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Hans Sachs' Tristrant: Farce, Tragedy or Serious Doctrine?

When at the end of Hans Sachs' tragedy of Tristrant, dated February 7th, 1553, the herold takes the floor, he calls to the audience to recognize that this is a tragedy,

Auß der wird öffentlich erkendt,

Wie solche unordnliche lieb

Hat so ein starck mechtigen trieb,

Wo sie einnimbt ein junges hertz

Mit bitter angst, senenden schmerz,

Darinn sie also heftig wüt,

Verkert hertz, sin, vernunft und gmüt,

Wird leichtfertig, verwegen gantz,

Schlecht seel, lieb, ehr, gut in die schantz,

Acht fürbas weder sitten noch tugent, (184,32-185,3) (1)

(which openly displays what a strong and powerful drive there is in such an orderless love. Once it conquers a young heart and fills it with fear and painful desire, love rages therein and corrupts the heart, the mind, the reason and soul. Thus, the young lover, without giving it any thought, risks his soul and body, his honour and possessions and does not pay any attention to manners or virtues any more.)

After a long description of the harm caused to a lover's body and soul, he concludes:

Auß dem so laß dich treulich warnen,

O mensch, vor solcher liebe garnen

Und spar dien lieb biß in die eh!

Denn hab ein lieb und keine meh!

Dieselb lieb ist mit Gott und ehren,

Die welt darmit fruchtbar zu mehren.

Darzu gibt Gott selb allewegen

Sein gnad, gedeyen und milten segen.

Das stäte lieb und trew aufwachs

Im ehling stand, das wünscht Hans Sachs. (185,21-30)

(Therefore, mankind, be faithfully warned of love's traps and spare your loving emotions for your marriage. Then you should have one love only, no more. This is a love which is in accordance with God an honour, a love by which to be fruitful and fill the earth. God always gives his grace, support and rich blessing to marital love. Hans Sachs wishes that constant love and loyalty may grow in the state of marriage.)

Most modern readers' reaction to these words is laughter. What a terribly easy way out of the tragical love conflict

would it have been if Tristan and Isold had refrained from their love and Isold were happily married to Marke and Tristan to Isold Weißhand! Even though the Tristan tradition does know critical tones and negative interpretations of Tristan's love, none of the other versions so blatantly propagates marriage. The prose version (2), Sachs' direct source, though warning of too strong worldly love which might distract a Christian so much as to forget the love of God, still accepts that Isold's love to Tristan was *irechte lyeb vnd treü*" (5173). (3) There is no notion of the high value of marriage; and most late medieval romances written in emulation of *imaster Gottfried*" fiercely attack the common practice of politically motivated marriage. (4)

Is thus Sachs' *Tristrant* a parody, a farce, or simply another carnival play staging the punishment of an adulterer? Didn't Sachs recognize the tragic potential of the Tristan-story's love constellation? Or, did he not care about it and is scholarship right in accusing Sachs that he did not alter his source material, that he just shortened it (5) and in some more or less appropriate way divided into acts (6) and attached a moralising epilogue which has nothing to do with the play, i.e. is Sachs' *Tristrant* actually a real tragedy, disregarding its epilogue?

The play's structure, however, does reveal some deliberate alterations by Hans Sachs:

Act I: Morholt, the poisoned wound.

Act II: *Tristrant*'s two journeys to Ireland, the dragon.

Act III: marriage arrangements, the love potion.

Act IV: Marx' and Isald's wedding, the heroes' secret love, the well in the garden.

Act V: *Tristrant*'s and Isald's life in the wilderness.

Act VI: *Tristrant*'s marriage, secret visits to Isald.

Act VII: *Nampeconis*, the poisoned wound, the heroes' death.

