his consent for their union: 'ye shall have her with yow to do with hir what it please you, that is for to sey, if that ye lyste to wedde hir yourselff, that is me leveste...' (257) The patriarchal transaction of the bride from father to husband has been blurred; it is now a transaction of authority over Isode from the King to Tristan.

Unsurprisingly to the medievalist, Iseult's opinion is not consulted in any of the texts with which this study is concerned. In the poems, prior to the public request Tristan makes of her father, she believes that she has two choices: marriage with the Cornish stranger who killed her uncle or with her father's cowardly steward. Whatever the faults of his past, Tristan is personally appealing, and moreover, he is clearly of noble blood. Iseult is making a reasoned choice of the lesser of two evils when she supports Tristan in his claim, only to discover that she has made no choice at all; she will be married to a stranger in a peace-weaving marriage that will send her far from her family into a hostile land.⁸⁹ Something of the insecurity of her situation is conveyed within Isolde's impassioned speech to Tristan before they have fallen in love, when kindly indifference on his side is met by an open hostility on her part:

die mich von kinde hant erzogen,
den habet ir mich nu an ertrogen
und vüeret mich, in weiz wa hin.
ine weiz, wie ich verkoufet bin,
und enweiz ouch, was min werden sol. (11587-91)

(You have won me by guile from those who brought me up, and are taking me
I do not know where! I have no idea what fate I have been sold into, nor what is
going to become of me!)

After drinking the love potion, Tristan grapples painfully with his loyalties, but Iseult suffers no guilt in betraying her future husband, who was never of her choosing.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Drawing on Celtic mythology, Leslie Rabine argues in "Love and the New Patriarchy" that Iseult forfeits her mystical powers when she fails to kill Tristan in the bath, 60-62

⁹⁰ Using Fenice as his mouthpiece, Chrétien de Troyes condemns Iseult for her lack of restraint. Unlike Iseult, Fenice is greatly concerned with the potential for dishonour in her situation, and through a combination of self-control and cunning, manages to keep both honour and love intact.

In the poems, any personal reluctance on the parts of the bride and groom fades in significance when set against the great political advantages of the match. As well as receiving the all-important paternal approval, the marriage meets with general acclaim from the people of Cornwall and Ireland. The long-standing hostility between the two countries, sketched briefly in the episode of the Morholt, has weakened them both. Earlier, the barons of Cornwall astutely outlined the match's potential to bring about peace between the two countries, and moreover, the possibility that Mark might acquire Ireland after Gurmun's death. The Irish lords also recognise the possibility of peace that the match carries with it, and acclaim it accordingly. Gottfried, ever-concerned with property, has Tristan and Gurmun arranging between them that Isolde should become queen of England, receiving Cornwall as her morning-gift; it is implicitly understood that Mark will then gain control of Ireland when Gurmun dies. These details are important for the understanding of the greater ramifications of Tristan and Isolde's defiant love affair. In following their personal desires in defiance of the marriage arranged by Isolde's father and approved by both Kings' vassals, the lovers risk disrupting the peace and security of both Cornwall and Ireland; this is openly suggested in Bérout's work when Tristran threatens to take Iseut back to Ireland with him to rule in her own country.

It is worth noting that the *Prose* author reduces the peace-making role of the marriage by carefully changing the way in which Tristan wins Iseut. Peace between the two countries is achieved by Tristan's successful championing of King Angyn in combat against another knight, thus healing the wound left by the Morholt's death, and not by the union of Marc and Iseut. Even before the marriage is achieved, the Irish people cry to their king: 'Bien a deservi a cesti point que li reaumes de Cornoaille soit amis a Yrlande, et Yrlande soit amie a Cornoaille' (I§436).⁹¹ The new accord between the two rests therefore on Tristan's shoulders, and not on the marriage that he will disrupt; to this end, Malory also emphasised the friendship between the Irish King and Tristram.

The lovers have only a brief space together before the outside world intrudes again. The focus shifts immediately from their consummated love to the other consummation fast approaching, Iseult's wedding night. The bed-trick - a device from *fabliaux* - is conceived in desperation. Gottfried's lovers busily scheme while still on

⁹¹ 'It served well at this point that the realm of Cornwall should befriend Ireland, and Ireland should befriend Cornwall.'

board, but the Carlisle fragment of Thomas' work postpones the actual planning of the trick until they are approaching the bedchamber.⁹² Iseult is responsible in the *version courtoise* for the inception of the trick; cunning is established in these texts as a feminine trait. Eilhart's account casts the lovers in the worst light; they lie together in the same chamber where Brangene is lying with the King, and Eilhart himself feels the need to excuse Tristrant's conduct as the fault of the love-potion. In the *Tristrams Saga*, Mark also drinks of the love potion, so that his love for Ísönd possesses the same compulsive strength as Tristran's. Finlay attributes this innovation to a 'somewhat mechanical logic of motivating Mark's love, too, by the same external means as that of the lovers', thus tying up perceived loose ends in Thomas' plot.⁹³ Until the discovery of the Carlisle fragment of Thomas' work in 1997, it was wrongly assumed by scholars that the *Saga's* author had been following Thomas' example in having Mark share the potion, but the fragment shows that, in fact Gottfried had followed his source correctly in the matter. Mark drinks wine that Brangian brings him, but it is nowhere indicated that this is the same fatally enchanted wine that the lovers consumed.⁹⁴ The potion is shared only by the lovers; Mark's desire, entirely unwanted by Iseult, springs from his own volition.

The *Saga's* description of the wedding night is highly sympathetic to Mark, who comes light-hearted and befuddled with wine to his nuptial bed. After the substitution, Mark also drinks of the love potion, though Ísönd does not drink with him. The rest of the night (missing from the Carlisle fragment) is described as follows:

Ok fyrir því at hann fann hana at öllu eptirlæti ok vel líkandi, þá sýndi hann henni mikla ást ok svá mikinn fagnað ok blíðlæti, at Ísönd gladdiz mikit. Ræddu þau þá alls konar gaman, sem æsku þeira sómdu, með kóngligri skemtan ok drottningligri dýrð. Er þeim sú nátt með ynniligum fagnaði. (122)

(Because he found her to be so indulgent and pleasing, he showered her with love and so much good cheer and affection that Ísönd was very happy. They

⁹² Walter Haug, "Reinterpreting the Tristan Romances of Thomas and Gotfrid: Implications of a Recent Discovery" argues that 'he wanted Tristran and Ysolt to enjoy a time of flawless happiness on their way to Cornwall... No fear, no premonition of what might happen later, should cast a cloud over their intimacy,' 52.

⁹³ Alison Finlay, "The Language of Love in *Tristrams Saga ok Ísöndar*," 10.

⁹⁴ 'Selon notre texte, cependant, il n'a jamais été question chez Thomas d'identifier ce banal vin d'après l'amour au célèbre vin herbé.' M.Benskin, T.Hunt, I.Short., "Un Nouveau Fragment du 'Tristan' de Thomas," 317.

talked about all kinds of interesting things appropriate to their youth, the king with amusement and the queen with joy. And so they spent the night in loving joy.)

We cannot know how closely Monk Robert was following Thomas' version here, but it is clear that in the Norse redaction of the *version courtoise* Mark's marriage is far from a *mésalliance*. Ísönd is made happy by her husband, and the King is delighted with her. If not for the love potion, it seems that the match might have been entirely successful.

Gottfried is more critical of Mark's part in the bed-trick. He strongly refutes that version of the Tristan legend in which Mark drinks the love potion, asserting that Brangene had thrown the remnants into the sea. His Mark cannot differentiate between brass and gold, between Brangene and Isolde. Tristan, Gottfried infers, would not have been so easily deceived. Mark is not a bad man, but neither is he one of Gottfried's select noble lovers:

in duhte wip also wip:
er vant ouch die vil schiere
von guoter maniere. (12666-68)

(To him one woman was as another: he soon found Isolde, too, to be of good deportment.)

The lovers are condemned for their deception, but Mark also bears Gottfried's implicit reproof for being so easily deceived.

The complexities of the adulterous triangle do not occupy a prominent place in Malory's *Sir Tristram*; in consequence, he gives only the briefest description of the wedding between Mark and Isode, and ignores altogether the mixed sentiments of the King and the lovers that the *Prose* explores in lengthy detail. Furthermore, by omitting the bed-trick, Malory can neatly avoid the complicated questions of morality and culpability that it creates. He summarises several lengthy pages of his source in his brief statement that 'evir, as the Frenshe booke seyth, sir Trystrames and La Beale Isode loved ever togedyrs.' Mark and Isode are 'rychely wedded wyth grete nobility', but what really matters to Malory is that the wedding provides an occasion for 'grete joustys and grete tournaynge', at which Tristram can excel above all the other knights.

In contrast, ‘the Frenshe booke’ gives a detailed description of the wedding festivities, contriving at every opportunity to demonstrate that Tristan and Iseut are a worthy match in every way, and that the marriage between Iseut and Marc is a terrible *mésalliance*. Marie de France employs a similar tactic in her tales of adulterous love. Guigemar’s mistress’s maidservant tells him ‘Vus estes bels e ele est bele’ (453),⁹⁵ pointing out his ideal compatibility with the lady’s character and appearance. This is in stark contrast with the lady’s aged and jealous husband.⁹⁶ At Marc and Iseut’s wedding, the lovers are seen together in public for the first time since the beginning of their affair on board.

Toz li regarz des dames et des chevaliers est sor Yselt. Et puis regardent Tristan. Tristanz est dejuste Yselt, et se li uns est biax, encores est li autres plus. Et li plusor quant il les ont assez regardez dient que merveilles a fait Tristanz quant il a Yselt livree a son oncle; mieuz s’acordassent ensemble et par biauté et par aaige, et se Diex eüst sofert que li uns eüst l’autre, onques mes nus plus biax mariaiges n’eüst esté veüz en nule terre com cist fust. Ensi disoient li plusor. Mes c’est neant, ce ne puet estre en nule maniere del monde: li rois Mars prist Yselt a feme selonce le droit de sainte eglise, et li dona après li tote l’onor de Cornoaille. (II§485)

(All the eyes of the ladies and knights are on Iseut. And then they look at Tristan. Tristan is next to Iseut, and if one of them is beautiful, the other is even more so. And many, when they had watched the two for a time, said that Tristan had done wonders when he delivered Iseut to his uncle; for these two would be better matched together in beauty and age, and if God had permitted that the one have the other, never would anyone have seen a better marriage in any land than this one would have been. Many spoke in this way. But that’s nothing, it cannot be in this world; King Marc took Iseut to wife according to the law of the church, and afterwards gave her all the honours of Cornwall.)

In his narrative, the *Prose* author gives some indication of the ages of the three central characters. Tristan is only twelve when the daughter of the King of Faramon falls in love with him; at the age of sixteen he fights the Morholt, and comes to Ireland

⁹⁵ ‘You are fair and she is fair.’

⁹⁶ A. Ewert, *Marie de France: Lais*, 14.

to be healed, when Iseut herself is only fourteen. Only two years separate them in age while Marc must be at least forty, middle-aged by medieval standards. The *Prose* author deliberately emphasises this discrepancy in age, which is not as obvious in the poems. Eilhart's King is still described as 'der koninge junge' when Tristrant first comes to his court, and Gottfried makes it clear that Mark came very young to his throne; 'do was aber Marke ein kint,/ als kint ze wer unveste sint' (5926- 27).⁹⁷ In showing how well Tristan and Iseut are matched in age and beauty, the *Prose* finds Marc sadly wanting; the law of the church may have joined Marc and Iseut together, but natural law links the two lovers.

Ironically, the marriage sways Marc's affections once more towards his nephew. Successfully taken in by the bed-trick, as with Gottfried's Mark the King is implicitly condemned for his lack of discrimination: 'li rois Mars cuidoit vraiment qu'il eüst eüe Yselt pucele, por ce qu'il trova Brangain pucele; ne il ne cuidast en nule maniere que l'en li osast faire tel changement' (II§486)⁹⁸ Marc is fond of Tristan once more because he believes that he has possessed Iseut, and that Tristan has not. The old wound of Segurades' wife's sexual rejection has been healed by Iseut's supposed resistance to Tristan's charms during their journey together.

With the consummation of the marriage, the third axis of the triangular relationship becomes binding, legitimised by church and society, linking all three of them irrevocably together. In an emotional sense, the marriage is the weakest of the three axes; Iseult's relationship with Mark is clearly one of duty, not love, and unlike Tristan, she suffers from no great conflict of emotional loyalties. Her marriage to Mark cannot possibly compete with her great love for Tristan. But the marriage is supported by all the weight of the social order, and in their eyes Iseult belongs to Mark, who has authority over her as her wedded husband. His marital rights are not denied by any of these Tristan texts. But except in Malory's *Book* alone, Mark is not simply satisfied with possessing her legally as a husband; he desires his wife to love him in return. This desire makes Mark deeply human, and differentiates him from the grasping elderly cuckold character who values his wife only as a prized possession. It also brings him into direct rivalry with Tristan for her love.

⁹⁷ 'But Mark was a boy at the time and irresolute in war, as children are...'

⁹⁸ 'King Marc truly thought that he had had Iseut as a maiden, because he had found Brangain a maiden; he didn't think at all that they had dared to make such an exchange.'

Lover

In the poems, Mark the reluctant bachelor falls in love with his young wife with all the ardour of an adolescent, and suffers accordingly for it. Thomas' Marc lives in pain 'car il n'aime rien ne desire / Fors soul Ysode que de lui tire' (Turin, 81-2).⁹⁹ For Gottfried's Mark, Isolde exists as the sole focus of his happiness, and she remains his 'herzeliep Isote' throughout her infidelities. Béroul's Marc, once his initial rage with his Queen has passed, leaps at the chance to be reconciled with his 'chiere amie' again. Eilhart's poem is alone among these early Tristan works in failing to place any great emphasis on Mark's feelings for Isalde; his King loves his honour and his nephew, in that order, and Isalde holds a weak third place in his affections. Even in the *Prose Tristan*, wherein Marc possesses neither honour nor affection for his nephew, his unstinting love for Iseut can be seen as his one redeeming feature; 'Cele aime ne autre plus el monde, cele est tous ses soulas et toute sa vie.' (IX§50)¹⁰⁰ While the *Prose* author changed his character radically in most other ways, a remnant of the earlier portrayals still survives in his intense love for Iseut, and in the resulting pathos of his desire to be loved in return.¹⁰¹

In the *version commune*, Mark is portrayed as a decent man, and a worthy husband. Scholars have criticised Béroul's Marc as a weak and indecisive character, but any indecisiveness springs principally from his desire to believe his wife's testimony as a good husband, and heed his barons' counsel as a good king. After the eavesdropping incident, Marc is convinced of the lovers' innocence and he greets his wife with a demonstration of affection that springs directly from his immense relief. 'Acole la, cent foiz la besse. / El plore, il dit qu'ele se tesse...' (461-2)¹⁰² In the forest, he is swift to believe the evidence of his eyes, which indicates that (contrary to all previous evidence) they are innocent, because he intensely desires it to be true. Tristan's letter proclaiming the queen's innocence falls on willing ears:

Li rois l'escoute bonement;
A grant merveille s'en esjot,
Qar sa feme forment amot. (2518-20)

⁹⁹ 'for he neither loves nor desires anything save Ysolt, who draws away from him.'

¹⁰⁰ 'He loves nothing more in the world than she, she is all his solace and his life.'

¹⁰¹ Surles, 65.

¹⁰² 'He embraced her and kissed her a hundred times. She wept, and he quieted her...'

(The king listened attentively; he was overjoyed because he loved his wife so much.)

Eilhart's Mark is also reluctant to suspect his wife, and swift to welcome her back, though he is less forgiving of his nephew's transgressions. He takes Isalde back from Tristrant, and promises to take care of her 'mit libe.' The *version commune*'s Mark is not a flawless character, but he behaves as well towards his wife as he is able in an impossible situation that is clearly not of his making.

