THE TRISTRAM LEGEND AND ITS TREATMENT

BY THREE VICTORIAN POETS:

MATTHEW ARNOLD, ALFRED LORD TENNYSON AND

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 1958

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department
of
English

We accept this thesis as conforming to the
required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

September, 1960

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ABSTRACT

        In its earliest form, the Tristram legend was
probably a Celtic folk-tale known in oral tradition as
early as the eighth or ninth century. During the early
part of the twelfth century it became known in France
and Brittany; and there, in the later years of that
same century, it was recorded in a lost romance now
referred to as the Ur-Tristan. From this source, so it
is believed, the earliest extant romances upon the
subject were derived. During the twelfth century, two
main versions developed--first the version des jongleurs,
given in the poems of Béroul and Eilhart von Oberge, and
second, the version courtoise, given in Thomas's Tristan
and some derivatives of it. Among these last, the Tristan
of Gottfried von Strassburg, written about 1215, is
generally regarded as one of the masterpieces of medieval
literature.
        In the early thirteenth century, the legend was
employed in an anonymous romance, the French prose Tristan.
In this version, which was greatly influenced by the prose
Lancelot cycle, the narrative is so grossly adulterated by
the machinery of thirteenth-century courtly romance that
the original love story is all but obscured. In most
texts of the prose Tristan, even the traditional love-
death scene is altered. This account of the legend became
for five centuries the only version in which it was known.
        Two treatments of the legend appeared in Middle
English literature. First is the northern Sir Tristrem,
an anonymous poem composed about 1300 and based upon the
Tristan of Thomas. Secondly, the Morte d'Arthur, composed
by Sir Thomas Malory about 1469, contains an account of
the Tristram legend based entirely upon the French prose
Tristan. The legend did not again receive a major treat-
ment in English literature until the mid-nineteenth century,
when it became the subject of poems by Matthew Arnold,
Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Algernon Charles Swinburne.
        Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult" is based, except
for the love-death episode, upon the version courtoise.
Arnold regarded as the central problem of the narrative,
not the love story itself, but Tristram's conflicting
loyalties to the two Iseults, and sympathized, not with
the ill-fated lovers, but with Iseult of Brittany, the
innocent victim of the tragic love. She becomes in his
poem symbolic of the Stoic way of life, the compromise
which Arnold offered to resolve the conflict of emotion
and intellect.

Tennyson treated the Tristram legend in "The Last Tournament," one of the <u>Idylls of the King</u> based upon Malory's <u>Morte d'Arthur</u>. The legend is employed in the moral allegory of the <u>Idylls</u> as an illustration of the evil consequences of adultery. In thus regarding the love story merely as a tale of adultery, Tennyson deviated greatly from the traditionally sympathetic treatment of the narrative.

Swinburne's <u>Tristram of Lyonesse</u> is, like Arnold's poem, based chiefly upon the <u>version courtoise</u>. In Swinburne's treatment the love story is again central, the theme being an exaltation of the ennobling and sanctifying power of human love. Along with the explicit exaltation of passionate love is an implied criticism of the hypocritical morality and distrust of passion which Swinburne regarded as prevalent in his age.

Although these three Victorian poems differ widely in plot, characterization and purpose, the Tristram legend is employed didactically in each, and the purposes governing its didactic treatment are dictated by the age in which and for which the poems were written.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the nineteenth-century treatments of the Tristram legend by Arnold, Tennyson and Swinburne against the background of the legend's origin, development of variants, and treatment in the medieval romances. A comparative study of the three Victorian poems will emphasize especially the selection and alteration of source materials, allegorical or symbolic interpretations of the legend, and didactic purposes governing its treatment.

CHAPTER I

THE ORIGIN AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRISTRAM LEGEND

In the course of its history from the eighth century to the fifteenth, the tragic story of Tristram and Iseult underwent many mutations. Beginning in oral tradition as a primitive Celtic folk legend, it was first recorded in literature as an early medieval French romance. In later French and German medieval versions, the legend was variously altered to suit the changing tastes and conventions of its audiences. When the legend at last reappeared in the literature of England, it had acquired many elements foreign to the traditional Celtic tale. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine the progress and development of the legend before its first known appearance in English literature.

In order to facilitate discussion of the origin and growth of the legend, the following synopsis is quoted from Helaine Newstead's chapter, "The Origin and Growth of the Tristan Legend," published under the editorship of R.S. Loomis in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages.

"A young noble or king named Rivalen came to Cornwall to take service with King Mark, fell in love with

his sister Blancheflor, married her, and had by her a son
Tristan. Blancheflor died the day the boy was born, and
the orphan was brought up by a master. The accomplished
youth arrived at King Mark's court incognito and won his
uncle's favour. He slew in combat the Irish champion
Morholt, who had demanded a tribute of Cornish youths. A
fragment of Tristan's sword, lodged in Morholt's skull, was
removed and preserved by the Irish princess Isolt, who vowed
to find the slayer of her uncle and to avenge his death.
Later, when Tristan was sent in search of a bride for King
Mark, he reached Ireland and slew a dragon ravaging the land.
As he lay unconscious, overcome by its poison, a false
seneschal claimed the victory and the hand of the princess.
But she discovered Tristan, and tended his wounds. As he
sat in a bath, she identified him as the slayer of Morholt by
a breach in his sword matching the fragment she had kept.
She spared his life only in order to save herself from the
seneschal. After confounding the false claimant, Tristan
won Isolt as his uncle's bride.

"On the voyage to Cornwall a magic potion intended
for the bridal couple on their wedding night was given in
error to Tristan and Isolt, who thenceforth were bound to
each other by its spell. All duties and obligations were
sacrificed to the demands of their consuming passion. The
episodes deal in mounting suspense with the stratagems of
the lovers to remain together and to escape the perils of
detection. On the wedding night, Isolt, to conceal the

loss of her virginity, persuaded her faithful attendant
Brangain to take her place and then plotted to murder her
to keep the secret, although afterwards she penitently
cancelled the order. On another occasion, King Mark was
induced by a spying dwarf to conceal himself in the
branches of a tree beneath which the lovers had planned
a rendezvous. His shadow revealed his presence to them,
and they cleverly lulled his suspicions by a conversation
suggesting their hostility to each other. The dwarf then
plotted to trap the lovers by strewing flour on the floor
of the royal chamber in the hope that Tristan's foot-
prints would betray his visit to the queen's bed. Tristan
outwitted the dwarf by leaping from his bed to Isolt's,
but the effort broke open a wound that stained the queen's
bed with blood. Since Mark was convinced of her guilt by
the bloodstains, Isolt offered to swear publicly on red-
hot iron that she was faithful to her husband. She
arranged for Tristan, disguised as a pilgrim, to meet her
at the place appointed for the ordeal, and, stumbling
apparently by accident into his arms, she was enabled
to affirm the literal truth that no man save her husband
and the pilgrim had ever embraced her. The red-hot iron

left her unscathed, and Mark accepted this proof of her
innocence.[1]

"Eventually, however, the king banished the lovers,
and they fled into the forest of Morois. One day when Mark
was hunting he discovered them asleep with a naked sword
between them. Reassured once more of their innocence, he
recalled Isolt, but sent Tristan into permanent exile. In
Brittany Tristan gained the friendship of the ruler's son
Kaherdin. Though suffering from his separation, Tristan was
persuaded to marry his friend's sister, Isolt of the White
Hands, because she bore the same name as his beloved. He
remained faithful, nevertheless, to the Irish Isolt. One
day, as his wife was riding with her brother and water
happened to splash her leg, she remarked that Tristan had
never been so bold with her. Accused by Kaherdin of
neglecting her and so insulting her family, Tristan
confessed that a more beautiful Isolt in Cornwall was his
true love. To satisfy Kaherdin's demand for proof of this
assertion, the friends travelled in disguise to Cornwall,
where they spent the night with the queen and one of her
maids. Kaherdin not only was convinced of the superior

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1 "This is the version of Thomas. According to Eilhart
and Béroul, Mark decided to burn the lovers as adulterers
after the discovery of the bloodstained bed. On his way to
the stake, Tristan obtained permission from his guards to enter
a chapel to pray; then he leaped from the window to the rocks
below and escaped. When Isolt was brought to the stake, a
company of lepers proposed as a more savage punishment that
she be given to them to serve their lust. After the king had
delivered her to the lepers, she was rescued by Tristan, and
the lovers fled into the forest." (Miss Newstead's note).

beauty of Isolt but he also fell in love with the maid. . . .
Finally, after many other adventures following the return of
the two friends to Brittany, Tristan was desperately wounded,
and he sent for Isolt to Ireland to heal him. If she came
with his messenger, the ship was to hoist white sails; if not,
black sails. Isolt hastened to her lover, but his jealous
wife falsely reported to him that the sails were black. He
died in despair, and when Isolt found that she had arrived
too late she died of grief beside him."[2]

Because the Tristram legend was first recorded in
French literature, some scholars have contended that the
French poets were merely employing the Celtic setting and
characters in stories entirely of their own invention, and
that the legend need not have had a Celtic origin at all.
Opinion, however, seems to favour the theory of the
existence of an original Celtic legend or folk-tale. As
R. S. Loomis states:

> Of course, the Bretons embellished the Welsh
> stories, adapted them to French and Anglo-
> Norman taste, and added features of their
> own, but they did not create an independent
> legend.[3]

The Tristram legend probably originated among
the Picts. The names of "Loonois," Tristam's birthplace,

2 Helaine Newstead, "The Origin and Growth of the Tristan
Legend," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: a
Collaborative History, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon,
1959), pp. 123-124.

3 R. S. Loomis, Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes
(New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 22.

and of "Morrois," the forest to which the lovers flee,
almost certainly refer, as J.D. Bruce suggests,[4] to Lothian
and Murray respectively, two districts of the Scottish
Lowlands once inhabited by Picts. Moreover, as Helaine
Newstead shows,[5] "Tristan," the name by which Tristram is
called in the early romances, almost certainly comes from
"Drust" or "Drostan," the name of a Pictish king who
ruled about 780 A.D. This evidence suggests that the
supposed derivation of "Tristan" from the French "triste"
was a post hoc invention of the French poets, and that the
original Tristan was not French but Pictish.

Further evidence supporting the theory of
Tristram's Pictish origin is supplied by the great Irish
legend of The Wooing of Emer. Helaine Newstead states:

> Although the Picts disappeared as a separate
> people after a crushing defeat in 843 and
> nothing remains of their language except a
> few dubious inscriptions, a precious fragment
> of the legend that developed around the royal
> name of Drust is preserved in the tenth-
> century recension of the Irish saga,
> The Wooing of Emer.[6]

In this saga, the hero Cuchulainn arrives with a band of
followers at an island in the Hebrides to find the people

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4 J. D. Bruce, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance (2 vols.;
2nd ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928), I, 177-180.

5 Newstead, p. 125.

6 Ibid., p. 126.

mourning because the king's daughter has been claimed for
tribute by three sea-robbers. In fighting and defeating
each of the pirates in turn, Cuchulainn receives a wound
which the princess binds with a strip torn from her garment.
When, later, others boast of the heroic deed, she commands
each man to bathe, and identifies her true rescuer by the
strip binding his wound. Drust is listed herein as one of
Cuchulainn's companions. Since Drust is mentioned nowhere
else in the saga, and since a closely parallel incident
occurs in the earliest French romances of Tristram,
Helaine Newstead concludes[7] that this episode may once have
belonged to a Pictish saga of Drust, the original hero of
which was displaced when the material was assimilated into
the legend of Cuchulainn. If this theory is correct, then
the parallel portion of the Tristram legend must have been
known among the Picts before the tenth century. Miss
Newstead remarks:

> The nucleus of the Tristan legend, then,
> was a tradition that Drust delivered a
> foreign land from a forced tribute and
> rescued the intended victim, a princess
> who later succeeded in identifying the
> hero in a bath and in thus confounding
> the false claimants to the victory.
> Since a version of this story was written
> down in the Irish Wooing of Emer in the
> tenth century, this part of the legend must
> have been in circulation as early as the
> ninth century.[8]

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7 Newstead, p. 126.

8 Ibid., pp. 126-127.

Although the name "Tristan" is originally Pictish, the names of other characters associated with the legend show Welsh and Cornish influence. The seneschal, Dinas of Lidan, bears a Cornish name meaning "large fortress."[9] "Mark," although a common Germanic name, is also both the Celtic word for "horse" and the name of a sixth-century Cornish king; in the more primitive versions of the legend, Mark is represented as bearing the ears of a horse, which he, like the corresponding king of classical antiquity, vainly endeavours to conceal.[10] The name of the heroine, "Iseult," has also been regarded as Germanic, but the existence of a Cornish place-name, Ryt-Eselt, meaning "Eselt's ford," and the name "Essylt" given to Mark's wife in the Welsh Triads, suggest that this name could be Welsh or Cornish as well as Germanic, and that it need not indicate Germanic influence in this portion of the legend.[11]

References to Tristram in the medieval Welsh Mabinogion indicate that he became a Welsh national hero. In Kulwch and Olwen, composed probably in the tenth or eleventh century, one of the great heroes is listed as "Drystan" or "Trystan mab Tallwch," a close equivalent

9 Bruce, I, 182.

10 Newstead, p. 128.

11 Bruce, I, 183-184.

of the Pictish Drostan son of Talorc.[12] Trystan also
appears in the Dream of Rhonabwy, a prose tale of the
Mabinogion, as one of King Arthur's counsellors; however,
since this tale is, according to J. D. Bruce, "certainly
not earlier than the middle of the twelfth century,"[13]
it may reflect the influence of French literature
rather than of genuine folk-lore.

It was probably in Wales that the original story
of the Pictish warrior and folk-hero acquired the important
conception of Tristram as the lover of Iseult. In the
Triads of the Mabinogion, "Trystan mab Tallwch" is
variously described as one of the three diadem-wearers
of Britain, one of the three machine-masters, one of the
three lovers, and one of the three great swineherds of
Britain.[14] He earns this last appellation when, keeping
March's swine so that the regular swineherd can deliver
a message to Essylt, he successfully defends the herd
against all the attempts of Arthur, March, Kei, and
Bedwyr, who cannot steal a single hog from him. Here
Trystan is identified as March's nephew, and as the lover
of Essylt, March's young wife.

Although the story of Tristram's love for Iseult,
as it is told in the French romances, was probably added to

12 Newstead, p. 122.

13 Bruce, I, 181.

14 Ibid., 180-181.

the legend in either Wales or Cornwall, it is based upon
an Irish legend. Helaine Newstead states:

> The Welsh attached to Trystan and Essylt
> one of the most celebrated plots in Irish
> legend--the aithed or elopement of Diarmaid
> and Grainne, which existed in the ninth
> century.[15]

Unfortunately the Aitheda are preserved only in such
fragmentary and corrupt versions that it is impossible
to determine the full extent of their influence upon the
legend of Tristan and Iseult. Miss Gertrude Schoepperle's
reconstruction of the aithed of Diarmaid and Grainne[16]
does, however, reveal a striking similarity in motif.
Diarmaid, the trusted nephew of the great chieftain Finn,
bears a love-spot, the sight of which compels Grainne,
Finn's young wife, to desire him. When he, through
loyalty to his uncle, rejects her, she places him under
a magic spell by which he is forced to flee with her
into the forest. Finn vengefully pursues them, and they
endure many hardships together. For a long time, Diarmaid
remains faithful to feudal and familial obligations by
keeping a cold stone between himself and Grainne while
they sleep. At last, however, when Grainne tauntingly
makes an unflattering comparison between her seemingly
timid companion and the bold water which accidentally

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15 Newstead, p. 127.

16 Gertrude Schoepperle, Tristan and Isolt: a Study of the
Sources of the Romance, expanded by a bibliography and
critical essay on Tristan scholarship since 1912 by
R. S. Loomis (2 vols.; 2nd ed.; New York: Burt Franklin,
1960), II, 395-417.

splashes her leg, Diarmaid resists her no longer, and they become lovers. The motif of flight into the forest to escape the wrath of the uncle and husband appears in identical form in the flight of Tristram and Iseult into the forest of Morrois; that of the splashing water occurs in altered circumstances, in the episode by which the maidenly state of Tristram's wife, Iseult of Brittany, is revealed to her angered brother.

The Tristram legend, as recorded in the early French romances, retains a core of Celtic material.[17] Tristram is described as a hero of extraordinary and varied accomplishments, many of which are characteristically Celtic. He is a mighty warrior of prodigious strength, able to leap remarkable distances and defeat the most forbidding giants and dragons; a musician unexcelled in harping and singing; a master woodsman who, though supreme in the chivalric art of venery, also possesses a magic bow which always hits its mark, and is skilled in imitating bird-whistles--in short, a hero in some respects better suited to the folk-tale than to the more sophisticated romance. The knowledge of leechcraft, amounting to an almost magical power of healing, is a characteristically Celtic attribute of the heroine, Iseult. Thus the characterization of the hero and heroine retained in the

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17 For information regarding the Celtic and non-Celtic features of the early French romances, I am indebted to J. D. Bruce, I, 185-191.

French romances is basically of Celtic origin.

Also of Celtic origin is the fundamental theme of the love story. Gertrude Schoepperle states:

> The story of Tristan and Isolt is
> significant only as it is tragic—the
> tale of two hapless mortals bound to
> each other by a supernatural power,
> and living in the midst of a society
> in which their love violates a sacred
> and indissoluble tie.[18]

Joseph Bédier has contended[19] that since according to Welsh law the marriage vow was not irrevocable, the tragic import of the romance could not have been a Celtic development of the legend. In *Tristan and Iseult: a Study of the Sources of the Romance*, however, Miss Schoepperle clearly proves:

> . . . not only that a tragic treatment of
> unlawful love was possible among the Celts,
> but that there were numerous tragic
> versions of the theme in Old Irish
> literature.[20]

The existence of the *Aitheda* alone should be sufficient to indicate that the fundamental conflict of passion and law thematic in the Tristan romances was understood by the Celtic peoples.

The legend was probably transmitted to Britanny during the early eleventh century. In the early French romances, Tristram's father is called not by the Pictish

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18 Schoepperle, I, 2.

19 Cited by Bruce, I, 187.

20 Schoepperle, I, 3.

"Talorc" or the Welsh "Tallwch," but by a Breton name, "Rivalen." There was at Vitré a certain lord named Tristan who ruled between 1030 and 1045, and was the son of a Rivalen. Miss Newstead has suggested[21] that Tallwch may have been renamed to honour this noble Breton family, and that, if this be true, the Celtic legend reached Brittany in the early part of the eleventh century.

The abundance of French and Breton features occurring in the earliest written versions of the Tristan legend indicates the large extent to which it was embroidered by the French romancers. The names of "Rivalen," Tristram's father, and "Blancheflor," his mother, are Breton, as indicated above, and French, respectively. Since the story of the love of Tristram's parents and the circumstances of his birth are absent from the Welsh tradition, it has been deduced that this portion of the legend originated in France or Brittany, and was added after the story's importation from Britain.[22] The name of "Hoel," Tristram's father-in-law, is also Breton.[23] Since the marriage to Iseult of the White Hands is similarly unmentioned in the

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21 Newstead, p. 128.