Sachs drops the story of Tristan's parents and the hero's childhood, which forms an important part of both *Gottfried*'s romance and the prose version. The drama immediately begins with *Tristrant*'s fight against Morholt, the first act ending with the hero having received the poisoned wound and Isald lamenting Morholt. The last act directly reflects the events in the first: In act VII *Tristrant* fights against *Nampeconis*, receives a poisoned wound, dies, and Isald dies lamenting him. Similarly, act II and act VI are related to each other: In both acts *Tristrant* disguises repeatedly in order to visit Isald: in act II he needs to be cured and intends to woo Isald in the name of Marx; in act VI he searches comfort for his painful love desire. Both act III and act V show *Tristrant* and Isald together in love, separated from society, on the ship to Cornwall resp. in the wilderness. The central act IV, stressed by the symmetrical structure of the play, deals exactly with what the epilogue is about: the wedding and the secret love in opposition to the legal marriage. The wedding scene which is in chapter 22 of the prose's 63 chapters was intentionally moved into the very core of the drama by Hans Sachs.

In all versions of the romance the wedding night during which Marke is betrayed plays an important role; here it is dropped. I claim that this is not just a result of Sachs' prudery or the impossibility to stage the wedding night: Sachs' *Brangel* does in fact mention the problem in act III (159,26-31), and therefore it would have been easy to let her or another person tell in act IV how the problem was solved. Hans Sachs, however, obviously isn't interested in the intimate side of the wedding. It is rather shown as an official, political act, including the coronation of Isald and a royal tournament. Thereby the wedding ceremony is sharply confronted with the very private love potion scene which concludes the previous act.

The love potion scene, the beginning of the heroes' love, is the crucial point of any interpretation of the Tristan story. It is here that Sachs makes considerable changes in the plot.(7) According to the prose, the hero had talked so much that he became thirsty, *vnd begeret zuo trincken. der schenck waz nit gegenwürtig. Aber ein kleines junckfrälin sprach. Herr jch weiß wol trincken. gieng darmit. do der verfluocht vnsällig tranck stuond. vnd bracht jm den.* (1115-1119) (and wished to have some drink. The cup-bearer wasn't present, but a young maiden said: *ìSir, I well know where to find a drink.*" She said it and went to the place where the forsaken, ill-fated potion stood. And she brought it to him.)

It is clearly an accident that the heroes drink the potion, an accident that the narrator regrets without blaming them.

Sachs, however, describes the situation very different to any other Tristan version: Here it is Tristrant who knows where to find a drink. He says:

Ich weis: zu trincken hat kein mangel.

In einem fläschlein hat die Brangel

In irem watsack; das muß sein

Der aller-beste plancken-wein.

Das hab ich gnumen euch und mir.

Darmit wöllen uns trencken wir. (157,24-29)

(I know: There is no lack of a drink. Brangel has s.th. in a little bottle in her kitbag, which must be the very best white wine. I have taken it for you and me. We may refresh ourselves with it.)

Hans Sachs doesn't describe an accident, but a theft, and the drink is not any liquid, but a special delicacy. As soon as Tristrant and Isald have tested the wine, Tristrant is shocked:

Was ist das gwest für ein wein?

Wie springt und tobt das hertze mein?

Mein gmüt ist in gantzer unrhu

Und setzt mir lenger herter zu. (157,32-35)

(What kind of wine has that been? How does my heart jump and rage! My soul is restless and hurts me the longer the more.)

Both Tristrant and Isald feel ashamed and quickly disappear to their cabins. One act later, when in the garden Marx realizes that he has been betrayed, he angrily reproaches Tristrant, expels him from the court and never allows him to return:

Tristrant, ist das die freundschaft dein? ...

Bald heb dich von dem hofe mein

Und kumb mir nimermehr herein! (163, 21.27f.)

(Tristrant, is this your friendship? Quickly leave my court and never return!).