It is in the *version courtoise* that Mark is first presented as a man who is clearly besotted with his wife, so much so that the authority and dignity of his character suffers in consequence. The fondness for Iseut evident in Béroul's poem evolves here into a deep infatuation, which inspires both pity and condemnation. The value of this love is a matter of some critical debate, as scholars have eagerly exceeded the poets' efforts in diminishing Mark's character in order to focus sympathies with Tristan. W.T.H. Jackson cites Mark's failure to distinguish between the women during the bed-trick as evidence that his love for Isolde is purely a sensual obsession: '[Mark] seeks always for proof of physical contact and his own yearnings for Isolt are entirely those of the flesh.'¹⁰³ This judgement effectively reduces the King to a lustful caricature, which is rather unfair to Gottfried; his differentiation between the worthiness of Mark and Tristan's love is subtler. Mark does not simply desire his wife physically; she is the centre of his world, and 'swaz zornes er haete, / so was im ie sin liebez wip / liep unde lieber dan sin lip' (16524-26).¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Tristan's love is also connected with animal lust, as symbolised by the boar that rampages through the king's bed in Marjodoc's dream. Both Tristan and Mark desire Isolde's beauty, the physical woman whom they can see. While Mark may be excluded from Gottfried's elect lovers, he is still a victim-follower of Minne, though he will never achieve the unity of the grotto because his love is unrequited.

Of Thomas' Marc, Wiesmann-Wiedemann argues forcefully that he is 'a weak, pathetic figure, a non-entity who suffers and causes others to suffer. He is merely an obstacle to the fulfillment of Tristan and Isolt's love, a catalyst causing their death.'¹⁰⁵ To the contrary, I would argue that the evidence of Thomas' few surviving fragments

¹⁰³ Jackson, 150.

¹⁰⁴ 'for all his anger, his beloved wife was as dear and dearer to him than life.'

¹⁰⁵ Wiesmann-Wiedemann, 56.

reveals his Marc to be a complex character, who is portrayed more as a figure of pathos than as pathetic. Of all the Tristan poets, Thomas is the least likely to miss the opportunity of exploring the character of the betrayed husband in acute psychological detail. Marc is certainly excluded from the ending of Thomas' story; he is given no place amidst the lovers' deathbed sorrows. But far from regarding him as a nonentity, Thomas focuses on the pain his love causes him, and compares his predicament in detail with that of the other lovers. Rather than being mere obstacles, both Ysolt la Blanchemains and Marc are acknowledged as rejected would-be lovers, caught in a situation not of their making which they are powerless to solve: 'Tut en ourent painne e dolur, / E un e autre en tristur vit; / E nuls d'aus nen i a deduit' (Fragment de Turin, 72-74).¹⁰⁶

Once Tristran has married Ysolt la Blanchemains, turning the love triangle into an even more complex quadrangle, Thomas explores the symmetry of their relationships with relish. He examines the misery which each of the four lovers is suffering in turn. Ysolt has twice Marc's pain, in having the King whom she doesn't want, and lacking Tristran whom she does desire:

Ele volt Tristran e ne puet:

A son seignor tenir l'estuet... (95-96)

(She longs for Tristran and finds herself powerless, and she has to keep with her lord.)

Tristran, too, is trapped with an unwanted spouse while desiring a lover whom he cannot physically possess. His misery is even greater than Ysolt's: 'Duble paigne, doble dolur / Ha dan Tristran por s'amor' (109-10).¹⁰⁷ The second Ysolt also suffers more than the first, because 'ele n'a delit de son seignor.'¹⁰⁸ Thomas informs us that she is quite the opposite of Marc, because while both suffer from unrequited love for their partners, Marc still enjoys the pleasures of his marriage bed, while Ysolt la Blanchesmains is denied even this consolation by her husband.

However, Thomas then admits that exercising his marital rights provides very little consolation for Marc in his misery:

¹⁰⁶ 'They all had pain and grief of it, each lived in sorrow, and none had joy of it.'

¹⁰⁷ 'Lord Tristran has double pain and double grief because of his love.'

¹⁰⁸ 'she has no delight from her lord.'

...Marques sis sire,
 Fait de son cors tut son volair,
 E si ne puet delit avoir,
 Fors de volair ou de desir. (169-72)
 ‘(...her lord Marc has his whole will of her body, and yet, but for lust and
 longing, fails to have any pleasure.)

Even with unrestricted access to Ysolt’s bed, Marc suffers from the same sexual jealousy that has plagued Tristan throughout this text.

Primer se dote Marques le rai
 Que Ysod ne li porte foi,
 Que ele aime autre de lui:
 Quel talent que en ait, soffre l’ennui.
 Hice li doit bien ennuier
 Et en son corage angoissier,
 Car il n’aime rien ne desire
 Fors soul Ysode que de lui tire.
 Del cors puet faire son delit,
 Mes ice poi a lui soffit,
 Quant autres en a le corage... (75-85)

(First, Marc dreads that Ysolt is unfaithful to him and that she loves another. He suffers this torment whether he will or no. And well may it torment him and give him anguish in his heart, for he neither loves nor desires anything save Ysolt, who draws away from him. He can have his pleasure of her body, but this gives him little satisfaction, since another possesses her heart.)

It is not sufficient that he can claim the rights of a husband; Marc desires to be treated as a lover and to have his love returned to him by his lady, who now only suffers his attentions because he is ‘son seignor.’

Thomas differentiates strongly between body and heart when he finally challenges his audience to decide which of the four is made the most miserable by the situation. Tristan possesses Ysolt’s heart, but is forced to celibacy; Ysolt possesses

Tristran's heart, but is forced to acquiesce to Marc's demands on her body.¹⁰⁹ Despite Tristran's earlier jealous speeches about the pleasure that Ysolt must be enjoying in her marriage bed, there is no indication of any enjoyment on her part in Thomas' tally of their joys and sorrows. Marc possesses Ysolt's body by law, and she is at his disposal sexually, but he is fully aware that she only tolerates his attentions. Finally, Ysolt la Blanchemains has neither the comfort of possessing Tristran's heart or his body. Thomas, in inviting his audience to evaluate their pain, is emphasising that all four have been made acutely miserable by the situation.

The strength of Marc's feeling for his wife is emphasised at the peril of detracting from Ysolt's sympathetic portrayal. Ferrante is not alone in finding Thomas' heroine a highly unappealing character.¹¹⁰ Brengvein upbrates Ysolt cruelly for her treatment of her husband;

Ne larai, Ysolt, nel vus die:

Vus faites mult grant vilanie,

A vostre cors hunisement,

Quant il vus aime di durement,

E vus vers li vus cuntenez,

Cum vers home que naent n'amez. (Fragment Douce, 291-96)

(I will not refrain from telling you, Ysolt, you do great wickedness and bring great shame on yourself, since the King loves you so very much and you treat him as a man whom you do not love at all.)

Brengvein is speaking from the extremes of bitterness, but her reproaches have an uncomfortably truthful ring to them. Ysolt is making Marc miserable with her honesty, as she does not even attempt to feign love for him.

But Thomas also condemns Marc as the author of his own misery. When she threatens to tell Marc of her indiscretions, Ysolt laughs away her threats:

Nuls ne nus poreit tant medler

Que sun cors poüst de mei sevrer.

Mes faiz puet avoir contre quer,

¹⁰⁹ Chrétien's Fenice emphatically rejects this separation of body and heart.

¹¹⁰ Ferrante, 116-7.

Mei ne puet haïr a nul fuer;
 E mes folies puet haïr,
 Mais m'amur ne puet unc guerpîr;
 Mes faiz en sun cuer haïr puet:
 Quel talent qu'ait, amer m'estuet...
 ...Ki li dient ço qu'il plus het,
 Sachét que mal gré lur en set. (209-20)

(None could embroil us so far that my lord could live apart from me. - He may dislike the things I have done, but he cannot hate me in any way. He may hate all my follies, but he can never forgo his love for me. He can detest my deeds in his heart, but, whether he wants to or not, he must love me... Know that he bears ill-will towards those who tell him what he most dislikes.)

In Ysolt's description, Marc is far from a blind husband. He is aware of Ysolt's past misdemeanours, and loves her in spite of them. Without the malevolent compulsion of the potion as an excuse, Marc does not appear to have a will of his own, and he loses dignity as a result.

Brengvein continues by blaming Marc's permissiveness for Ysolt's past misbehaviours, and likening her to a colt that has been badly broken in.

Si li reis vus eüst castié
 Ne feïsez la maveisté... (257-8)
 (If the King had chastened you, you would not have indulged in this wickedness.)

Out of spite, Brengvein declares that he ought to have punished Ysolt as an adulterous wife as soon as he became aware of her affair:

Il l'ad suffert si lungement
 Huniz en est a tute sa gent.
 Le nés vus en deüst trencher
 U autrement aparailer
 Que hunie en fusez tus dis... (271-5)

(He has endured it for so long that he stands shamed before all his people. He ought to cut off your nose, or deal with you in some other fashion so that you should be held to scorn for ever.)

Brengvein is angry beyond all reason, but there are grains of truth in her condemnation of her friend. Ysolt has shamed the King with her adultery, and he would be legally justified in shaming her in return. But Marc's love for her prevents him from asserting his authority as husband, as Brengvein accurately observes: 'Se il itant ne vus amast, / Altrement vus en castiast' (289-90).¹¹¹ If he is fully aware of her adultery with Tristan, Marc can be accused of complicity.

Gottfried's Mark also becomes wilfully blind to the true object of Isolde's love as soon as he has recovered his wife from the Minnegrotte. He commands that the lovers conceal all obvious signs of their love - their intimate looks and familiar speech - so that he can live happy in his self-deception. The result is a hollow mockery of a marriage:

ern haete an sinem wibe
 noch minne noch meine
 noch al der eren keine,
 die got ie geworden liez,
 wan daz in sinem namen hiez
 ein vrouwe unde ein künigin
 da, da er künic solte sin. (17728-34)

(He possessed in his wife neither love nor affection, nor any of the splendid things which God ever brought to pass, except that in virtue of his name she was called 'Queen' and 'Lady' where he by right was King.)

Gottfried states clearly that the lovers are no longer trying to deceive him; Mark can plainly see and understand that his wife does not love him, but rather than face this truth, he remains in deliberate ignorance. If Mark is afflicted by the 'blintheit der

¹¹¹ If he were not so enamoured of you, he would act differently and admonish you.'

minne',¹¹² it is an affliction of his own choosing. It is ironic that at the same point of the narrative where the lovers abandon all deception, Mark wilfully embraces it.

In Bérout's *Tristan*, when the hero is disguised as a leper, he tells Marc that he caught his leprosy from his mistress, whose husband was sadly afflicted with the disease.¹¹³ There have been various interpretations of Tristan's meaning, but most scholars argue that in the medieval mind leprosy was associated with great lust and promiscuity (possibly because the disease was confused with a form of syphilis). Tristan therefore 'implies that the jealous, vengeful Mark has also been corrupted by his lust for Iseut.'¹¹⁴ Chaucer, in his Parson's Tale, equated marital lust with adultery; married men are adulterers when they make love 'oonly to hire fleshly delit.' Tristan is claiming that the King suffers from the same complaint as himself, and furthermore, that they share a common culpability. It is worth referring here to Andre le Chapelain, who wrote his treatise *On Love* in the same quarter-century that Bérout, Eilhart and Thomas were writing their disparate Tristan poems. 'Love cannot extend its sway over a married couple', he argued, on the grounds that spouses were compelled to refuse each other nothing, for 'married partners are forced to comply with each other's desires as an obligation.'¹¹⁵ He also argued (in accord with the doctrinal teachings of St Jerome, Peter Lombard and Alain de Lille) that 'as we are taught by apostolic law, anyone who loves his wife too ardently is considered guilty of adultery.'¹¹⁶ Marriage was a matter of grave importance, involving the transaction of wealth and power, and formed an integral part of the social structure; the vagaries of passion and sentiment were seen as threatening the security of this institution.¹¹⁷ Following the church teachings of the times, Mark is reduced to the same moral status as an adulterer when his role is transformed from a dutiful husband to that of an obsessed lover.

The idea that Mark's love for his wife is dangerously excessive and inappropriate to his rank and status was taken up by the author of the *Prose Tristan*:

¹¹² 'blindness of love'

¹¹³ Bérout, (3771-3).

¹¹⁴ Merritt Blakeslee, *Love's Masks: Identity, Intertextuality and Meaning in the Old French Tristan Poems*, 71.

¹¹⁵ P.J. Walsh, *Andreas Capellanus On Love*, 157.

¹¹⁶ Walsh, 151.

¹¹⁷ In his work *Love and Marriage*, Georges Duby writes of marital love that '*Affectio* (affection) and *dilectio* (pleasure) were acceptable, but love was not. In the twelfth century all men, churchmen and courtiers alike, were agreed on that point' 32.

Il l'aimme si de tout son cuer qu'il n'aimme Dieu ne home ne or ne argent
 autretant, ne tere ne roiaume. Cele aimme ne autre plus el monde, cele est tous
 ses soulas et toute sa vie. (IX§50)

(He loves her so with all his heart that he does not love God, nor man, nor gold
 nor silver so much, nor land, nor his realm. He loves no one more than her in all
 the world, she is his comfort and all his life.)

Marc's love for her is so great that it overcomes his legendary cowardice. He invades Arthur's lands to steal her back from the Joyous Garde, and his military losses mean nothing to him in comparison with the gain he has in recovering her. The *Prose's* Marc is not blind to his wife's love for Tristan, and he is only too willing to suspect the lovers of treachery. But despite her many betrayals, he still wants Iseut, and he is willing to jeopardise his knights, realm and person to possess her again; he is an *uxorius* husband, and a bad leader because of it.¹¹⁸

In the Tristan poems, Mark is clearly an inferior rival for Iseult's love, but not an entirely unworthy one. It is emphasised that Tristan is clearly superior to *all* other men, rather than that Mark is especially lacking in prowess or skill; in contrast, the innate treachery and cowardice of the Mark character in the *Prose* and Malory renders him ineligible as a rival for Iseult's affections. If the love of noble ladies should only be bestowed on worthy knights, Iseult can no more love her unworthy husband than Guinevere can love Meliagante, and no reproach can be attached to her for it. In the *Prose*, she makes it quite clear that she only chooses to stay with Marc for fear of the dishonour that leaving her lord will bring (II§502.) The deterioration of Marc's character leaves a gap in the Tristan story for a worthy rival for Iseult's affections, against whom Tristan can be measured and found superior. The pagan knight Palamedes, who is introduced as one of the *Prose* writer's greater innovations, fits neatly into this gap, as 'l'adrateur malheureux d'Iseut.'¹¹⁹ He seems to have been entirely the creation of the *Prose* author, taking the King's place as Tristan's rival for Iseult's love, and he develops a similar relationship with Tristan in which love, admiration, and jealousy are uneasily mixed. In both prose works, Tristan only falls in love with Iseut when he becomes aware that the rival knight loves her. Unlike Marc,

¹¹⁸ See Duby's *Love and Marriage* again for a discussion of the medieval opinion of the uxorious husband, who failed in his duty to control both his wife and his feelings for her, 24.

¹¹⁹ Renee L. Curtis, "Introduction" Vol. I, 10.

however, Palamedes has no legitimate claims to the lady. Iseut can refuse him with impunity.

In the *Prose*, Palamedes wins Iseut from Marc by a trick, in the same way that the Irish baron Gandin stole her in Gottfried's *Tristan*. The difference in the two episodes is that, in the *Prose*, one feels that the Queen almost deserves her abduction as it follows immediately from Iseut's attempt to murder Brangain. Iseut, having ordered two men to kill her friend, regrets her decision immediately afterwards, and mourns her loss. Brangain, however, has been left tied to a tree, where Palamedes finds her. Iseut offers him anything that he desires if he returns her friend to her; Palamedes promptly does so, and then demands his boon of King Marc, who agrees to uphold his wife's promise. Predictably, Palamedes then demands to take Iseut away, and Marc, though enraged, cannot break his word. In both Gottfried's *Tristan* and in the *Prose Tristan*, he is offered the option of undertaking combat to keep her:

nun was da nieman, der sin leben
 en aine wage wolte geben,
 noch Marke selbe enwolde
 niht vehten umbe Isolde,
 wan Gandin was von solher craft,
 so menlich und so herzehaft... (13247-52)

(But no one was ready to hazard his life, nor was Mark willing to fight for Isolde in person, since Gandin was so strong, virile, and courageous.)

