

Wagner's Tristan und Isolde:
A Transformation of the Medieval Legend

Wagner probably learned of the legend of Tristan and Isolde while studying medieval literature in Dresden. He no doubt studied Gottfried von Strassburg's Tristan and may have been familiar with the earlier works of Thomas, Béroul, and Eilhart von Oberg. At least one of the French texts, the version of Thomas, does play a role, albeit perhaps an indirect one, in Wagner's opera, for Gottfried's text is based on that of this French predecessor.

Gottfried's version of the legend is a masterly account of a powerful story and must have impressed the young composer deeply, for Wagner chose Gottfried's romance as the basis of one of his greatest operas. Of course, Wagner's rendition of the legend differs from his predecessors' in that it is an opera, and consequently music plays an important part. But the difference between the works is a more important one. Wagner uses his music-drama as a showcase for a new philosophy which had for some time been taking form in his mind. This philosophy necessitated several important changes in the text. Wagner's drama, although based on Gottfried's text, is a completely new creation. The nineteenth-century opera does not always hold true to the medieval conception of the legend. One can only believe that this new creation would have been applauded by Wagner's medieval predecessors whose idea of originality was not necessarily to invent a new text, but rather to take a pre-existing text and make something new and, if possible, something superior. The purpose of this study is to analyze those elements in the opera which make Tristan und Isolde a truly original creation.

Gottfried's Tristan (c. 1210) was written in short, rhyming couplets. In his prologue he explains

that he chose Thomas of Britain as his source. Although the other versions of the legend were both "good and well done," they did not write "according to the authentic version as told by Thomas of Britain, who was a master-romancer and had read the lives of all those princes in books of the Britons and made them known to us."¹ The names of Gottfried and Thomas are often linked. Not only does Gottfried name Thomas as his source but, curiously enough, Gottfried finished only about the first five-sixths of his story, and the only remaining fragments of Thomas' version supply the last sixth. Thomas' Tristan is dated circa 1170.² It differs from the other early versions, Béroul (c. 1190) and Eilhart von Oberg (end of the twelfth century), by its "courtly" style, which was perhaps influenced by Eleanor of Aquitaine.³ The emphasis in Thomas' work is on a psychological analysis of the main characters. The motives which engender an action often seem more important than the action itself. Whereas Béroul and Eilhart describe a love potion that loses its effectiveness after a few years, Thomas creates a potion whose effects are eternal. For the most part, Gottfried follows Thomas' model faithfully, and the remarks made about Gottfried's version in this study also pertain to Thomas' French version. There are, however, some subtle changes. Gottfried seems more understated than his French model. He rarely condemns an action, and there is perhaps less emphasis on psychological analysis. He occasionally alters the facts of the story. King Mark takes the love potion also in Thomas' version, but not in Gottfried's.

In the introduction to his English translation of Gottfried's Tristan, A. T. Hatto maintains that Gottfried was clearly influenced by twelfth-century mysticism, especially by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (p. 17). Some of Gottfried's passages seem directly inspired by biblical texts: "We can only garner what has been put into the ground, and accept what the seed bears us. We must mow and reap as we have sown"

(p. 202). Certainly the liturgical inspiration is clear in passages such as the following from the end of the prologue: "Their life, their death are our bread. Thus lives their life, thus lives their death. Thus they live still and yet are dead, and their death is the bread of the living" (p. 44). Such mystical passages may have attracted Wagner who was, as we shall see, studying the writings of a quasi-mystical philosopher at the time.

The role that music plays in the story must also have pleased the composer. Tristan is an excellent musician. His skill on stringed instruments enabled him to pose as a court minstrel and eventually to approach Isolde. Music literally brought the two future lovers together.

In the interest of dramatic simplicity, Wagner had to condense the plot. The action of the opera is very simple and is reduced to three main dramatic situations corresponding to the three acts of the opera. The battles and adventures that take up the first part of Gottfried's romance and establish Tristan's reputation as a knight are reduced to a few lines in the first act of the opera. Kurvenal jeers at Brangaena in Act I, scene ii, for example, telling of Tristan's victory over Morold. Gottfried's vivid accounts of hunting scenes are practically eliminated from the text of the opera and are merely alluded to musically with hunting-horn sounds in the second act. Wagner reduces the group of conspirators against Tristan to one person, Melot, and completely does away with the second Isolde, Isolde of the White Hands. This second Isolde plays a very important role in the medieval versions of the legend. Her jealousy finally kills Tristan when she lies about the color of the sail, thus dashing the hero's hopes. Many critics consider Tristan's "sin" in betraying his true love by promising to marry Isolde of the White Hands as the direct cause of his death. But by limiting the number of characters, Wagner is able to rivet the spectator's attention on the tragic couple and thus intensify the drama.