22 Bruce, I, 186.

23 Ibid.

Welsh tradition, and since the widespread folk-motif of
the man loved by two wives occurs in a Breton lai,[24] this
portion of the legend may be another of the Breton accretions,
although the water-splashing motif is clearly Irish. The
magic dog, "Petitcriu," is obviously French. The Breton
folk-tale in which the hero slays a dragon to which a
princess is to be sacrificed, and later by displaying the
dragon's tongue exposes a false claimant who possesses
only its head,[25] is fused in the Tristram romances with the
similar rescue episode from the Irish saga, The Wooing of
Emer, discussed above. Although the device of the white
and black signal sails is derived ultimately from the
classical Theseus legend, its immediate source was probably
a Breton folk-tale.[26]

Certain elements of the early Tristan romances
were imported indirectly from Oriental sources. The
episode in which Iseult attempts to preserve her secret by
murdering Brangien is ultimately an Oriental theme,
although, as Miss Newstead shows,[27] the first European
version occurs in an early Irish exemplum on the virtue of

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24 Newstead, p. 129.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 130.

penitence. The equivocal oath comes ultimately from the Hindu Act of Truth, which became a popular device in Sanskrit tales of the deceptions practiced by unfaithful wives.[28] The episode of the tryst beneath the pine tree combines the plot of "The Carpenter's Wife" with the setting of "The Enchanted Tree," two Oriental fabliaux which achieved widespread popularity in medieval Europe.[29] Oriental literature may also have influenced the story of Tristram's marriage, since, as Miss Newstead shows,[30] the famous Arabic romance of the poet Kais ibn Doreidsch and Lobna is strikingly similar in outline to this portion of the legend; this romance appears to have been adapted to the Breton lai of the man loved by two wives, and further enlarged by the addition of the splashing water incident from the Irish Diarmaid and Grainne. Thus in the course of its transmission from Britain through Brittany to France, the original legend acquired a great many new embellishments.

Most scholars today agree with the theory,[31] expounded chiefly by Prof. W. Golther, Joseph Bédier, and Gertrude Schoepperle, that the original Celtic legend was first given literary form in a lost French romance now

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28 Newstead, p. 130.

29 Ibid., p. 131.

30 Ibid., pp. 131-132.

31 Bruce, I, 153-157.

referred to as the Ur-Tristan, and that all the medieval lais and romances concerning the legend were ultimately derived from this version. The close similarity of all the extant early versions of the story is too remarkable to be explained by any other reason than that of a common written source.

Some scholars[32] have suggested that the lost Ur-Tristan is actually identical with the non-extant "Del roi Marc et d'Iseut la blonde" which Chrétien de Troyes includes in a list of his works recorded in the Cligès. There are several strong objections to this theory, however. First, since the name of Tristan is absent from the title, it seems likely that the poem, if it ever existed, treated only a brief episode, whereas the Ur-Tristan must have recorded the legend in full. Secondly, according to J. D. Bruce,[33] the Ur-Tristan was a masterpiece superior to even the most mature of Chrétien's romances, whereas Chrétien's "Del roi Marc ... ", as mentioned in the Cligès, is listed among the works of his youth. Thirdly, in all the literature of the Middle Ages, there is no other allusion to this poem by Chrétien, and it is therefore highly probable that the poem was either never written, never completed, or never made public. Thus it is unlikely in the extreme that "Del roi Marc et d'Iseut la blonde" is actually the long-sought Ur-Tristan.

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32 Cited by Bruce, I, 155-156.

33 Bruce, I, 155.

According to Prof. W. Golther,[34] the fact that
most early French poets have linked the story of Tristram
with that of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table
indicates that the Ur-Tristan poet must also have made
this connection, and therefore must have been familiar
with Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, the
principal medieval source of Arthurian materials. The
linking of Tristram with Arthur, however, appears frequently
enough in the Welsh fragments, as J. D. Bruce shows,[35] to
suggest that the connection had already been made during
the story's sojourn in Wales and Cornwall. Of course, it
cannot be definitely established that the early French
Tristram poems did not influence the Welsh versions, which
exist only in manuscripts of the twelfth to fourteenth
centuries, but several of the early French poems do link
the names of Arthur and Tristram in a manner suggesting an
established native tradition. Therefore, since the
connection of Tristram with Arthur appears to be a Celtic
tradition, and since Tristram is entirely unmentioned in
Geoffrey of Monmouth's work, there is no sound reason for
setting the terminus a quo of the Ur-Tristan at 1137, the
date of the Historia Regum Britanniae.

The frequent references to the love-story of
Tristram and Iseult occurring in French troubadour songs of

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34 Cited by Bruce, I, 152.

35 Bruce, I, 152.

the twelfth century suggest that these poets must have been familiar with the Ur-Tristan. Probably the earliest such reference is that made by the Poitou poet, Bernhard of Ventadour, in a song which has been tentatively dated by Bédier at 1154. Several scholars, Miss Schoepperle among them, have contended that the dating of this poem is entirely uncertain, and that 1154 cannot therefore be established as the terminus ad quem of the Ur-Tristan. Most scholars,[36] however, accept the theory that the Ur-Tristan was composed during the mid-twelfth century, and probably, as Frederick Whitehead suggests,[37] between 1150 and 1160.

According to Joseph Bédier and Prof. W. Golther,[38] the poems of Thomas, Eilhart, and Béroul are immediate derivatives of the common source, the Ur-Tristan. The poems of Eilhart and Béroul are essentially a single version of the legend, known as the version des jongleurs, and considered very close to the version of the Ur-Tristan. Thomas's poem and its derivatives form what is called the version courtoise, which departs more extensively from the source. These two versions are distinguished primarily by the treatment of the love-potion: whereas in the version des jongleurs, the duration of the effects of the love-potion is limited to a

36 Bruce, I, 152-153.

37 Frederick Whitehead, "The Early Tristan Poems," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: a Collaborative History, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 137.

38 Cited by Whitehead, p. 137.

period of three or four years, in the *version courtoise* its
duration is unlimited, and the lovers voluntarily separate
not because their love has weakened, but because they suffer
from a consciousness of sin.

Probably the poem most faithful to the substance
of the *Ur-Tristan* is the *Tristant* of the German Eilhart von
Oberge, probably written between 1170[39] and 1189.[40] It is a
very long poem, well over 10,000 lines, and an absurdly
formal treatment of its subject. Of Eilhart's poem, George
P. McNeill says:

> His work is long, dull, and conventional,
> padded with interminable soliloquies and
> tediously minute descriptions. He wrote for
> the court [of Henry the Lion] and his manner
> is punctilious to affectation. . . .[41]

Eilhart's poem, in spite of its length, gives only the bare
facts of the archetypal narrative. Frederick Whitehead
remarks:

> The narrative is in places drastically
> abridged, and it is usually passages
> of great psychological interest that
> suffer most.[42]

The poem did, however, influence several later treatments
of the Tristram legend.

Close to Eilhart's *Tristant* in the substance of its
narrative is the *Tristan* of Béroul, a Norman poet of Amiens.

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39 Whitehead, p. 136.

40 Bruce, I, 159.

41 George P. McNeill, ed., *Sir Tristrem* (Edinburgh and London:
Blackwood and Sons, 1886), p. xvi.

42 Whitehead, p. 138.

This poem, which exists in a unique fragmentary manuscript of 4,485 lines, is approximately contemporary with that of Eilhart, since it has been dated as written between 1165 and 1191.[43] Although it is the work of a jongleur rather than a courtly minstrel, and addressed to a common rather than courtly audience, it places far more emphasis upon psychological motivation than does the Tristant of Eilhart, and is far more feudal in atmosphere. According to Frederick Whitehead, Béroul:

> . . . tries to vindicate the lovers' conduct in terms of feudal law. What matters is not whether Tristan and Isolt are guilty but whether they can be proved to be so by the standards of feudal justice. Tristan behaves correctly in submitting to the king, refrains from violence against the barons who demand punishment, and he has therefore the right to trial by battle. In refusing this right, Mark becomes in a sense the offender and hence God rescues Tristan by a miracle (the leap from the chapel).[44]

The frequent references to Arthurian materials in both this poem and Eilhart's attest to the connection, firmly established by this time, of the Tristram legend with the whole body of Arthurian romances.

Also contemporary with the Tristant of Eilhart von Oberge is the Tristan of an Anglo-Norman poet, Thomas, who may have written under the patronage of Eleanor of Acquitaine. Because of his use of Wace's Brut and the Cligès of Chrétien de Troyes as well as the hypothetical Ur-Tristan, his work is

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43 Bruce, I, 159.

44 Whitehead, p. 140.

assumed to have been written between 1155 and 1170.[45]
Although his poem, which is the source of all subsequent
treatments belonging to the version courtoise, is extant
only in non-continuous fragments totalling about 3,000
lines, the missing portions have been reconstructed by
Joseph Bédier[46] through comparison of the later derivative
versions, so that a study of the complete text is now
possible.

Thomas seems to have considerably modified the
material of the Ur-Tristan, reducing the elements of
fantasy and savagery and infusing the machinery of amour
courtois. In Thomas's version of the legend, Tristan's
fantastic quest for the princess whose strand of golden hair
has been brough to Mark by two swallows is replaced by a
more rational, purposeful voyage to seek Iseult for Mark's
bride. The savagery with which Mark punishes Iseult by
abandoning her to a band of lepers to satisfy their lust
is replaced by his banishment of the lovers; he allows
them to depart unmolested and later, when convinced of their
innocence, he peacefully restores them to the court. Tristan's
violation of feudal and familial obligations is justified not
by the feudal right to battle, but by the code of amour
courtois. Edwin H. Zeydel states:

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45 Bruce, I, 157.

46 Joseph Bédier, The Romance of Tristan and Iseult
(New York: Pantheon Books, 1945).

While Thomas seems not to have been the
first to introduce courtly ideas into the
romance, he deserves credit for modifying
and curbing them so that they stand out
more effectively. On the whole he tends
to tone down the unbridled passion of the
thoroughly uncourtly original tale, and to
turn it into tender emotion.[47]

Thomas's departure from the archetypal concept

of the love-potion as a magic spell of limited duration

is perhaps his most important contribution to the

development of the Tristram romance. As Frederick

Whitehead states:

Thomas's primary theme is the exaltation
of love. True love proceeds from 'desir',
the longing of the heart, and from 'raison',
not from 'voleir', the lusts of the flesh. . . .
Most significant . . . is Thomas's refusal to
believe that the power of the potion really
waned. So there is no repentant visit of
the lovers to a hermit, as in Eilhart and
Béroul.[48]

The infusion of this concept of love into the version of the

legend given by the archetypal narrative was, as Frederick

Whitehead comments, an achievement worthy of praise:

To be sure, Thomas was not consistently
successful in idealizing and refining the
old legend. . . . The task which he attempted,
to fit together the old plot and his new
conception, called for more drastic procedures
than he could or would adopt. The archetype
depicted a world where love at its highest

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47 Edwin H. Zeydel, ed. and trans., The 'Tristan and Isolde'
of Gottfried von Strassburg (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1948), p. 10.

48 Whitehead, p. 142.

was a criminal infatuation and at its lowest
an overmastering lust. One may sympathize,
therefore, with a poet who sought to rise,
not always successfully, into a better world.[49]

A brief episode from the Tristram story is the
subject of a lai, Chievrefueil, composed by Marie de France
at some time between 1165 and 1189.[50] The poem describes
that one of the many secret trysts in which Tristan lays a
hazel wand entwined with honeysuckle in Iseult's path as a
signal of his presence. Although very brief, the lai
successfully conveys the tragic emotion which is at the
heart of the legend. As Ernest Hoepffner comments:

> 'Bele amie, si est de nus: Ne vus sanz
> mei, ne mei sanz vus.' In this couplet
> we have the essence of the whole Tristan
> legend. In its harmonious simplicity it
> reveals not only the art of Marie but
> also the profound feeling with which she
> entered into the sorrows and the joys of
> her characters.[51]

It is a striking testimony to the popularity of the legend
at this time that in describing this brief episode, Marie
was able to assume in her audience a complete familiarity
with the characters and the entire history of their ill-
fated love.

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49 Whitehead, p. 143.

50 Alfred Ewert, ed., Marie de France Lais (Oxford: Basil
Blackwell, 1947), p. x.

51 Ernest Hoepffner, "The Breton Lais," in Arthurian
Literature in the Middle Ages: a Collaborative History,
ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 118.

Another episode from the legend is described in the anonymous poem fragment, <u>Le Domnei des Amanz</u>, also written in the last quarter of the twelfth century.[52] This fragment is significant because it contains the first mention in French literature of Tristan's remarkable skill in the imitation of bird-whistles. Isolt, hearing her lover's imitation of bird-songs in the garden below, braves the dangers which encompass her in order to join him, and her bravery is employed by the poet to illustrate the fitting moral that there can be no love without courage.

The episode of Tristan's assumption of madness as a disguise enabling him to visit Iseult secretly was given independent treatment in two short Norman-French poems both entitled <u>La Folie Tristan</u>. Both of these poems are based upon derivatives of the <u>Ur-Tristan</u>. The Oxford manuscript version, which is the work of an Anglo-Norman poet of the late twelfth century,[53] is plainly derived from the <u>Tristan</u> of Thomas. The version of the Berne manuscript was composed in the early thirteenth century[54] by a continental Norman poet, and is clearly related to Béroul's treatment of the episode. Although the Oxford version is generally considered the better of

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52 Bruce, I, 175.

53 <u>Ibid.</u>, 160-161.

54 <u>Ibid.</u>, 161.

the two, Frederick Whitehead states that:

> Both poems handle with humour, vivacity,
> and poignant feeling the dramatic
> possibilities of the theme.[55]

The _Tristan_ of the German poet, Gottfried von
Strassburg, is one of the finest renderings in the whole
history of the legend. Edwin H. Zeydel says:

> Gottfried's work has been prized as a
> great masterpiece ever since about
> 1215, when probably death forced him
> to leave it unfinished. It is based
> upon a fierce and passionate old tale
> which was already very popular in
> Europe when Gottfried took it up. But
> he refined it with all the good taste,
> subtlety and grace of a consummate artist.[56]

Gottfried based his poem upon the _Tristan_ of
Thomas, and followed his source closely. Many of the
refinements distinguishable between his poem and the
Ur-Tristan are due to the preparatory efforts of Thomas.
W. T. H. Jackson states:

> To Thomas are to be attributed . . .
> the refinement of the tone, the shedding
> of much coarseness and cruelty, the
> details of the courtly setting, and the
> paramount interest in character rather
> than incident.[57]

There are few episodes in Gottfried's poem which do not
correspond closely to the narrative of his source. It is
only in the matter of emphasis and in the concept of the

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55 Whitehead, p. 144.

56 Zeydel, p. 4.

57 W. T. H. Jackson, "Gottfried von Strassburg," in
_Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: a Collaborative
History_, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 146.

ill-fated love that his poem differs markedly from its

source. Mr. Jackson remarks that:

> . . . with Gottfried, incident is less
> important than motivation, action less
> important than feeling. It is in this
> regard that Thomas and Gottfried stand
> far apart. For Thomas is interested in
> his main characters as human beings moving
> in a society motivated by normal human
> passions and controlled by a code essentially
> secular, whatever originally Christian
> elements it may contain. Gottfried . . .
> sees in their love a reflection in human
> terms of the bond between the mystic and
> his God.[58]

Gottfried follows Thomas in establishing the

narrative within a milieu of amour courtois. Edwin H.

Zeydel says:

> Already one of the best-told and richest
> tales in the wonderful storehouse of
> medieval narrative literature, it became
> in Gottfried's hands a unique panorama of
> passionate love-romance, minstrelsy,
> adventure, knightly battles-royal, and
> keen moral and psychological observation.
> We find ourselves in a world of perfect
> medieval courtoisie.[59]

But although the tale is set amid these external features

of the courtly life, the love-story itself is, as Mr.

Jackson has demonstrated,[60] not governed by the canon

of amour courtois. Since the innate nobility of the

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58 Jackson, p. 147.

59 Zeydel, p. 5.

60 Jackson, pp. 148-149.

lovers causes them to despise subterfuge, the normal

courtly view of life is for them unsatisfactory, and

courtly conduct brings them only misery. Unlike Mark,

who can conceive of love only in its sensual form and

thus constantly seeks evidence only of physical contact

as proof of their infidelity, the lovers are among the

company of edele hertzen who can understand and experience

a spiritual and mystical love, and for whom the courtly

concept of love is inadequate.

Tristan's disloyalty to Mark, which is a

violation of courtly honour, is justified in Gottfried's

poem by the transcendent power of the love-potion.

W. T. H. Jackson states that:

> . . . there can be no question of free will
> here, of a loose and cynical disregard for
> all feelings of honour in the determination
> to satisfy sensual desires. The lovers act
> under compulsion and this compulsion is
> symbolized by the Minnetrank.[61]

The love-potion is thus conceived as a seal of destiny

externally imposed, and as a power which lifts its victims

above all moral restrictions. It is a symbol at once of

new life in a spiritual, ennobling love, and of the

inevitable death to which that love must lead.

Gottfried's originality is most evident in his

treatment of the episode of the lovers' banishment and

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61 Jackson, p. 152.

subsequent sojourn in the forest. In his poem they dwell not in a leafy bower, but in a stone love-grotto, which allegorically represents a temple of love. It is here that the love of Tristan and Iseult reaches a supreme spiritual and mystical realization. Mr. Jackson comments that:

> The grotto is a place of miracles, not merely a hiding place. For here the lovers' misery changes to delight, they are fed magically by their love and need no other food.[62]

It is in this episode that the mystical allegory of their love becomes apparent:

> There can be no doubt that Gottfried is drawing deliberate comparisons between the love of Tristan and Isolt and Christian mysticism and eucharistic communion. The ecstasy of the Christian soul yearning for the heavenly Bridegroom and losing completely its individual entity is translated into terms of earthly passion. The lovers experience this ecstasy while on earth although such ecstasy can only be short-lived while it is unable to free itself from the demon of sensual passion. . . . Only by death can their love be freed from this snare and the 'love-death' means that the lovers can be reunited in mystic love, freed from all grossness and carnal attraction.[63]

It is because of Gottfried's concept of the spiritualizing force of love that this poem is the most sympathetic, as well as perhaps the most beautiful, of the medieval

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62 Jackson, p. 154

63 Ibid.

Tristram stories. Mr. Jackson states:

> Gottfried's Tristan is one of the
> greatest achievements of medieval
> literature. In his delineation of
> human love, the poet embraces all
> contemporary knowledge and refines
> it for his purposes. For him the
> dominance of Minne in the world is a
> sublime and noble thing. It can be
> debased by sensual passion and
> misunderstood by lesser spirits, but
> in its purest form it exalts to the
> skies. Such a love is that of
> Gottfried's Tristan and Isolt.[64]

Unfortunately, Gottfried's Tristan is incomplete;
it breaks off abruptly, after 19,573 lines, at the point
of Tristan's marriage to Iseult of the White Hands. Two
later German poets, Ulrich von Türheim and Heinrich von
Freiberg, wrote continuations of Gottfried's poem about
1240 and 1290 respectively.[65] Unhappily, both of these
poets drew their material from Eilhart von Oberge's
Tristant, a source of which Gottfried disapproved, rather
than from Thomas's Tristan, and both continuators were
entirely unable to recapture the spirit of the poem.

It is with a sense of anticlimax that we turn
from the masterpiece of Gottfried von Strassburg to the
Tristan which marks the first appearance of the legend in
French narrative prose. This prose romance, by an
unknown author, has been variously dated between 1215 and

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64 Jackson, p. 156.

65 Zeydel, p. 8.

1230.[66] It has not survived in its original form, but versions thereof exist in a great many manuscripts and printed editions. Two principal versions have been distinguished: an earlier one written between 1225 and 1235, attributed to the probably fictitious Anglo-Norman, Luce de Gast, and a later one written in the last half of the thirteenth century, attributed to the fictitious Helie de Boron.[67] The second version, upon which all the printed editions are based, is the longer, and is frequently connected in manuscripts with the Vulgate cycle of prose romances. It is from these two versions that the original prose Tristan has been reconstructed.

The prose Tristan was greatly influenced by the prose Lancelot cycle. Although the writer seems to have known the poems of Thomas, Eilhart, and Béroul, his narrative is filled with the machinery of thirteenth-century courtly romance--tournaments, chivalric feats, knightly adventures, and romantic digressions of a courtly nature, all of which are extraneous to the subject of the verse romances--all modelled, as J. D. Bruce shows,[68] upon similar features in the Lancelot.

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66 Bruce, I, 160.

67 Eugène Vinaver, "The Prose Tristan," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: a Collaborative History, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 339.