In both these versions, Mark lacks both the prowess and the courage to fight for his wife. Tristan has won her for him, and only Tristan can recover and keep her. His wife is a possession, like his realm, which he cannot defend or hold.

Cuckold

In all six texts, the lovers are eventually discovered, and Mark is confronted with the final proof of his wife's infidelity. Eilhart's Mark staunchly refuses to believe the rumours until confronted with the evidence of his own eyes; Bérout's Marc is caught between his desire to trust the lovers, and his need to listen to his barons' counsel. Both

are slow to suspicion, and swift to forgiveness, while, in sharp contrast, both of the prose Kings are eager to accuse the lovers of treachery. Thomas's fragment shows Marc suffering in the full awareness of his wife's infidelity, while Gottfried's Mark wavers tragically between doubt and denial. All suffer from sexual jealousy of the hero. Even though these portrayals differ widely, the King of Cornwall is never willing to release his wife; rather, he seeks various means of controlling her wayward desires, in the hope that she may eventually love him. His situation as cuckold has the potential to attract pity rather than criticism.

To avert any potential sympathy for Mark's predicament, Gottfried has Isolde's mother deliver a condemnation on those men who desire women who will never return their love. She addresses the cowardly Steward, whose attentions are clearly unwanted by her young daughter, and insults him as a man without manhood who has adopted feminine traits in desiring that which he cannot have. Real men, says the Queen, love women who love them in return.

du seist uns ie genote,

du wellest Isote

und si enwelle din niht.

daz ist ir art: wer mac des iht? (9925-28)

(You keep on telling us that you desire Isolde and that she will have none of you? Such is her nature: who can change it?)

Here is Gottfried's answer to those among his audience who might condemn Isolde for failing to requite her husband's love: firstly, that unrequited passion is a game for women, not for men: secondly, that Mark ought not to set his desires on a woman who does not desire him in return: and thirdly, that even without the love potion turning her will from Mark, Isolde's natural inclinations cannot be changed or directed.

As much as Mark loves her, it is essentially a selfish love; he seeks exclusive possession and control of his wife. Iseult, who was given no choice in her husband, is presented in a vulnerable light in a number of the texts, as a woman alone in a strange country, lacking the support of her family and kinsmen. But despite her apparent weakness, she has the power to withhold her love from her husband, and to give her body to the man of her choice whenever she has the chance. The traditional balance of power in the marriage is thus reversed; she can easily control Mark by manipulating his

love for her, but he is powerless to control her desires. Twice in Gottfried's poem she succeeds in convincing him of her innocence only after she has made love to him.¹²⁰ As a reflection of this imbalance of power, Mark resorts to the deceitful devices traditionally assigned to women; he eavesdrops and spies on the lovers, and finally sets traps in order to prove his suspicions. Once their love is discovered, he moves abruptly to using his powers as king, rather than husband, attempting to separate the lovers by ordering their banishment, imprisonment, and even their execution in his desperation to end their affair.

The remaining fragment of Béroul's poem begins with Marc hidden in a tree, eavesdropping on the lovers' conversation while they are fully aware of his presence.¹²¹ His suspicions alerted by a malevolent dwarf, Marc essays deceitful methods as a means of discovering the truth, but his efforts are doomed to failure. Both Tristran and Iseut are skilled tricksters who delight in their ability to deceive 'with a childlike, almost malicious pleasure'.¹²² Marc is no trickster, and in the eavesdropping scene, he is competing as an amateur against professionals. Lacking their ability to create truth by manipulating language, Marc places great value on the evidence of his eyes and ears, but as Lacy observes, 'throughout the romance, appearances are illusory.' Nothing is as it seems: the barons, named and condemned by the author as traitorous slanderers, speak nothing but the truth to their King, while the lovers betray him constantly in their adultery, and yet Béroul - and his God - are clearly on their side. In these circumstances, Marc's search for 'verité' based on the *appearance* of things is doomed to failure.¹²³ When he finds the lovers lying together in the forest, he judges them innocent against all probability because of their appearance as they lie separated by the sword; when he eavesdrops on them from the tree, he deduces their innocence because their conversation appears to be unguarded.

¹²⁰ Bekker, in *Gottfried von Strassburg's Tristan: A Journey*, sees this relationship in which 'the couple 'lay each other snares and see fit to attain their goals under the guise of love-making' as 'a form of prostitution, the commercialisation of love in which sex is utilised in order to gain an entirely selfish goal, rather than to achieve true union' 204-5. Alternatively, the nature of their relationship, based on negotiation and exchange, can be seen as characteristic of their arranged marriage. Ideally, Mark and Iseult would have eventually reached 'true union' together, but her love for Tristan precluded this; thus, the way they communicate still reflects the economic and political origins of their relationship.

¹²¹ For an analysis of the eavesdropper-in-the-tree motif as it appears in fabliaux and eastern legend, see Helaine Newstead's "The Tryst Beneath the Tree: An Episode in the Tristan Legend", 269-84.

¹²² Lacy, xiii - xiv.

¹²³ E. Jane Burns, in "How Lovers Lie Together: Infidelity and Fictive Discourse in the 'Roman de Tristan'" has accurately likened him 'to the blindfolded player in a game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey' 85.

Li rois de l'arbre est devalez;
 En son cuer dit or croit sa feme
 Et mescroit les barons du reigne,
 Que li faisoient chose acroire
 Que il set bien que n'est pas voire
 Et qu'il a prové a mençonge. (286-91)

(The king came down from the tree. He told himself that he now believed his wife and doubted the barons of his land, for they had made him believe something that he realized was untrue, something he now knew to be a lie.)

Scholars have found Béroul's constant affirmation of the lying lovers - and his denunciation of the truthful barons - morally bewildering. But he seems to be indicating that his audience, too, needs to look beyond the appearance of things. Tristran and Iseut may be lovers, but they are deceiving the King in order to preserve his honour and happiness because they love him; while the barons, in wishing to reveal the painful truth of his cuckoldry to him from the motives of envy and hatred, are his true betrayers. Neither actions nor words reveal the whole truth of the situation, and ironically, it is only while deceived that Marc can rightly determine that Tristran and Iseut are more true to him than his barons.

The lovers, compelled to their affair by the potion, are forced into their subterfuge, but Mark has no such excuse. Hiding in the linden tree, Eilhart's Mark has lost his dignity; he is not behaving like a king, but like the jealous cuckold figure of *fabliaux*. When he turns on the dwarf with murderous rage, it seems to be partly in rage at his own humiliating suspicions. Yet, once he has entered into the cuckold role, he cannot escape from it. Eilhart does not attack Mark's surveillance directly, but he discusses the behaviour of Lord Nampetenis, who - like Mark himself - is a great knight and hunter. However, as Eilhart writes, he guards his beautiful wife Gariole so fiercely that his honour suffers for it. He builds castle walls and three moats around her, and whenever he leaves the castle, he drives out all the men, and locks her and her women inside. Eilhart is highly sympathetic to the lady's embarrassment; 'swen sô he zu hûs quam, / si entorste nîman an sên. / wie mochte ir ummer wers geschên?' (7942-44)¹²⁴

¹²⁴ 'When he came home, she didn't dare look at anyone. How could it ever be worse with her?'

His scathing condemnation of Nampetenis' actions, that 'vreislich man', can easily be extended to Mark's behaviour as well:

mich wundert, wes he denkit
 der sînes wîbes hûtet,
 wen stât ir ir gemûte
 nicht williglichen dar,
 sô mag he nimmer sie bewarn
 mit allen sînen sinnen.
 wen, wil sie einen minnen,
 sie tût ez âne sînen dang,
 ez were korz adir lang:
 daz wart an desin dingen schîn. (7878-87)

(I would like to know what a man is thinking about who keeps watch over his wife, for, if her heart is not willingly faithful, he can never protect her, no matter how careful he is. If she wants to have a love affair, she will have one against his will sooner or later, as was seen in this case.)

According to Eilhart, it is impossible for any man to control his wife's desires, and moreover, he should not attempt to, lest his efforts expose them both to shame and ridicule. Gottfried follows a similar line of argument when he denounces surveillance as the enemy of love, explaining that in this way husbands will only incite their wives to infidelity, rather than prevent it. He also makes it clear yet again that love cannot be forced:

swie dicke mans beginne,
 dem wibe enmac ir minne
 nieman uz ertwingen
 mit übelichen dingen:
 man leschet minne wol dermite. (17917-21)

(However much he tries, a man will never extort love from a woman by wrong means - that is how to extinguish it.)

Even though the eavesdropping incident convinces Mark of their innocence, he allows Andret and the malicious lords to persuade him into allowing them to orchestrate a final trap for the lovers, in which white flour is scattered between the Queen and Tristan's beds to reveal Tristan's footprints. While Mark does not play an active role in the devising of the scheme, his deceit is necessary for its success; he must agree to lie to Tristan about a sudden errand which the knight must undertake, or about a fictional journey that he intends to make. Tristrant, no fool, sees the flour on the floor, but recklessly decides to leap over it to Isalde's bed;

Daz was eine grôze tumheit
 daz her daz nicht vormeit
 dorch sînes lîbes freise.
 her wolde vor der reise
 zû der koninginne komen,
 doch habe wir wol vornomen
 daz ez von dem tranke quam. (3909-15)

(He was very foolish not to refrain in fear of his life, but, as we have heard, the power of the potion taught him such lack of restraint.)

Béroul offers no such excuses for his hero's recklessness; instead, he pays close attention to the troubled Marc's dilemma. He is caught again between his desire to believe in the lovers' fidelity to him and the barons' relentless desire that he should test this belief. As Tristrant leaps, his old wounds break open, and his blood drenches Isalde as 'recht als ein blût'; Béroul's Tristran does not notice the bleeding, 'qar trop a son delit entent.'¹²⁵ When the king and the *felons* break into the chamber, her bed is stained red with their sexual guilt.¹²⁶ The success of his trap affords Marc little pleasure, for as Béroul observes, hatred has triumphed.

In the *version commune*, Mark immediately condemns them to be bound and executed on the following day. Gottfried, in contrast, makes the results of the trap more ambiguous; since Isolde has been recently bled, the King cannot be certain that the blood in her bed is not her own. In his doubt, he summons his barons in order to subject

¹²⁵ 'for he thought only of his pleasure'

¹²⁶ In the *Prose Tristan*, Iseut saves them both by noticing that the sheets are stained with blood before they are discovered. (II§532)

her to an ordeal. By agreeing to set the trap, Mark has turned his private doubts of Iseult's fidelity into a public matter, and thus exposed the Queen to the accusation of treason. While a knight might prove his innocence by trial of combat, Iseult faces the trial of a sacred vow in which Tristan's prowess cannot help her. In Bérout's work, Tristran is exiled, leaving Iseut vulnerable to the barons' attacks, but Marc at least is now convinced of her innocence, and willingly defends her angrily against the barons. Iseut here offers of her own volition to undergo the ordeal in order to prove her innocence, and furthermore, demands that King Arthur witness her vow before all Cornwall. Her one advantage lies in that 'in the medieval legal system of immanent justice, guilt or innocence is established solely on the basis of what is seen,'¹²⁷ and the Queen is by now an old hand at creating the appearance of innocence through language.

Iseut's vow is her only chance to overturn the weight of evidence collected against the lovers. One might be justified in expecting a retributive lightning bolt, but Bérout has made it clear that God is on the lovers' side, and that love will triumph over hatred. As Lacy observes, 'the occasion of the queen's exculpation is largely a celebration, a joyous event that will reunite her with Mark and permit her return to court.'¹²⁸ The Queen's oath becomes the climax of the text, a glorious masterpiece of trickery, and a triumph of deceptive language over literal justice. Marc's private reconciliation with his wife has now been validated by her public exoneration:

Li rois a Cornoualle en pes,
 Tuit le criement et luin et pres.
 En ses deduiz Yseut en meine,
 De lié amer forment se paine. (4267-70)

(The king now had peace in Cornwall, and he was feared by all, from far and near. He included Iseut in his activities, and took care to show his love for her.)

When the royal marriage is publicly restored by the oath, Mark's authority as King is restored with it.

The ordeal is a less happy event in Gottfried's poem. The King is still tormented by doubts and suspicions after the episode of the bloody bed, and wishes both to achieve an elusive personal peace of mind, and to silence the rumours that he fears are

¹²⁷ Burns, 75.

¹²⁸ Lacy, xiv.

circulating in the court. To this end, he summons his nobles and declares that for the sake of his land, he wants the Queen publicly tried. The Bishop of Thames points out that he has no evidence on which to condemn them, and demands that Isolde be summoned to make her defense. Mark then traps her into agreeing to the ordeal of the red-hot iron. Isolde, rightly concerned about her guilt,¹²⁹ prepares by dressing as a penitent, giving away her material possessions, and sending up fervent prayers. Her sudden devotion is an effort to bargain with God; she hopes

daz got ir waren schulde

an ir niht gedaechte

und si zir eren braehte. (15648-50)

(that He might overlook her very real trespasses and restore her to her honour.)

Having surrendered herself to divine judgement, Isolde passes the test with another oath designed to be contextually false, though literally truthful. In one of his most controversial statements, Gottfried writes ‘da wart wol goffenbaeret / und al der werlt bewaeret, / daz der vil tugenthafte Crist / wintschaffen also ein ermel ist.’ (15733-6)¹³⁰ This passage has been cited as evidence of Gottfried’s heresy, but in this context, he is simply arguing for the adaptability of God’s mercy. Mark may only be capable of viewing their situation in limited terms of black and white, definitive betrayal or absolute fidelity, but Gottfried’s Christ suffers from no such limitations. Mark’s suspicions are thus allayed once more.

Mark’s efforts to take control of his situation through traps and surveillance are defeated by a combination of serendipity, trickery, and divine grace. The attempts at resolution that he undertakes as King are also unsuccessful: the execution, which will be discussed in Chapter Three, is defeated by Tristan’s prowess, and though he can successfully banish Tristan from his realm, the lovers are able to reunite repeatedly by using the same tactics of deceit and disguise which characterised their earlier relationship. Urged to it by the three barons, Béroul’s Marc banishes his nephew with reluctance, offering him ‘or et argent et vair et gris’ by way of reparation. He returns,

¹²⁹ Bekker, however, argues that Isolde never sees her love for Tristan as a sin; rather, she regrets that she has failed to retain a flawless public appearance as Mark’s wife, and has thus jeopardised the social order, *Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan: A Journey*, 224-5.

¹³⁰ ‘Thus was it made manifest and confirmed to all the world that Christ in His great virtue is pliant as a windblown sleeve.’

however, in the guise of a leper as soon as Iseut sends for him. Eilhart's Mark banishes Tristrant as his first action upon discovering his wife's infidelity, and as he might have had them both executed for treason, his verdict seems both merciful and just. He then banishes Tristrant for a second time, after Isalde is returned to him from the forest, and again his reasoning appears to be sound, though inflexible. In a key interaction between the two that emphasises the gulf now separating them, Tristrant tries to persuade Mark to let him stay:

„alsô vele ich ûch noch dînen sol,
 daz ich ûch wedir werde lîp.“
 „ûwers dînstes begere ich nît.“
 „war umme, hêre?“ „daz wil ich sagin:
 dâ habe ich lastir unde schadin
 vil von ûch gewonnen.“
 „wolt ir mir nicht gonnen
 daz ich in ûwerm lande sî?“
 „nein, ir wêret mir zu nâhe bî. (4938-46)

(“I shall perform such deeds for you that you will again be fond of me.” “I don't want your service.” “Why not, sir?” “I'll tell you. You have brought me much harm and shame.” “You won't allow me to remain in your land?” “No, you would be too near me...”)

Tristrant tries to re-establish Mark's affection for him on the old grounds; Mark first loved him because of his great deeds of honour, and he reasons that Mark will love him once more if he serves him in this manner again. But their old relationship is lost beyond repair, damaged by their mutual rivalry for Isalde's love. Tristrant is indeed 'too near' to Mark in his desire for the Queen; his banishment, and even his subsequent marriage, are not enough to separate him from her.