Frequent mention is made in Gottfried's Tristan of the power and the effect of the lovers' glance. When Tristan and Isolde are together in the Cave of Lovers, they have no need of food: "They looked at one another and nourished themselves with that!" (p. 262). In his opera, Wagner retains the importance of the glance. We find that Isolde did not kill Tristan after discovering that he was her brother's murderer because of the way he looked at her: "I came to him / Full well I wished to slay him, / for Morold's death to pay him. / But from his sick bed / he looked up / not at the sword, / not at my arm-- / his eyes on mine were fastened, / and his feebleness / softened my heart."⁴ This passage is accompanied by a theme that has already played an important part in the prelude and which is identified by most critics as the "Glance" or "Look" motive:



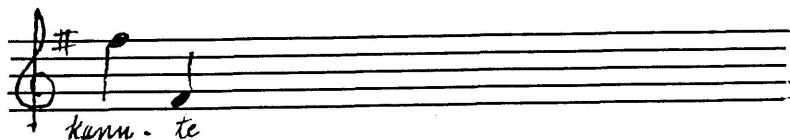
This motive is repeated when the lovers have drunk the potion and gaze at each other and at other key points in the drama. Wagner's explanation of why Isolde spared Tristan differs from Gottfried's. In the medieval romance, Isolde does not kill Tristan because of the entreaties of her mother or because "sweet womanhood intervened" (p. 176). She is simply incapable of committing murder.

Wagner occasionally transforms Gottfried's play on words into music. In Gottfried's version, Isolde and her mother indulge in a medieval "name game":

"Mother," said the daughter, "listen to the

astonishing way in which I discovered that his name was Tristan! When I had solved the mystery of the sword, I turned my attention to the names, 'Tantris' and 'Tristan.' As I passed them over my tongue, it struck me that they had something in common. I then examined them closely and found that the letters needed for either were exactly the same. For, whichever way I read it, it contained only 'Tantris' or 'Tristan,' and both were comprised in either. Now, Mother, divide this name Tantris into a 'tan' and a 'tris,' and say the 'tris' before the 'tan,' and you will say 'Tristan.' Say the 'tan' before the 'tris,' and you will say 'Tantris' again."⁵

In Wagner's opera the composer stresses the contrast between "Tristan" and "Tantris" by the use of rhyme, alliteration, modulation, and tone color:



Wagner divides the passage into two equal but contrasting parts separated by a quarter rest. "Tantris" corresponds to "Tristan" by alliteration and by the accented half note on the first syllable.

"Nannte" contrasts with "erkannte," what he "called" himself versus what she "recognized" him to be, and both words are accented by their rhyme and their position before a rest. The first part of the passage is in the key of A flat major and the second part modulates suddenly to A major. The interval of an augmented fifth between "als" and "Tris-" accentuates the surprise of the discovery. The rising perfect fifth of "Tan-tris," suggesting the intonation of a question, is answered by a descending perfect fifth on "Tris-tan." As the syllables are reversed so is the interval.

Such literal tone painting is rare in the second and third acts. Both Gottfried and Wagner show a great change after the drinking of the love potion. In Gottfried's version, the gentle Isolde is willing to sacrifice Brangaena's virginity to hide her own guilt. Later on she actually commands two of her squires to kill the innocent Brangaena, a task they are unable to perform. After the potion, Isold's reason and her sense of justice are overshadowed by her all-consuming passion. Wagner underlines this change by emphasizing the music in the last two acts. In the first act the music had served to highlight the text. This is consistent with Wagner's essay on the synthesis of the arts published in 1851, Opera und Drama, where he preaches a complete union of word and tone. The music and text would be fused to form an indivisible unit he called "die Versmelodie" ("melodic verse").⁶ The melodic line is dependent on the words to which it is united; the music then helps to extend the emotional content of the words into the more expressive sphere of music. This is the central exposition of Wagner's "Gesamtkunstwerk." The text is enhanced by the music, but the words of the drama are still prominent. We are still in a rational, conceptual world. With the drinking of the love potion we enter a new world, a world dominated by music. The voice is often lost under the weight of the orchestra. Wagner sometimes extends vowel sounds to such an extent that the concept is lost. The emotion, the passion is all important.



The wonderful second act love duet contains many passages of free canonic imitation. The lovers sing at the same time, but the one sings words the other has already finished. Naturally, the words are difficult to understand; the conceptual gives way to the passion of the moment.

