

ARTHURIAN LITERATURE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

III

THE  
ARTHUR  
OF THE  
GERMANS

THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND IN MEDIEVAL GERMAN  
AND DUTCH LITERATURE

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## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 7: ARTHUR IN THE TRISTAN TRADITION

*Volker Mertens*

Although it is not clear at what stage in their development the stories of Tristan and of Arthur first came together, the two complexes were already associated in twelfth-century works, and the appearance of Arthurian motifs and figures in Tristan romances forms an illuminating strand in the history of Arthurian literature. It is generally held that a lost *Estoire de Tristan*, written in French c. 1150, was the basis from which later, existing versions derived. Bérout's *Tristan* (incomplete), the oldest French Prose *Tristan*, and Eilhart von Oberg's *Tristrant*, which is considered the most faithful representative of the lost work, are versions which emphasize adventure and dramatic action, whilst the 'courtly' or clerical version by the Anglo-Norman poet Thomas, from which Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* derives, has a more psychological and rational bent.

In Thomas's *Tristan* King Arthur appears only in a retrospective passage, based on Wace's *Brut*, which tells of him killing a giant who had claimed his beard. In the versions of Bérout and Eilhart, by contrast, the worlds of Arthur and Tristan come together, Arthurian episodes play a direct part, and Arthur and his knights aid the lovers. In Bérout, they come to Yseut's aid when she acquits herself of the charge of adultery in the trial by ordeal, an episode which Eilhart omits, probably for religious reasons.

In Eilhart's version Arthur plays an important part in the chain of adventures that lead Tristrant back to Cornwall in order to meet Isalde – a part of the poem not included in the incomplete Bérout manuscript. Following the pattern of Arthurian romances, Eilhart's Tristrant gains the friendship of Gawain (Walwan) and acquires a chivalric reputation comparable to his. Impressed by the courtly attitude shown by Tristrant when (after his victory over Delekors) he asserts that he will undertake anything he is asked to do for the sake of his mistress (vv. 5339–44), Walwan arranges a meeting between the lovers which shows Arthurian kingship in an interesting light. When Arthur's company arrives at Mark's court with Tristrant, Mark asks Arthur to ensure that none of his men should do anything detrimental to his (Mark's) honour (vv. 5474–77), and Arthur promises that anyone who brings disgrace to Mark shall be punished (vv. 5488–91). This amounts to a legal contract between the kings, but Tristrant

disregards it when he goes to the queen's bed. When Tristrant is at risk of discovery by the blood that flows from the wound he received on visiting Isalde's bed, Arthur's knights help him hide the offence by arranging a fight in which they voluntarily wound themselves on the iron trap set by Mark to guard Isalde's bed, and Arthur covers up for his knights' deception by telling Mark that it is their habit to behave like that. The Arthurian knights return to Brittany and, despite offers of fief and land, Tristrant leaves the court.

Eilhart thus presents Arthur as an accomplice in Tristrant's adultery, and the breach of trust is intensified by the fact that Arthur had expressly promised to avenge any offence against Mark's honour. The solidarity of the knights of the Round Table overrides legal propriety, and Tristrant has a claim to this solidarity because of his knightly feats and because of his perfect courtly conduct in love as shown in the Delekors episode. Love is here not a goal in itself but an incentive to knightly deeds and knightly perfection; love has become functionalized as courtly service within the system of Arthurian values. By becoming a member of the Round Table Tristrant is transformed into a courtly knight, and this accords with his general characterization, for Eilhart shows him primarily as a hero without equal and only in a secondary way as the great lover. In the prologue 'the marvellous feats' performed by Tristrant rank before the love story, which itself is reduced to the winning of the beloved and the death that results from love (vv. 38–47). The image of the valiant hero concurs with that of the Arthurian Tristrant who has transformed his love into an incentive for knightly achievement and himself into a model of courtliness.