68 Bruce, I, 484-485.

Little of the original tale remains: the story has fallen away in plot and characterization, and the originally thematic love-story has given way to the emphasis on chivalric adventures. Of the prose *Tristan* Miss Jessie L. Weston remarks:

> The details of the beautiful old love
> poem, the poignant tragedy of Tristan
> and Iseult, are lost sight of. In a
> fragmentary form they still exist, but
> are buried out of sight underneath the
> great mass of Arthurian accretion. It
> is no longer the love of Tristan for Iseult
> which is the central interest of the story,
> but the rivalry between Tristan and
> Lancelot, which of the two shall be reckoned
> 'the best knight in the world'.[69]

Tristan is completely "Arthurized"--he has been made a Knight of the Round Table, and created anew in the mold of Lancelot. Mark is no longer a victim of the dichotomy between love and loyalty, but a treacherous villain, and an enemy of Arthurian chivalry whom it is Tristan's special privilege to keep in check. The concept of love which illumined the poems of Thomas and Gottfried von Strassburg is absent from the prose *Tristan*. Eugène Vinaver states that:

> The tragic tale of unlawful love yields
> its place to a romance of chivalry with
> its characteristically simple scale of
> values, and its condemnation of all that
> lies beyond the narrow boundaries of the
> 'adventurous kingdom'.[70]

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69 Jessie L. Weston, *The Legend of Sir Lancelot du Lac* (London: David Nutt, 1901), p. 117.

70 Vinaver, p. 340.

The account of Tristan's death given in the majority of the prose _Tristan_ texts introduces an entirely new version of the episode. In the mss. B.N. fr. 103 and the early printed editions, the narrative follows the poetic tradition; but in all other manuscripts and texts Tristan is killed not by a poisoned arrow inflicted in combat, but by a treacherous blow from Mark, who attacks without warning as Tristan sits playing his harp and singing for Iseult. According to Gertrude Schoepperle[71] this account is a survival of an older Celtic version in which Tristan remained unmarried. Vinaver, however, believes that:

> . . . the author was anxious to conclude the story with a final encounter between the hero and the villain and so provide a fitting ending to a romance in which the hero was a victim of the evil designs of a wicked king. There is no need to imagine behind this version a primitive Celtic theme not previously used. . . .[72]

The prose _Tristan_ lacks the fundamental concept of tragic, ill-fated love which is the essence of the legend. Eugène Vinaver comments:

> Of the original character of the Tristan poems, of the blending of magic and tragedy which had made the legend great, few traces remain in the prose romance. . . .[73]

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71 Cited by Vinaver, p. 342.

72 Vinaver, p. 342.

73 _Ibid._, p. 347.

Unfortunately the prose _Tristan_, the most defective of
all the twelfth- and thirteenth-century treatments, so
rapidly and completely superseded all other versions of
the legend that, from the thirteenth century to the
nineteenth, it remained the only version in which the
Tristram legend was known.[74]

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74 Vinaver, p. 346.

CHAPTER II

THE TRISTRAM LEGEND IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

The earliest treatment of the Tristram legend
in medieval English is the thirteenth-century narrative
poem, Sir Tristrem. The only extant copy of the work is
an incomplete text in the Auchinlech manuscript, which
contains nineteen of the twenty or more original folios.
From this text it has been deduced that the poem was
written in the latter half of the thirteenth century,
possibly as late as 1300,[1] in the dialect of either the
northwest English Midlands or the Scottish Lowlands.

The authorship of the Sir Tristrem is entirely
uncertain, but internal evidence has offered two possible
theories.[2] The opening stanza of the poem begins:

> I was at Erceldoune
> Wiþ tomas spak y þare. . . .[3]

Since several other passages also make reference to this
Thomas of Erceldoune, known to be the historical figure,
Thomas the Rhymer, who lived near the Scottish border town

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1 Albert C. Baugh, ed., A Literary History of England (New
York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948), p. 192.

2 Discussed by George P. McNeill, ed., Sir Tristrem
(Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons, 1886), pp.
xxxii-xlv.

3 Sir Tristrem, ll. 1-2.

of Berwick in the middle of the thirteenth century, Sir
Walter Scott and George P. McNeill, among others, have
concluded that the author was Thomas of Erceldoune and
that he used this oblique method of drawing attention
to himself. Further evidence supporting this theory is
offered by the Chronicle of England written by Robert
Mannyng of Brunne in about 1330:

> I see in song, in sedgeyng tale
> Of Erceldoune and of Kendale,
> Non þam says as þai þam wroght,
> And in þer sayng it semes noght.
> Þat may þou here in sir Tristrem,
> . . . .
> If men it sayd, as made Thomas.[4]

Thus it seems that the author's near contemporaries
assumed him to be Thomas of Erceldoune. Several scholars,
Eugen Kölbing and W. H. Schofield among them, have denied
the reliability of this evidence, however. Since the Sir
Tristrem is obviously based upon the Tristan of Thomas,
they believe that an unknown author confused the Anglo-
Norman Thomas of Brittany with the local rhymer, Thomas
of Erceldoune, and thus cited misleading references in
his poem.

The manner of narration suggests, as George P.
McNeill says,[5] that the poem was written for an audience
already well acquainted with the legend. The story is
condensed into a brevity which, although admirably

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4 Quoted by McNeill, ed., Sir Tristrem, p. xxxv.

5 McNeill, Sir Tristrem, p. xlvi.

spirited and vivid at times, does at other times render the plot virtually unintelligible to a reader lacking previous knowledge. The narrative moves along very rapidly, the episodes being brief and the transitions abrupt. Frequent entreaties that the audience "listen" indicate, as McNeill remarks,[6] that the poem was intended primarily for oral recitation.

Like all the other writers who have composed versions of the Tristram legend, the poet of the Sir Tristrem was not content with writing a laboriously faithful rendition of his source. Thomas C. Rumble says:

> . . . he was little interested in presenting the psychological intricacies of a system of courtly love which, probably, he did not understand in the first place. What he was concerned with . . . was the presentation of a story so rationalized and so moralized that it would satisfy in terms of its own implicit solace and sentence the expectations of his relatively uncultured audience.[7]

Thus although the Sir Tristrem poet followed the substance of Thomas's Tristan very closely, he did alter certain details in order to adapt the narrative to the tastes of his audience.

The poet's attempts at rationalizing his story

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6 McNeill, p. xlvii.

7 Thomas C. Rumble, "The Middle English Sir Tristrem: Towards a Reappraisal," Comparative Literature, XI, No. 3 (Summer, 1959), 223.

usually consist of supplying additional evidence or
motivation to reinforce those already present in his
source. Mark, for instance, is convinced of Tristrem's
guilt by the double evidence of footprints in the snow
and a scrap of Tristrem's garment caught on a board in
Ysonde's chamber. Hodain's extraordinary fidelity to
Tristrem, which in Thomas's poem is motivated by the
normal love of a dog for its master, is explained in the
Sir Tristrem by the dog's having licked the cup contain-
ing the dregs of the love philtre. Another less success-
ful attempt at rationality is the innovation of making
Tristrem's four major antagonists all brothers; according
to Thomas C. Rumble,[8] this detail was added in order to
motivate the slaying of each as part of Tristram's general
revenge on his father's murderer. But whatever rational-
ity there is in such a revenge motif is certainly out-
weighed by the implausibility of the fraternal relation-
ship among two warriors and two superhuman giants of
four different nationalities.

The morality operative in the Sir Tristrem is
not that of the amour courtois which governs the Tristan
of Thomas, but that of Christian ethics and conduct. In
justifying his marriage to the second Ysonde, Tristrem
takes the attitude that his relationship with Ysonde of
Ireland is adulterous and therefore, according to

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8 Rumble, Comparative Literature, p. 225.

"the boke," sinful. On Tristrem's piety, Thomas C. Rumble comments:

> . . . so far as I can find, there is in no other version of the story anything like the Christian humility which the _Tristrem_ poet attributes to his hero in battle--the invocation of divine aid and the realization of a need to put the outcome of his struggles in God's hands.[9]

Since Tristrem's humility increases with each successive battle, there would seem to be an attempt by the poet to show a gradual development in character.

The atmosphere of the _Sir Tristrem_ is in many respects more primitive than that of Gottfried's poem, or of their common source, the _Tristan_ of Thomas. The hero of the _Sir Tristrem_ is far more pugnacious than his counterparts in either of these poems. He enters his battles not with desire for chivalric honours but with sheer love of combat for its own sake, and succeeds in his endeavours not by skill in arms but by the force of his marvellous brute strength. Thus his behaviour in battle accords ill with his pious words. During their exile in the forest of Morrois, the lovers are sheltered in Thomas's poem by a leafy bower and in Gottfried's by a beautifully-appointed stone grotto, but in the _Sir Tristrem_ they take refuge in an earthen hut which Tristrem builds. This primitive atmosphere pervading the _Sir_

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9 Rumble, _Comparative Literature_, p. 227.

<u>Tristrem</u> suggests more the effect of the Anglo-Saxon epic
than that of the relatively sophisticated medieval French
romance, an effect which is enhanced by the elaborate
alliterative patterns incorporated into the stanzaic
form of the poem. Since the <u>Sir Tristrem</u> is more
primitive in spirit than its source, the <u>Tristan</u> of
Thomas, the poem would seem almost certainly to have
been deliberately created so in order to recapture the
tone of an early folk tradition.

Although frequent references to Tristram and
Iseult were made in the literature of medieval England,[10]
there was no new treatment of the Tristam legend until
nearly two hundred years after the writing of the <u>Sir
Tristrem</u>. Sir Thomas Malory's prose romance, the <u>Morte
d'Arthur</u>, completed about 1470,[11] contains in "The Book
of Sir Tristram of Lyones" the last of the medieval
versions of the Tristram legend.

Eugène Vinaver says of Malory:

His attitude towards the legacy of the
Middle Ages was essentially that of a
moralist. . . . He used his 'French
books' to show his readers how virtuous
knights had come 'to honour, and how they
that were vycious were punysshed and ofte
put to shame and rebuke'. And he wished

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10 E.g.: Chaucer, <u>Legend of Good Women</u>; Gower,
<u>Confessio Amantis</u>; Lydgate, <u>Temple of Glas</u>.

11 Eugène Vinaver, <u>Malory</u> (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929),
p. 1.

> 'al noble lordes and ladyes . . . that shal
> see and rede in this sayd book and werke'
> to 'take the good and honest actes into
> their remembraunce and to folowe the same'.[12]

Malory was thus conscious of a moral purpose in composing

the Morte d'Arthur. He wrote his work in an earnest

endeavour to restore to the life of England the moral

grandeur which he believed to be inherent in the

practice of chivalry.

In writing "The Book of Sir Tristram of Lyones,"

Malory used for his narrative certain variant forms of

the French prose Tristan which can be traced in three

manuscripts[13] now in the Bibliothèque Nationale. He

was thus dependent upon that version of the legend most

adulterated by the influence of the Vulgate cycle of

Arthurian romances. Many of the faults of Malory's

version have thus been inherited from its source, while

most of its virtues can be attributed to his alterations

of the material provided by the French prose Tristan.

Malory's version differs from that of his

source in several ways. The most obvious alteration is

the degree of condensation--Malory used only two of the

three books of the French romance, and condensed them

in his narrative into one sixth of their former length.

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12 Vinaver, pp. 55-56.

13 B.N. fr. 103, 334, and 99; see Ibid., p. 139.

He replaced the traditional scene in which Tristan feigns madness as a disguise by an invented episode, referred to by Vinaver as ". . . probably his finest and most subtle contribution to the story, . . ."[14] in which the hero is driven to genuine madness by his despair. Because, as Vinaver remarks,[15] he had no sympathy for the French tradition of <u>amour courtois</u>, Malory also reduced the courtly element, emphasizing instead the romantic sentiment. But in plot and characterization, his version of the legend follows closely the prose <u>Tristan</u>.

Because of the close association of Malory's source with the Vulgate cycle of prose romances, his version of the story is full of the Arthurian chivalric machinery. The element of chivalry, stressed throughout the <u>Morte d'Arthur</u>, is employed in the Tristram portion particularly in its relation to the treatment of women. The chivalric attitude to women, as described by Malory, is rather strange; they seem to be treated, not as wives or paramours, and not often as objects of adoration, but rather as feudal possessions. Thus when Tristram and Isode first plight their troth, she accepts him as her

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14 Eugène Vinaver, ed., <u>The Works of Sir Thomas Malory</u> (3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), III, 1494.

15 Eugène Vinaver, "Sir Thomas Malory," in <u>Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: a Collaborative History</u>, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 547.

knight for a period of seven years, and agrees to accept
his selection of her husband; when he later seeks her
for Mark's bride, he experiences no sense of passionate
or tragic loss. The treatment of women as property is
even more apparent in the brief abductions of Isode by
Palomydes and of the wife of Segwarydes by Bleoberys.
These knights simply ask an unstated boon, which to
defend his honour Mark must grant, and then demand and
seize their respective ladies, and it becomes the duty
of the knights of the court to give pursuit and attempt
to recover the stolen property. Malory's employment of
this aspect of feudalism in a work intended to exemplify
the moral value of chivalry can be explained only by a
naive belief that the moral value of the heroic rescue
of a lady in distress outweighs the immorality of her
antecedent abduction.

Malory's belief in the moral significance of
chivalry is naive in the extreme. Eugène Vinaver
remarks:

> With less faith in the moral elevation
> and educational value of Malory's romance,
> we can only accept his modest effort as an
> expression of his simple and narrow ideal.
> His was not a crusading chivalry raised to
> its highest energy by the reunion of the
> knightly and monastic ideals of service,
> love, and sacrifice. What he advocated
> were the comfortable virtues of a righteous
> gentleman who 'does after the good and
> leaves the evil', but whose spiritual

attainments are limited to social discipline and good manners.[16]

It is the narrowness of Malory's concepts of chivalry and morality which creates such incongruities as that described above.

In the extensive emphasis in the Morte d'Arthur upon Arthurian chivalry, little of the characterization of the original Tristram legend remains. Tristram retains his skill in harping, and some of his primitive pugnacious tendencies, but otherwise he is a stereo-typed chivalric knight. As W. H. Schofield says:

> The manners and dress of the heroes and heroines are those of the late days of chivalry. Tristram is a vastly different personage from what he was even in the time of Thomas. He is now a conventional knight-errant, who spends his time going about from one tourney to another, ever on the lookout for adventure.[17]

Isode has suffered a similar transformation: she is not the passionate, quick-witted, desperately faithful tragic heroine her progenitor was; indeed, she thrives on tournaments, compliments, and court-life, and is seldom deeply affected by anything.

The love-story of the original legend is,

16 Vinaver, Malory, p. 69.

17 W. H. Schofield, English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer (London: Macmillan and Co., 1906), p. 211.

like the characterization, scarcely recognizable in
Malory's version. The influence of the love-potion is
rendered almost negligible, since the lovers plight
their troth before drinking it, and enjoy romantic
interludes with other lovers after doing so. During
his enforced wanderings, Tristram forgets his love for
La Beale Isode, and, encouraged by prospective "ryches",
he willingly agrees to marry Isode le Blaunche Maynes,
for whom he has rapidly conceived a great love. He
experiences the traditional repentance upon his marriage
bed, but this repentance is motivated by fear of the ill
regard of his idol, Lancelot, rather than by genuine
regret for his infidelity. Later, when Tristram reproaches
Isode for her infidelity, he complains of the "Rychesse"
he has sacrificed for her sake. Thus the love-story of
Tristram and Iseult as it was originally conceived has
all but vanished in Malory's work.

Even the tragic love-death has disappeared.
Although Malory had read the version of the French prose
Tristan which gives the traditional account, he apparently
preferred to follow that version of Tristram's death
given by his other source manuscripts. He abandoned
the tale of Tristram and Isode at the point of their
happy sojourn at Joyous Garde and then, abruptly return-
ing to the story in a later portion of his work,
described how Mark treacherously killed Tristram with a

poisoned spear as the knight sat playing his harp for
Isode, and how she instantly died of grief. Thus in
the Morte d'Arthur, the legend of Tristram and Iseult
is a story vastly different from that given in the
early metrical romances.

The Tristram legend made but a brief appear-
ance in the literature of Renaissance England. In the
sixth book of Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene, the
knight Callidores encounters Tristram and pauses a
moment in his quest while they become acquainted.
Tristram is here revealed not as the rather pugnacious
knight of the late prose romances, but as an unknighted
lad of seventeen, already from instinctive nobility a
defender of womankind and champion of justice. Of his
traditional characterization, only two features remain:
his ability as a huntsman, and, in a more youthful
form, his amazing physical strength. Spenser makes
no reference to the subject matter of the original
Tristram legend beyond a brief, somewhat altered account
of the hero's birth. Since his work was never completed,
it is impossible even to conjecture whether or not he
intended to relate the legend in some later book, and
if so, in what form and manner he would have employed it.

The Tristram legend did not receive a major
treatment in English literature subsequent to Malory's

Morte d'Arthur until the mid-nineteenth century, when it became the subject of three poems[18]--Matthew Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult;" "The Last Tournament," one of Alfred Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King; and the Tristram of Lyonesse of Algernon Charles Swinburne. These Victorian treatments of the Tristram legend form the subject of the succeeding chapters.

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[18] Thomas Hardy's The Queen of Cornwall, published in 1923 and written as a mummer's play for production by the Hardy Players of Stinsford, cannot properly be considered a Victorian treatment of the Tristram legend, and therefore will not be discussed in this thesis.

CHAPTER III

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S "TRISTRAM AND ISEULT"

> I read the story of Tristram and Iseult
> some years ago at Thun in an article in
> a French review on the romance literature:
> I had never met with it before, and it
> fastened upon me. . . .[1]

So confided Matthew Arnold on November 5, 1852, in a

letter to his former tutor, Herbert Hill. The story

which thus "fastened upon" him inspired the writing of

the poem, "Tristram and Iseult," which, though probably

composed during the late 1840s,[2] was first published in

1852 in the volume, Empedocles on Etna and other poems.

The narrative that Arnold read at Thun has been identif-

ied by C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry as the first of a

series of articles by Theodore de La Villemarqué on

"Les poèmes gallois et les romans de la Table-Ronde."[3]

Near the beginning of this article La Villemarqué

inserted a brief prose summary of the Tristram legend

as it was told by the Anglo-Norman Thomas and Gottfried

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1 Quoted by R. E. C. Houghton in "Letter of Matthew
Arnold," Times Literary Supplement (May 19, 1932),
p. 368.

2 C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry, The Poetry of Matthew
Arnold: a Commentary (London and New York: Oxford
University Press, 1940), p. 106.

3 Theodore de La Villemarqué, "Les Poèmes gallois et
les Romans de la Table-Ronde," Revue de Paris, 3rd. ser.,
XXXIV (1841), 266-282.

von Strassburg. It was upon this version of the legend
that Arnold founded his poem.

Arnold would not have been discouraged by the
fact that this legend had not received a major treatment
in English literature since the fifteenth century. In
the Preface to his Poems of 1853, he vigorously attacked
the opinion, quoted from an "apparently intelligent"
anonymous critic in the Spectator, that

> . . . the Poet who would really fix the
> public attention must leave the exhausted
> past, and draw his subjects from matters
> of present import, and therefore both of
> interest and novelty.[4]

According to Arnold, the poet must select a subject
which possesses an excellent action; and those
actions are most excellent

> . . . which most powerfully appeal to
> the great primary human affections: to
> those elementary feelings which subsist
> permanently in the race, and which are
> independent of time. These feelings are
> permanent and the same; that which
> interests them is permanent and the same
> also. The modernness or antiquity of an
> action, therefore, has nothing to do
> with its fitness for poetical represent-
> ation; this depends upon its inherent
> qualities. To the elementary part of
> our nature, to our passions, that which
> is great and passionate is eternally
> interesting; and interesting solely in

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4 Matthew Arnold, The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold,
ed. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford
University Press, 1950), p. xix.

proportion to its greatness and to its
passion.[5]

Ancient subjects, if they possess an excellent action,
are therefore neither remote nor exhausted, but time-
less in their appeal; and a medieval subject which
touches the primary human affections may thus hold
greater significance for an audience of the Victorian
age than a less impressive subject drawn from the
contemporary scene. That the Tristram legend, with
its story of the compelling force of an ill-fated
love, makes a powerful appeal " . . . to the element-
ary part of our nature, to our passions, . . ." cannot
be denied. Arnold must have felt, upon his first read-
ing of it, that he had found in this medieval story a
subject which admirably fulfilled his criterion of
"excellent action."