This shift of emphasis from the textual to the musical, so appropriate in the *Tristan* drama, is probably in part due to Wagner's reading of the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer held music to be a superior art, being independent of the world as representation in that it does not derive its material from phenomena. Music is an objectification of the ultimate reality, of the metaphysical will itself. Music after *Tristan und Isolde* plays a more important and a more independent role than in the earlier operas. The "Leitmotifs," or musical themes, in *Tristan und Isolde* are less strictly associated with a particular text or with a particular object. They seem to represent interrelated psychological states which are more difficult to label. The various music critics are rarely in agreement about what to call even the most common of the motifs.⁷

Wagner's interest in Schopenhauer may also have influenced some of the changes he made in the text. One of the most striking differences is in the treatment of the love potion. In Gottfried's version, the lovers drink the potion by mistake, thinking it to be wine. There is no death potion and no indication that Isolde plans to kill Tristan on the way to Cornwall. But Isolde truly hates Tristan. When Tristan tries to

comfort Isolde in her sadness, she pushes him away. And when Tristan innocently asks if he is offending her, she answers, "You are--because I hate you!" (p. 193). There is no love until after the potion has been mistakenly drunk.

In Wagner's version, Isolde reveals that her supposed hatred is in fact love. The music keeps making this point as Isolde tells Brangaena how she and Tristan met, how she spared his life and how he asked for her hand in marriage--for his king, not for himself. Isolde sighs, "And I must near him / loveless ever languish! / How can I support such anguish?" (Act I, scene iii), only to be misunderstood by Brangaena. Isolde, knowing that she can never find happiness in this world, decides to drink the death potion and to revenge herself of Tristan's rejection by having him drink of it also. Tristan also expresses a death wish and gladly downs the potion: "Endless trouble's / only truce! / Oblivion's kindly draught, / with rapture thou art quaff'd!" (Act I, scene vi). Having drunk what they believe to be a death potion, they are free to confess their love: Isolde free of her shame and Tristan free of his duty to King Mark. Rather than causing their love, the love potion in Wagner's opera simply permits the lovers to voice their love.

The lovers are both seeking release through death, which coincides with Schopenhauer's position of total renunciation. Wagner explains his understanding of Schopenhauer's position in Mein Leben:

. . . the extinction of the Will to Life, absolute renunciation, was put forward as our only real and final redemption from the bonds . . . of our individual limitation in understanding and dealing with the world.⁸

Wagner was familiar with Book I of Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Idea, where the philosopher interprets and enlarges upon Kant's doctrine of the mere ideality of this world of space and time. Schopen-

hauer's philosophy deepened Wagner's feeling that the outer world is a tragic illusion. Gottfried's Tristan is filled with objects that play an important part in the story: rings, sails, statues, etc. Material objects have little importance in Wagner's drama. The lovers seek to escape the physical world, and death is the only lasting release.

Death is also an important theme in the medieval legend. Tristan is usually cited as the prime example of "amour-passion," a love dominated by the ideas of fate and of death. Moshé Lazar explains the concept:

Le destin les a mis face à face et rien ne peut les séparer désormais; même dans la mort ils se trouvent réunis dans une même tombe. . . . Cet amour est le seul vrai et pur, mais il conduit inévitablement les amants à leur mort. C'est un amour tragique.⁹

In some of the medieval versions, trees sprout from the graves of the lovers and enlase their branches. In Eilhart von Oberg's version, a vine entwines a rose bush. Thus in these medieval tales the authors indicate that physical love has been purified into the spiritual by death. In Gottfried's Tristan, there is no such implication of a spiritual transformation, but the death theme is introduced very early. Brangaena tells the lovers, "that flask and the draught it contained will be the death of you both!" But her prophecy does not worry Tristan and he answers: "Whether it be life or death, it has poisoned me most sweetly! I have no idea what the other will be like, but this death suits me well! If my adorable Isolde were to go on being the death of me in this fashion, I would woo death everlasting" (p. 127). This light-hearted reply is turned into a desperate desire in Wagner's operas. In Thomas' version, Gottfried's model, one has the impression that, had Isolde arrived earlier, the lovers would have resumed their life together. Tristan awaits Isolde's coming that she

might heal him and that they might live together. In Wagner's opera, Tristan awaits Isolde that they might die together.

The lovers engage in a Schopenhauerian dialogue in the love duet of the second act. The idea of love is inexorably tied to the idea of death. They embrace and cry out, "From the world / oh set us free!" and later, "O might we then / together die." They express a desire to lose themselves in the infinite (Schopenhauer's universal will): . . . in realms of space unmeasured, / vision blest and treasured! / Thou Isolde, / Tristan I; / no more Tristan, / no more Isolde." The lovers wish for union in "endless Night."