However, this transformation is possible only in the later stages of the work. In Eilhart's romance the most powerful, life-threatening effects of the love-potion fade after four years, to give place to a more 'natural' love. Even if this love now has a courtly dimension, it is still strong enough to force Tristrant into violations of social and moral laws in order to be with Isalde, and time and again Eilhart excuses these offences by reference to the potion that induced love 'against their will' (v. 9697). King Arthur's complicity in Tristrant's adultery points forward to the end of the romance when King Mark's regret at having banned Tristrant from his court and caused the death of his wife and his nephew signals Tristrant's and Isalde's love as an innocent fate. Indeed, two worlds come together in the concept of the Arthurian Tristrant: on the one hand, the magic love of the potion acquires courtly qualities and, on the other, the Arthurian court becomes 'Tristanized' in its support of an adulterous love. Eilhart has probably shifted the compromise between love and courtliness from an earlier position in the story to its present place. In the *Estoire* the episode of the iron trap took place at Mark's court soon after the marriage to Isolde. This is its position in the oldest prose *Tristan*, where it also has no Arthurian connection. Eilhart seems deliberately to have changed the episode in order to have King

Arthur himself sanction the adulterous love. The episode of the trap takes the place of the ordeal in which God helps the lovers, and which Eilhart has omitted probably because of religious scruples. Arthur was less problematic as an accomplice than God himself and, as Eilhart needed an authority to sanction the love between Tristrant and Isalde, he chose the king so as to legitimize his telling a story in which adultery plays such a prominent part. This interpretation matches what we know about the Welf court, for which Eilhart probably produced the romance, for the Welfs' cultural self-understanding was characterized by religiosity, aristocratic pride and the dignity of lordship.

In Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* Arthur plays no part in the narrative, he is referred to only in the episode of the lovers' cave, when the narrator comments that the lovers' joy is greater than that of Arthur's court and his Round Table (vv. 16859–65, 16896–901). Gottfried's lovers accept the destiny of their love with their full being. They do not need an external recognition of their love by an exemplary King Arthur. However, in other works Tristan is often associated with Arthur's court. Tristan is present among the knights of the Round Table already in the work that established the genre of Arthurian romance – the *Erec* of Chrétien de Troyes and its adaptation by Hartmann von Aue – and in Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet*, which also represents an early stage of the genre.

In his continuation of Gottfried's *Tristan* Heinrich von Freiberg goes so far as to narrate Arthur's inauguration of the Round Table and to present Tristan as one of its founding members (vv. 1307–20, 1981–2000). The table can seat 500 knights; its roundness places all members in a position of equal dignity; and in order to gain a seat the knight must demonstrate military prowess, nobility of birth and true loyalty ('triwe', v. 1372) as well as the courtly qualities of generosity and good bearing. Arthur invites all knights who wish to win membership of the Round Table to seek adventure in his realm as proof of their worth. Spurred on by his manly courage and his love for Isolde the Blonde, Tristan travels to Karidol, where the knights of the Round Table are engaged in competitive combats in a kind of park of adventure, where any knight who rides in armour is bound to give combat (vv. 1606–15). This is an expansion of the motif of knightly adventure that was introduced as a typical practice of Arthur's knights already in Eilhart's work. Tristan engages in a brilliant combat against Gawan, with neither recognizing the other until Tristan reveals himself by his war cry, whereupon Gawan breaks off the combat, and Tristan is received into the company of the Round Table, where he quickly gains the highest renown among the knights.