While Mark engages in subterfuge, the three central characters seem trapped in a cyclic pattern. Mark's dormant suspicions are roused, the lovers are caught by trickery in potentially damning circumstances, they extricate themselves through their own trickery, and Mark's belief in their innocence is restored until the next cycle begins. Yet Emil Nickel correctly identifies Mark as the only character with the power to

release all three from their impasse; he can avert tragedy by releasing Isolde.¹³¹ Despite the lovers' efforts at secrecy after the episode of the ordeal, Gottfried's Mark is witness to their 'süeze blicke', their secret glances and gestures of affection. In 'blinden leide', Mark summons a court in the Palace and banishes them publicly. Finally, he has acknowledged that

swaz ich mir huote genime
 beidiu hin ziu und hin ze ime
 dazn mac ze keinen staten gestan:
 ez ist allez umbe niht getan,
 swie vil ich es getribe. (16561-5)

(Whatever watch I set on you or him, it is of no avail. It is all to no purpose, whatever lengths I go to.)

Mark begins this speech in bitterness and frustration, but as he continues, his words reveal slowly and steadily the wise King whom the young Rivalin once so greatly admired. He outlines clearly the impasse they have reached; he will not bear any longer his 'unere', but he also will not revenge himself on the lovers as he is legally entitled to do. Despite his rage, he still loves them too much to have them killed, and so he seeks another method of escape from his dilemma:

diu gemeinde under uns drin
 diun mac niht langer gesin;
 ich wil iuch zwei derbi lan,
 ich eine wil dervon gan,
 swie ich mich dervon geloese. (16607-11)

(This fellowship between the three of us can hold no longer; I will leave you two together, and I alone shall quit it, however I succeed in freeing myself.)

Viewing their situation clearly, Mark sacrifices his personal desires and releases the lovers; it is his great redeeming moment, in which he recovers for a brief time the lost dignity of his kingship.

¹³¹ See Emil Nickel's Studien zum Liebesproblem bei Gottfried von Strassburg, 60.

Considering this, it seems a tragedy that the lovers choose to return from the Minnegrotte, 'in ir herzen vro',¹³² into a situation even worse than the one they left before. Mark now willingly sacrifices his dignity for the cuckold's blindness, and to perpetuate the King's illusions, Tristan must leave the court for Arundel, where he will eventually marry another. It is difficult to understand why the lovers would willingly forsake the ideal realm of the Minnegrotte for the corrupt reality of the court for the sake of their lost places in society. When Béroul's lovers choose to leave the harsh deprivation of the wilderness for this reason, this same motivation seems far more plausible. It is clear that the narrative requires that the lovers return to court at this point and then separate once more, but their rejection of the spiritual idyll of the Minnegrotte for the sake of their social roles seems a jarring inconsistency. However, Mark's motivation for requesting their return is clear enough; he has fatally succumbed to his desire for Isolde once more.

In the episode of the Minnegrotte, it becomes clear that the lovers form a world entire unto themselves, which Mark can only observe impotently. Some critical studies have termed him a voyeur, and he certainly gains pleasure from watching his beautiful wife as she sleeps. However, Mark does not take delight in being a mere observer; he wants to take Tristan's place beside her in the Minnegrotte. He cannot enter their world, but he can desire what he sees there, and express a love and tenderness towards Isolde, that, while well-intentioned, must darken her world. When he covers the window to prevent the sun from waking her, it is far from the proprietary gesture that Eilhart's King makes when he places his glove on Isalde's breast. Bekker is correct in asserting that this is 'the poignant gesture of the outsider looking in, who seeks to *know* what is destined to remain beyond his understanding...'¹³³ Touchingly, Mark prays to God to protect her, blesses her in farewell, and then goes away in tears. Mark's tragedy is that he is not an insensitive cuckold; he is fully aware of what he has lost in his wife, and what he is missing in his marriage with her.

In Béroul's poem, Marc goes secretly into the forest with the clearly stated intention of killing the lovers while they sleep.¹³⁴ He has failed to kill them publicly by

¹³² 'happy in their hearts'

¹³³ Bekker, 262.

¹³⁴ Eilhart, infuriatingly enough, claims complete ignorance of the king's motivations (4614-16). Nor does he give any indication of the king's emotions when he sees the pair, or explain his reasoning for placing his glove on Isalde's breast and his sword in place of Tristrant's.

execution, and now he intends to take vengeance on them privately;¹³⁵ Béroul twice states that either Marc or Tristan will die in this encounter. But when the lovers are entirely vulnerable, lacking even the defences of language, Marc is unable to slay them. Instead, he leaves his gloves to block the sun from falling on Iseut, a gesture which is both kindly and possessive, and he leaves his sword in place of Tristan's, as a reminder that he gave his nephew knighthood. Upon seeing them, Marc is convinced of their innocence, but when the lovers wake they immediately assume in their guilt that his gestures portend some ambiguous 'felonie' on his part, and flee from the Morrois. It is not until the potion wears off that they can interpret his merciful actions correctly, and seek the reconciliation that he desires. The *Prose Tristan* retains this episode as one of Marc's few redeeming moments, when his habitual treachery is momentarily put aside. Though he can essay murder easily in his rages, he can still be touched by the sight of the lovers asleep.

In Malory's *Book*, Isode clearly does not return to her marriage from their forest exile of her own free will. Mark steals her by cunning, while Tristram's back is turned: 'And whan he cam there he founde hym gone, and anone he toke La Beale Isode home with hym and kept her strayte, that by no meane she myght never wryght nor sende.' (272) In the prose works, Mark progresses rapidly from surveillance to imprisonment of his unwilling wife. Made desperate by his awareness that he has no control over the situation, he takes to locking his wife up in towers. It is an unsubtle attempt to regain control over her wayward desires, but he only succeeds in confining her body. The imprisoning tower becomes an accurate metaphor for Iseut's imprisoning marriage, and like the marriage, it fails to contain her sexuality. In the *Prose*, Tristan invades it in the guise of a woman, takes his pleasure with Iseut, and Marc is left thwarted once again. Even when he directly confronts Iseut after discovering the lovers together (II§514), she proves to be more than a match for his angry bluster. Marc is powerless against her.¹³⁶

Thomas and Gottfried presented Mark's love as a selfish love, and the *Prose* author emphasises this in his work. The Mark of the *version courtoise* is far from insensitive to Isolde's feelings, but once he has recovered her, he refuses to give her up. The Marc of the *Prose Tristan* never appears to consider releasing her, but repeatedly kidnaps her from Tristan, despite her intense and obvious misery:

¹³⁵ R. Howard Bloch argues that Marc would be legally justified in his premeditated murder, as Tristan is now an outlaw as well as an adulterer at this point; *Medieval French Literature and Law*, 239-40.

¹³⁶ Renee L. Curtis, "The Character of Iseut in the *Prose Tristan*," 178.

Li cuers est en grant dolour et en tristece. Bien le puet apercevoir li rois March, car il n'est gaires heure que la roïne Yseut ne pleure, ne ce n'est mie de faintise mais de cuer: dont il est merveille qu'ele puet tant plourer et tant jeter larmes conme ele rent, car sans faille la viande est avant moullie qu'ele le menjuce ne mete em bouce... Et quant li rois March voit choir les lermes, souvent en a males paroles et mal samblant et male ciere. Il en a le cors seulement, et que vaut li cors d'une dame morte? Quant autre soulas n'en a fors qu'il le voit plorer, comment si puet il reconforter? (IX§50)

(Her heart is in great sadness and great sorrow. King Marc can see this well, because there is scarcely an hour when Queen Iseut does not cry, and it is not a pretence, but a thing of the heart; it is a wonder that she can cry so much and shed as many tears as she does, because without fail her food is already wet before she puts it in her mouth... And when King Mark sees the tears falling, often he is ill-spoken, and ill-seeming, and grim-faced. He has her body only, and what's the body of a dead woman worth? What solace has he other than to see her crying, how can he comfort her?¹³⁷)

As dislikable a character as he is, Mark's unhappiness that he cannot make her happy is palpable. But when weighed in the balance, his possessive love matters more than her misery: 'Il l'aimme tant que por mauvais samblant qu'ele face, il ne le puet onques amer mains.'¹³⁸

Malory omits all mention of Mark's love from his source in order to present his King Fox as the epitome of villainy, without the few redeeming qualities that survive in the *Prose*.¹³⁹ His Mark does not suffer emotional pain with the loss of Isode to Tristram, but displays all the fury of a selfish child who has lost a favourite toy. His gestures of affection towards her are few and far between. For example, when Isode believes Tristram to be dead, she attempts to kill herself in her garden. Her suicide attempt is serendipitously interrupted by Mark's arrival, who 'toke hir in hys armys...

¹³⁷ Due to the ambiguity of the phrasing, 'comment si puet il reconforter?' might also translate as 'how can he be comforted?'

¹³⁸ (He loves her so much that even with her unhappy countenance he can never love her less.)

¹³⁹ Surles gives a comprehensive, if brief, list of these qualities, arguing that the king is to be believed when he claims that he loves his wife 'plus que rien du monde', 64-65.

and bare hir away with hym into a towyre, and there he made hir to be kepte, and wacched hir surely.’ (307) A generous reader might take this passage as indicative of Mark’s love for her, but it can be better read as an example of Mark’s possessiveness; nothing, including death, must take Isode from him. Her desire to escape their marriage is met repeatedly by kidnapping and imprisonment, and when Mark gets the chance, he promptly casts Tristram into prison as well.

King Mark’s intense frustration at the impasse in which he finds himself pervades Malory’s *Book*. Mark’s customary solution to any irritation he might encounter usually involves the rapid execution of the culprit, but here he finds himself thwarted. He cannot be publicly avenged on Tristram, as his overlord Arthur has forbidden it, and nor can he end his misery by having his wife killed, as his barons will not suffer her to be harmed. Moreover, he is trapped by his own jealous nature; he cannot surrender his most prized possession to the man he envies most in the world. In desperation, he reaches out to the one man whose situation parallels his most closely, and writes a letter to Arthur, and ‘bade hym entermete with hymself and wyth his wyff, and of his knyghtes, for he was able to rule his wyff and his knyghtes.’ (381) Mark cannot harm Tristram and Isode, nor end their affair, but he can attempt to hurt their allies in adultery, and the man who has prevented him from wreaking his vengeance on them.

King Arthur does not dismiss the letter immediately; Merlin’s warning must echo at the back of his mind. He remembers upon reading Mark’s epistle Morgan le Fay’s previous accusations against his best knight and his queen, but, aware of his sister’s malice towards them, ‘he put that all oute of his thought.’ Mark has failed, defeated by Arthur’s unwillingness to stoop to suspicion without reason, and to dishonour two honourable people. Though technically a cuckold, Arthur has retained his dignity and his honour by refusing to enter into the role as Mark does, and thus he cannot be caught in the same trap of sexual jealousy that has trapped the vicious ‘Kynge Foxe’.

Conclusion

The marriage between Mark and Iseult is an arranged one, and in the poems, the precarious peace and security of Cornwall depends on it. Iseult is formally handed by

her father over to Tristan's custody, and from a misguided sense of loyalty, Tristan gives her as wife to Mark, who never desired a wife in the first place. Mark is a highly reluctant bridegroom, who seems content with Tristan's company in his male world of hunting and knightly pursuits. The bachelor king is thus entirely unprepared for the effect his young wife has on him, and in the *version courtoise*, she becomes the lodestar of his happiness. But Iseult herself never chose Mark, and under the influence of the potion, cannot love him in return. Because she was not given a choice in the matter of her marriage, Iseult is never constrained by personal loyalty to Mark as Tristan is, and she readily makes a cuckold of him.

While the King of the *version commune* clearly loves his Queen - Beroul's Marc and Eilhart's Mark are both slow to suspect her and swift to take her back - the Mark presented by the *version courtoise* loves her with a dangerous excess. Thomas' Marc, caught in an eternal quadrangle, has the rights of a husband over Ysolt's body, but he also wants the rights of a lover over her heart. His desire for her is inappropriate to both his rank and role; rather than elevating him, his character is reduced by it. Gottfried's Mark chooses to be deliberately blind to her infidelity, rather than suffer the pain of his knowledge as Thomas' Marc does; he fully accepts the humiliation of the cuckold role.

In the prose works, Mark's marriage with Iseult is clearly a *mésalliance*; Mark began the bridequest by seeking death for his nephew, not a bride for himself, and it is clearly impossible that Iseult should ever requite his love. It is essentially a selfish love, focused on possession; Marc kidnaps and imprisons the object of his desire repeatedly, despite her palpable misery. Yet, in all six of these versions, Mark is never a stupid or insensitive man. He is aware of Iseult's worth, but he also understands fully she does not love him. He is shut out of the Minnegrotte, excluded from the lovers' world, and his tragedy lies in his awareness of his loss.

*MARK AS KING: Mark and Cornwall***Introduction**

Mark's role as King sets him apart from the mass of cuckolded husbands of medieval literature; he is also the lovers' liege lord, with far greater powers of revenge and punishment. In their disparate portrayals of Mark, the Tristan texts present a remarkably consistent ideal of kingship that is in accord with modern historical findings about medieval kingship. To briefly summarise these, a good king must firstly maintain peace and order within his land and defend his people from foreign aggressors. He should be autocratic, capable of making crucial decisions alone, but he should also seek advice from the vassals on whose support his authority rests. He should be honourable, generous, wise and just in all his rulings. Moreover - crucially in Mark's case - he should place the good of his kingdom above his own personal inclinations.

This is the ideal against which Mark's actions are measured, as he wrestles with the private problem of his wife and nephew's mutual infidelity. Tristan is not just his nephew and only potential heir, but he is also the champion upon whom Mark relies for the defence of his realm. Mark must consider, therefore, when he allows the lovers to be exposed to public accusations of treason and its subsequent penalties, that the external security of Cornwall will be fatally jeopardised by Tristan's death, and that potentially, the hard-won peace between Cornwall and Ireland which Mark's marriage to Iseult represents will be lost. Moreover, the distress evinced by the people of Cornwall provides evidence of the internal disruption that the loss of the Queen and the Cornish champion will cause.

On the other side of the argument, Mark's advisors, who are set directly in opposition to the lovers, present two critical accusations against Tristan and Iseult. They accuse them firstly of dishonouring the King through their adultery, and secondly, of critically undermining his authority by their behaviour. Though these accusations spring from jealousy and malice, they are not entirely groundless. When the Queen's sexual misbehaviour becomes known within Mark's court, it must reflect badly on him; the poems are in agreement that he is dishonoured by it. Furthermore, if the advisors' accusations are correct, Mark is fully justified by medieval law in sentencing the lovers to die as traitors, and his rage is righteous. But even though he is fully within his rights

to kill them as king, Mark is acting at the same time as a jealous husband, and exploiting his power to inflict pain in revenge for his own. The question must be asked as to whether Mark is acting in the interests of *pax* and *ordo*, or purely from self-interest.

Tristan is not the only character in the legend to wrestle with the demands of love and duty; Mark is similarly torn between the two. Eilhart's Mark is a noble and generous King, who is obsessed beyond reason with his honour, while Bérout also presents an essentially decent King, who is overly susceptible to bad counsel. Gottfried's Mark enters as an exemplary King, who slowly deteriorates as his private concerns come to dominate over his public duties, while Thomas' King seems entirely lost to his painful uxoriousness. In the wider world of the prose works, Mark's bad kingship infects his realm. Cornwall becomes a land of deceit and treachery, and the Cornish knights are notorious for their rank cowardice; Mark and his kingdom are inextricably bound together.

While the Tristan texts are generally in agreement on how a good king should behave, they are less clear on how a king should behave when he learns that his nephew and heir is bedding his queen. Malory's *Book* gives the only direct answer in providing a direct comparison to Mark's actions in the exemplary behaviour of King Arthur, whose relationship with Guinevere and Lancelot closely parallels Mark's situation. Malory is less interested in Mark as lover or husband than any of the other Tristan authors of this study, because he is intent on creating his character as the antithesis of Arthur, and of all that Arthur represents. The portrayal of Mark has transformed from the noble, if misguided, lord of the original legend into a tyrant.