Arnold's poem is based almost entirely upon
the conception of the story which he derived from La
Villemarqué's summary. In the letter to Herbert Hill
quoted above, he remarked:

> . . . when I got back to England, I looked
> at the Morte d'Arthur and took what I
> could, but the poem was in the main formed,
> and I could not well disturb it.[6]

5 Arnold, Poetical Works, pp. xix-xx.

6 Quoted by Houghton, Times Literary Supplement,
p. 368.

It is, however, difficult to establish what Arnold meant in saying that his poem was "in the main formed." He must also have consulted Dunlop's History of Fiction,[7] from which he extracted the précis which prefaces the poem in the revised edition of 1853, but since the summary of the legend recorded in Dunlop's book depends, except for the conclusion, almost entirely upon the French prose Tristan, its resemblance in outline to the version given in the Morte d'Arthur prevents any reliable estimate of its importance as source material. If the versification of Arnold's poem was "in the main formed" before he consulted Malory, then he must have referred to Dunlop at an earlier time; if, however, it was only his concept of the poem which was "in the main formed," then he may have taken considerable material from the Morte d'Arthur, and very little from Dunlop's History.

Malory is clearly the source of some details in the poem. Tristram's skill in hunting is mentioned neither in La Villemarqué's article nor in Dunlop's book; yet, in describing him, Arnold says:

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7 J. C. Dunlop, History of Prose Fiction, a new edition revised by Henry Wilson (2 vols.; London: G. Bell and Sons, 1906).

> I know him by his harp of gold,
> Famous in Arthur's court of old,
> I know him by his forest-dress--
> The peerless hunter, harper, knight,
> Tristram of Lyoness.[8]

This detail, then, must have come from his study of Malory. Tristram's explanation of the derivation of his name is almost a direct quotation from the <u>Morte d'Arthur</u>; he repeats to Iseult of Ireland the words of his dying mother:

> 'Son,' she said, 'thy name shall be of sorrow;
> Tristram art thou call'd for my death's sake.'[9]

Arnold's description of the voyage from Ireland to Cornwall may also be an echo of Malory. Paull F. Baum remarks:

> The mention of Wales would be natural,
> but Arnold may have taken a hint here
> from Malory. . . .[10]

These few details are the only ones, however, which can with some certainty be ascribed to Arnold's reading of Malory.

Several other features of the poem are not mentioned in La Villemarqué's article--the manner of Iseult's departure from Ireland, Tristram's sojourn at

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8 Matthew Arnold, "Tristram and Iseult," i, 19-23, in <u>The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold</u>, ed. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

9 <u>Ibid</u>., ii, 85-86.

10 Paull F. Baum, <u>Ten Studies in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold</u> (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 43.

Joyous Gard, the cause of his banishment, and his
career in King Arthur's campaign against the chivalry
of Rome. All of these details, however, are mentioned
both in Dunlop's History and in Malory's work, and
could have been obtained from either source. In
their Commentary, Tinker and Lowry, using the rather
tenuous evidence of Arnold's mispronunciation of
"Tyntagel" in the first edition of his poem and his
subsequent corrections in the second, assert that he
made this error because of Dunlop's spelling, "Tintadiel,"
and that he must therefore have studied Dunlop's version
before beginning to write his poem. They conclude on
the basis of this evidence that the extent to which
Arnold used the Morte d'Arthur as source material is
very small. Paull F. Baum, on the other hand, has
noticed that in the second edition of the poem Arnold
added a passage specifying the location of Tristram's
tomb as Cornwall; this detail is mentioned in only
one of the sources--Dunlop's History. Upon this insub-
stantial evidence, Baum concludes that Arnold had not
read the book at all until after 1852, and that he
obtained from the Morte d'Arthur all of the other
material absent from La Villemarqué's summary. Obvious-
ly all that can be said with certainty is that Arnold's
version of the Tristram legend is drawn chiefly from La
Villemarqué's summary, supplemented by material from

Malory and Dunlop.

Arnold's statement regarding his source for the tale of Merlin and Vivian, which he incorporated into his "Tristram and Iseult," is similarly uncertain. Writing to Clough on May 1, 1853, he said:

> . . . the story of Merlin is imported from the Morte d'Arthur. [11]

This statement is misleading, however, since, as Tinker and Lowry indicate:

> . . . there is nothing in Malory's account of Merlin and Nimue (Book IV.1) which could have supplied any of the important details in the story related by Arnold. [12]

They have identified the true source of his version of the tale as an account of the medieval Merlin romance occurring in La Villemarqué's article, "Visite au Tombeau de Merlin." [13] Arnold was in fact indebted to Malory in this portion of his poem only for his concluding line; he says, quoting the Morte d'Arthur, that Vivian left Merlin, "For she was passing weary of his love." [14] With this one exception, the immediate source of Arnold's basic material for the tale of

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11 Matthew Arnold, The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H. F. Lowry (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 135.

12 Tinker and Lowry, Commentary, p. 122.

13 Theodore de La Villemarqué, "Visite au Tombeau de Merlin," Revue de Paris, 2nd. ser., XLI (1837), 45-62.

14 "Tristram and Iseult," iii, 224.

Merlin and Vivian was not Malory but La Villemarqué.

Arnold's concept of the essential meaning of the Tristram legend was limited by the inadequacies of his principal source. Working from what is merely a plot summary, he gleamed an outline of the chief incidents of the story, but learned nothing of its traditional significance or of the various interpretations of the characters made by earlier authors. Paull F. Baum remarks:

> It is obvious that Arnold missed the essential tragic import of the Tristram and Iseult story as we now see it: the tragedy of an overmastering passion, "purified by suffering and as it were consecrated by death," in which love transcends all other human relations and in which the lovers are innocent victims of a well-intentioned but accidentally misappropriated magic philtre.[15]

Thus Arnold, chiefly through his ignorance of its traditional interpretation, found a new significance for the legend.

What in the story so fastened upon Arnold when he first encountered it was not the tragedy of Tristram's ill-fated love for Iseult of Ireland, but rather his anguish in being divided against himself and torn between his two contrasting loves, and the pathetic sufferings of his innocent wife. It is

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15 Baum, p. 36.

likely that the very problem of divided loyalty which

Arnold perceived in the legend was the source of its

attraction for him, since his own vacillation between

the life of the senses and the life of pure reason--

discussed in an earlier poem, "The New Sirens"--

was still causing him anxiety, and may well have sub-

consciously influenced both his selection of the subject

and his interpretation of it. This theme of divided

love and loyalty is explicitly stated in the poem:

> There were two Iseults who did sway
> Each her hour of Tristram's day:
> But one possessed his waning time,
> The other his resplendent prime.[16]

Thus in Arnold's version of the legend, the two Iseults

become equally important factors in the story of

Tristram's life, and, for the first time in its long

history, Iseult of Brittany becomes a major figure,

threatening even to eclipse her splendid rival. This

unusual interpretation of Tristram's story, with its

new emphasis upon the role of the Breton Iseult, caused

Arnold to make several departures from the traditional

story both in form and in content.

Since the important aspect of the legend was,

for Arnold, not the history of Tristram's life but the

divided loyalty which perplexed his latter days, the

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16 "Tristram and Iseult," i, 68-71.

poem was constructed so that it should focus intently
upon that portion of the story. It begins in medias
res with a scene, invented by Arnold, between the dying
Tristram and his page, and the important incidents in
the hero's life are introduced by the delirious wand-
derings of his speech. The second part describes the
scene of Tristram's death, and the third the life of
his widow.

This design, although an excellent solution
of the matter of emphasis, introduced new problems for
the poet. Paull F. Baum says of Arnold's plan:

> By commencing with Tristram's death he
> aimed to subordinate the early life of
> his hero with Mark and the Queen,--only
> to be snared by the difficulty of
> reducing the rich variety of incident
> which is the main story and to be exposed
> to the dangers of disunity of effect.[17]

Arnold's solution to the problem of the fullness of
Tristram's early life was to include only those
incidents vital to comprehension of the situation of
the hero's latter days. Thus he treated the drinking
of the love-potion, one of the trysts with Iseult at
Tyntagel, Tristram's banishment from Cornwall and
subsequent marriage to Iseult of Brittany, his career
in the army of King Arthur, and a scene in which he
is haunted by memories of the Irish Iseult. Of the

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17 Baum, p. 41.

other incidents mentioned by La Villemarqué--Tristram's
battle with the Irish Morholt, the wound which necess-
itates his first voyage to Ireland, Iseult's trial by
oath, and the several disguises by which Tristram facil-
itates his various trysts with the Queen--of these
Arnold made no mention, and thus achieved a radical
simplification of the story of Tristram's early life.
In order to reduce the danger of disunity, Arnold
employed in the first scene a narrator who, listening
to the delirious Tristram's speech, identifies the
subject of each hallucination, interrupting his des-
cription of the sick-bed scene in order to relate the
details of the incident to which the dying knight
refers, and then returning to his narration. This
device enabled Arnold to delineate the story of
Tristram's early life without drawing the readers'
attention from the dying lover.

The narrator assists once more in maintaining
unity of effect when, in the second part, he describes
the scene of Tristram's death. His attention turns to
a tapestry depicting Tristram engaged in his favourite
pastime, the hunt. In this portrait, invented by
Arnold, he is young and virile, untouched as yet by
the love which is soon to dominate his life and change
him from a carefree, untroubled youth into a passion-
tormented man. The lad in the tapestry is described

as seeming to wonder at the passion-scarred knight
who has now found release from suffering in death:

> What place is this, and who are they?
> Who is that kneeling Lady fair?
> And on his pillows that pale Knight
> Who seems of marble on a tomb?[18]

Ironically, the young Tristram seems not to recognize
himself as he will one day be; he is ignorant of the
fate which awaits him. Thus, by the device of the
narrator's description of the tapestry, Arnold was able
to introduce a significant contrast between Tristram's
youth and his later years, and to emphasize the change
wrought in him by his ill-fated love without disturb-
ing the time-sequence of the poem.

Arnold departed from the traditional story
in omitting entirely the character of Brangien, Iseult
of Ireland's handmaid. According to Paull F. Baum:

> The harsh treatment of Brangien, which
> so shocked Dunlop, is not in La Ville-
> marqué and therefore was not "omitted"
> by Arnold.[19]

Brangien's adventures are recorded, however, both by
Dunlop and by Malory, at least one of whom Arnold must
have read during the late 1840s; Brangien's absence

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18 "Tristram and Iseult," ii, 164-167.

19 Baum, p. 40n.

from his poem must therefore be deliberate. This
omission may, of course, have been one of those made
in order to achieve greater simplicity in the narrat-
ion of Tristram's early life. Tinker and Lowry
suggest in their Commentary, however, that the
omission of Brangien was made for aesthetic rather
than technical reasons. They point out Dunlop's
comment that:

> The character of the Queen of Cornwall
> can hardly excite love or compassion, as
> the savage atrocity of her conduct to
> Brangian [sic] starts up every moment in
> the recollection of the reader.[20]

Certainly Iseult's treatment of Brangien, first in
requiring her to sacrifice her virginity to protect
the honour of her mistress, and later in thinking to
ensure secrecy by attempting to have her murdered,
indicates primitive qualities of ruthlessness and
cruelty with which it is impossible to sympathize.
Arnold may therefore have omitted the character of
Brangien in order to ennoble and refine that of
Iseult of Ireland.

Arnold also modified the circumstances in
which Iseult of Brittany is traditionally portrayed.
In his poem, as in the previous versions, she is

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20 Dunlop, I, 206.

described as virtuous, gentle, and good, possessing a
quiet beauty lovely in its own way but pale in compar-
ison with the striking splendour of her rival. It is
this traditional characterization that Arnold gives in
the first scene:

> I know her by her mildness rare,
> Her snow-white hands, her golden hair;
> I know her by her rich silk dress,
> And her fragile loveliness--
> The sweetest Christian soul alive,
> Iseult of Brittany.[21]

Arnold's modifications of the Breton Iseult's story
merely reinforce the pathos of this traditional
portrait. In his poem she is not a damsel supported
and protected by a loving father and loyal brother, but
the orphan chatelaine of a lonely sea-coast castle, and
no longer a virgin wife, but the devoted mother of
Tristram's two children.

Arnold also removed a strange inconsistency
from the traditional characterization of Tristram's
wife. In La Villemarqué's summary of the legend, as in
all the medieval versions except Malory's, it is she,
although described as virtuously pure in heart, who
causes Tristram's death by a deceitful lie inspired
by insane jealousy of her rival. Dunlop objects to
the effect of this deceit upon the characterization:

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21 "Tristram and Iseult," i, 50-55.

> The pitiful malice of the white-handed
> Yseult, who, to serve no end, brings a
> false report to her husband in his last
> moments, renders her as contemptible as
> the heroine is hateful. . . .[22]

But in Arnold's poem, the virtue of Iseult of

Brittany never wavers. Her manner towards Tristram,

even as he impatiently awaits the arrival of the

Irish Iseult, is tenderly affectionate; she wears:

> The gaze of one who can divine
> A grief and sympathize.[23]

Her traditional humility, self-abnegation, and utter

purity are, in Arnold's poem, sustained consistently

to the end.

Arnold's most significant alteration of the

medieval legend is his account of Tristram's death.

Influenced perhaps by Dunlop's comment, or perceiving

for himself the barbaric nature of the story given by

La Villemarqué, he invented a new version which avoids

the former degradation of character. As in the account

which so shocked Dunlop, Arnold's Tristram, dying in

Brittany of a wound which only his beloved Iseult of

Ireland can heal, has sent a messenger to Cornwall to

plead for her assistance. But in Arnold's poem, the

Breton Iseult does not tell the lie which traditionally

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22 Dunlop, I, 206.

23 "Tristram and Iseult," i, 95-96.

caused Tristram to die of grief; it is the too-rapid
progress of his illness, hastened by his feverish
desire, which prevents Iseult of Ireland from effect-
ing his cure. She arrives in time only to witness his
death, and to die with him of grief and despair. Thus
in Arnold's modification of the legend, the lovers are
permitted, as never before, to be conscious of sharing
the moment of death.

Arnold's poem, as he designed it, should have
been a significant re-evaluation of the Tristram legend.
The story had not received a major treatment in English
literature for nearly four hundred years, and was thus
free from the encumbrance of contemporary interpret-
ations. The legend had, in fact, become so little
known that he was able to alter it freely, refining
its more primitive aspects as his sense of propriety
dictated. By restricting his attention to the problem
of Tristram's later years, Arnold provided an opport-
unity for a creative rendering of the old material
which would, by its detailed exploration of one aspect
of the story, give new insight into the emotions and
desires underlying the action. Unfortunately, the dis-
crepancy between the plan and its execution is great,
and Arnold's poem, in spite of the excellent intentions
of its design, is a failure by his own standards.

The execution of "Tristram and Iseult" contravenes two of the most important principles of poetic composition which Arnold derived from his study of the classical Greek literature--that the parts should be subordinated to the whole, and that the poet should maintain a classical objectivity towards his subject. The unity of his poem is marred by the inclusion of extraneous material which distracts attention from the central situation, and by digressive passages in which the poet comments subjectively upon the story.

The passage describing Iseult's sleeping children at the end of Part I is the least serious of these digressions. It is introduced by a skillful transition from the dying Tristram to his wife, whose eyes are as innocent as her children's, and thence to the children themselves. The tranquillity of their rest and the innocence of their dreams contrast effectively with Tristram's fitful sleep and delirium, which have been the subject of the preceding passage. At the end of this description the focus shifts from the children to the inlet which can be seen from their window, and thus to the ship by which Iseult of Ireland arrives. The introduction of Tristram's children at this point prepares also for their appearance in Part III, which deals with the life of the Breton Iseult and her children after Tristram's death. The

passage, although skillfully introduced and related by contrast to the main subject, is nevertheless distracting, since it draws the narration away from Tristram's death-bed at the very moment when this scene should be the focus of attention.

Part II includes a passage of commentary not originally composed for "Tristram and Iseult." The sixteen lines beginning "Yes, now the longing is o'er-past. . . ." were published in 1852 as the first half of the poem, "Lines written by a Death-Bed," and then omitted from the lyric in all later versions, but added to "Tristram and Iseult" in the edition of 1869. The insertion may have been made, as Tinker and Lowry suggest, "with the intention of lending force and fire to a rather sluggish passage,"[24] but it creates an un-welcome intrusion, and the passage is a very strange comment upon the character of Iseult of Ireland:

> Yes, now the longing is o'erpast,
> Which, dogg'd by fear and fought by shame
> Shook her weak bosom day and night,
> Consumed her beauty like a flame,
> And dimm'd it like the desert-blast.[25]

Never before have the weaknesses of fear and shame been associated with the Queen of Cornwall. Of Arnold's

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24 Tinker and Lowry, Commentary, p. 117.

25 "Tristram and Iseult," ii, 131-133.

insertion of these lines in "Tristram and Iseult,"

Tinker and Lowry remark:

> His judgment in attempting to suture
> them in the context is no easier to
> commend than his taste in applying the
> sentiments to the life and character of
> Iseult.[26]

Part III has been criticized as being ent-
irely superfluous to the poem, since the situation
it treats does not directly involve Tristram, and does
not exist in traditional versions of the legend. This
scene is, however, an essential part of Arnold's
conception of the poem, and must have been included in
his plan from the first. It was his interest in the
character of Iseult of Brittany which influenced him
to design his poem to treat, not the conventional
story of Tristram's life and adventures, but the
special problem of the two Iseults". . . . who did
sway/ Each her hour of Tristram's day. . . ."[27]
This concept of the legend necessarily required that
more than the customary emphasis be placed upon the
character of Iseult of the White Hands. To devote
the final third of the narrative to a description of
the life of Tristram's widow seems disproportionate

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26 Tinker and Lowry, Commentary, p. 118.

27 "Tristram and Iseult," i, 68-69.

and anticlimactic in a poem entitled "Tristram and Iseult," but since Arnold's poem is concerned with the two Iseults at the time of Tristram's death, this unusual proportioning of emphasis is not unreasonable.

Part III contains a lengthy digression which, by bursting in with a moralizing commentary upon the story, rudely disrupts the narrative and destroys the objectivity of viewpoint. Arnold was evidently conscious of the undesirable effect of these lines upon his poem, since he excised them from the 1853 and 1854 editions; but in 1857, still dissatisfied, he allowed them to be reinstated. The offending passage reveals Arnold's view of the effect of passion upon the characters in the legend. Iseult of Brittany endures in spite of sorrow, because:

> . . . we may suffer deeply, yet retain
> Power to be moved and soothed, for all our pain,
> By what of old pleased us, and will again.[28]

The spirit in man is killed, says Arnold, not by sorrow, but by ". . . the gradual furnace of the world . . ."[29]

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28 "Tristram and Iseult," iii, 116-118.

29 Ibid., iii, 119.

Which leaves the fierce necessity to feel,
But takes away the power--
. . . .
This, or some tyrannous single thought,
                                    some fit
Of passion, which subdues our souls to it,
Till for its sake alone we live and move--
Call it ambition, remorse, or love--[30]

Such was the fate of Tristram and the Irish Iseult, who

lived for the tyrannous passion which governed their

souls, and were eventually destroyed by it. This

passage explains the basis of Arnold's sympathy for the

Breton Iseult who, by a philosophy of Stoic resignation,

was able to restrain passion and to accept and endure

suffering; yet it is a coldly unsympathetic interpret-

ation of the all-transcendent, compelling love which is

the traditional theme of the Tristram legend. Arnold's

utter failure to understand the lovers and their ill-

fated surrender to passion is only too obvious; he

concludes his commentary with this thought:

And yet, I swear, it angers me to see
How this fool passion gulls men potently;
Being, in truth, but a diseased unrest,
And an unnatural overheat at best.[31]

One can only wish that such a contemptuously critical

view of the ". . . mighty sorrow, which has drawn

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30 "Tristram and Iseult," iii, 123-124 & 127-130.