Tristan is able to pass the Arthurian test because he has the proper qualifications: a thirst for action inspired by love, prowess as shown in the indecisive combat with Gawan (which is modelled on the combat between Gawan and Parzival in Wolfram's *Parzival*) and noble descent. Indeed Tristan is drawn into

a family relationship with Arthur's court because he is not only the special friend but also a relative ('mac', v. 1936) of Arthur's nephew Gawan, and Arthur himself speaks of Tristan in terms of kinship ('neve', v. 2287). In addition, Tristan's career thus far is sufficient proof of his worthiness for acceptance into the company of the Round Table. Tristan is a model Arthurian knight, and his love for Isolde the Blonde fits that concept, because it motivates him to knightly deeds, like the loves of the other knights. As well as friendship with Gawan, the classic career of the Arthurian hero includes a combat with Keie, and this, too, Tristan undertakes. Only after this combat does Tristan meet the knight Delekors. Heinrich largely follows Eilhart in the Delekors episode. In comparison with Eilhart, Heinrich leaves out the agreement between Mark and Arthur that the latter will protect the honour of his host. However, Heinrich does have Tristan himself reflect inwardly on the consequences that will follow if he goes to Isolde: he will endanger her reputation and bring anger to Mark and sadness to Arthur; but these scruples are vanquished by love (vv. 2726–50). What was an external, juridical conflict in Eilhart has become an inner conflict in Heinrich's work, and this shift from the outer to the inner dimension echoes the treatment of Tristan in Gottfried's work.

The love potion does not, in Heinrich's work, lose its power. The lovers meet as often as possible, and when they seek refuge in the forest after escaping Mark's sentence of death the narrator comments that, even though they were unable to find the lovers' cave of Gottfried's romance, they nevertheless delighted in each other's company (vv. 3321–33). Indeed, it is clear that Heinrich von Freiberg sought to include the entire Tristan tradition in his continuation and thus to write a *summa* of Tristan material. This tendency is typical of authors of the thirteenth century, and it indicates not only a desire to possess the whole tradition, but also that fiction is now at the disposal of the author and not to be derived faithfully from a source. In terms of narrative composition this disposability means that individual motifs can be rearranged in new connections and new relations. In terms of broader thematic structures it means that the Arthurian tradition is available to the author as well as that of Tristan. Heinrich equips Tristan with characteristic attributes of the classical Arthurian hero and in doing so he brings together two different literary projects which represent different conceptions of the world: Tristan stands for the supremacy of love above the law, Arthur for the courtly ideal and the upholding of peace and justice.

Heinrich goes further than Eilhart in integrating Tristan's love into the courtly realm. It is not first at Arthur's court that Tristan becomes a knight servitor of his lady-love, but he is driven there already by a similar motivation in his love for Isolde. The functionalization of love thus begins not in the courtly milieu of Arthur's court but earlier, in Tristan himself. Just as the autonomy of

Tristan's love is reduced, so is Arthur's position impaired. Although he does not break a formal promise (as in Eilhart's work) when he helps Tristan, he is apparently content to go even further by arranging a reconciliation between Tristan and Marke (vv. 2980–3000) and thus covering up not merely for the folly of one night but for a long-term adulterous relationship. When Arthur is 'saddened' ('betruebet', v. 2837) that Tristan has been wounded in Mark's trap, it is not because of the offence against Mark's hospitality but out of concern for his knights, including Tristan. King Arthur is no longer a regal embodiment of universal justice but reduced to solidarity with the knights of the Round Table and with their internal code of honour. The founding charter of the Round Table (vv. 1329–48) speaks of valour and noble-mindedness, but not of functions of the ruler such as the defence of peace and justice. Chivalric combats aim only at the accretion of honour; they have no overarching purpose, and consequently Arthur's knights do not ride through the world in order to help those in need, but stay in their realm and compete with each other for eminence. It is in keeping with this perspective that the episode of the iron trap has comical aspects (Arthur and his knights fighting with cushions, bedclothes and garments).