An author as productive as Hans Sachs cannot avoid quoting or nearly quoting himself. Regardless of any evaluation of style and originality, it is most remarkable to see where the author saw a possibility to quote himself, i.e. where he felt a similarity in motifs. In October, 1548 Hans Sachs wrote a tragedy about the Fall of Man.(8) In this play Eve does not primarily pick the fruit and offer it to Adam because of its promised enlightening power, but because she expects an extreme pleasure from testing the "aller süsten frucht" (38,27). After trying the delicacy, Adam is shocked by the sudden change in his soul: "iO wie ist mein gmüt verwandelt!" (39,27). Both feel ashamed and hide quickly. God, having seen how he was betrayed in the garden, reproaches Adam and expels him and Eve from the garden and never allows them to return:

Adam, wie stellst du dich so frumb? ...

Darumb, Cherubin, bald rüst dich!

Treib auß die newen Gottes weiß

Auß dem gartten des paradeiß,

Auß wollust, frewden, gwalt und ehr!

Darein sie kummen nimmer mehr." (45,13. 47,11-15)

(Adam, why do you pretend to be so pious? ... Cherubim, go ahead! Expel these people who are newly as wise as God from the Garden of Eden. Drive them out of the state of pleasure, happiness, power and honour! They will never return to it.)

The parallels between these scenes indicate a similarity between Tristrant and Isald and Adam and Eve: The beginning of the forbidden love equals the Fall. The notion of sin in Sachs' Tristrant is further stressed by the fact that the hero, as opposed to the romance, does not hate but rather desire Isald before they drink the potion. When Wilhelm, Isald's father, asks Tristrant whether he would like to marry Isald, he answers:

Ja, von hertzen ich ihr beger.

Doch bin ich ihr zu schlecht am adel (155,21f.)

(Yes, I desire her with all my heart, but I am not noble enough for her.)

The marriage with the princess of Ireland would lift him to a royal level. And in fact, after the wedding, two counts at Marx's court complain about Tristrant looking down on them:

Sacht ir nit, wie groß er sich macht

Auff der hochzeit und uns veracht,

Als ob wir all stalbuben wern? (161,25-27).

(Didn't you see in what a high position he put himself during the wedding, and how he laughed at us, as if we were stablemen?)

By tasting the forbidden delicacy Tristrant thus unknowingly exceeds his social level and puts himself in one place with his lord. The punishment is that he is expelled by his lord and will finally die. - Tristrant very much resembles Adam - or actually Eve. The gender of the sinner does not seem to be important to Hans Sachs.

Tristrant, who loses God's grace and is driven out of human society after his fall, does not remain "ider teür manlich held" (5170) who he still is in the prose's epilogue, but he distinctively changes his character: In act I, when Morholt threatens the country, Tristrant appears as an extraordinary example of piety, trust in God and responsibility for the society. While in Sachs' source the fight against Morholt is the first deed of the newly accoladed knight, wishing to earn his first merits, Sachs' Tristrant isn't a knight yet when Morholt appears. Marx only allows him to fight, as he says, "Weil du dein trawen hast zu Gott" (145,10). Morholt tries to bribe Tristrant, but the hero won't forget his social duty (146,11). In act II Marx offers him to make him his only heir, but Tristrant refuses and claims that it is better for the kingdom that Marx should take a wife, "Das dir geboren werd auß ihr/ Ein natürlicher erb zum reich" (150,11f.). In Ireland he again appears as the servant and saviour of the society. He kills the dragon that terrifies the country, and this deed is the only reason why Isald does not kill Tristrant when she recognizes him as Morholt's murderer. There is no notion of Isald's "süeze wîpheit" as in Gottfried (9) (10255) to prevent her from killing him, and there is no fear that she might have to marry far below her status if not accepting Tristrant: The seneschal does not appear in the tragedia. - Finally, as already mentioned, Tristrant proofs his role as society's servant again when he, though he desires Isald, does not woo her for himself, but in the name of Marx.

All his concern for the public disappears immediately when he steals the potion. From now on all his actions are solely aimed at one good: his personal love. It is especially remarkable how Sachs motivates the heroes' return from the idyllic life in the wilderness in act V: In Gottfried they miss society; in the prose version the potion's effect ceases; here their love is unbroken, but they fear for their lives since Marke has discovered them. Their "confession" to the hermit is a mock confession, since there is no other than a very personal interest in returning to the court - and continuing their life and love there.