31 _Ibid._, iii, 133-136.

the heart of the world to it . . ."[32] had not been
reinserted in the edition of 1857.

Arnold's conclusion to Part III has, like
Part III itself, been criticized as being superfluous
to the poem. According to Tinker and Lowry,[33] the
story of Merlin and Vivian was not embraced in
Arnold's original conception of the poem; its inclus-
ion was an afterthought. In the letter to Herbert
Hill quoted above, Arnold wrote, apparently in answer
to criticism:

> The story of Merlin, of which I am
> particularly fond, was brought in on
> purpose to relieve the poem which would
> else I thought have ended too sadly; but
> perhaps the new element introduced is
> too much.[34]

To many critics, it is indeed "too much" that the
story of Tristram and Iseult should not only continue
at some length after the love-death of the principals,
but also include a totally unrelated story on the slim
pretext of its having been told by Iseult of the White
Hands to her children. In Fraser's Magazine, an anon-

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32 Stopford A. Brooke, Tennyson, His Art and Relation
to Modern Life (New York and London: G. Putnam's Sons,
1894), p. 346.

33 Tinker and Lowry, Commentary, p. 124.

34 Quoted by Houghton, Times Literary Supplement,
p. 368.

ymous critic, having reached the limit of his patience, exclaimed:

> Who cares about Vivian and Merlin, with
> Iseult and those two children in sight?[35]

Others have complained that Iseult of Brittany is far too wise a mother to tell her impressionable children a story which, because it deals with a sensual, immoral love, is so grossly unsuitable for young minds. The story is actually intensely moral; it is an exemplum which illustrates, by a fairy tale which children can in some fashion understand, "how this fool passion gulls men potently." Because Merlin loved Vivian too much, he entrusted her with a secret which gave her complete power over his life, and for his total submission to love he paid the price of everlasting imprisonment:

> And in that daisied circle, as men say,
> Is Merlin prisoner till the judgment-day;
> But she herself whither she will can rove--
> For she was passing weary of his love.[36]

What lesson could Iseult more earnestly desire to teach her children? She has witnessed in Tristram's life the disastrous effects of an overmastering, magical love which could be ended only by death itself, and she too

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35 "Poems by Matthew Arnold," *Fraser's Magazine*, XLIX (February, 1854), p. 147.

36 "Tristram and Iseult," iii, 221-224.

suffers its bondage. The story is her attempt to
protect her children from a similar fate. The tale is
thus an integral part of Arnold's explanation of the
attitude of Iseult of Brittany towards her situation.
Its structural relationship with the rest of "Tristram
and Iseult" is so weak, however, that the passage seems
a superficial appendage and a most unsatisfactory con-
clusion to the poem.

Certain aspects of "Tristram and Iseult"
suggest that the poem violates Arnold's dictum[37] regard-
ing the unsuitability of an allegory of the poet's own
state of mind as a subject for poetic treatment. In
his psychological biography of Matthew Arnold, Louis
Bonnerot says:

> L'exemple le plus caractéristique d'
> autobiographie indirecte dans l'oeuvre
> poétique d'Arnold, c'est le long poème
> de Tristram and Iseult. ... Le rapport
> entre cette oeuvre et la vie d'Arnold
> ... ce n'est même pas une hypothèse,
> mais une certitude.[38]

It was at Thun during the late 1840s that Marguerite,
whether she was a real woman whom he loved or merely
a symbol of the Romantic philosophy, became for Arnold

37 Arnold, Poetical Works, p. xxiv.

38 Louis Bonnerot, Matthew Arnold: Poète; Essai de
Biographie psychologique (Paris: Librairie Marcel
Didier, 1947), p. 85.

a crucial problem: ought he to yield to desire and follow her, or to obey the warnings of intellect and forsake her? In the end, of course, it was his intellect which governed his decision. Bonnerot perceives, in Arnold's interpretation of the Tristram legend, a reflection of the dilemma which so perplexed him during that period:

> Le dessein d'Arnold, dans Tristram and Iseult, fut d'opposer les deux Iseult, Iseult de Bretagne à Iseult d'Irelande, autrement dit l'âge mûr à la jeunesse, l'union calme à l'amour passionné. Nous sommes fondés à lire dans ce poème la transposition de la destinée même d'Arnold, du conflit sentimental qui dut exister en lui, non point forcément dans le plan de la vie réelle, mais dans le plan de l'imagination, entre sa femme et Marguerite.[39]

If this be so, then "Tristram and Iseult" is indeed an allegory of Arnold's own state of mind.

An element of wish-fulfilment can be traced in the poem. Tristram is never forced to choose between his two Iseults, and his marriage to one does not terminate his relationship with the other. "The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea"[40] is here not estranging, since it can be traversed at will; for Tristram

39 Bonnerot, p. 86.

40 Arnold, "To Marguerite--Continued," 1. 24.

and Iseult of Ireland:

> ... la mer ne fut un obstacle ni à leur
> union ni à leur réunion.[41]

The Irish Iseult's reassurance to Tristram that his

people will not object to her vigil at his bedside

also reflects an aspect of Arnold's dilemma. Bonnerot

comments:

> ... remarquons l'expression: "nor will
> thy people ..." qui pourrait bien être une
> allusion demi-consciente aux désapprobat-
> ions qu'Arnold recontra dans sa famille.[42]

These details suggest that there is an indirect corres-

pondence between the problem of Arnold's relationship

with Marguerite and his interpretation of the Tristram

legend.

The two Iseults may be regarded as symbolic

of the Romantic and Stoic ways of life, between which

Arnold felt himself forced to choose. His fear of

Romanticism and preference for classical restraint

are thus reflected in his unconventional interpretation

of the Tristram legend and his unusual sympathy for the

character of Iseult of Brittany. In his poem, her

manner is distinguished by Stoic tranquillity which,

though always less than joy, is yet somewhat richer than

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41 Bonnerot, p. 86.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

resignation. In <u>Matthew Arnold: a Study in Conflict</u>,

E. K. Brown indicates a resemblance between the Breton

Iseult and the Greek Stoic, Marcus Aurelius, whom

Arnold so greatly admired.[43] Iseult, like Marcus

Aurelius, has annihilated egotism and, like him, she is

enabled by her self-abnegation to bear the infidelity

of her mate calmly and with detachment. She has achieved

the tranquillity and repose which Arnold himself was

earnestly seeking.[44]

Arnold's preference for the character of

Iseult of Brittany and the philosophy of Stoic serenity

which she represents influenced the tone of his treat-

ment of the Tristram legend. J. M. Murry says of

Arnold:

> His most consistent achievement was
> in the kind which we call elegiac.
> It suited best with his own persistent
> mood, of restrained regret for the
> life which he could not accept and the
> soul which he could not make his own.[45]

This elegiac tendency is noticeable both in the design

of the poem, and in its mood:

> The whole tone of "Tristram and Iseult"
> is elegiac, a chastened review of
> passion spent and past, not of passion

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43 E. K. Brown, <u>Matthew Arnold: a Study in Conflict</u> (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1948), pp. 89-90.

44 See <u>Letters to Clough</u>, pp. 122-123, 128-129, & 131-133.

45 J. M. Murry, <u>Discoveries: Essays in Literary Crit-icism</u> (London: W. Collins' Sons and Co., 1924), p. 209.

strong and present.[46]

This tone of subdued regret is felicitously appropriate
in the portion of the poem which treats Iseult of
Brittany, but it is often incongruous elsewhere.

The scene describing the reunion of the
lovers suffers most from the elegiac mood, which rend-
ers it inappropriately cold. Commenting on Arnold's
treatment of the love-death, Stopford A. Brooke says:

> The story of Tristram is a story of
> passion between the sexes. The
> intensity of the story fades out in
> Arnold's poem. . . . Had he known more
> of true emotion in love, and felt the
> story and the atmosphere of its time
> more truly, he would not have made this
> artistic mistake, which he probably
> thought was an artistic excellence.
> The note which is sounded in the poem
> might suit the temper and situation of
> Iseult of Brittany. It does not suit
> those of Tristram and Iseult of Ireland.
> The poem is cold.[47]

The dialogue in Part II is conspicuously unsuccessful.
Tristram bitterly accuses his "haughty Queen" of loving
him less than her honour, and Iseult as bitterly defends
herself. Of joy in reunion, there is not a word; no
impassioned declaration of undying love lightens the
gloom. Only in his request for "One last kiss upon

[46] "Poems of Matthew Arnold," Spectator, in Living Age,
CLXVI (August 22, 1885), 504.

[47] Stopford A. Brooke, Clough, Arnold, Rossetti, and
Morris: a Study... (London: I. Pitman, 1910), pp. 107-
108.

the living shore"[48] does Tristram convey any vestige

of romantic passion. Arnold was aware of the inad-

equacy of his treatment of this scene; in the letter

to Herbert Hill, he wrote:

> I am by no means satisfied with *Tristram*
> in the second part myself.[49]

His attempts at improving this passage were to no

avail; as Tinker and Lowry remark:

> The final dialogue, in spite of revision,
> remained quite unimpassioned. The lines
> are mild and laboured at the very point
> where the poem should take fire and
> blaze with medieval splendour.[50]

The love-death scene is also restrained by

concessions to Victorian morality. A stern disapproval

of illicit love seems to hover over the reunion, inhib-

iting the dialogue and preventing any intrusion of

passion. Iseult speaks of Mark not as Tristram's

treacherous, ignoble enemy but as her "deeply-wronged

husband."[51] She is portrayed not as an enchanting

adultress, but as an aging woman who has left beauty

and passion far behind; she says to Tristram:

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48 "Tristram and Iseult," ii, 98.

49 Quoted by Houghton, *Times Literary Supplement*, p. 368.

50 Tinker and Lowry, *Commentary*, pp. 113-114.

51 "Tristram and Iseult," ii, 45.

> Ah, harsh flatterer! let alone my beauty!
> I, like thee, have left my youth afar.
> Take my hand, and touch these wasted fingers--
> See my cheek and lips, how white they are![52]

Her intention of remaining with Tristram is so phrased as to seem motivated not by a desire for reunion with her lover, but by an almost sisterly affection for the ailing knight whom she has known for so many years:

> Fear me not, I will be always with thee;
> I will watch thee, tend thee, soothe thy pain;
> Sing thee tales of true, long-parted lovers,
> Join'd at evening of their days again.[53]

Tristram speaks frequently to Iseult of the virtue and purity of his patient wife; even in his last moment with his mistress before death takes him from her, he eulogizes the Breton Iseult:

> . . . she is kind and good.
> Now to sail the seas of death I leave thee--
> One last kiss upon the living shore![54]

Arnold's emphasis throughout the poem upon the blessings and virtues of domesticity also betrays the influence of Victorian morality. The portrayal of Iseult of Brittany as a chaste, affectionate wife and devoted mother, and the introduction of her two delightfully lovely children entirely remove from the

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52 "Tristram and Iseult," ii, 21-24.

53 Ibid., ii, 29-32.

54 Ibid., ii, 96-98.

legend its medieval atmosphere of passion and splendour, and reduce its tragedy to the level of pathos. Paull F. Baum says of Arnold that:

> . . . he produced in 'Tristram and Iseult' a sentimental version of a great tragic story, a version as Victorian as Tennyson's <u>Idylls</u> which were to follow. . . .[55]

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[55] Baum, p. 57.

CHAPTER IV

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON'S "THE LAST TOURNAMENT"

Tennyson followed Malory in using the Tristram material not as an independent legend, but as one of the many tales ancillary to those of the great British mythic hero, King Arthur. Just as Malory, following his French prose sources, included the story of Tristram within the framework of his Morte d'Arthur, so Tennyson, following Malory as his principal source, employed it as a portion of his Arthurian cycle, Idylls of the King.

Tennyson, however, dealt with the Tristram legend in his own way. Although Malory greatly condensed his material, his narrative is still, by modern standards, lengthy and digressive. In "The Book of Sir Tristram of Lyones," Tristram is constantly the central figure, his story being given in full detail while Arthur's progress is temporarily forgotten; the thematic ideal of chivalry is not affected by this digression because it is exemplified, not in the actions of Arthur alone, but in those of all the principal knights of the Round Table. Tennyson, on the other

hand, in condensing Malory's narrative, has focussed
much more closely upon the central figure of Arthur
and has identified his ideal exclusively with the
King; consequently, in order to preserve unity in
theme and narrative, the secondary tales such as
Tristram's are given only in summary, as it were, and
only in relation to the central story of Arthur's
fate. Thus, in adapting the Tristram legend to its
position and function in the Idylls of the King, Tennyson
has necessarily altered and greatly abbreviated Malory's
narrative.

The Tristram legend as such forms only a
small part of the idyll in which it appears. The main
portion of "The Last Tournament" is a story concerning
the last of the tournaments fought by the knights of
the Round Table.

The Tournament of the Dead Innocence, as it
is called, is established as a memorial to a foundling
child who has died in infancy. The story of the found-
ling, as Harold Littledale notes,[1] has been adapted
from an incident in the life of Alfred, as cited in
Stanley's Book of Birds. In Tennyson's version, the
child was discovered when Arthur and Lancelot, riding
through the forest, heard her cries coming from the

1 Harold Littledale, Essays on Lord Tennyson's Idylls of
the King (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912), p. 258.

top of a giant oak tree. Lancelot climbed the tree
and found the infant lying unharmed in an eagle's nest,
with a ruby carcanet wound about her neck. She was
given to Guinevere, who cared for her tenderly. The
foundling nevertheless soon died, and the Queen, un-
willing to keep such a painful reminder of her grief,
gave the infant's jewels for the prize at a tourna-
ment in honour of the dead Innocence.

The story of the tournament itself is entire-
ly Tennyson's invention. At the jousting it is not
Arthur, but Lancelot who presides, seated in the
golden throne of the Pendragonship. This last of the
tournaments becomes a mockery of the principles of
chivalric combat: as the courtesy of the field is
brazenly flouted, all the dignity of the occasion is
lost. Lancelot, sick at heart because of the wantonly
ignoble conduct he witnesses, abandons his role of
arbitrator and does not intervene. Eventually Tristram,
resplendent in his emblems of warrior, harper and
hunter, appears on the field; but at his entrance, all
the knights draw back, being too cowardly to give the
challenge. Thus Tristram, denied the opportunity to
defend his honour, wins the tournament ignobly by
default.

The feast which follows is equally debased. The ladies, relieved that they are no longer required to maintain a semblance of purity, don their gayest robes for the celebration. At last, the merry-making becomes so boisterous and unruly that Guinevere, alarmed by the vulgarity of the court, abruptly terminates the revels.

Arthur's absence meanwhile has been occasioned by a challenge from the Red Knight, who has established a Round Table of debauchery in the north. Thus, ironically, while his knights are engaged in mock combat, Arthur himself is fighting a genuine battle; moreover, he is fighting to deliver his kingdom from the very evils which, in incipient form, have disgraced the festival at Camelot. Although Arthur wins the battle, he fails essentially in his mission, for the knights in his company humiliate him by acting almost as shamefully and ignobly as their enemies.

At the end of the idyll, Tristram at last appears in a traditional scene--a secret tryst with Isolt--adapted from the Morte d'Arthur. It is the day after the tournament, and he is riding to Tintagel to present the ruby carcanet to his Queen of Beauty. He is somewhat apprehensive about the meeting, for it is to be his first encounter with Isolt of Ireland since his marriage to Isolt of the White Hands. However,

Isolt, though hurt by his infidelity, agrees to be reconciled, and for a short time they are happy together. Then suddenly, just as Tristram is fastening the jewels about her neck, the treacherous Mark, striking from behind, kills him with one blow.

One question naturally arises--why, in "The Last Tournament," did Tennyson introduce Tristram at all? He was not following tradition, for the story of the tournament itself does not occur in any previous version of the Arthurian legends. Tristram does not appear in any of the other idylls. Why then, instead of introducing a new character so late in the cycle, did Tennyson not let some other knight win the tournament-- Gawain, for example, who, in the Idylls of the King, is equally renowned for prowess in combat and fickleness in love? The answer, I believe, lies in the allegorical purpose which governs all the episodes of the cycle.

Whether or not Tennyson began the Idylls with any such purpose in mind has been a question for considerable debate. On this subject H. I. Fausset comments:

> The various episodes of this cycle
> of poems, it must be remembered, were
> built on no original plan. . . .
> Each new narrative was at first added

> more by happy chance than by design,
> until Tennyson, seeing the possibilit-
> ies of a complete cycle illustrative
> of his moral theories, inserted the
> later episodes with considerable con-
> structive ingenuity.[2]

When "The Last Tournament" was first published in

1871, only two of the final twelve poems of the

Idylls of the King remained to be written. Thus it

would seem safe to regard this idyll as one of those

later episodes added more by design than by happy

chance, and to examine it in the context of the

allegory of the completed cycle.

Tennyson, like Malory, used the Arthurian

legends for a didactic purpose. In the Idylls of the

King, these legends are employed as a vehicle for a

warning to Tennyson's age, and for the expression of

his personal concept of morality. As H. I. Fausset

explains:

> The first principle of that morality
> was that life is a conflict between
> flesh and spirit; that the great and
> the good man must always master the flesh
> by suppressing it, being "passionate for
> an utter purity," and that all evil results
> from some surrender, if only momentary, to
> the flesh, which engulfs good and evil
> alike in its dread consequences.[3]

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2 H. I. Fausset, Tennyson, a Modern Portrait (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1923), p. 260.

3 Ibid., p. 204.

This conflict of ". . . Sense at war with Soul"[4] is the central problem of the Idylls. Guinevere sins in preferring Lancelot to Arthur—preferring the easy pleasures of the flesh to the more austere delights of the spirit—and Arthur falls through his failure to condemn the lovers. All of the subsequent corruption of Arthur's kingdom arises as a consequence of this one surrender to the flesh. Tennyson himself stated:

> The whole . . . is the dream of man
> coming into practical life and ruined
> by one sin.[5]

Thus, as Condé B. Pallen says of the Idylls:

> Their message is a rebuke to the pride
> of the flesh, the crime of sense
> become the crime of malice, the
> ancient rebellion against the spirit-
> ual and God.[6]

This, then, is the nature of Tennyson's warning to his age, as conveyed in the Idylls of the King.

"The Last Tournament," the tenth of the twelve idylls as they appear in their final order, illustrates the ever-encroaching corruption which,

4 Alfred Tennyson, Idylls of the King, annotated by Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. Hallam Lord Tennyson (London: Macmillan and Co., 1908), p. 420, l. 18.

5 Alfred Tennyson, quoted by Hallam Lord Tennyson, ed., in Idylls of the King, p. 433.

6 Condé B. Pallen, The Meaning of the Idylls of the King: an Essay in Interpretation (New York: American Book Co., 1904), p. 19. Pallen's statement contains an interesting echo of ll. 215-216 of "The Vision of Sin," and points to the persistence of Tennyson's belief in the capacity of sensuality to induce malice or hatred.

as a result of Guinevere's sin, afflicts Arthur's

court, and foreshadows the total disintegration of

his kingdom to be depicted in "Guinevere" and "The

Passing of Arthur." Harold Littledale states:

> The main object of the poem is to
> continue the exposition of the decline
> that is taking place in the spirit of
> chivalry amongst both the knights and
> the dames of Arthur's court.[7]

Their behaviour during the tournament indicates that,

seeing Lancelot and Guinevere sin with impunity, they

have taken good heed of this precedent; they openly

mock the noble vows made to Arthur:

> To reverence the King, as if he were
> Their conscience, and their conscience
> as their King,
> To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,
> To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,
> To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
> To honour his own words as if his God's,
> To lead sweet lives in purest chastity. . . .[8]

The violation of one vow has led to the violation of

all, until even Arthur notices the general moral

laxity--

> The foot that loiters, bidden go,--the
> glance
> That only seems half-loyal to command,--
> A manner somewhat fall'n from reverence--[9]

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7 Littledale, p. 254.