Advice and Authority

Mark's power as King is balanced by his obligation to hear and heed the advice of his vassals, those noble lords and barons of Cornwall upon whom his authority rests.¹⁴⁰ He who has the king's ear has the king's influence, which is a highly valued commodity; Tristan and Iseult's perceived monopoly of this influence accordingly creates jealousy and hostility among the other nobles. Tristan's elevation in Mark's favours has been

¹⁴⁰ R. Howard Bloch, 241.

discussed earlier, but Iseult herself is given great power through Mark's affection for her. In Bérout's work, her anger against the barons springs in part from her belief that they have usurped her right to the king's ear.¹⁴¹ As vulnerable as she is in a strange land, Iseult has the ability to influence the King through a combination of clever words and caresses, appealing to both his intellect and his body as his barons cannot. The subsequent jealousy of these barons poses the greatest threat to the lovers in Bérout and Eihart's poems, and they use their knowledge of the Queen's adultery in an attempt to correct what they perceive as an imbalance in the King's favour. Mark might have remained happily oblivious to their affair if his advisors had not informed him of it, and the many traps invented for the lovers are usually not of his own devising.

In Bérout's poem, the three barons who denounce the lovers are making an entirely accurate and well-founded accusation. Tristan and Iseut have been lamentably careless considering the surveillance they are under; 'plusors foiz les ont veüz / El lit roi Marc gesir toz nus' (593-4).¹⁴² Moreover, when they confront the King with their evidence, they accuse him of complicity:

Qar bien savon de verité

Que tu consenz lor cruauté

Et tu sez bien ceste mervelle. (615-17)

(because we know for a fact that you are fully aware of their crime and that you condone it.)

It is a clever strategy: Marc must act against the lovers, or seem guilty of conniving at his own cuckoldry, which the barons announce that they will not tolerate any longer. However, their loyal indignation on the King's behalf forms a thin veneer over what, upon examination, is revealed as a form of blackmail. Consider the choice the barons offer him:

Se ton nevo n'ostes de cort,

Si que jamais il ne retort,

Ne nos tenron a vos jamez,

Si ne vos tendron nule pez.

¹⁴¹ Burns, 83.

¹⁴² 'several times [the barons] had seen them lying completely naked in King Marc's bed.'

De nos voisins feron partir

De cort, quel nel poon souffrir. (619-24)

(If you do not banish your nephew from court so that he never returns, you will never have our allegiance, and we will never leave you in peace. We will also have others leave the court, for we cannot tolerate this.)

This is a direct challenge to Marc's authority. His barons are threatening him with the loss of his sovereignty and of Cornwall's peace if he does not accede to their demands.¹⁴³ This is not advice, but a demand that the King obey his own vassals; if the barons were really concerned for Marc's honour rather than their own interests, they would have tried persuasion rather than coercion. Marc, however, is too distracted by the matter of their accusation to attend to the revealing manner in which it is couched, and responds to them encouragingly:

Conseliez m'en, gel vos requier.

Vos me devez bien consellier,

Que servise perdre ne vuel. (631-3)

(Advise me, I pray you: you must give me good counsel, for I do not want to lose your service.)

Marc accepts their advice without discrimination, and allows himself to be persuaded into setting the trap of the bloody bed; this, after he has only recently repented of his earlier suspicions after the eavesdropping scene, saying: 'Molt est fous qui croit tote gent' (308).¹⁴⁴ As Perinis observes, his mind is easily swayed one way or another:

Li rois n'a pas coraige entier,

Senpres est ci et senpres la. (3432-3)

(The king constantly changes his mind, now believing one thing, now another.)

¹⁴³ It should be noted that R. Howard Bloch argues that in accordance with the reciprocal nature of the feudal bond between ruler and ruled the barons are entirely entitled to disobey Marc if he does not follow their advice, 242.

¹⁴⁴ 'He is a fool who believes everyone.'

Many critics have observed Marc's gullibility, the ease with which he can be persuaded by ill-motivated advice and by weak evidence,¹⁴⁵ but only Tyson has analysed this as springing from his need to trust those around him, especially the nephew and wife whom he loves.¹⁴⁶ Trust and gullibility, she argues, are sides of the same coin.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, the King cannot dismiss the barons' accusations out of hand; as a good king, he must hear them.

In Eilhart's *Tristrant*, the seven jealous lords are led by Antret the Cowardly, Mark's nephew, who approaches King Mark on their behalf. He begins by apologising for being the bringer of bad news, and then bluntly announces that Tristrant loves Mark's wife. His real grievance comes after this accusation; 'ouch hâstû, hêre, dînen mûd / zu sêre an in gelâzin' (3184-85).¹⁴⁸ In accusing Tristrant of causing the King dishonour and shame, Antret is displaying some tactical cleverness, as Eilhart's Mark is concerned for his honour above all else. However, unlike Béroul's monarch, he silences Antret sharply. Tristrant has brought him great 'êre unde vromen'¹⁴⁹, and he defends Tristrant's honour accordingly against the lords' slanders. But then Mark goes straight from this valiant defence of his nephew to his bed-chamber where he finds Tristrant and Isalde embracing, and his unshakeable belief in Tristrant's fidelity is brutally shattered.

Mark has loved Tristrant for bringing him honour, but he turns on him when this honour is threatened:

wie mochte ich daz vorwinnen
zu mîner wereltlîchen êre,
tût ir mir sô grôze sêre
mit ûwir valschen libe? (3262-5)

(How can I keep my honour with a traitor like you causing me such grief?)

When he catches them *in flagrante delicta* for the second time, he listens eagerly to Antret's advice that Tristrant should be broken on the wheel, and Isalde burnt at the stake. Eilhart shows that the King cannot be just in his rulings when he is filled with

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Gweneth Whitteridge's "The 'Tristan' of Béroul," in which she describes Marc as 'weak and vacillating, easily led and incapable of making up his mind or taking any firm line and persisting in it,' 346

¹⁴⁶ Tyson, 69.

¹⁴⁷ Tyson, 74.

¹⁴⁸ 'Moreover, lord, you favour him too much.'

¹⁴⁹ 'honour and profit'

rage; Antret, the voice of jealousy, holds sway, and Tinas, the voice of conscience, is fatally ignored.

The lord high steward Dinas, as Tinas is usually called, possesses a curious place in the Tristan legend; among Mark's barons, he provides a solitary voice of support for the lovers, even defying the King on their behalf. Eilhart's Tinas is a highly born nobleman, and when Tristrant first arrives in Cornwall, Mark places him in his steward's care:

der koning hâte in ûz irkorn

daz he sînes rîches wîlt

und im lant und êre behîlt...

...he tet î gerne dez beste.

he was hobisch unde rîche (322-31)

(He had been chosen by the king to wield the latter's might and preserve his country and honour... He always did what was best, was courteous and was powerful...)

Though a minor character, Tinas plays a pivotal role; he is the embodiment of the king's conscience, the guardian of his honour. When Tristrant lies ill and rotting of the Morolt's wound, Tinas is one of only three men who will tend him. Tinas' good nature is badly misguided on one occasion only, when he discovers and protects the evil dwarf from the King's rage.

When the King discovers the lovers the second time, enraged by the violation of his honour, he decides to give the lovers the most dishonourable death that he can devise; if he has been living in shame, they must die in shame in order to expiate it. He is inapproachable in his rage, and only Tinas dares to speak up.

ei, wie holt he Tristrande was!

her bat den koning sêre

daz he dorch sînes selbis êre

lîze sînen zorn zugân.

,swaz ûch Tristrant hât getân,

daz helfe ich im kein ûch bûzin.' (3998-4004)

(Oh how fond he was of Tristrant! He begged the king for his own honour's sake to let his wrath cool and said, "I shall help Tristrant make up to you any harm he has done you.")

Mark promptly turns his rage on his friend:

...,ûch en ist mîn êre
 sô lîp nicht, als ich wânde,
 daz ir um Tristrande
 mich sô sêre soldit betin:
 ja vorzornet ir mich dâ mete.“ (4005-9)
 (“Your pleading for Tristrant shows that my honour is not as dear to you as I thought. You anger me by this.”)

But Tinas is unfaltering in his opposition; his integrity will not allow him to watch the lovers die in silence. The King understands his uncharacteristic defiance as yet another betrayal, but rather it is a desperate attempt to protect the King's honour from the King himself. Eilhart writes that when Mark gives his unfaithful wife to the lepers to be raped to death, he achieves his desire for vengeance only at the price of great shame, so that he is condemned by many of his own people. Even if Mark is blinded by rage, Tinas sees clearly that the King will be dishonoured far more by the deaths of the lovers than he was by their behaviour while living.

Tinas leaves the King in bitterness, having failed to turn him from his course, but he passes the captive Sir Tristrant on his way and succeeds in freeing his bonds. Eilhart writes that those guarding Tristrant become sorrowful and uneasy on seeing the steward's distress. However Tinas may have failed with the King, he succeeds in touching the consciences of Tristrant's captors so that he is given the opportunity to leap from the chapel to his freedom; later in the story, he saves Tristrant's life again by hiding him while Antret and the enraged King hunt him like an animal.¹⁵⁰ Tinas acts as a moral witness to Mark's worst moments, and his opposition to the King underlines the complex view of honour that Eilhart presents. In Eilhart's poem, any obsession with the

¹⁵⁰ The resemblance between Tristan's battle with the Morholt and David's battle with Goliath has been observed by scholars; when Mark hunts Tristan, he becomes a Saul figure, once noble, but now filled with hatred for the boy he once loved.

public achievement of honour is dangerous, and may paradoxically lead one to undertake dishonourable actions in order to maintain this public appearance.¹⁵¹

Tristrant and Isalde have threatened the King's public honour, and so, to his dishonour, he orders them killed shamefully in order to try and salvage it. It is only by their deathbed that Mark seems to have learnt at last that the loss of his nephew and his wife matters far more than any threat to his precious honour.

In Bérout's poem, the seneschal Dinas is also the lovers' only advocate among the nobles when they face execution. Knowing that Tristran has escaped, he pleads for Iseut's life by arguing cleverly that Tristran will wreak great damage on the realm if the Queen dies. Dinas alone is concerned with protecting the social order, by both keeping the Queen alive and averting a possible civil war. He pleads for Marc to give her into his keeping:

Roi, rent la moi, par la merite

Que servi t'ai tote ma vite. (1119-20)

(King, entrust her to me as a reward for my having served you all my life.)

The King refuses his request; he will give Iseut to a leper's keeping, but not to his faithful seneschal. Heartsick, Dinas leaves, refusing to witness her execution; Marc is lost entirely to the voice of reason.

When Marc receives Tristran's letter in the night, he has his barons woken immediately. The split between the King, his heir, and the Queen is a public matter, and must be resolved publicly, with the consent of his vassals. By now, Marc has managed to reconcile the sight of the lovers together in the forest with his need to believe that they are faithful to him. He is already set on a course of action, but must still be seen to consult his council as a good King. He reminds them formally of their relationship, that 'Rois sui sor vos, vois mi marchis,' (2526)¹⁵² and that it is their duty to proffer advice. Dinas then rises, quick to amend this; it is their duty to provide *good* advice.

Ne quier celer:

Qui son droit seignor mesconselle

¹⁵¹ Tristrant has earlier pursued honour blindly in the bride-quest, beginning a train of events that will lead him to dishonourable behaviour.

¹⁵² 'I am your king, you are my vassals.'

ne puet faire greignor mervelle. (2542-44)

(I don't wish to conceal it: giving poor advice to one's rightful lord is the worst offence anyone can commit.)

In Bérout's work, the barons are blamed consistently for their slander (which is in fact the literal truth), but Marc himself is blameless. Tristran and Iseut are consistent in attacking the King's poor advisors, rather than the King himself.

By the end of Bérout's fragment, Marc has become a better king, capable of turning on his bad advisors with disgust when they demand that Iseut be tried: 'Dex vos destruire / Qui si alez querant ma honte!'¹⁵³ (3082-83) Marc has recognised at last that the barons are not defending his honour, but are actually threatening his authority in their public accusations of his wife:

Mais se encor nes en desment,
 Que nes enchaz fors de ma terre,
 Li fel ne crientent mais ma gerre.
 Il m'ont asez adesentu,
 Et je lor ai trop consentu:
 N'i a mais rien del covertir. (3188-93)

(Unless I do something about it now, unless I drive them out of my land, the villains will no longer fear my power. They have pushed me too far, and I have given in to them too often. Now my mind is made up.)

Atkinson has identified the barons as the true disrupters of peace and social order;¹⁵⁴ the lovers may subvert it, but they do so in secret. When Tristran slays them, he is fulfilling his role as the defender of Marc's realm, dealing with the internal threat as he dealt with the Morholt, and he is also acting in accordance with Marc's stated wishes (3196-98).

In Gottfried's poem, Tristan does not destroy Mark's honour; Mark himself steadily erodes it. His kingship is crippled by his uxoriousness and jealousy; one is reminded of William of Malmesbury's observation of a love-struck Philip I, of whom he wrote that 'Majesty and love do not go well together and do not reside in the same

¹⁵³ 'May God destroy you for trying to bring me shame!'

¹⁵⁴ Atkinson, 38-39

place'.¹⁵⁵ The fragments remaining of Thomas' work present a besotted king who takes advice from women, and who places the responsibility for his wife in Brengvein's hands. Gottfried further emphasises this weakness as his narrative progresses; Mark is transformed steadily from a capable monarch to an indecisive cuckold, from a man who values 'êre' to a man who embraces the 'blintheit der minne.' When Mark first enters the story, he is presented as a great and noble king, who rules over a joint territory of Cornwall and England at the request of the feuding petty lordlings who had previously riven the land by their squabbles. Yet, by the end of the text, 'Marke der guote, der höfsche hohgemuote' has become 'Marke der zwîvalaere',¹⁵⁶ a man painfully divided against himself. Dinas, guardian of the King's honour, has been replaced as the royal steward by the character Marjodoc, the new leader of the King's bad advisors.

Marjodoc is hardly in the position to restrain Mark's sexual jealousy and anger with reason, as he is in love with Isolde himself, and suffering from the same complaint. It is Marjodoc who first informs Mark that his wife is unfaithful to him, and Marjodoc who, together with the malicious dwarf Melot, is responsible for the trap of the flour between the beds. Yet there are only two of these bad advisors, and Mark seems all too easily persuaded to suspicion.

There is no chance of blaming Mark's poor kingship on poor advice; except for the early episode of the bride-quest, Mark is more likely to manipulate his councillors in an attempt to gain his own ends than the other way around. When he desires to learn the truth about his wife's innocence, he summons his counsel in order to gain the trial he desires. Mark himself makes his cuckoldry a matter of public debate, even though, as the wise Bishop of Thames points out, he has no solid evidence on which to base his suspicions. Mark does not actually catch the lovers in bed together until after he has subjected his wife to the ordeal, and then his first response is to silently depart and gather his councillors and vassals together so that they might bear witness to their adultery. However, during his absence, Tristan leaves, so that when the King returns with a crowd of councillors, Isolde is alone in the bed. Seeking to shame the lovers, Mark has only succeeded in embarrassing himself, and is soundly reproached by his counsellors:

'herre' sprachen si 'hier an

¹⁵⁵ DUBY, *Love and Marriage*, 34.

¹⁵⁶ 'Mark the waverer'

missetuot ir harte sere,
 iuwer wip und iuwer ere
 daz ir diu ze also maneger zit
 ziehende unde-zogende sit
 ze lasterlicher inziht
 gar ane not und umbe niht.
 ir hazzet ere unde wip
 und almeist iuwer selbes lip.
 wie muget ir iemer werden vro,
 die wile ir iuwer vröude also
 an iuwer wibe swachet
 und si ze spelle machet
 über hof und über lant
 und habet an ir noch niht erkant,
 daz wider ir eren müge gesin? (18378-93)

(Sire, they said, it is very wrong of you continually to drag your wife and your honour to judgement on scandalous charges without reason. You hate your honour and your wife but most of all yourself! How can you ever be happy so long as you thus injure your happiness in her, and make her the talk of the court? - for you have never discovered anything that goes against her honour.)