Most obvious, however, is the opposition between Tristrant's former social motivation and his private motivation

after the theft of the potion in the parallelism between act I and act VII: While in act I Tristrant is wounded with a poisoned weapon in a just fight in defence of his uncle's country against a tyrant, in act VII he fights against a righteous person in defence of an adultery. These wounds won't heal. Tristrant's last deed confirms thus his sinful fall out of society and life.

The answer to the opening question, whether Sachs' tragedia ist simply an abbreviated version of a romance describing a tragical but still ideal courtly love, with an unfitting moral attached to it, has to be "no". The text has been given a new structure which demonstrates the doctrine given in the epilogue. And the doctrine is far too serious for a farce or a Fastnachtspiel: Tristrant is not just another punished adulterer like the odd preast loving a peasant's wife in several carnival plays, but he is the well-known and highly estimated hero from courtly literature tradition. He is shown as to fall out of his most positive role in society through a love, which is premarital and secret - as it is typical for courtly love. As pointed out above, the opposition in Sachs' Tristrant is not the classical opposition between worldly love to man and spiritual love to God, but between "unordentlich" love and "ordentlich" love, i.e. the love in "ehling stand", marital love.

In the epilogue, marital love is said to be in accordance with God and honour (185,25-28) and to serve to fill the earth. It will always find God's grace, support and blessing. - This is not just a civic invective against the nobility's morally questionable ideal of courtly love, it is rather a moral attitude which is heavily supported by theological ideas: Sachs writes in accordance with Luther's teaching on marriage, which has turned into bourgeois morality, as a few selected quotations from his writings might illustrate. In Vom ehelichen Leben (1522) Martin Luther writes:

das gott die ehe selbs eyngesetzt, man unnd weyb tzusamen geben, kinder tzeugen und wartten verordenet hat. (10) (that God himself has established marriage and has led man and woman together and has ordered that they should have children and care for them)

In his Predigt vom Ehestand Luther interprets the biblical wedding in Cana as a sign,

wie auch Christus, Gottes Son für sie sorget, will dennoch bey inen zur hochzeit, das ist: im Ehestand sein, sie trösten und nicht verhungern noch verdürsten lassen, sonder will ihnen so viel verschaffen, das sie sollen sath werden, unnd eh sie solten noth leiden. will er inen aus wasser wein machen. (11)

(how Christ, God's son, cares for them. He will be at their wedding, i.e. in their marriage. He will comfort them and won't let them die of hunger or thirst, but will support them with as much as they need to be well fed. Before they should suffer from poverty, he will turn water into wine for them.)

The highly criticized opposite to marital love in Sachs is not primary adulterous love - he does not dramatize Lancelot -, but premarital love: "Und spar dien lieb biß in die eh!", which was founded in secret, without the families' and the society's knowledge. He thereby adopts Luther's condemnation of the "heimliche Verlöbniß", the secret marriage:

Denn weil die Ehe ist ein öffentlicher stand von Gott geordnet und nicht ein winckel geschafft noch finster werck ist, Und wer sie ym winckel und finsternis sucht odder heimlich annimpt, der ist ein Ehediab und hat sie gestolen und nicht redlich mit Gott und seines worts gehorsam bekommen, wie es doch solchem ehrlichen stande eigent, darumb sol die meuchlinge, gestolen, heimliche und unehrbarlich bekommen Ehe weichen der offenberlichen, die mit Gott und ehren redlich bekommen ist, Denn unser Regel sol und mus die sein, das allewege hierin privata publicis weichen sollen ceteris paribus, Das ist, Heimlich verlöbniß sol dem öffentlichen weichen, Also auch Heimlich beschlaffen dem öffentlichen beschlaffen. (12)

(Marriage is a public status, established by God, and not a secret deal done in a dark corner. Who, however, searches it in a dark corner or accepts it secretly, is a thief and has stolen marriage and has not received it righteously with God's blessing and in obedience to his word, as it is appropriate for the honourable status of marriage. Therefore, the villainous, stolen, secret and dishonourably achieved marriage should give way to the official one, which has been achieved in public with God, in honour and righteousness. It should and has to be our rule that in this case and similar cases private affairs have to give way to official affairs, i.e. a secret engagement has to give way to an official engagement, a secret sexual relationship should give way to an official sexual relationship.)