8 Idylls of the King, p. 389, ll. 19-25.

9 Ibid., p. 344, l. 24 - p. 345, l. 1.

"The Last Tournament" takes this moral and spiritual decay for its subject.

The process of gradual decay is echoed in the descriptions of nature in the poem. Throughout the Idylls, the pattern of the growth and decline of Arthur's kingdom is parallel to that of the passing seasons of the year. Condé B. Pallen remarks:

> This temporal framework is the external symbolism of the seasons of human life, the spiritual passage through the avenues of time from birth to death. . . . It is also the symbol of the moral growth and then the decadence of the Round Table through the corrupting influence of the Queen's great sin.[10]

The Idylls progress from vernal spring, with its promise of new life, at the time of Arthur's marriage to Guinevere, through to the finality of bleak mid-winter at the time of his death. "The Last Tournament" is held in late autumn, a season which tells, in this poem, not of fruition and harvest, but of ruin, corruption and decay, and fore-tells the approach of winter:

> And ever the wind blew, and yellowing leaf,
> And gloom and gleam, and shower and shorn
>   plume
> Went down it.[11]

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[10] Pallen, p. 94.

[11] Idylls of the King, p. 346, ll. 12-14.

This atmosphere of impending winter and death pervades the idyll, darkening each scene with its shadow of inevitable disaster.

It is ironical that the corruption of Arthur's court is nowhere more evident than in the tournament scene. The Tournament of the Dead Innocence is designed as a tribute to purity--all the ladies are robed in white, and at a fountain of wine twelve damosels in white samite sit with golden cups, ready to minister to the members of the court. But this outward display of innocence cannot disguise the guilt within. There is no knight on the field who fights honourably, and there is no lady who does not betray her irreverence for the occasion; when the tournament ends, one says with obvious relief:

> . . . Praise the patient saints,
> Our one white day of Innocence hath past,
> Tho' somewhat draggled at the skirt.[12]

Commenting on the appropriateness of this scene, Andrew Lang remarks:

> With a wise touch Tennyson has represent-
> ed the Court as fallen not into vice only
> and crime, but into positive vulgarity
> and bad taste. The Tournament is a
> carnival of the "smart" and the third-rate.
> Courtesy is dead. . . .[13]

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12 Idylls of the King, p. 348, l. 24 - p. 349, l. 2.

13 Andrew Lang, Alfred Tennyson (2nd ed.; Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1901), p. 152.

The behaviour of the members of the court trans-
forms the nature of the festival, turning the well-
intentioned celebration of innocence into a ridiculous
travesty. Describing the ironic contrast
between the purpose of the tournament and its
outcome, Stopford A. Brooke says:

> In this fierce contrast Tennyson
> strikes out on his canvas the mocking
> cynicism in which he involves the
> court. There is no innocence which is
> not dead, and there is no love which
> is innocent.[14]

Thus the Tournament of the Dead Innocence becomes
a memorial not to the innocence of a dead child
but to the dead innocence of Guinevere and its
venomous effect upon the morality of Arthur's court.

In offering the jewels for the prize of the
tournament, Guinevere has said to Arthur:

> Perchance--who knows? the purest of thy
> knights
> May win them for the purest of my maids.[15]

But the outcome of the jousting is an ironic mockery
of her wish. Just as the ladies, by their vulgarity,

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14 Stopford A. Brooke, _Tennyson, His Art and Relat-
ion to Modern Life_ (New York and London: G. Putnam's
Sons, 1894), p. 343.

15 _Idylls of the King_, p. 342, ll. 5-6.

profane the sanctity of the occasion, allowing it
to become a celebration not of innocence but of
immorality, so the knights, in fearing to challenge
Tristram, further degrade the festival by allowing
the prize to be won uncontested by a known adulterer,
an acknowledged practitioner of free love. Thus, in
a scene of consummate irony, the jewels of Innocence
are claimed not by a pure knight but by a man guilty
of Lancelot's very sin, and presented not to a pure
maid but to his paramour.

Since the tournament is in every aspect a
trenchant commentary upon the corruption caused by
the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere, it is appropriate
that the winner of the jousting should be a knight
who, though less noble, occupies a moral position
similar to Lancelot's. Tristram, in his traditional
character, is almost ideally suited to the part.
Just as Lancelot is Arthur's closest friend and
mightiest comrade-in-arms, so Tristram was, in earl-
ier versions of his story, Mark's beloved nephew and
bravest champion. And just as Lancelot is torn be-
tween the chivalric loyalty he owes to Arthur and
the love he feels for Guinevere, so Tristram was torn
between his duty to Mark and his desire for Isolt.
This Tristram is not quite the same man as the Tristram

of the Idylls of the King; in the tournament scene,
however, because nothing is yet known of him except
his name, the resemblance to Lancelot is closer than
later in the idyll, when Tennyson's characterization
of him is fuller. Thus the comparison is effective.
Tristram's victory in the Tournament of the Dead
Innocence, claiming for him the jewels intended for
the purest of Arthur's knights, implies therefore
that the "purest" is as guilty as Lancelot, and
that Lancelot's sin has infected all the court.

Since in this idyll Tennyson was depicting
the ruinous corruption which can grow from one small
sin, it was important that the sin be made as small
as the legend would permit, emphasizing as a moral
consequence the magnitude of the corruption. For
this reason, it was necessary to render Lancelot's
actions as pardonable as possible, though still at
fault, and to make Tristram's sin the greater by
comparison, since it is a part of that corruption
which results from the original violation of Arthur's
law. Thus the infusion of Tennyson's allegory into
the Arthurian legends caused some alterations in the
source material.

Tennyson rendered the sin of Lancelot and
Guinevere less culpable by altering the circumstances
of their first encounter. In the Morte d'Arthur,

Guinevere does not meet Lancelot until after her
marriage, when she falls in love with his prowess
in combat and his equal skill in courtesy. Tenny-
son, however, as Andrew Lang comments,[16] modelled
this portion of their story upon that of Tristram
and Isolt. When the marriage of Arthur and
Guinevere has been arranged, it is Lancelot who
goes, at Arthur's request, to escort the bride to
Camelot, just as Tristram was sent by Mark for Isolt.
No supernatural philtre compels them to love each
other, but the charm of Lancelot's courtesy and the
enchanting journey through the May flowers inspires
affection nevertheless. Thus Guinevere, like Isolt,
is obliged to marry one man when she has previously
given her heart to another.

Sustaining Lancelot as the noblest of
Arthur's knights necessitated some alterations in the
character of Tristram who, in the Morte d'Arthur, is
his nearest rival in fame. There is nothing in the
description of Tristram's first appearance to indic-
ate that he is no longer his traditional self; he
enters the field--

> . . . taller than the rest,
> And armour'd all in forest green, whereon
> There trip't a hundred tiny silver deer,

16 Lang, p. 117.

> And wearing but a holly-spray for crest,
> With ever-scattering berries, and on shield
> A spear, a harp, a bugle--Tristram--late
> From overseas in Brittany return'd,
> And marriage with a princess of that realm,
> Isolt the White--Sir Tristram of the Woods--[17]

Soon, however, it becomes apparent that he is no longer the noble, conscience-striken sufferer of the legend, but a cynical iconoclast of idealism and an exponent of free love, scornful of fidelity both in chivalry and in love.

Tennyson's Tristram would call himself a realist. He scorns belief in the power of virtue; when, in presenting the tourney prize, Lancelot asks, "Art thou the purest, brother?"[18] he replies:

> . . . Strength of heart
> And might of limb, but mainly use and skill
> Are winners in this pastime of our King.[19]

He doubts the practicality of the higher life, preferring not to strive after spiritual ideals, but rather to enjoy the easy delights of the flesh, and to accept and tolerate the world's sinfulness and his own; he says to Lancelot:

> Great brother, thou nor I have made the
> world;
> Be happy in thy fair Queen as I in mine.[20]

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17 _Idylls of the King_, p. 347, 11. 2-10.

18 _Ibid._, p. 347, 1. 25.

19 _Ibid._, p. 348, 11. 4-6.

20 _Ibid._, p. 348, 11. 10-11.

Once, he admits to Isolt, he was inspired to ideal-
ism; but now he scorns those who would dedicate them-
selves to such distant and difficult goals. Describ-
ing the moment when he took his vows before Arthur, he
says:

> . . . he seem'd to me no man,
> But Michaël trampling Satan; so I sware,
> Being amazed: but this went by--The vows!
> O ay--the wholesome madness of an hour--[21]

Such is Tristram the cynic--a man blind to aims
beyond those of his own self-indulgence, deaf to the
music of the spirit--a destructive element in Arthur's
kingdom.

Tristram's inferiority to Lancelot is
most evident in his behaviour as a lover. Although
Lancelot's, like Tristram's, is a guilty love, it
is always dedicated faithfully to one-woman. The
Tristram of the earlier legend also loved one woman
only, and although in the Morte d'Arthur Isode is not
his first paramour, she is nevertheless the only
woman he seeks after the love philtre has taken effect.
Tennyson's Tristram, however, takes the doctrine of
free love as the gospel of his conduct. M. W. Mac-
callum comments:

> It is noticeable that in Tennyson's
> account of him, all mention of the love

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21 Idylls of the King, p. 367, ll. 4-7.

> philtre is omitted; for in the <u>Idylls</u>
> he is the type no longer of overmaster-
> ing passion but of free and careless
> desire.[22]

Unlike Lancelot, Tristram is troubled by no pangs of

conscience. Stopford A. Brooke remarks:

> There is a difference between . . .
> Lancelot, whose love was mingled with
> a vast remorse, and Tristram who in the
> Idyll of <u>The Last Tournament</u> has, in the
> airy cynicism of free loving, become
> careless of faithfulness, and then un-
> courteous towards the woman whom he
> once loved so well.[23]

In a dialogue with Arthur's fool, Dagonet,

Tristram proclaims his callous attitude to love.

Dagonet refuses to dance to Tristram's harping, which

he calls "broken music;" the music which Tristram

has broken is:

> . . . Arthur, the King's;
> For when thou playest that air with Queen
>   Isolt,
> Thou makest broken music with thy bride,
> Her daintier namesake down in Brittany--
> And so thou breakest Arthur's music too.[24]

But Tristram expresses neither concern nor constern-

ation at the fool's accusation; he replies by singing

his credo of free love:

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22 M. W. Maccallum, <u>Tennyson's Idylls and Arthurian Story from the XVIth Century</u> (Glasgow: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1894), p. 400.

23 Brooke, p. 299.

24 <u>Idylls of the King</u>, p. 350, ll. 20-24.

Free love--free field--we love but while we
        may:
The woods are hush'd, their music is no more;
The leaf is dead, the yearning past away:
New leaf, new life--the days of frost are o'er:
New life, new love, to suit the newer day:
New loves are sweet as those that went before:
Free love--free field--we love but while we
        may.[25]

Thus the Tristram of "The Last Tournament" is not only

an adulterer, but also a cynical philanderer who has

abandoned himself to the lusts of the flesh.

Tristram carries this philosophy even into

the presence of Isolt. He excuses the infidelity of his

marriage to Isolt of Brittany by saying only, "The night

was dark; the true star set"[26]--while the star of her

love was beyond the horizon, he needed and found another

star to comfort him. During his reunion with Isolt:

He talks of the freedom of Love to love
wherever it may please, and of their love
failing when beauty fails, and when desire
is cold. He speaks in this light, tossing
way in the presence of the woman whom he
has loved; and Isolt, though she shows
indignation, suffers it at last with in-
difference.[27]

After they have dined, Tristram sings to Isolt; his

song, however, is not of her alone, but of his two stars

of love:

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25 Idylls of the King, p. 351, ll. 6-12.

26 Ibid., p. 364, l. 14.

27 Brooke, p. 345.

> Ay, ay, O ay--the winds that bend the brier!
> A star in heaven, a star within the mere!
> Ay, ay, O ay--a star was my desire,
> And one was far apart and one was near:
> Ay, ay, O ay--the winds that blow the grass!
> And one was water and one star was fire,
> And one will ever shine and one will pass.
> Ay, ay, O ay--the winds that move the mere.[28]

There is, perhaps, some satisfaction for Isolt in id-
entifying herself with the star that "will ever shine,"
and the other Isolt with the watery reflection of her
fire; but the song is not the comforting and reassur-
ing music she craves, nor is it the song which an earl-
ier Tristram would have made in honour of his love.

Isolt, too, is not the Isolt of the old legend.
Just as Tristram is debased in order to ennoble Lancelot
by contrast, so Isolt's character is altered in order to
elevate Guinevere's. The Queen, like Lancelot, feels
remorse for her betrayal of Arthur and a measure of
sympathy for the mission which drives him so relentless-
ly. But in Isolt, hatred of her husband is more evident
than love of her knight; her first words to Tristram at
their meeting are:

> . . . Not Mark--not Mark, my soul!
> The footstep flutter'd me at first: not he:
> Catlike thro' his own castle steals my Mark,
> But warrior-wise thou stridest thro' his halls
> Who hates thee, as I him--ev'n to the death.

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28 <u>Idylls of the King</u>, p. 369, ll. 12-19.

> ·My soul, I felt my hatred for my Mark
> Quicken within me, and knew that thou wert
> nigh.[29]

Isolt, of course, has ample cause for despising her

husband, but all Mark's baseness and treachery do not

excuse the violence of her hatred. Nor do they excuse

her equation of adultery with revenge; she frankly

admits to Tristram:

> My God, the measure of my hate for Mark
> Is as the measure of my love for thee.[30]

Isolt seems hungry for revenge; she tells Tristram how

she has longed to hurt his wife for her role in his in-

fidelity, and says spitefully that she has achieved her

aim in drawing him back to Tintagel:

> Well--can I wish her any huger wrong
> Than having known thee? her too thou has left
> To pine and waste in those sweet memories.
> O were I not my Mark's, by whom all men
> Are noble, I should hate thee more than love.[31]

This violence of passion, scarcely distinguishing between

love and hate, is appropriate in the paramour of a dis-

ciple of free love--it is, according to the principles

of Tennyson's morality, what he deserves--but it is

entirely foreign to the nature of the traditional Isolt

of Ireland.

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29 <u>Idylls of the King</u>, p. 360, l. 22 - p. 361, l. 4.

30 <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 361, ll. 21-22.

31 <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 364, ll. 5-9.

Mark in the _Idylls of the King_ is essentially
the Cornish king of the _Morte d'Arthur_, except that his
villainy is rather more sharply emphasized. Tennyson's
Mark is a grizzled lecher, dastard and assassin; Arthur
describes him as:

> . . . craven--a man of plots,
> Craft, poisonous counsels, wayside
> ambushings--[32]

When, in "Gareth and Lynette," he tries to bribe Arthur
for a position in the order of the Round Table, Arthur's
astonishment is almost as great as his wrath:

> But Mark hath tarnished the great name of king,
> As Mark would sully the low state of churl.[33]

In the idyll, "Merlin and Vivien," when a minstrel at
the castle of Mark,

> . . . he that always bare in bitter grudge
> The slights of Arthur and his Table. . . .[34]

tells of the pure love of Lancelot for the Queen, Mark
is so enraged by this description of purity that he sends
Vivien, his paramour, to attempt to sully the virtue of
Arthur's court. Vivien promises to be a worthy pupil,
since by him she has been

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32 _Idylls of the King_, p. 43, ll. 3-4.

33 _Ibid._, p. 42, ll. 22-23.

34 _Ibid._, p. 182, ll. 6-7.

> . . . shown the truth betimes,
> That old true filth, and bottom of the well,
> Where Truth is hidden.[35]

Commenting on Mark's hatred of Arthur, Stopford A. Brooke says:

> Injustice, falsehood, cruelty are his characteristics, and out of these are born coarse cynicism in sensualism and hatred of pure love.[36]

Mark's actions in the _Idylls_ are little different from his behaviour in the _Morte d'Arthur_, but his consciousness of evil motive is greatly increased.

Throughout the _Idylls of the King_, Mark's motives and principles are set directly contrary to those of Arthur, as are the ways of his court. Mark expresses total disbelief in purity and honour, and glories in the triumph of evil over good. He is as base as Arthur is noble. Arthur's forbearance of Lancelot is as great as Mark's enmity for Tristram; and Arthur's continuing friendship with Lancelot contrasts with Mark's assassination of Isolt's lover. In Mark, Tennyson portrays the sin of deliberate, consciously evil action and desire which results indirectly from Guinevere's surrender to the flesh. Just as her

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35 _Idylls of the King_, p. 184, ll. 7-9.

36 Brooke, p. 302.

sin prepares the way for Tristram's discipleship in free
love, so Tristram's adultery gives birth to Mark's base
treachery. Condé B. Pallen states that:

> Mark, King of Cornwall, "the scorn of Arthur
> and his Table," is the type of the crime of
> malice. . . .[37]

Mark's assassination of Tristram thus exemplifies "the
crime of sense become the crime of malice,"[38] and takes
its place in the process of ever-encroaching corruption
as a foreshadowing of the ultimate malicious treachery
of Modred.

The Tristram legend, as it is told in "The
Last Tournament," is, though much briefer, reasonably
faithful in plot to "The Book of Sir Tristram of
Lyones," but much different in characterization. Harold
Littledale says:

> This Idyll is only indebted to Malory for
> the superficial outline of the story of
> Tristram and his two Isolts, and the
> vengeance of King Mark.[39]

The Tristram and Isolt who enact this plot are not those
of the old legend. Commenting on this change in charact-
ization, Stopford A. Brooke remarks:

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37 Pallen, p. 70.

38 Ibid., p. 19.

39 Littledale, p. 254.

> Tristram is not the Tristram we know, nor
> Isolt our Isolt; they are both vulgarized.
> All the romance is taken out of them; their
> great and inevitable love is turned into a
> common intrigue. Their mighty sorrow, which
> has drawn the heart of the world to it . . .
> is left untouched by Tennyson. Nay, their
> characters, as he draws them, are incapable
> of such a sorrow.[40]

The legend undeniably suffers from Tennyson's alterat-

ions; M. W. Maccallum states:

> In the case of no branch of Arthurian
> romance has Tennyson's unavoidable pruning
> been more cruel than in the story of
> Tristram. . . .[41]

Tennyson, however, was not concerned to any extent with

the problem of fidelity to the spirit of the old

romance; his interest lay rather in adapting the

legend to its place in the allegory of the _Idylls of

the King_, and in that endeavour he was successful.

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40 Brooke, p. 346.

41 Maccallum, p. 279.

CHAPTER V

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE'S TRISTRAM OF LYONESSE

The publication of Tristram of Lyonesse was
for Algernon Charles Swinburne the culmination of a
period of some thirty years' fascination with the leg-
end of Tristram and Iseult. As a schoolboy at Eton he
first read and loved Matthew Arnold's poem on the sub-
ject. Then, during his first year at Oxford, he began
a metrical romance, Queen Yseult, the first canto of
which was published in the Undergraduate Papers of
December, 1857. Six of the proposed ten cantos were
completed during that year before Swinburne abandoned
the work, with the never-fulfilled intention of later
revising and completing it. The following year, in a
letter to Edwin Hatch[1] he mentioned being at work on a
new Tristram poem, which apparently was also abandoned.
No new attempts were made upon the subject until 1869,
when the "Prelude" to Tristram of Lyonesse was begun.
After the publication of the "Prelude" in 1871,

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1 A. C. Swinburne, The Complete Works of Algernon Charles
Swinburne, ed. Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise
(London: Heinemann, 1925-27), XVIII, 3.

Swinburne continued to work spasmodically upon the re-
mainder of the poem; finally, in 1881, he set himself
in earnest to the task of its completion, and the entire
poem at last appeared in the 1882 volume, Tristram of
Lyonesse and other poems, just thirty years after the
first publication of Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult."