Mark is persuaded by their counsel to abandon his vengeance; as his councillors argue, he has been carrying out a vendetta against his own honour which has harmed him more in the eyes of his people than any action of Tristan's might have done. This is the last time we see Gottfried's Mark, as the manuscript ends abruptly soon after. One can assume that he will continue in his honourless possession of Isolde, having lost the respect of his councillors.

In the prose works, the question of whether Tristan's adultery robs the King of honour becomes an entirely moot point. While Gottfried and Thomas' king can be seen as an example of *rex inutilis*, a once-proud monarch incapacitated by his uxoriousness, the King of the prose works is an example of *rex tyrannus*. His actions are wholly self-serving, and his people suffer accordingly for it. In this new conception, the demonic Audret is given full rein; he proves himself to be truly kin to his uncle in the creativity of his malice. Audret willingly acts as Mark's chief spy, and instigates most of the

schemes to entrap the lovers; it is Audret who first discovers their infidelity to Mark, and Audret who orchestrates Tristan's murder by telling Mark of his cousin's presence in the Queen's chamber. Dinas, once the guardian of the King's honour, is now recast as Tristan's main Cornish ally and 'trusty frynde'; when he discovers that Mark has imprisoned Tristram through treachery, he 'defyed suche a kynge and seyde he wolde gyff up all his londis that hylde of him' (412). When Tristan is mortally wounded by his uncle in the *Prose*, he takes sanctuary in Dinas' castle; it is the last refuge of honour in Cornwall.

In the *Prose*, Tristan frequently condemns the barons of Cornwall as cowardly, but they still ally themselves with him against Marc in their counsels. Faced with their sympathy for Tristan, Marc is forced to manipulate them with deceit in order to achieve his ends. When advised by Audret to recall Tristan to court in order to trap him with the Queen, Marc summons his counsellors to him in a parody of good kingship:

Lors vient li rois en son palés et apele toz ses barons entor li, et lor di: "Seignor, malement ai erré qui d'entor moi ai enchacié Tristan, mon neveu, puis que il sera mal de nos... Et quant je voi que de sa bonté ne nos poons consirer, je pri a vos toz qui ci estes que vos porchacez coment il ait pes entre moi et li. Je li amenderai au jugement de vos toz tot ce qu'il dira que je li avrai mesfet."

(II§517)

(The King comes to the palace and calls all his barons around him and says to them: 'Sirs, I have erred badly when I banished Tristan, my nephew, from my court, because it will be harmful to us... And when I see the good he can do for us, I ask all of you who are here that you discover how it is between us. I will make amends according to the judgement of you all, all that he will say I have done badly.')

Successfully deceived by the King, who wishes to recall Tristan so that he might have him killed, the barons give him the excellent advice of sending Brangian with a letter to recall Tristan. By deceiving his good advisors as to his real intent, Marc succeeds in perverting the entire purpose of the king's council while giving every appearance of fulfilling his kingly duties towards them.

Malory's Cornish barons are divided in their loyalties. The Cornish knights are notorious for their cowardice, as if Mark has infected those he rules with his own poor

knighthood, and ‘som of the barownes’ join Mark and Andret in their plots against Tristram. Yet most find the courage to defy him. When he seeks to ‘geve jugemente unto sir Trystrames to the dethe’, his barons ‘wolde nat assente thereto’, but advise that the King banish him instead. Thwarted, Mark turns to treachery, but his nobles also refuse to obey him here. When he learns that Mark intends to murder his nephew ‘by some wyllys other by treson’, Sir Bersules flatly refuses to obey him: ‘I woll not consente to the deth of hym, and therefore I woll yelde hym my servyse and forsake you.’ (354)¹⁵⁷ Bersules pays a high price for his integrity; Mark promptly kills him.

Mark’s malevolence against Tristram springs directly from his fear that his nephew will one day usurp his crown: ‘in hys harte he feryd sore that sir Trystram sholde gete hym such worship in the realme of Logrys wheretherow hymselff shuld nat be able to wythstond hym’ (333-4). Ironically, it is Mark’s consistently treacherous behaviour that leads to his loss of authority. Led by Dinas, all of Cornwall eventually arises against their vicious King after he has twice imprisons Tristram. Mark himself is eventually put in prison ‘by his owne knyghtes’. Moreover, he is imprisoned under Isode’s orders. Mark has lost his authority just as he always feared he would, and he has lost it not to Tristram’s prowess but to his exasperated wife.

Yet Mark’s fears that he will lose his kingdom to his nephew are not entirely groundless. Without conscious design, Tristan does take some of the king’s authority when he becomes Cornwall’s champion, for when he defeats the Morholt, Tristan defends Mark’s realm where his older uncle is incapable. Since Mark draws his right to rule from his ability to protect Cornwall, Tristan takes part of the King’s relationship with the land upon himself when he becomes the king’s champion. The tensions created when an older King must be represented by a younger man of greater prowess can be seen in Beowulf’s championing of Hrothgar. It is vital for a champion of this sort to be clearly under his king’s authority. Bérout’s Tristran attacks the Cornish barons for their cowardice in refusing to take arms against the Morholt, but he is careful not to criticise Marc himself. Eilhart also attaches no dishonour to Mark, who has successfully defied Ireland for fifteen years; Cornwall is the only land that refuses to pay tribute among all Ireland’s neighbours. Gottfried is the first to implicitly blame Mark for his land’s dishonour, when Tristan denounces the tribute as unjust, and urges the lords to war against Ireland in defence of their land. Mark is silent as his nephew

¹⁵⁷ Edward Kennedy, “Malory’s King Mark and King Arthur,” sees in Bersules’ defiance a statement of the individual’s right to refuse obedience to a tyrant’s evil commands, 143.

takes his place as military leader and challenges Morold, and when he next appears, he is described as a woman who is passively distressed for her man. The deterioration of Mark's kingship thus begins subtly, with his inability to defend his realm.

In the *Prose Tristan*, Marc's failure as King is underlined by rejection of his younger brother Pernehan's advice. Pernehan urges him eagerly to defend his land from the Irish threat;

...prenez vos armes et vos genz ausi, et elez a estrous sor cez d'Yllande, et deffende le treü qu'il vos demandent. Se vos i morez, ce vos tornera a honour; se vos i vivez, ce vos tornera tote vostre vie a gloire, et a honor a tot vostre linaige. Or gardez que vos feroiz de ceste chose, car bien sachiez que vos iestes venuz a point d'avoir honor ou tote honte. (I§241)

(...take your arms and your people also, and go directly to these Irish and defend the tribute that they demand of you. If you die, it will bring you honour; if you live, it will bring you glory all your life, and bring honour to all your lineage. Now consider what you will do about this thing, because know well that you have come to the point where you could have honour or total shame.)

It is now, as a young king, that Marc must make a decision between honour and 'tote honte' from which the rest of his royal career will follow. He argues with his brother that their forebears, who paid the Irish tribute, have set him a precedent which must be followed, and moreover, that he will not be able to defend himself if he does not surrender the children of Cornwall to the Irish. But Pernehan dismisses Marc's first argument with ease:

...se vostre linaige foloia, volez vos donc autresi faire? A ce ne devez vos mie regarder, enz devez amender ce que il mesfirent. Et se vos n'avez cuer et hardiece de ce faire, lessiez la corone, se verroiz s'il vendra avant quelque preudome qui bien osera entreprendre de deffendre le treü encontre ces d'Yrlande. (if your lineage acted foolishly, do you wish therefore to do the same? You must pay attention to what they have done, but you must amend that which they have done wrongly. And if you have neither heart nor boldness to do this, you must leave the crown, and you will see whether some nobleman will come

forward, who will dare to undertake the defence of the tribute against those of Ireland.)

Marc, enraged, responds by saying that he does not intend to leave the crown during his lifetime, but Pernehan accurately observes that if he does not behave like a king, he has already abandoned his crown:

Se vos ne faites come rois, vos n'iestes pas dignes de porter corone; et se vos la portez, et ne faites oevres de roi, vos iestes plus honiz que je porroie dire.
(If you do not behave like a king, you are not worthy to bear the crown; and if you bear it and do not perform the actions of a king, you are more dishonourable than I can say.)

Marc ignores his brother's advice, and pays the tribute to Ireland. Among the Cornish children given into Irish slavery is Mark's own sister, who is among the innocents whom Mark is supposed to protect; Pernehan condemns his actions as shaming them all, and Mark promptly kills him for it. Tristan cannot be accused of stealing Mark's authority, as Mark lost it long ago when he first failed to defend his land. Mark has absented himself from his role as Cornwall's defender, and Tristan simply steps into the vacuum left by his lost kingship.

Rage and Punishment

With the sole exception of Gottfried's version, Mark uses his authority as king in an attempt to have the lovers publicly killed. It must be clearly stated that he is fully entitled by medieval law to have them executed; referring closely to the legal customs of the times, Pierre Jonin has argued conclusively that the King has a legitimate right to execute the lovers, even if his chosen method of fire is unusual.¹⁵⁸ Adultery with the king's wife was a treasonable offence for both parties; it was subject to the most serious

¹⁵⁸ P. Jonin, *Les Personnages féminins dans les romans français de Tristan au XIIe siècle*, 59-63; A.H. Diverres also observes in "Tristan and Iseut's Condemnation to the Stake in Beroul" that 'no evidence exists that the stake was used as a punishment for adultery in twelfth century France', 21. However, Edward III of England legislated that burning at the stake should be the legal punishment for queens caught in adultery, though Henry VIII would later choose to behead those two of his wives who were accused of infidelity.

penalties for the very good reasons that firstly, it fatally jeopardised the legitimate succession, and secondly, it threatened the King's authority on a primal level. Karen Pratt argues that symbolically, the Queen's body is associated with the kingdom, and her adultery 'is bound to imply the lover's illicit claim to the political power tied to the land.'¹⁵⁹ Chrétien's *Fénice* says of Iseut that her body 'fu a deus rentiers' (3114): she is a land occupied by two tenants.¹⁶⁰ Tristan may have been acting as Mark's representative when he defended Cornwall and won Iseult to be the Cornish Queen, but his presence in the Queen's bed is a clear usurpation of the King's privileges. It is this usurpation that the barons of Bérout and Eilhart's poems seize on as a pretext for their attack on the King's favourite, when they argue that he must take vengeance on Tristran or lose his 'droit en terre' (1903-4). Diana Tyson argues that the dishonour the lovers inflict on the King reflects directly on his people: 'His position as king and his duty to safeguard public order oblige him to correct the situation.'¹⁶¹

In Bérout's poem, the real controversy does not arise from the King's right to execute the guilty pair, but over whether or not the lovers should receive a trial. Tristran complains of Marc in the eavesdropping scene that 'Il ne me lait sol escondire' (131).¹⁶² He allows himself to be bound when caught in the barons' trap because he fully expects that he will be given the opportunity to defend himself in single combat, and through his prowess prove his innocence. When Dinas, the voice of honour, pleads with the King for Iseut's life, he does so by arguing:

Vos la volez sanz jugement

Ardoir en feu: ce n'est pas gent,

Qar cest mesfait ne connoist pas. (1097-99)

(You want to have her burned without a trial; that is not honourable, since she has not confessed the crime.)

The people of Cornwall, who have a very vocal presence in Bérout's text, also demand their King give the lovers a trial:

¹⁵⁹ Karen Pratt, "The Image of the Queen in Old French Literature", 256.

¹⁶⁰ Duby, in his *Love and Marriage*, discusses a letter of spiritual guidance from a cleric to a young noblewoman who desired to deny her husband access to her bed and body. Consistent with medieval doctrine, the cleric argued that in the marriage ceremony, 'the husband became the feudal tenant of the [wife's] body, and was authorised to use and exploit it, and make it bear fruit,' 27-28.

¹⁶¹ Tyson, 68.

¹⁶² 'He does not even permit me to defend myself.'

Tuit s'escriënt la gent du reigne:

“Rois, trop feriez lai pechié,

S'il n'estoient primes jugié.

Puis les destrui...” (884-887)

(All the people of the kingdom cried: “King, you would be committing a terrible injustice if they were not tried first; wait until afterwards to kill them.)

But to Marc's mind, the lovers' guilt has already been proved conclusively; there is therefore no need for a trial. When he sees the bloody sheets, he says to the lovers: ‘Trop par a ci veraie enseigne:/ provez estes.’ (778-9)¹⁶³ Bloch has argued that according to medieval customary law, a husband had the right to kill both his wife and her lover if he caught her in the act of infidelity,¹⁶⁴ furthermore, it was considered sufficient proof of guilt if the pair were simply surprised together in a locked room.¹⁶⁵ As adulterers, Tristran and Iseut forfeited any right to a trial when they were caught together in bed by the king and witnesses: ‘to *see* them alone together defied the visual truth (unity) of the marriage contract, and justified killing them forthwith.’¹⁶⁶ Following this logic, Eilhart's Mark can condemn them to death immediately in his rage, and like Bérroul's Marc, he arranges for their execution as soon as daybreak arrives.

Mark is thus legally justified in executing the lovers without a trial on the grounds of the existing evidence, but the moral justification for his actions is another matter. A king is expected to temper his justice with mercy, but Mark is entirely incapacitated as judge in this matter by the depth of his rage. Bérroul writes that ‘li rois fu molt fel et engrés’(862),¹⁶⁷ while Eilhart's King is so enraged that he glows like a coal (4036-37). His personal pain and anger make it impossible for him to rule objectively in this matter; recognising this, Iseut will later demand that King Arthur preside as an impartial judge over her ordeal.¹⁶⁸ When his people plead with him now to spare the lovers, Mark denies their request in the language of a despot:

¹⁶³ ‘This is conclusive evidence; you are proven guilty.’

¹⁶⁴ R. Howard Bloch, 55-57. ‘The defendant who was seized rather than slain *in flagrante delicto* was deprived of the right to defend himself through the regular procedure of denial and battle.’

¹⁶⁵ Diverres, 24.

¹⁶⁶ Burns, 78.

¹⁶⁷ ‘The king was in a cruel and violent humour.’

¹⁶⁸ In the *Mort le Roi Artu*, King Arthur's neutrality in his public role as judge of Guinevere is completely undermined by his love for her (101) so that an angry Mador eventually accuses him of twisting the judicial process to his own ends. In Malory's work, however, Arthur withdraws from his

“Par cel seignor qui fist le mont,
 Totes les choses qui i sont,
 Por estre moi desherité
 Ne lairoie nes arde en ré.” (889-92)

(Even if I should be disowned by the Lord who created the world and everything that is in it, I will not fail to have them burnt on a pyre.)

Mark is abusing his public authority in order to achieve a private vengeance that will harm his land and damage his own reputation in the eyes of his people. This becomes obvious in the scene where Mark gives Isode to the lepers. Public execution on the grounds of adultery is one matter, but giving the Queen away to be raped to death by lepers is quite another. The King is not acting to protect his honour from the Queen's infidelity, but is simply inflicting a hideous torture on a woman who has hurt him. Mark is not performing public justice, but enacting his private revenge in a blatant abuse of his power. But in Bérout's poem, the King's power to pronounce death is balanced by God's power to bestow mercy; the lovers are saved by divine grace, and furthermore, God avenges the lovers on those who have betrayed them to the King's judgement (2763).

Strangely enough, the *Prose Tristan's* version of this episode is more sympathetic to Marc. He orders the lovers burnt, but he will not take part in the preparations for their death. Rather, he hides in his room and weeps for the loss of ‘le meillor chevalier del monde, et Yselt, la plus bele dame qu’il onques veïst.’ (II§545).¹⁶⁹ Moreover, his action in sending Iseut to a leper colony in response to his people's pleas, is presented as an act of mercy. Marc's remorse for Tristan's death is clearly shallow, and he reverts to form as soon as he learns that Tristan survives. However, his love for Iseut seems to outweigh his rage.¹⁷⁰ Earlier, when she fails the test of the magical drinking horn devised to reveal unfaithful wives, King Marc is swift to condemn her of

wife's defence in order to preside over the case with full impartiality: ‘the case ys so I may nat have ado in thys mater, for I muste be a ryghtfull juge.’