Tristrant, who has stolen the love potion, is a thief who has stolen marriage or a marriage-like sexual relationship. The potion symbolizes the bounds that the lovers established between each other, far from the public, on a ship which nearly all members of the crew and all passengers have left at that moment. According to Luther, the secret love between the heroes should give way to the official marriage: But it doesn't, and thus the heroes have fall out of the grace of God, who is the supporter of marriage. Tristrant, the thief of marriage, finds "An leib und seel gotts ungnaden" (185,20).

We might laugh a Hans Sachs' tragedia today, but in its time it was meant as a serious means of moral instruction, combining bourgeois ethics and Protestant teaching. It is one of so many Protestant dramas of the 16th century that use both the stage and the printing press in order to spread Luther's words and thoughts. (13)

1) Hans Sachs. Tragedia mit 23 personen, von der strengen lieb Herr Tristrant mit der schönen königin Isalden, unnd hat 7 actus, in: Hans Sachs. Ed. by Adelbert von Keller, vol. 12. Stuttgart, 1879 (StLV 194), repr. Hildesheim, 1964, pp. 142-186. Also: facsimile edition, Greifswald, 1993 (Wodan 29; Greifswalder Beiträge zum Mittelalter 14).

2) Tristrant und Isalde. Prosaroman. Ed. by Alois Brandstetter. Tübingen, 1966.

3) Cf. Bernward Plate, Gottfried-Rezeption im Prosa-Eilhart? Euph. 71 (1977), pp. 250-268. Plate argues that the prosewriter introduced Gottfried's idea of courtly love into the Eilhart's narrative.

4) Johann of Würzburg's Wilhelm von Österreich is one of the most striking examples.

5) Cf. eg. Wolfgang Golther, Tristan und Isolde in den Dichtungen des Mittelalters und der neuen Zeit. Leipzig, 1907, p. 258; Reinhold Bechstein, Tristan und Isold in deutschen Dichtungen der Neuzeit. Leipzig, 1876, p. 16.

6) Cf. Golther, p. 255; Bechstein, p. 17.

7) Cf. Bechstein (p. 24) calls the scene "hausbacken", homespun.

8) Hans Sachs, Tragedia von schöpfung, fal und außtreibung Ade auß dem paradeyß, hat 11 person und 3 actus, in: Hans Sachs, vol. I (StLV 102, 1870), pp. 19-52.

9) Gottfried von Straßburg, Tristan. Hrsg. u. übers. v. Rüdiger Krohn. 2 Bde. Stuttgart 1980.

10) Martin Luther, Vom ehelichen Leben (1522), in: D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. 10. Weimar, 1907, pp. 267-304, p. 294.

11) Martin Luther, Eine predigt von Ehstand (1525), *ibid.*, vol. 17., pp. 12-29, p. 16.

12) Martin Luther, Von Ehesachen (1530), *ibid.* vol. 30, pp. 198-248, p. 219. Cf. *id.*, Daß Eltern die Kinder zur Ehe nicht zwingen noch hindern, und die Kinder ohne der Eltern Willen sich nicht verloben sollen (1524), *ibid.*, vol. 15, pp. 155-169.

13) Cf. my essay "Hans Sachsens 'höfische Minne'. Zur Dramatisierung höfischer Liebesromane durch Hans Sachs", to be published in the proceedings of the ICLS Convergence, Vancouver, 25.-31.7.1998.