The "night and day," "dark and light" symbolism is important throughout the opera. The day seems to represent the world and worldly reality; the night, death or an escape from worldly reality. The light of day is the lover's enemy. It is interesting to note that, in contrast with the heroine of the opera, Gottfried's Isolde is associated with the light of day: " . . . See how the new Sun following on its Dawn, Isolde after Isolde, shines across from Dublin into every heart!"¹⁰ In the opera, Tristan and Isolde can meet only at night. The lovers must remain separated until the light of Brangaena's torch is extinguished. When the lovers are discovered in the garden, Tristan turns to Isolde and asks: "Where Tristan now is going, / wilt thou, Isolda follow? / The land that Tristan means / of sunlight has no gleams" (Act II, scene iii). With Isolde's promise to follow, Tristan drops his guard and, inviting death, is mortally wounded. The symbolism continues in the third act. Tristan regains consciousness and tells Kurvenal that he has been in the endless realm of "earthly night." But he cannot find peace because "accursed day" still shines on Isolde. The lovers will never find rest until they both find the peace of eternal night and are united in death. Gottfried's ending, where Tristan, betrayed by his wife, dies of despair before Isolde arrives, was rejected by Wagner. The lovers



must die in each other's arms. Isolde must keep her promise and follow Tristan to the land where "sunlight has no gleams." When Isolde arrives, Tristan rips off his bandages, once again attempting suicide, this time successfully. Isolde follows him after assuring the audience that Tristan lives again "calmly happy," having at last found release.

Wagner allows the lovers very little time together and never permits total union until the final union in death. In Gottfried's version Tristan and Isolde consummate their love immediately after having drunk the love potion. In a later episode they do so eight times in as many days, and Gottfried insists that this pair of lovers "did not play the prude" (p. 204). He supplies them with a honeymoon in the Cave of Lovers, a veritable earthly paradise: "Man was there with Woman, Woman there with Man. What else should they be needing? They had what they were meant to have, they had reached the goal of their desire" (p. 262). Each delighted in the company of the other, their senses full to overflowing.

The music of the opera is intensely sensual. Eric Bentley goes so far as to say that in its symbolism the opera is "one long representation of the sex act."¹¹ But the lovers are never allowed to consummate their love. There are three moments of highest passion depicted in the orchestra, but each time the lovers are foiled. They have only a few minutes together to confess their love after drinking the love potion before they land in Cornwall. The sailors interrupt their bliss by announcing the world of reality and ending their dream: "Hail to King Mark! / Cornwall, hail!" The music of the love duet in the second act modulates to an ever higher key as the passion of the lovers rises. But Brangaena interrupts them twice with her eerie and significant warning, "Have a care! / Have a care! / Night yields to daylight's glare." The lovers continue their song but are finally interrupted by the sudden entrance of Kurvenal, King Mark, and the traitor Melot, announced in the orchestra by a tremendous dissonance. The third time a sexual climax

seems to be depicted by the orchestra is in the final scene when Isolde sings the famous "Liebestod." Isolde ends the opera alone, for Tristan has already died in the previous scene. Both Gottfried and Wagner depict society and the official marriage of Isolde and King Mark as an obstacle to Tristan's and Isolde's true love. In the opera, as in most medieval romances and in most troubadour poetry, the lovers find love outside of marriage. Yet Wagner seems to suggest not only that love and marriage are incompatible, but that love and any sort of tangible or temporal satisfaction are incompatible. In Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Idea we read:

All satisfaction, or what is commonly called happiness, is always really and essentially only negative, and never positive. It is not an original gratification coming to us of itself, but must always be the satisfaction of a wish. The wish, i.e., some want, is the condition which precedes every pleasure. But with the satisfaction the wish and therefore the pleasure cease.¹²

The lovers realize that the only true, lasting satisfaction is in death.

The two lovers' yearning for death and their dissatisfaction and uneasiness in this world are expressed eloquently in the music. The music modulates unceasingly from bar to bar, all but abolishing any sense of tonal center. In the first part of the opera none of the dominant seventh chords is resolved. In the highly chromatic atmosphere that Wagner creates, the dominant seventh chord seems relatively stable. The theorist Victor Zuckerkandall comments on this harmonic revolution:

. . . the dominant seventh chord suddenly appears, no longer as pointing toward the goal, but as the goal itself! The same chord with which we have been positively

forced, by countless repetitions of experience, to associate a particular state, that of concentrated tension immediately before the attainment of the goal, now expresses the opposite state, the comparative relaxation of attaining a goal.¹³

Deceptive cadences join short sequences into a continuous whole. Wagner increases the tension over long periods of time, denying the listener the resolution. The listener finds release only when the lovers die. The B major chord at the end of the "Liebestod," awaited since the love duet of the second act, floats upward into infinity, and the listener can exhale at last after inhaling continually for forty-five minutes.