¹⁶⁹ ‘the best knight in the world, and Iseut, the most beautiful lady that he ever saw’

¹⁷⁰ Fanni Bogdanow argues that as Marc has already been firmly established as a villain, the *Prose* author can afford to present him in a more kindly light during this episode; moreover, in order to prepare for the scene in the *Morois*, this episode needed to suggest that ‘Mark never ceased to love Yseut despite her infidelity’ 103.

‘deleauté’ to him, crying ‘Vos avez deservie mort’ (II§530).¹⁷¹ Iseut, however, challenges the King’s decision, demanding that he provide proof of his accusations; Curtis argues that ‘he gives way before her superior intelligence,’¹⁷² but it seems that Marc is not only defeated by Iseut’s arguments but by his desire for her. Where his unfaithful wife is concerned, his natural malice is constantly at war with his love.

When Malory’s Mark attempts to have Isode burnt, it is clearly the action of a tyrannous despot as he lacks any real evidence upon which to condemn her. He desires to have her ‘brente’ when she fails the test of the drinking horn; however, ninety-seven other Cornish ladies also fail. Just as Mark’s behaviour is reflected in the cowardice of his knights, Isode’s infidelity is reflected in her ladies’ lack of morals. Mark determines to burn them all, but at this his barons unite against him, and ‘seyde playnly they wolde nat have tho ladyes brente for a horne made by sorsery’ (270). Having been thus opposed by all his vassals, Mark does not attempt to burn Isode when he actually discovers the lovers in bed together; he simply puts her into a ‘lazar-cote’, from which Tristram promptly rescues her. The judgement of the poems is eventually reversed; it is Isode who will eventually judge the King guilty of ‘treson’ against Tristram, and will take his freedom from him.¹⁷³ Mark may have the legal right of the matter, but he is consistently morally wrong.

Duty and Desire

Tristan’s struggle to reconcile his private desire for Iseult with his public duty to his uncle and liege-lord has been analysed at length, but Mark is also torn between love and honour, between his public duties as king, and his private desire for his wife. All six Tristan texts seem to eventually reach the same conclusion; if Mark is to be a good king, ‘the demands of private vengeance and private morality are to be subsumed by the demands of public *pax* and *ordo*.’¹⁷⁴ Mark must relinquish his rage and forgive his faithless wife, or he must relinquish his desire for her and let her go.

¹⁷¹ ‘You have deserved death.’

¹⁷² Renee L. Curtis, “The Character of Iseut in the *Prose Tristan*,” 179.

¹⁷³ In the *Tavola Ritonda*, Arthur eventually invades Cornwall and captures the aged King Marc, who is then locked up in a high tower above Tristan’s tomb, so that he might have leisure to contemplate the magnitude of his crimes. He dies within the space of three years.

¹⁷⁴ Atkinson, 42.

It is this necessary sublimation of private wrongs to the public good that the selfish King of the prose works can never grasp. Marc will go on paying the tribute to Ireland for his entire reign, even sacrificing his own sister, provided that his personal safety is guaranteed. He is also highly reckless of Cornwall's security in his pursuit of vengeance; his barons are aware that the land needs Tristan to defend it as he is the only Cornish knight of any prowess, but Marc himself is intent on murdering his kingdom's sole champion. In the final book of the *Prose Tristan*, an enraged Marc leads an army of Saxon and Cornish knights in a direct attack on King Arthur. Arthur's outnumbered forces are only saved from their imminent defeat by Galahad, who single-handedly routs the invading army. Marc is left to flee in disguise back to Cornwall with the few surviving Cornish knights. However, he has succeeded in stealing Iseut away from Joyous Garde, and his catastrophic public defeat fades in comparison to this private victory:

Tout entendant a faire doeil, fors seulement li rois March. Mais cil ne fait samblant qu'il en soit granment coureciés. Toutes les fois qu'il resgarde madame Yseut, il oublie toutes ses pertes... Ce est son confers, c'est ses joie et ses soulas. Autre riquece il ne demande fors Yseut: cele li est joie, cele li est vie et santé et confort en toutes choses. (IX§50)

(They all mourned greatly, excepting only King Marc. For he only pretends that he is very upset. Every time he sees the lady Iseut, he forgets all his losses... This is his comfort, it is his joy and his solace. He does not demand anything besides Iseut; she is his joy, his life and health and comfort in all things.)

Marc has failed disastrously once again as leader and protector; he has led his knights on an aggressive military venture, and he is ultimately responsible for the resulting loss of lives. But his military defeat does not matter to him, provided he can possess Iseut again. His ambitions and desires are wholly centred upon his wife, and his uxoriousness makes him a danger to all those whom he rules.

In the *Book of Sir Tristram*, King Mark and King Arthur represent two extremes on Malory's spectrum of kingship, Mark portrayed as the epitome of tyranny, Arthur

portrayed as the exemplar of good kingship.¹⁷⁵ The deliberate contrast between the two Kings is sharpened by the parallel nature of their private lives. Arthur's Queen and much-loved wife is also unfaithful with the King's best knight and champion, but unlike Mark, Arthur retains his dignity and his authority despite his cuckoldry. Edward Kennedy has written an authoritative comparison of these two kings, identifying Mark as a 'ruler who lives for his *bonum privatum* instead of the *bonum commune*, who is dominated by feelings of hatred, envy, jealousy and fear...'¹⁷⁶ He argues that Malory deliberately exaggerated the malevolence of the *Prose Tristan*'s Mark, while he improved the flawed King Arthur whom he found in his sources in order to increase the contrast between the two. Arthur's behaviour in the face of his Queen's infidelity provides a model against which Mark's failures can be measured. Unlike Mark, when confronted by slander of his Queen the troubled Arthur deliberately chooses to 'put that all oute of his thought' rather than disrupt the order of his court; when his Queen's adultery is finally dragged into public, he takes care to act as a 'ryghtfull juge.' However, Arthur has been criticised by scholars for his apparent callousness in mourning the loss of his knights above the loss of Guinevere, when he says:

And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes loss than for the losse of my fayre queen; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company.

Yet is important to realise that Arthur is speaking as a king here, and not as a husband. The loss of his 'good knyghtes' is more damaging to the well-being of his realm than the loss of his queen, for queens can be replaced. In his later Tales, Malory consistently places a much greater emphasis on Arthur's kingship than on his role as Guinevere's husband. He is a man capable of valuing Lancelot's 'trew servyse' to his realm above any personal grief caused by his wife's infidelity.

Finally, I wish to turn to the episode of Segurades' wife which seems to have been generally ignored by scholars. I would argue that this innovation is crucial for several reasons: firstly, it establishes the sexual rivalry between Tristan and Mark,

¹⁷⁵ See Kennedy's "Malory's King Mark and King Arthur" for a discussion of the ways in which Malory has glossed over Arthur's flaws and deliberately emphasised his virtues, in some cases substantially altering his sources. In the French prose romances, Arthur's character also deteriorated, though to a lesser degree than Mark: Arthur's faults were emphasised in order to make Lancelot and Guinevere more sympathetic figures.

¹⁷⁶ Kennedy, "Malory's King Mark and King Arthur," 140.

where Mark is proved to be the inferior lover; secondly, it is the catalyst for Mark's hatred of Tristan; thirdly, Segurades, the cuckold Cornish knight, becomes another important parallel for Mark.¹⁷⁷ Like Mark, Segurades is not a knight of great physical prowess, but he is still presented as a decent man. When he learns that Tristram has made a cuckold of him he challenges him in fair combat (unlike Mark, who attacks his unarmed nephew with sword in hand). Tristram defeats Segurades easily with no little show of reluctance, as he is aware that he has badly wronged the knight. But after Segurades' initial rage has passed, 'all was forgyffen and forgetyn... Therefore he lette hit overslyppe, for he that hath a prevy hurte is loth to have a shame outwarde' (246). Segurades does not resort to treachery, or to a prolonged vendetta that will bring shame upon all parties. He respects Tristram's strength, and his position as the king's nephew. Reason prevails over the desire for vengeance.

Foreshadowing Palamedes' abduction of Isode, Sir Bleoberys begs that Mark grant the boon of any 'gyffte' within Mark's court. After Mark has blithely promised him his boon, Bleoberys chooses Segurades' wife and rides off with her. Segurades promptly rides after them; Tristan does not, explaining that 'hit is nat my parte to have ado in suche maters whyle her lorde and husbände ys presente here' (247). While the *Prose's* Tristan forgoes the quest in fear of his uncle's anger, Tristram holds that it is a husband's duty to defend his wife, and yields his rights as her lover before Segurades' greater right as her husband. In contrast, when Palamedes takes Isode away, Mark does not challenge him, reasoning in his cowardice that Tristram can battle for her in his place. Segurades fails, more through lack of prowess than through any lack of courage, and Tristram rides out to rescue her. The fickle lady, however, ungratefully rejects her lover, and returns to her wounded husband, who is 'gretly comforted' by his unfaithful wife's return; in the *Prose* she actually elects to stay with her kidnapper.

Segurades' part in the story seems now over, but he appears again when Tristram is shipwrecked on the perilous Isle of Servage. His behaviour towards Tristram could not contrast more strongly with Mark's.

¹⁷⁷ Malory earlier mentions a Sir Segurades in the Book of Sir Gareth, who is a brother to Palomides, and a converted Saracen. This seems to me to be an entirely different character to the Cornish earl; if Tristan was bedding Palomides' sister-in-law Malory would probably have mentioned the connection. At Joyous Gard a Sir Segurades jousts with Gareth and defeats him, but given the Cornish knight's poor combat record and the location, this is probably the Saracen knight. Lastly, a noble Segurades is among the casualties of Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere, but as both his brothers, Palomides and Safire, join Lancelot's party afterwards, it is possible that it is the Cornish Segurades who dies here.

‘Sir,’ seyde sir Segwarydes, ‘I know you well for sir Trystrames de Lyones, the man in the worlde that I have moste cause to hate, bycause ye departed the love betwene me and my wyff. But as for that,’ seyde sir Segwarydes, ‘I woll never hate a noble knyght for a lyght lady, and therefore I pray you to be my frende, and I woll be yourys unto my power. For wete you well ye ar harde bestadde in this valey, and we shall have inowe ado ayther to succour other.’

(275)

Within this passage, Segurades shows that while he has not forgotten that he has a genuine grievance against Tristram, private grievances over women must not be allowed to disrupt the bonds between good knights. King Arthur displays a similar logic when he mourns the loss of his knights as more irreplaceable than his wife. Segurades shows a greatness of mind that Mark will never possess when, seeing clearly the perilous nature of their current situation, he offers to forget Tristram’s past wrongs against him so that they might unite together against the treacherous giant Sir Nabon, who is a killer of good knights. Like Arthur, he is capable of weighing the greater good against his private grievance. Sir Tristram promptly follows Segurade’s example when he forgives Sir Lamerak, and Nabon is consequently defeated. The Isle of Servage is then given to Segurades, as neither Tristram nor Lamerak will accept it:

And he thanked them, and so was he lorde, and worshypfully he dud governe hem. And than sir Segurades delyvirde all the personers and sette good governaunce in that valey. (278)

Like Mark, Segurades has suffered the humiliation of Tristram bedding his beloved wife; unlike Mark, he does not let his cuckold role cloud his good judgement. Moreover, like Mark (and Mordred), Segurades is a physically weak knight who is easily defeated by others in combat, yet he does not resort to treachery, but fights according to the rules of chivalry. Despite his lack of prowess, the second and third greatest knights of the Table choose him to be ruler in Nabon’s place, a role which he performs honourably and well. The lordship of the Isle of Servage is his reward, a happy ending for a man who has acted decently in difficult circumstances. Segurades then disappears from the narrative once more, but, like Arthur, he has provided a valuable example of how Mark might and should have behaved. For the sake of

Cornwall and his own kingship, Mark should have either put the matter of Tristram and Isode's love out of his mind, or simply 'lette hit overslyp'.

Conclusion

In the poems, Mark is never a perfect king; he often acts as a besotted husband or aggrieved cuckold rather than a just ruler, and he attempts to execute the two people upon whom the peace and security of his realm depends. In this attempt, his personal desire for vengeance against the lovers completely defeats his public duty towards his people. But it must be remembered that the judgement he metes out in rage towards the lovers is the action of a wounded man, who has been betrayed by the two he loved most in the world. Tristan's betrayal cuts to the heart; he has not only seduced the king's wife, but he has seduced the sympathies of Mark's people away from him. When he acts as defender of Mark's realm, he takes upon himself some of the King's authority, and by giving his lover to Mark as wife and then continuing with her in adultery, he abuses the King's trust. Tristan's presence by Mark's side is vital to Cornwall's security, but it also must undermine his authority.

Yet though Mark may seem to be placed in an impossible situation, it is always his choice whether or not to expose his cuckoldry to the public eye. Mark alone can make the decision to subject the lovers to the penalties of treason, with his subsequent loss of face. He has the option of refusing to pay any attention to his advisors' slanders, and when he does discover their infidelity, the poets seem to be in agreement that he should keep it to himself. Béroul concludes that for the sake of preserving the social order of his kingdom, a cuckold king must remain deceived, and close his ears to any scandal that threatens to disrupt his bonds with his Queen and his champion. His Marc is at his most authoritative when he has reconciled with his wife in the erroneous belief of her innocence. Eilhart also argues that as a good king, Mark needs to reconcile with the Queen, but he should also act to prevent any further adultery by banishing her lover, lest, by seeming to condone their affair, he suffer the same loss of dignity as Thomas' King. Gottfried alone among the poets argues that to retain his authority, Mark should send both the lovers from his realm.

The villainous King of the prose texts clearly works towards the destruction of his realm in his constant attempts to murder Tristan. Cornwall is now a land of

cowards, of knights as morally and physically weak as their king, and the Cornish people are aware that Tristan is the realm's sole line of defence. Despite the wrong Tristan has done him, Malory argues that Mark has a duty to 'lette hit overslyppe,' but his character has deteriorated to the point where he is incapable of doing so. As a good king, Mark must keep Tristan and Iseult together and by his side, but it is necessary for him to live in ignorance of their infidelity in order to retain any personal honour and dignity.

CONCLUSIONS

As villain or as victim, King Mark is trapped by his circumstances. He is trapped by his role as uncle to the orphan Tristan into a bond that can be betrayed, but never broken; he is trapped by the cuckold role when he marries Iseult, and by his great love for her which will not let him release her; and finally, he is trapped by his role as king, which demands that he keep his Queen and his champion together with him, when his only chance of escaping from their personal impasse lies in breaking the bonds between the three of them. Yet Mark never ceases to battle against fate. Tristan and Iseult are curiously passive characters in contrast; they drink the potion, and then accept their doom, Gottfried's Tristan saying philosophically, 'nu waltes Got!'¹⁷⁸ Their struggle is simply a prolonged attempt to maintain their places in the social order, while continuing in a love affair that must subvert it; it is Mark's initiatives that eventually force them into flight or banishment. His palpable frustrations can make him seem a comic character, but the futility of his relentless battle against fate also makes him tragic.

There is no possibility of Mark achieving a happy ending. In an ideal romance, the hero falls in love, proves himself worthy by defeating the obstacle to this love, and then finds fulfilment in marriage, which is the desired conclusion for lovers like Sir Gareth and Lyonesse. The Tristan narrative follows a similar structure initially: Tristan meets Iseult, slays the dragon, and wins her hand from her father, but he then gives his lady in marriage to another. The chief obstacle to the hero's love then becomes the heroine's husband, Mark, who is no dragon, and cannot be so easily slain. It is only through Mark's death that the lovers might marry and achieve legitimacy for their union, while maintaining Cornwall's peace. But if Mark remains alive, then the story must become a tragedy to achieve conclusion; the lovers can only find fulfilment and unity in death.¹⁷⁹ The failure of Mark's many attempts at resolution shows that the bonds linking Mark and the two lovers together, composed as they are of kinship and fealty, marriage and love, can only be broken by death.

In the poems, the futility of Mark's attempts at controlling his Queen is amply demonstrated when word arrives in Cornwall of Tristan's final injury. Tristan has composed a long message complaining of his sufferings for love, but it is not needed. Iseult goes straight as an arrow to her wounded lover, leaving her husband, her

¹⁷⁸ 'It is in God's hands!'