Swinburne's first attempt at a poem on the
Tristram legend was inspired by his friendship with
William Morris and his admiration of Morris's pre-
Raphaelite poems. Morris's enthusiasm for subjects
drawn from medieval history and legend was so infect-
ious that, as Georges Lafourcade relates:

> Le 1er novembre 1857, Swinburne est
> présenté à Morris et l'entend déclamer ...
> Guenevere, Blanche et The Willow and the
> Red Cliff. Le 10 novembre, il est en
> train de composer Queen Yseult; le 16
> décembre, il a terminé les six premiers
> chants. L'influence est, on le voit,
> directe et l'imitation immédiate.[2]

In his eagerness to emulate the pre-Raphaelite poems of
Morris, Swinburne naturally turned to the medieval leg-
end which had earlier, in Arnold's version, captured his
imagination. The resultant poem, immature and imitative
though it is, is nevertheless important as the beginning

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2 Georges Lafourcade, La Jeunesse de Swinburne (1837-
1867) (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), II, 40.

of his prolonged endeavours with the legend, and as
the groundwork of the later poem, Tristram of Lyonesse.
Georges Lafourcade remarks:

> Queen Yseult ... est le principal monument
> de cette période préraphaelite pure qu'il
> importe de fixer dans sa longue carrière
> poétique; malgré la manque de fini, les
> négligences, la monotonie, le poème n'est
> pas, à certains endroits, dépourvu de
> mérites littéraires; mérites qui sont à
> vrai dire plutôt de promesses, mais de
> très belles promesses; enfin, il est la
> clef du chef-d'oeuvre publié par Swinburne
> en 1882. ...3

Knowledge of the sources which Swinburne
employed in writing Queen Yseult is of course fundam-
ental to determining those which he utilized in the
later poem, Tristram of Lyonesse. In 1857, he may have
read Malory's Morte d'Arthur, but if so, he apparently
disregarded this treatment of the legend. According to
Georges Lafourcade[4] he was acquainted with Béroul's
poem, the extant portions of the Tristan of Thomas, and
various other fragments collected in Tristan, recueil
de ce qui reste des poemes relatifs a ses aventures,
published in 1835-37 by Francisque Michel. This volume,
however, was not his principal source; according to
Lafourcade:

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3 Lafourcade, II, 42.

4 Ibid., II, 45.

> ... Swinburne a à peine utilisé Francisque
> Michel; il a, dans Queen Yseult, suivi
> de près non pas Thomas, qui était alors
> inaccessible dans son ensemble, mais la
> traduction ou imitation anglaise du
> treizième ou quatorzième siècle, connue
> sous le nom de Sir Tristrem, et qui fut
> longtemps attribuée à Thomas of Ercildoune. ...
> C'est à n'en pas doubter la principale
> source de Swinburne. ...[5]

When he began Tristram of Lyonesse, Swinburne
engaged in a project of much more extensive research
than he had done in preparation for the writing of
Queen Yseult. In a letter to William Michael Rossetti,
dated December 28, 1869, he wrote:

> Meantime I am at work on the moral
> history of Tristram. Do you know any-
> thing of the old romances on the subject
> beyond Walter Scott's book [Scott's edition
> of the Sir Tristrem] and the Morte d'Arthur?
> anything for instance of the Early English
> people's unearthing? I want to look at the
> romance of his father Meliadus in the Brit.
> Mus. as well as the Tristan and the
> Lancelot.[6]

Whether or not Swinburne actually accomplished all of
this research cannot be determined; if he did, however,
it must have proved to be of little value to him, since
the material of this poem has come almost entirely from
the sources employed previously in Queen Yseult.

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5 Lafourcade, II, 45-46.

6 Swinburne, Complete Works, XVIII, 75.

Tristram of Lyonesse is based mainly upon the northern
Sir Tristrem and its hypothetical conclusion written
by Sir Walter Scott, with additional material drawn
from Francisque Michel's _Recueil_ and Malory's _Morte
d'Arthur._

In Swinburne's later poem, the material which
has no counterpart in the _Sir Tristrem_ consists of
details and episodes which, being supplementary, do
not affect the basic outline of the main source. The
origin of Tristram's name is given in words which echo
the _Morte d'Arthur_; Swinburne says of the young
Tristram that:

> . . . nothing save his name he had of grief,
> The name his mother, dying as he was born,
> Made out of sorrow in very sorrow's
> scorn. . . .[7]

Also drawn from the _Morte d'Arthur_ are the references
made in the conversation of Tristram and Iseult to King
Arthur, his half-sister Morgause, Lancelot, Guenevere,
and the story of Merlin and Nimue. The incident of
Tristram's spectacular leap from a chantry window in
order to escape the vengeance of Mark's barons may have
been drawn either from the _Morte d'Arthur_ or from the
extant fragment of Béroul's poem, included in Michel's

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7 Swinburne, "Tristram of Lyonesse," in _Complete Works_,
IV, 35, ll. 22-24.

Recueil. The devices of the swallow on the ship which
brings Iseult to Cornwall and the swan on that which
carries her to Brittany are original with Swinburne,
although the swallow may have been suggested by the
incident in Eilhart von Oberge's poem (also included
in Michel's volume), in which two swallows bring a
strand of Iseult's golden hair to Mark and thereby
inspire him to seek her for his bride. Aside from
these supplementary details, the material of Tristram
of Lyonesse is drawn from or based upon the northern
Sir Tristrem.

Swinburne also modified certain incidents
from the Sir Tristrem by combining them in his poem
with versions given in other sources. This technique
of collation enabled him to enrich and enlarge the
rather cryptic narrative of his main source.

The adventure in which Iseult, claimed by
Palamede as a boon for his minstrelsy, is rescued,
after a ride through the forest, by Tristram's defeat
of the pagan knight in combat combines two versions of
the episode. In the Sir Tristrem, it is an anonymous
Irish knight who plays his harp in order to win Iseult,
and only by Tristram's clever trickery is he prevented
from sailing with her to Ireland. In the Morte d'Arthur,
Palamede rides off with Iseult through the forest and
loses her to Tristram in combat, but he claims her as

a boon, not for his harping, but for his rescue of
Brangwayne. Thus in Swinburne's poem the two versions
of this adventure are interwoven.

In the idyllic interlude which follows the
rescue, Tristram and Iseult dwell together for three
months in a forest bower, but are pardoned and re-
instated at Tintagel when Mark discovers them asleep,
separated by a naked sword. In the Sir Tristrem, the
lovers remain together after the rescue only seven
days before voluntarily returning to King Mark. In a
later episode, however, they are banished from Mark's
court and dwell secretly for a time in an earthen hut
in the forest; when the King discovers them sleeping
with the naked sword between, he pardons them and
restores them to Tintagel. The forest bower which in
Swinburne's version replaces the earthen hut could be
drawn from the description of a similar incident in
either Malory or Béroul. Thus in relating this episode
Swinburne modified the version given in the Sir Tristrem
by combining it with material from a later episode and
with details drawn from another source.

This assimilation of the two episodes from
the Sir Tristrem into one is compensated by the import-
ation of a later incident from the Morte d'Arthur. In
Swinburne's poem, Tristram, after his marriage, journeys

with Ganhardine to Cornwall, where they arrange a
tryst with Iseult and Brangwain, just as in the <u>Sir
Tristrem</u>. But the tryst results in a decision to accept
the refuge offered by Lancelot and Guenevere at Joyous
Gard, where, as in the <u>Morte d'Arthur</u>, the lovers so-
journ for a time. This interlude is terminated abruptly
when, acting upon the order of King Arthur, Tristram
restores Iseult to Mark, just as, in a later book of the
<u>Morte d'Arthur</u>, Lancelot is compelled by a special writ
of intervention from the Pope to return Guenevere to
Camelot. Arthur's command at the same time sends
Tristram upon the mission of freeing Wales from the
tyranny of the giant, Urgan, and thereby introduces a
heroic battle scene drawn from the <u>Sir Tristrem</u>. The
importation of the Joyous Gard episode is thus emp-
loyed to enlarge the brief tryst mentioned in the main
source, and to give greater purpose to the episode of
the battle with Urgan.

In his treatment of the legend, Swinburne was
faithful to the spirit of the twelfth- and thirteenth-
century versions and to the main outline of the story
given in the <u>Sir Tristrem</u>. As W. B. D. Henderson
remarks:

> The theme came straight to his hands, with
> most of its perfections on it, from Thomas,
> Béroul, and the compiler of the romance of
> Tristram--and he has retold it with great

faithfulness, neglecting no important
incident in the original. . . .[8]

The incidents which Swinburne did omit are those of
Tristram's birth and arrival at Tintagel, his slaying
of one Irish dragon and three Spanish giants, Iseult's
abortive attempt to have Brangwain killed, the many
persecutions of the lovers by Mark's barons and the
several devices by which on these occasions they elude
discovery, and Iseult's ordeal by fire. These omissions
modify the deliberately primitive atmosphere of the
version given by the Sir Tristrem and simplify the
narrative by reducing the number of repetitious epis-
odes. By these modifications Swinburne achieved an
intensified focussing upon the love element of the
legend and the minimizing of the heroic and chivalric
element.

This condensation of the material provided by
the Sir Tristrem was necessitated by the form in which
Swinburne chose to present his version. Tristram of
Lyonesse consists of an introductory invocation to love,
and nine cantos which form a series of lyrical studies
upon the principal episodes of the legend. The poem is

8 W. B. D. Henderson, Swinburne and Landor, a Study of
their Spiritual Relationship and its Effect on Swinburne's
Moral and Poetic Development (London: Macmillan and Co.,
1918), p. 231.

thus a succession of scenes rather than a continuous,
uninterrupted narrative. Edward Thomas cites Swin-
burne's explanation of his form and purpose:

> In undertaking to "rehandle the death-
> less legend of Tristram," he says, his
> aim was "simply to present the story, not
> diluted and debased as it has been in our
> own time by other hands, but undefaced by
> improvement and undeformed by transform-
> ation, as it was known to the age of Dante
> wherever the chronicles of romance found
> hearing, from Ercildoune to Florence; and
> not in the epic or romantic form of sus-
> tained and continuous narrative, but mainly
> through a succession of dramatic scenes or
> pictures with descriptive settings or back-
> grounds. . . ."9

Often the descriptive background of a canto
serves to recount the incidents of the story which
have brought about the situation it depicts. The narr-
ation of the first canto begins in medias res with
Iseult's journey to Cornwall, and then turns back to
describe Tristram's first and second voyages to Ireland
and the brewing of the love-potion by Iseult's mother,
before completing the story of "The Sailing of the
Swallow." Similarly in the fourth canto, the episode
of Tristram's marriage is interrupted by Tristram's
reminiscence, in which King Mark's discovery of the
sleeping lovers in the forest bower, their return to

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9 Edward Thomas, Algernon Charles Swinburne, a
Critical Study (London: M. Secker, 1912), pp. 211-212.

Tintagel, their betrayal and capture, Tristram's escape by means of the chantry leap, and his subsequent wanderings are described. Thus by means of these and similar passages of descriptive background, Swinburne was able to include all of the principal incidents of the legend, and yet to focus in each of the nine cantos upon only one significant episode.

The emphasis in Tristram of Lyonesse is, as it was in the Tristan of Gottfried von Strassburg, upon the element of immortal and all-transcendent love. Of Swinburne's poem, T. E. Welby declares:

> . . . in spirit it is an eestatic hymn to changeless and timeless love.[10]

All of the situations which constitute the chief topics of the nine cantos are episodes concerned with love—the drinking of the love philtre, the forest bower interlude, Tristram's banishment, his marriage, Iseult's grief at their separation, the Joyous Gard interlude, Iseult of Brittany's growing hatred of the lovers, their second separation, and their reunion in death. In each of these situations, the emotions attendant upon love—joy in union, grief in separation, remorse for sin and resoluteness for fidelity—these are the aspects developed by the poet. Thus, as Oliver Elton remarks:

10 T. E. Welby, A Study of Swinburne (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1926), p. 215.

> . . . the subject of <u>Tristram</u> is not so
> much the long-canonized lovers as Love
> itself. . . .[11]

The love which is exalted in <u>Tristram of</u>

<u>Lyonesse</u> is not mere physical passion but a transcend-

ent, spiritual power. In the "Prelude," Swinburne

invokes:

> Love, that is first and last of all things made,
> The light that has the living world for shade,
> The spirit that for temporal veil has on
> The souls of all men woven in unison. . . .[12]

This love it is which gives both joy and grief, which

elevates and sanctifies the lovers even as it leads them

inexorably to their doom:

> Love that is fire within thee and light above,
> And lives by grace of nothing but by love;
> Through many and lovely thoughts and much desire
> Led these twain to the life of tears and fire;
> Through many and lovely days and much delight
> Led these twain to the lifeless life of night.[13]

Swinburne's description of the philtre, the instrument

by which love enters and transforms the lives of Tristram

and Iseult, expresses the power of this spiritual love to

transcend moral conventions and to convey a paradoxical

burden of ecstasy and sorrow. Iseult comes to Tristram:

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11 Oliver Elton, <u>Modern Studies</u> (London: E. Arnold, 1907),
p. 224.

12 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 25, 11. 1-4.

13 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 26, 11. 15-20.

> Holding the love-draught that should be for
> flame
> To burn out of them fear and faith and shame,
> And lighten all their life up in men's sight,
> And make them sad forever.[14]

Since this spiritual love seeks physical

expression, it is paradoxically both of the flesh and

of the spirit. In the "Prelude," love is described as:

> The body spiritual of fire and light
> That is to worldly noon as noon to night;
> Love, that is flesh upon the spirit of man
> And spirit within the flesh whence breath
> began. . . .[15]

The love which endues Tristram and Iseult with spiritual

grace is thus frequently manifested in physical passion,

as in the bower scene, when:

> . . . with strong trembling fingers she
> strained fast
> His head into her bosom; till at last,
> Satiate with sweetness of that burning bed,
> His eyes afire with tears, he raised his head
> And laughed into her lips; and all his heart
> Filled hers; then face from face fell, and
> apart
> Each hung on each with panting lips, and felt
> Sense into sense and spirit in spirit melt.[16]

Of this passage, George Barlow remarks:

> Here, as always in Mr. Swinburne's greater
> work, we find the dominating conviction
> that sense and spirit are not separate,

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14 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 56, 11. 7-10.

15 Ibid., p. 25, 11. 9-12.

16 Ibid., p. 69, 11. 20-27.

are, in fact, inseparable, and that, in
the highest love, it is the actual
imminent <u>soul</u> which speaks and makes
itself felt through the infinitely del-
icate and subtle physical fabric of
passion.[17]

It is this sublime fusion of sense and spirit which is

exalted and glorified in the poem.

Although fidelity to this love is, in <u>Tristram</u>

<u>of Lyonesse</u>, more imperative than obedience to the moral-

ity ordained by religion, violation of the moral code is

nevertheless accompanied by passionate remorse. H. J.

C. Grierson states:

The strain in Swinburne's poem is
always that of passionate exaltation--
love and hate; and to my mind the
most characteristic and moving section
is that in which Iseult . . . pours forth
the conflict between her passionate
longing for the vanished Tristram, and
her consciousness of sin--for the
poem is dramatically a poem of the
Middle Ages, sin a reality.[18]

Iseult wishes to pray for Tristram, but, burdened by

her sense of sin, she doubts that her prayer will be

acceptable:

17 George Barlow, "The Spiritual Side of Swinburne's
Genius," <u>Contemporary Review</u>, LXXXVIII (August, 1905),
245.

18 H. J. C. Grierson, <u>Swinburne</u> (London: published for
the British Council by Longmans, Green and Co., 1953),
p. 21.

> . . . wilt thou care,
> God, for this love, if love be any, alas,
> In me to give thee, though long since there was,
> How long, when I too, Lord, was clean, even I,
> That now am unclean till the day I die--[19]

Yet she glories in her guilt, since it is the measure of

her love for Tristram:

> Blest am I beyond women even herein,
> That beyond all born women is my sin,
> And perfect my transgression: that above
> All offerings of all others is my love,
> Who have chosen it only, and put away for this
> Thee, and my soul's hope, Saviour. . . .[20]

In the end, the conflict unresolved, she can pray only

that in spite of their transgression, God will not keep

". . . in twain forever heart and heart. . . ."[21]

The love for which Tristram and Iseult forsake

all other obligations brings equally joy and bitterness.

When they partook of the love philtre, they entered upon

a new life, and yet they ". . . quaffed Death. . . ."[22]

Each tryst commences a new life, and concomitantly each

separation brings a new death. During his exile in

Brittany, Tristram meditates upon the bittersweet meta-

physical relation of love and death:

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19 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 95, ll. 30-34.

20 Ibid., p. 96, ll. 27-32.

21 Ibid., p. 103, l. 24.

22 Ibid., p. 56, ll. 26-27.

> "As the dawn loves the sunlight I love thee";
> As men that shall be swallowed of the sea
> Love the sea's lovely beauty; as the night
> That wanes before it loves the sweet young light
> And dies of loving;
> . . . .
> We have loved and slain each other, and love
> yet.[23]

He concludes:

> Yea, surely as the day-star loves the sun
> And when he hath risen is utterly undone,
> So is my love of her and hers of me--
> And its most sweetness bitter as the sea.[24]

This conflict of love and sorrow is resolved only in
death itself.

The portrayal of the characters in _Tristram
of Lyonesse_ is largely in accord with their character-
ization in the _Sir Tristrem_ and all of the other medieval
romances derived from the _Tristan_ of Thomas. But whereas
in most medieval versions there is little attention to
motive, in Swinburne's poem the psychological motivat-
ion of the characters is fully developed.

Traditionally, it is implied that Tristram's
refusal to consummate his marriage to Iseult of the
White Hands arises from respect for his first love.
Swinburne follows this version, but dwells upon the
inner conflict which Tristram suffers, of fidelity to

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23 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 73, 11. 1-5 & 8.

24 _Ibid._, p. 74, 11. 23-26.

Iseult with pity and desire for the young bride:

> . . . Fierce regret
> And bitter loyalty strove hard at strife
> With amorous pity toward the tender wife
> That wife indeed might never be, to wear
> The very crown of wedlock. . . .[25]

Tristram is thus not rendered insensible to the charms
of his maiden wife by the memory of his love for the
Queen of Cornwall; nor is his conscience easily re-
conciled to a decision which will deny his wife her
right of motherhood. He is fully aware of the incom-
patible obligations under which he is held, and his
choice between them is made only after bitter heart-
searching.

Iseult's soliloquy in the vigil scene
emphasizes her innate nobility of soul. She is here
far more conscious of sinfulness than was her prototype
in the medieval romances. Just as passionately as she
desires reunion with Tristram she fears that their love
will be his damnation, as she believes it to be hers.
So selfless is her love that she would deny it in order
to secure her lover's salvation; she exclaims:

> Nay, Lord, I pray thee let him love not me,
> Love me not any more, nor like me die,
> And be no more than such a thing as I.
> Turn his heart from me, lest my love too lose
> Thee as I lose thee, and his fair soul refuse

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25 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 90, ll. 18-22.

> For my sake thy fair heaven, and as I fell
> Fall, and be mixed with my soul and with
> hell.[26]

Iseult is thus, in Swinburne's poem, fully aware of the

implications of her submission to love.

The character of Mark in <u>Tristram of Lyonesse</u>

is somewhat ambivalent. He is described as:

> A swart lean man, but kinglike, still of guise,
> With black streaked beard and cold unquiet
> eyes,
> Close-mouthed, gaunt-cheeked, wan as a
> morning moon,
> . . . .
> And way-worn seemed he with life's
> wayfaring.[27]

But Mark, in spite of his gauntness and his "cold

unquiet eyes," is not a sinister figure. He awaits

Iseult's arrival in a mood ". . . fixed between mild

hope and patient pride; . . ."[28] but his first glimpse

of her presents a vision which so surpasses his expect-

ation that he is overcome with reverence for her beauty

and shame for his own unworthiness. It is not Mark but

a felon kinsman who lays the trap to discover Tristram's

love and attempts to kill him, although presumably he

does so with Mark's consent. When, after their death,

Mark learns the cause of the long-drawn suffering of

26 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 97, ll. 22-28.