Wagner sets the tone of the drama with the music. The character of the music reveals the intent of the spoken word, and the listener is immediately aware if the speaker is sincere, sarcastic, or lying. The orchestra is constantly commenting upon the action and the music adds its power to the dialogue. Thomas Mann speaks of the "Leitmotiv" as a "magical formula, casting meaning on what had come before as well as on what was to follow."¹⁴ The music frequently recalls a situation earlier in the opera which makes the present situation more dramatic. In the third act, for instance, when Isolde is coming to Tristan, the orchestra plays a version of the theme used when Isolde impatiently awaited Tristan in the second act. Although Wagner's libretto is not great poetry, the combination of music and drama produces a powerful effect. In Nietzsche contre Wagner, Nietzsche describes the opera's effect on him: "One walks into the sea, gradually loses one's secure footing, and finally surrenders oneself to the elements without reservation: one must swim."¹⁵ Nietzsche saw Wagner as a mass seducer and warned against the decadence of his music. Denis de Rougemont in his Passion and Society describes the second act of the opera as a "disturbing and vampire-like crescendo."¹⁶ Wagner's Tristan has indeed "bitten" many a listener, and the

opera's supporters are among the world's most enthusiastic.¹⁷ Wagner combined a powerful medieval legend and a talent for music and drama to create a magnificent new work of art which is at the same time personal in its uniqueness and universal in its application.

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NOTES

¹ Gottfried von Strassburg, Tristan, trans. and intro. A. T. Hatto (Baltimore: Penguin, 1960), p. 43. All subsequent references to Gottfried's Tristan are from this edition.

² See Jean Charles Payen, ed., Tristan et Yseut (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1974), who dates the Tristan of Thomas as "1170 environ" (p. viii).

³ Regarding the dating of the Béroul text, Payen refers to the allusion it makes to the epidemic at Saint-Jean d'Acre in 1191. This passage is often cited for the dating of the version of Béroul, and Payen asks whether it should be considered an interpolation (p. viii). This would explain his hesitant suggestion of the date of the Béroul text as "avant 1170?" (p. i).

⁴ Libretto for Richard Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, synopsis by Lionel Mapelson (New York: Fred Rullman, Inc., n.d.). All quotes from the opera refer to this edition.

⁵ Gottfried, p. 181. This adventure may seem

naive to the modern reader. Ernest Newman, in The Wagner Operas (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1949), maintains that this passage is "very much as if a modern novelist were to ask us to believe that Mr. Winston Churchill managed to maintain himself for some weeks in the Cabinet councils of the Nazi party by calling himself Chinston Wurchill" (p. 176n).

⁶ See Jack M. Stein's chapter "Opera and Drama" in his fine book, Richard Wagner and the Synthesis of the Arts (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), pp. 69-79.

⁷ Stein, p. 145.

⁸ Quoted by Joseph A. Campbell in The Masks of God: Creative Mythology (New York: Penguin, 1978), p. 76.

⁹ Moshé Lazar, "Amor mundi et amor Dei," Chimères (Hiver 1970), 10.

¹⁰ Gottfried, p. 150. Jessie L. Weston, in her Legends of the Wagner Operas (London: David Nutt, 1900), suggests that in the original nature myth on which the legend of Tristan is based, Isolde probably represented the day, and Isolde of the White Hands the night (p. 322).

¹¹ Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), p. 88.

¹² Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Idea, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1883), Bk. IV, section 58.

13 Victor Zuckerkandall, Sound and Symbol (New York: Pantheon, 1956), p. 51.

14 Quoted by Roland Jackson in "Leitmotif and Form," The Music Review, 36 (1975), 45.

15 Quoted by Elliot Zucherman in The First Hundred Years of Wagner's Tristan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 75.

16 Denis de Rougemont, Passion and Society (London: Faber and Faber, Limited, 1956), p. 25.

17 Wagner's Tristan und Isolde has directly influenced works by such greats as D. H. Lawrence (The Trespasser) and Gabriele D'Annunzio (Trionfo della morte). See Léon Guichard's lengthy volume tracing Wagner's immediate influence on the artistic life in France, La Musique et les lettres en France au temps du Wagnerisme (Paris: PUF, 1963).