¹⁷⁹ Curtis, *Tristan Studies*, 37.

possessions, and her status behind her: ‘dô lîz sie man unde lant, / beide schaz unde gewant / und alliz daz sie î gewan’ (9327-29).¹⁸⁰ It is clear that she sees herself first and foremost as Tristan’s life-giver and lover, rather than as Mark’s Queen and wife. As in the forest when Mark gave her his ring to claim her, the wounded Tristrant sends her his ring to claim his rights over her. Isalde’s response to his summons is telling; she discards the ‘koninglîche êrê’¹⁸¹ which Mark has bestowed upon her without a backward look.

Eilhart’s lovers die with a quiet dignity, but he does not end the story there. He turns to the reaction of the sole survivor of this tragedy:

dô quam deme koninge Marke
 in korzin zîten mêre,
 daz Tristrant tôt wêre
 und sîn wîp, die koninginne
 umme ir zweier minne,
 die sie zusammen habetin.
 zewâre man im sagete,
 daz hête gemachit ein trang,
 daz sie sich âne iren dang
 minnetin alsô sêre. (9464-73)

(In a little while, the news came to King Mark that Tristrant and his wife, the queen, had died because of their love for each other. He was told indeed that a potion had caused them to fall in love against their will.)

Mark has been battling blindly against an unseen foe, which is only now revealed. His nephew’s hitherto incomprehensible betrayal finally becomes transparent, and his early faith in Tristrant is vindicated. But his knowledge comes too late to save them:

dô clagete her ez ummirmêre
 daz her es nicht wiste in [der] zît,
 die wîle sie habeten den lîp.
 Her jach ouch jêmirlîche

¹⁸⁰ ‘she left husband and land, wardrobe and treasure, and all else she had’

¹⁸¹ ‘royal honour’

,got weiz wol: früntlichen
 hête ich die koningîn Îsaldin
 ummir gerne behaldin
 und Tristrande mînen nebin
 dar umme, daz der degin
 stêtlîche mit mir wêre belebin.
 daz ich in habe vortrebin,
 daz sal mir ummir sîn leit. (9477 - 85)

(On hearing this [news], he was deeply grieved that he had not known it in time - while they were still alive. "God knows," he declared sadly, "I would gladly have treated Queen Isalde and my nephew Tristrant kindly so that the knight would have stayed with me always. I shall forever regret having driven him away.")

Those critics who have found Eilhart's Mark to be 'violent, cruel, full of hatred ... an exemplary figure who embodies all the vices and exhibits all the attributes of a small-minded tyrant'¹⁸² would be entirely correct in citing this forgiving speech as an example of the complete inconsistency of Mark's character.

But as my previous analysis has shown, the Mark portrayed in the *version commune* cannot be easily confined to a stereotype; he is neither a perfect man, nor a bad one. Nor is he an ideal king, or a tyrant. If this sometimes makes his actions seem inconsistent, it also makes his character very human; Wiesmann-Wiedemann is correct in observing that 'much more than Tristan and Isolt, it is Mark who embodies the human condition.'¹⁸³ In Bérout's *Tristran* and Eilhart's *Tristrant*, Mark is capable of both great rage and great tenderness towards his nephew and his wife. He evinces a great desire to trust his loved ones, which corresponds directly to the depth of his anger when he finds himself betrayed. In many ways, he seems to be a simple man caught in complex circumstances, bewildered by his inability to solve things neatly. Bérout's Marc believes strongly in the evidence of his eyes in a world where appearance is illusory, while Eilhart's King is portrayed as a man who believes in absolutes of right

¹⁸² William McDonald summarises here in "Eilhart's Character Portrayal" the many hostile criticisms directed at Eilhart's Mark from such scholars as Frederick Whitehead and W.T.H. Jackson, 28.

¹⁸³ Wiesmann-Wiedemann, 53.

and wrong, in extremes of guilt and innocence. He learns slowly that the world cannot be so simply judged.

Eilhart gives Mark a last moment of hindsight, in which he sees their old predicament now with a terrible clarity:

ouch was ez ein grôz tôrheit,
 daz sie mir des nicht sageten,
 daz sie getrunken habeten
 den unsêligen trang,
 daz sie sich âne iren dang
 sô sêre musten minnen.
 ,ôwê, gûte koniginne
 und lîbe nebe Tristrant,
 ich lîze ûch lûte unde lant
 und al mîn koningrîche
 ummer eigenlîche,
 daz ir nû [wedir] wêrit gesunt!¹⁸⁴ (9486-97)

(It was very foolish of them not to tell me that they had drunk the fatal potion and, against their will, were forced to love each other so. Oh, noble queen and dear nephew, Tristrant! I would give you my whole kingdom, people and land, forever for your own if this could bring you back to life.)

In Mark's final speech, the possibility of an alternative, happier romance is revealed; Tristrant might have confessed his love for Isalde to his uncle before the wedding, and obtained Mark's permission to marry her himself. The peace with Ireland would have still been kept with this new marriage, and Tristrant would have inherited Mark's throne after him, as Mark had always intended. The whole tragedy might have been easily averted, if Tristrant had only trusted in his uncle's love for him.

It is unsurprising that Thomas, who focused far more than Eilhart on the great love and suffering of Tristan and Iseult, avoids this ironic ending. In the *version courtoise*, Marc is omitted entirely from the final deathbed scene,¹⁸⁴ and there is no final

¹⁸⁴ As the final sixth of Gottfried's poem is incomplete, it is uncertain whether or not Mark might have been included here, but as Gottfried is noticeably less sympathetic to Mark's character than Thomas, it

redeeming speech that might shift the final focus away from the great tragedy of the lovers' death. As Bruckner has observed, 'after the lovers die, there is nothing, no survivors, no miraculous plants growing out of the lovers' tombs.'¹⁸⁵ Nothing softens the unremitting bleakness of Thomas' vision; the lovers share a deathbed, as they will never share a marriage bed, and they only become inseparable in death. Furthermore, Marc is excluded from their unity in death as he was in life.

In his determination to exclude Mark from the audience's sympathies, Gottfried is guilty of the greatest inconsistency of characterisation. When Tristan enters the story, Mark begins to deteriorate; when he marries Iseult, his character becomes even weaker. He is helpless to battle the Morholt, and yet Gottfried has described how he subdued all of England, and bravely defeated a previous aggressor in the encounter that left Rivalin wounded. It is hard to reconcile the great and magnanimous king that Rivalin encountered with the self-deceiving waverer who finally banishes Tristan. Where Thomas is sympathetic to Mark's plight, Gottfried is condemnatory, arguing that Mark brought his sufferings upon himself. But Mark's pain still demands sympathy; though he did not share the potion with the lovers, he is still an unwitting victim of its aftermath.

Of the many changes that the *Prose Tristan* made to the key episodes of the Tristan legend, the alteration of the manner of the lovers' death is perhaps the most profound. In the morally simplistic world of the *Prose*, Tristan's death in a petty struggle over another knight's paramour makes for an unsatisfactory ending; the *Prose* author chooses instead to have his villainous King slay Tristan through treachery, in a final confrontation in Iseut's bedchamber.¹⁸⁶ Schoepperle has argued that this ending harks back to an older Celtic version of the story, as it resembles the murder of Naisi by King Conor and the murder of Diarmid by King Finn. She points out that 'the vengeance comes, as in the Celtic stories, from the injured husband',¹⁸⁷ rather than from the injured wife as in the poems. Whether Schoepperle is correct or not, the new ending gave a moral symmetry to the story that suits the *Prose* author's purposes. Furthermore, this new ending gives him the opportunity to reunite Iseut and Tristan before Tristan dies, making the scene even more emotive. To achieve his grand dénouement, he has

seems unlikely that he would have deviated from his model here. The *Tristrams saga* also omits Mark entirely from the ending.

¹⁸⁵ Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "The Representation of the Lovers' Death," 106.

¹⁸⁶ Sir Lamorak, the third best knight, is also slain by treachery in his lady's bedchamber shortly after Tristan becomes a member of the Round Table.

¹⁸⁷ Schoepperle, 440.

Tristan return without any given motivation to Cornwall, so that he might die with the other two key protagonists both present at his deathbed.

Marc's final victory is achieved by stabbing Tristan in the back with a poisoned spear that Morgan le Fay gave to him. In this allusion, Marc is allied with the greatest Arthurian villainess, the 'female equivalent of the false knight',¹⁸⁸ who is also characterised as treacherous, destructive and lustful. Marc's initial reaction to the news of Tristan's imminent death is one of demonic glee, for he recognises that once Tristan is dead, 'il ne trouveroit jamais home en Cornuaille qui contre lui s'osast drechier.'¹⁸⁹ His corrupt authority will be unchallenged once more.

Il envoie cascun jour savoir comment mesire Tristrans le fait, et on li aporte noveles qui bien li plaisent, car on li dist certainement qu'il ne puet mais longement vivre. Grant joie a li rois March, onques ne fu si liés de cose qui li avenist. Audrés en tressaut tous de joie. (IX§77)

(He sends each day to find out how Sir Tristan does, and they bring him news that pleases him well, because they say to him that Sir Tristan cannot live much longer. King Marc has great joy; never was he so happy about anything which happened to him. Andret is jumping for joy.)

But, within the space of a few lines, Marc's reaction changes dramatically. When he learns that the wasted Tristan is approaching death, he feels a sudden 'pitié a son cuer',¹⁹⁰ and repents of his actions, crying:

Certes, ce est damages de la mort monsigneur Tristran, que jamais, a mon escient, ausi boin cevalier ne sera el monde com il estoit. Et s'il ne se fust si desloiaument menés vers moi com il se menoit, on le peüst prisier de toutes coses, sour tous cevaliers! (IX§77)

(Certainly, this death of Tristan is a great sorrow, for never to my knowledge will there be as good a knight in all the world as he was. And if he had not behaved so disloyally towards me as he did, one could have esteemed him in all things above all knights.)

¹⁸⁸ Helen Cooper, "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones," 126.

¹⁸⁹ 'he will never find a man in Cornwall who would dare to stand against him.'

¹⁹⁰ 'pity in his heart.'

One is tempted to suspect that Marc's sudden repentance springs from the fact that 'tous li mondes le honnira et blasmera'.¹⁹¹ However, Marc has cared little enough for the world's opinion of his actions in the past. Now, in genuine grief, he abandons his customary pretences, and for the first time, he is united with his wife in sorrow. Marc goes to Tristan's deathbed, grieving that he has slain 'mon cier neveu', where Tristan makes a final request of him. He wants to see Iseut again before he dies, and only Marc can unite them now, by giving his permission, which he does. Iseut perishes in the dying Tristan's embrace, and Marc erects a grand tomb for them both as a final act of reparation, which of course comes too late.

It is a last grand inconsistency on Marc's part that he unites the lovers in death when he spent the duration of their lives working furiously to separate them. Vinaver attempts to attribute his repentance to a sudden recognition of 'the miracle of love,'¹⁹² but his real recognition seems to be of what the loss of his nephew will mean to the world. He is an intelligent man who understands Tristan's worth even while hating him for it, just as he understood Iseut's misery while refusing to release her. Where a stupid man might have lived in happy ignorance of his failures as king and husband, Marc is aware of his failings, and pursued his nephew with an unhappy hatred because of it, for while Tristan lived as a better defender of Marc's realm and a better lover of Marc's wife, Marc's weaknesses were exposed to the world. It is only when his rival lies vulnerable and dying that Marc can behave generously towards him. Even in the much-changed world of the *Prose Tristan*, Mark is never completely ignorant of the consequences of his actions, and he cannot rejoice in them fully.

Malory's *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones* does not finish tragically, but triumphantly, with Tristram acting as godfather at Palamedes' christening. His death is eventually reported in an aside, as simply another tragedy in the steady corruption of Arthur's Round Table. Mark's malice could be thwarted and contained, and Mark himself safely locked away in prison during the *Book of Sir Tristram* when the chivalric values were at their strongest, but when these values begin to crumble, Mark finally succeeds in slaying Tristram. Mark himself will be killed later by Alisaundir's son. There is a certain poetic justice in his death by the hands of one of his kin, but his death is hardly important; his reasons for existing died with Tristram and Iseut. Mark has

¹⁹¹ 'all the world vilifies and blames him'

¹⁹² Vinaver, "The Prose Tristan," 343.

become the living embodiment of a vengeance which is now fulfilled. There is almost nothing of the old Mark remaining in Malory's version of the cuckold king, yet his character now holds the reader's attention more than the virtuous Tristram, who lacks Lancelot's humanity. Mark is passionate, vicious, mercurial, deceitful, malicious, and constantly self-serving, but he also seems very much alive.

In the early Tristan poems, the characterisation of the three main figures still lies too close to its Celtic origins to fit neatly into the conventions of medieval romance. Tristan is an amoral trickster at heart, Iseult is often selfish and sometimes even murderous, and Mark is an essentially decent man, whose plight must invite sympathy. In Eilhart and Bérout's poems, he is deceived, betrayed and bewildered by the two he should most be able to trust; the central moral conflict of the Tristan legend is sited in his character. When the courtly poets seek to idealise Tristan and Iseult's love, elevating it beyond the under-handed affair of the *version commune*, Mark must no longer seem wholly blameless. For Tristan to seem honourable, an imbalance in honour between the two must be created, and the man that the lovers have hurt so badly must seem to have invited his own pain, through his own failings.

As the Tristan legend enters the morally simple world of the prose romances, the excuse provided for the lovers' betrayal in the symbol of the love potion is no longer excuse enough. Mark is therefore demonised, and all possible sympathetic qualities are stripped from his character. Though his defining roles of husband, uncle and king never change, his few early faults become typical of his new character. His inability to defend Cornwall from the Irish on his own becomes symptomatic of a rank cowardice. His rightful rage at discovering his nephew in bed with his wife becomes evidence of a viciously choleric temperament, and his one attempt at their execution becomes a general murderousness which is directed at all those around him. Moreover, some of Tristan's early and less appealing characteristics shift to Mark; Bérout's trickster hero is likened to a fox, but by Malory's *Book*, Mark has become the skilled dissembler, and is named 'Kynge Foxe' by Lancelot. The traits of cunning and trickery, suitable in a Celtic hero but unworthy in an Arthurian knight, have passed from Tristan to Mark. The virtues of Mark's original character are lost almost entirely; his much-prized honour is transformed into a constantly self-serving treachery, his desire to trust into an all-embracing suspicious nature, and his love for his wife into uxoriousness. Finally, his best feature, his love and faith in his nephew, is entirely eroded. Only Mark's handsome appearance remains the same.

Yet this transformation of the third party of the triangle from victim to villain failed to sustain the legend's earlier popularity, and it was surpassed by the romance of Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur. Unlike Tristan and Iseult, Guinevere and Lancelot love without the aid of a magical drug. While scholars have pointed to the rise of individualism in the Tristan romance, Tristan and Iseult only rebel against the social order when they are compelled to it by the potion, and they seem to be principally concerned with maintaining the appearance of orthodoxy for as long as possible, while continuing their affair.

Unlike Tristan and Iseult, Mark never drinks the love potion. His choices and actions are therefore his own; his rages, his deceptions, his murderous impulses, are the actions of an independent individual. His portrayal is unrestricted by the conventions that surround the hero of a romance, and his character can thus be changed to suit the author's purposes. From the thirteenth century onwards, this flexibility inherent in Mark's role allowed his transformation into a villain. Yet Mark's love for his wife, Iseult, springs from his own volition, and likewise, his moments of forgiveness and trust. If he is wholly culpable for his faults, his virtues must also be wholly his own. In the Tristan poems, his many inconsistencies can be seen as the actions of a decent man caught between his public duty and his personal desire; in the prose works, his viciousness can be seen as the reaction of a fox in a trap, prevented by its own nature from finding an escape. Like the two lovers, Mark is trapped by fate, but without the consolation of reciprocal love; unlike the lovers, he never ceases his solitary war against their circumstances. Mark is 'the most problematic figure' of the Tristan legend simply because, whether honourable or treacherous, he seems the most human of the three.

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