The bringing together of the two realms, that of Tristan and Isolde and that of Arthur, thus has a mutually corrosive effect. However, in the further course of the action Tristan and Isolde's love regains some of its absoluteness: for instance Heinrich refrains from taking over the quarrel of the lovers from Eilhart. He plays a double game, on the one hand reducing the absoluteness and self-sufficiency of love, on the other hand building it up again, and thus preventing the establishment of a firm doctrine in the course of the narrative (the 'gewisse lère' promised in the prologue to Hartmann's *Iwein*), as neither the Arthurian court nor the love of Tristan and Isolde provides an absolute norm. It lies in the logic of this stance that the end of the work is orientated towards transcendental values, as the narrator reminds the audience of the transience of earthly love and interprets the rose and the vine that entwine on the graves of Tristan and Isolde allegorically as an appeal to Christians to entwine themselves with Christ (vv. 6847–90). The religious turn at the end of Heinrich's work has been criticized as unfitting, but it is the logical consequence of the relativity of values in the romance: only Christ (and here Heinrich differs from Gottfried) is not 'at the author's disposal'; his grace remains a necessity for mankind.

Heinrich wrote his romance for the Bohemian noble Raimund von Lichtenburg, and the account of the foundation of the Round Table and the self-directed activities of the knights have been seen as reflections of the knightly societies of the time, to one of which Raimund may have belonged (Grothues 1991, 131–5). The initial Arthurian ideal has become a confirmatory ritual for an exclusive body of noblemen – that matches the spirit of the knightly societies.

The political aims of the societies were avowedly particularist and could not well be represented by the traditional Arthurian concept of a Round Table that fought for peace and justice for all.

The only German episodic Tristan poem is *Tristan als Mönch* (2705 vv.). The opening of the narrative uses the Arthurian court to show a courtly conflict between honour and love. This conflict, however, does not determine the action for long, and for the most part the work is characterized by a sequence of ostentatious episodes rather than by any consistent thematic programme. The work begins like an Arthurian romance, with the name of the king as an indicator of genre (v. 3) and a typical court meeting. The meeting, however, is summoned not by the king, but by the queen in order to meet her lover again (Lancelot, who remains unnamed in this work). Tristan experiences the conflict between honour and love when he receives an invitation to attend the court: shall he attend with his wife, Isolde with the White Hands, as honour demands, or with Isolde the Blonde, as love demands? Kornewal counsels Tristan that Queen Isolde would not be angry if he were to follow the dictate of honour (vv. 275–7), and Tristan takes his wife to the court, where he receives a seat at the Round Table. (For an outline of the remainder of the action see Chinca, chapter 7 above.)

In *Tristan als Mönch*, even if adultery exists at Arthur's court in the form of the love between Guinevere and Lancelot, the adultery has to remain concealed: it is possible only in secrecy. In the case of Tristan, this means that it would have brought a loss of honour had he made his adulterous relationship public by choosing Queen Isolde as his companion for the feast. Arthur does not become an accomplice in adultery (as he did in the versions of Eilhart and Heinrich von Freiberg); rather, the episodic poem preserves Arthur's role as the guarantor of honour and custom, as is indicated in the prologue, where it is stated that his country enjoyed high esteem (v. 4). The courtly ideal represented by the king has marginalized the conflict between love and honour, or relegated it into the secret realm of the love between Guinevere and Lancelot. It is this conflict that underlies Guinevere's words when she mourns the supposed death of Tristan: 'What I must conceal hurts me more than anything else. Alas, how will she react, alas, how will she mourn you? Alas, what am I saying! What did I almost accuse you of? From now it is better that I remain silent' (vv. 1172–8). Guinevere is here referring to adulterous love, which has to be kept secret in order to maintain the honour of the court.

The text of *Tristan als Mönch* is transmitted in one manuscript which dates from the middle of the fifteenth century; a second, slightly later one has been lost. The free play with literary motifs and the dominance of the public and representative dimension which characteristically follows from the introduction of Arthur into the Tristan tradition could suggest a date of origin for the work around the middle of the thirteenth century.



### **Bibliographical Note**

Line numbers in this contribution refer to Eilhart von Oberg, *Tristrant und Isalde*. Middle High German/New High German. Ed. and transl. by D. Buschinger and W. Spiewok. 1993 (Wodan. 27. Ser. 1, 7). Greifswald.

For other Primary Sources and for Other Literature see Chinca, the bibliography to chapter 7 above.