27 <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 60, ll. 3-5 & 9.

28 <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 60, l. 12.

Tristram and Iseult, he exclaims, weeping:

> Had I wist,
> Ye had never sinned nor died thus, nor had I
> Borne in this doom that bade you sin and die
> So sore a part of sorrow.[29]

Mark is thus, although less so than Tristram and Iseult,
a tragic victim of the love philtre, and a nobler figure
than his counterpart in the Sir Tristrem.

In the medieval romances the character of
Iseult of Brittany is enigmatic. At the time of her
marriage she is sweetly pure in mind and heart; yet at
Tristram's death-bed, her mind, which previously seemed
incapable of an ignoble thought, suddenly conceives an
evil plan whereby to cause Tristram to die of grief.
Tennyson avoided this perplexing inconsistency in her
character by following that account of Tristram's death
given in the Morte d'Arthur; Arnold, by inventing a
new conclusion to the tale. In Tristram of Lyonesse,
Swinburne followed the earlier medieval version, but
removed the inconsistency by explaining it as a gradual
transformation of character.

When Tristram first encounters Iseult of
Brittany, she is the timid maiden of the traditional
legend:

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29 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 167, ll. 14-17.

> She looked on him and loved him; but being
> young
> Made shamefastness a seal upon her tongue,
> And on her heart, that none might hear her
> cry,
> Set the sweet signet of humility.[30]

Such is the maiden who becomes his wife. During

Tristram's sojourn with Iseult at Joyous Gard, however,

lonely and anguished brooding over her situation

transforms her sweet love for her husband into bitter

hatred of him. Swinburne explains that:

> . . . all that year in Brittany forlorn,
> More sick at heart with wrath than fear
> of scorn
> And less in love with love than grief,
> and less
> With grief than pride of spirit and
> bitterness,
> Till all the sweet life of her blood
> was changed
> And all her soul from all her past estranged
> And all her will with all itself at strife
> And all her mind at war with all her life,
> Dwelt the white-handed Iseult, maid and
> wife. . . .[31]

The wife to whom Tristram returns after the Joyous

Gard interlude is thus as consciously and wilfully

evil as she was unconsciously virtuous in the early

days of her marriage. When Tristram, mortally wounded

while rescuing his young namesake's bride, begs Ganhardine

to summon the Irish Iseult, and explains the device of the

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30 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 81, ll. 31-34.

31 Ibid., p. 121, ll. 1-9.

white and black signal sails, the Breton Iseult overhears:

> And hard within her heavy heart she cursed
> Both, and her life was turned to fiery thirst,
> And all her soul was hunger, and its breath
> Of hope and life a blast of raging death.
> For only in hope of evil was her life.[32]

The deception of Tristram which causes his death is thus motivated not by an apparently sudden whim of jealousy, but by a conscious, all-consuming passion for vengeance.

Tristram of Lyonesse is a masterpiece of technical craftsmanship. Of Swinburne's poem, Edward Thomas says:

> All his characteristic ways with words help
> to enrich the poem, chiming of words,
> repetition, duplication and balancing of
> words and thoughts, abundance of full vowels
> and especially of the vowel of "light" and
> "fire."[33]

Technical devices are employed to enhance the lyrical beauty of the lines and to emphasize the dramatic significance of narrative passages. Abundant alliteration decorates and rhythmically reinforces the flowing heroic couplets of the poem. An extensive use of metaphor and of simile in the epic manner lends colour and richness to the descriptive passages. Perhaps the most interesting device is the technique of echo, in which by repet-

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32 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 155, ll. 25-29.

33 Thomas, p. 217.

ition of words and ideas or by an emphasized similar-
ity of situations, the thematic significance of an
episode is accentuated, often with ironic effect.

The structural balance of the poem establish-
es a significant pattern. The first canto, which des-
cribes the inception of love in the lives of Tristram
and Iseult, is entitled "The Sailing of the Swallow;"
the last canto, in which love brings them at last to
death and the end of sorrow, is "The Sailing of the
Swan." The canto which presents the forest bower
interlude is followed by that devoted to Tristram's
grief in separation from Iseult; "The Maiden Marriage"
is followed by a portrayal of Iseult's grief; and "Joyous
Gard" precedes the portrayal of the Breton Iseult's
growing hatred of Tristram during their separation. The
pattern in these six cantos is thus one of alternate
union and separation, joy and grief.

This balancing of situations is paralleled
by an echoing of similar words in contrasting situations.
Such echoes occur between the first canto and the eighth
and ninth. The moment before the drinking of the love
philtre is described as:

> The last hour of their hurtless hearts at rest,
> The last that peace should touch them, breast
> to breast,

> The last that sorrow far from them should sit,
> This last was with them, and they knew not it.[34]

These words describing the last hour of innocence and
ignorance of their fate are echoed in canto eight, in
the scene of the lovers' last parting, made in full aware-
ness of the death which awaits them; the moment of
parting is:

> The last time ere the travel were begun
> Whose goal is unbeholden of the sun,
> The last wherewith love's eyes might yet be lit,
> Came, and they could but dream they knew not it.[35]

The moment of first love is similarly echoed in the
moment of death. In the first avowal of love:

> Their heads neared, and their hands were
> drawn in one,
> And they saw dark, though still the
> unsunken sun
> Far through fine rain shot fire into the
> south;
> And their four lips became one burning mouth.[36]

When love's fire in Tristram has at last been extinguish-
ed by death, Iseult:

> . . . came and stood above him newly dead,
> And felt his death upon her; and her head
> Bowed, as to reach the spring that slakes all
> drouth;
> And their four lips became one silent mouth.[37]

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34 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 55, ll. 19-22.

35 Ibid., p. 130, ll. 27-30.

36 Ibid., p. 57, ll. 7-10.

37 Ibid., p. 165, ll. 13-16.

This description of the love-death thus echoes that of
the birth of love.

In the last canto, a word echo is employed
with ironic effect. As the Breton Iseult keeps vigil
by Tristram's death-bed:

> . . . hatred thrilled her to the hands and feet,
> Listening: for always back reiterate came
> The passionate faint burden of her name.[38]

It was this same "passionate faint burden" which, in
the third canto, convinced her that it was she whom
Tristram loved; hearing him sing of "Iseult," she
innocently assumed the song was for her. On their
marriage night, Tristram remembered his love for the
Irish Iseult and their sharing of the philtre:

> . . . and he spake
> Aloud one burning word for love's keen sake--
> 'Iseult'; and full of love and lovelier fear
> A virgin voice gave answer--'I am here.'[39]

The dramatic irony of this response contrasts with the
conscious irony of the same reply in the later scene.
In his delirium Tristram confuses the two Iseults, and
says:

> Seeing hardly through dark dawn her doubtful
>   head,
> 'Iseult?' and like a death-bell faint and
>   clear
> The virgin voice rang answer--'I am here.'[40]

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38 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 156, 1. 32 - p. 157, 1. 2.

39 Ibid., p. 92, 11. 11-14.

40 Ibid., p. 163, 11. 2-4.

The word echo thus establishes an ironic contrast
between self-deception and self-awareness, and between
the circumstances of Tristram's marriage-bed and those
of his death-bed.

There are both structural balance and echoing
of words between the invocation to love with which the
"Prelude" opens and that to fate which commences the
concluding canto. The story of the love of Tristram
and Iseult begins:

> Love, that is first and last of all things
> made,
> The light that has the living world for shade,
> The spirit that for temporal veil has on
> The souls of all men woven in unison,
>
> . . . .
> Through many and lovely thoughts and much
> desire
> Led these twain to the life of tears and fire;
> Through many and lovely days and much delight
> Led these twain to the lifeless life of
> night.[41]

Canto nine, in which the lovers come to the end of
their "life of tears and fire" and enter "the lifeless
life of night," begins with this invocation:

> Fate, that was born ere spirit and flesh were
> made,
> The fire that fills man's life with light and
> shade;
> The power beyond all godhead which puts on
> All forms of multitudinous unison,
>
> . . . .
> Through many and wearied days of foiled desire
> Leads life to rest where tears no more take fire;

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41 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 25, ll. 1-4 & p. 26, ll. 17-
20.

> Through many and weary dreams of quenched
> delight
> Leads life through death past sense of day
> and night.[42]

The canto in which the love story terminates thus recalls
the "Prelude," and contrasts its turbulence with the
tranquillity of eternal rest.

The strange fate of Merlin, who sleeps forever
by the enchantment of Nimue, is first introduced in the
opening canto of the poem. Merlin has been put under
Nimue's spell not because, as in Arnold's "Tristram and
Iseult," she is weary of his love, but because he is
weary of life. In canto six, Tristram and Iseult speak
wistfully of Merlin, who:

> Takes his strange rest at heart of slumberland,
> More deep asleep in green Broceliande
> Than shipwrecked sleepers in the soft green sea
> Beneath the weight of wandering waves. . . .[43]

Merlin and Nimue are enabled by their supernatural powers
to achieve a mystic union of love even after his depart-
ure from life:

> Yea, heart in heart is molten, hers and his,
> Into the world's heart and the soul that is
> Beyond or sense or vision. . . .[44]

Tristram and Iseult long for the tranquillity of this

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42 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 150, ll. 1-4 & p. 151,
ll. 13-18.

43 Ibid., p. 115, ll. 23-26.

44 Ibid., p. 116, ll. 19-21.

spiritual union in death, which they fear can never be
theirs. After their death, a tomb was erected for them
in Cornwall, but, Swinburne says, it has since been buried
by the sea. And thus, just as Merlin sleeps under the
green leaves which resemble the green sea, so Tristram
and Iseult achieve their eternal rest:

> . . . peace they have that none may gain who
>   live,
> And rest about them that no love can give,
> And over them, while death and life shall be,
> The light and sound and darkness of the sea.[45]

Throughout the poem, by the device of pathetic
fallacy, the wind and the sea echo the various emotions
of the principal characters. W. B. D. Henderson says
of Swinburne that in this poem:

> He gives to his Tristram and Iseult in their
> "life of tears and fire" the rapture and
> grief of the sea for sympathy; he makes their
> melancholy and their glory germane to the
> stars.[46]

In "The Sailing of the Swallow" the sea is at first
merry, reflecting the innocent merriment of the still-
innocent pair, and then storm-tossed, foreshadowing the
stormy emotions which they are soon to suffer. During
Iseult's soul-searching vigil on the night of Tristram's
marriage, the storm of wind and sea echoes each phase of

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[45] "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 168, ll. 5-8.

[46] Henderson, p. 232.

her anguished soliloquy; she believes herself damned:

> And as man's anguish clamouring cried the wind,
> And as God's anger answering rang the sea.[47]

She prays for mercy:

> And like man's heart relenting sighed the wind,
> And as God's wrath subsiding sank the sea.[48]

The pathetic fallacy occurs again in canto six, where the Breton Iseult's hatred of Tristram is reflected in a storm over the sea at sunset:

> So mused she till the fire in sea and sky
> Sank, and the north-west wind spake harsh
> on high,
> And like the sea's heart waxed her heart
> that heard,
> Strong, dark, and bitter, till the keen
> wind's word
> Seemed of her own soul spoken, and the breath
> All round her not of darkness but of death.[49]

Similar passages accompany the expression of grief and joy throughout the poem.

There are also images in which the sea corresponds to mankind and the sun to the light and fire of love. In canto one, Tristram sings:

> Love, as the sun and sea are thou and I,
> Sea without sun dark, sun without sea
> bright. . . .[50]

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47 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 101, ll. 20-21.

48 Ibid., p. 103, ll. 14-15.

49 Ibid., p. 128, ll. 15-20.

50 Ibid., p. 50, ll. 32-33.

During the forest interlude, Iseult awakens to find

Tristram bending over her:

> And with the lovely laugh of love that takes
> The whole soul prisoner ere the whole sense
>   wakes,
> Her lips for love's sake bade love's will be
>   done.
> And all the sea lay subject to the sun.[51]

As the sea is subject to the sun, so Iseult is here

totally submissive to love. Again, in the eighth canto,

Swinburne describes the

> Limitless love that lifts the stirring sea
> When on her bare bright bosom as a bride
> She takes the young sun, perfect in his pride,
> Home to his place with passion. . . .[52]

Throughout the poem, reunion of the lovers is equated

with the relation of sun and sea.

In some passages the sea becomes a symbol of

liberty, as it frequently is in the works of Swinburne.

Of Swinburne's poetry, T. E. Welby says:

> . . . the ceaseless and vehement aspiration
> to liberty is no accident . . . liberty is
> the vital principle of Swinburne, animating .
> . . all of his work that is truly alive . . . .
> He brought to [liberty] . . . the ardour with
> which he entered into the life of her supreme
> symbol, the sea . . . .[53]

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51 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 72, ll. 15-18.

52 _Ibid._, p. 143, ll. 2-5.

53 Welby, p. 4.

It is notable that the love of Tristram and Iseult is engendered while they share the liberty of the sea. Later, Tristram preserves his liberty by leaping from a chantry window into the sea in order to escape death. On the morning of his last battle, he swims far out to sea, and there enjoys a sense of liberation from the grief of his separation from Iseult. It is by means of the sea that Iseult escapes from the fetters of life in Mark's court and is brought to Tristram's death-bed. Finally, the engulfing of the lovers' tomb by the sea symbolizes the liberty which they achieve in death, the liberation from "the life of tears and fire" which only death can give.

In <u>Tristram of Lyonesse</u>, the Tristram legend is retold for its own beauty. There is no allegory beyond the implicit one of the relation of love and death, the bittersweetness of love and its resolution in the tranquillity of death. The story is given much as it must have been in the <u>Tristan</u> of Thomas, from which the northern <u>Sir Tristrem</u> was derived. In plot, characterization, and theme, Swinburne's poem is faithful to the medieval versions of the legend.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Although the versions of the Tristram legend
given by Arnold, Tennyson and Swinburne differ conspic-
uously in many ways, they have in common the influence
of the age in which and for which they were written.
Examination of the differences among these three treat-
ments of the legend reveals also a fundamental simil-
arity among them.

Some of the differences in plot and charact-
erization arise obviously from differences in the
sources which these poets employed. As has been shown
in the previous chapters,[1] Arnold drew his material
largely from La Villemarqué's summary, Tennyson from
the _Morte d'Arthur_, and Swinburne primarily from the
northern _Sir Tristrem_, supplemented by episodes from the
Morte d'Arthur and from the poems included in Michel's
Recueil. Tennyson's version is thus based ultimately
upon the prose _Tristan_, whereas the narratives of Arnold

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1 _Supra_, pp. 50-54, 79, & 105-110.

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and Swinburne depend largely upon the <u>version courtoise</u> of Thomas's <u>Tristan</u> and its derivatives. The differences in plot and characterization between these two traditions of the Tristram legend are great, as has been shown in Chapter I. However, since the selection of sources was only in Swinburne's case not dictated by circumstance--for Arnold was unaware of the variety of sources available, and Tennyson's choice was impeded by a previous commitment to the Arthurian framework-- differences in treatment which can be attributed to different source materials do not constitute a reliable basis for comparison of the three Victorian versions.

All three poets made certain alterations in the plot and characterization given by their source material. Arnold altered the character of Iseult of Brittany and her behaviour at Tristram's death-bed in order to present her as a consistently virtuous, noble, and long-suffering woman, and as a symbol of the Stoic way of life. Tennyson invented the scene of the Tournament of the Dead Innocence and increased the degradation of the principal characters begun in his source in order to adapt the legend to its role in the moral allegory of the <u>Idylls of the King</u>. Swinburne

omitted Iseult of Ireland's cruelty to Brangwain, and
selected and reordered episodes from the traditional
story in order to ennoble the lovers and emphasize the
thematic love element of the legend. Since these alt-
erations in plot and character are influenced by the
purpose for which each poem was written, differences
in treatment arising from such alterations can be
attributed to the differing purposes governing the
three poems.

The didactic purpose of Arnold's "Tristram
and Iseult" is explicit in Part III, in the "critic-
ism of life" passage, where Arnold reveals the sig-
nificance of the central problem of Tristram's div-
ided loyalty. The two loves between which Tristram
is torn can be regarded as symbolic of the Romantic
and Stoic ways of life, and Tristram's dilemma as
reflecting the division of Arnold's own loyalty between
the life of the emotions and the life of the intellect.[2]
In this passage Arnold rejects the life of pure reason
which, by denying the emotions, ". . . leaves the fierce
necessity to feel,/ But takes away the power."[3] But he
rejects also the life of uncontrolled Romantic individ-

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2 Supra, p. 73.

3 "Tristram and Iseult," iii, 123-124.

ualism, in which the subjection of reason by the
emotions renders man an easy prey to ". . . this fool
passion. . . ."[4] Tristram, in preferring Iseult of
Ireland to Iseult of Brittany, has chosen the life of
the senses and abandoned himself to passion. His choice
is clearly wrong in Arnold's view, since it causes not
only the lovers' deaths but also the wife's suffering,
and makes her an innocent victim of the passion which
she herself resisted. Arnold's sympathy for the Breton
Iseult is thus dictated by his rejection of both the life
of the senses and the life of pure reason. As he port-
rays her, she has avoided both abandonment to passion
and denial of the emotions, and is therefore not dest-
royed by suffering, but able to endure it; her Stoic way
of life represents the best solution Arnold can offer to
the problem of his divided loyalty. "Tristram and Iseult"
is thus an implicitly didactic poem, intended to draw
attention to the dilemma which Arnold suffered in his own
life and perceived in his age, and to present the solut-
ion which he advocated.

Tennyson's purpose in "The Last Tournament" is
avowedly didactic, since his treatment of the Tristram
legend is designed to sustain the moral allegory of the

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4 "Tristram and Iseult," iii, 134.

<u>Idylls of the King</u>. During his lifetime Tennyson, as

F. E. L. Priestley asserts,[5] was deeply concerned with

the growing materialism which he perceived in the society

of his age. Commenting on the purpose of the <u>Idylls</u>,

Priestley says:

> The <u>Idylls</u> present in allegory the phil-
> osophy which pervades the whole of
> Tennyson's poetry, the philosophy which he
> felt it necessary to assert throughout his
> poetic lifetime. Penetrating all his
> poetry is the strong faith in the eternal
> world of spirit. . . . The assertion of the
> validity and necessity of idealism is re-
> inforced by continual warnings of the dangers
> of materialism. . . .[6]

In the <u>Idylls</u> Tennyson illustrates, by the disastrous

consequences of Guinevere's preference for the worldly

comforts of Lancelot's love and her consequent failure

to embrace Arthur's idealism, how such a failure leads

from the crime of sense to the crime of malice, and ult-

imately to the destruction of man and society. The

idealism which Tennyson strives to restore to his age is

that of the principles of Christianity. Priestley says:

> He wants to make the reader understand
> how these principles become neglected, and
> what must happen to individuals and societies
> who neglect them. He is voicing a warning
> to his own age and nation, and to all ages
> and nations.[7]

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5 F. E. L. Priestley, "Tennyson's <u>Idylls</u>," <u>University of Toronto Quarterly</u>, XIX (October, 1949), 48.

6 <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 48-49.

7 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 49.

The didactic purpose of the _Idylls_ is to convey this warning. The Tristram legend is employed in "The Last Tournament" to depict the fatal consequences of adultery, which Tristram in Tennyson's version commits because of his failure to respect and adopt Arthur's idealism.

In Swinburne's _Tristram of Lyonesse_, the legend is treated chiefly for its own beauty. Implied in the exaltation of human love, which is conceived as a passion at once physical and spiritual, there is, however, a criticism of the Puritan distrust of passion which Swinburne perceived in the moral code of his age. His attack upon the hypocrisy which he detected in the Puritan morality is implicit in his portrait of Iseult of Brittany. During Tristram's absence, as her love for him is gradually transformed into hatred, she disguises her malice with a mask of self-righteous Puritan piety. She attempts to justify her passion for vengeance by a hypocritical abhorrence of adultery:

> Nor seemed the wrath which held her spirit
> in stress
> Aught else or worse than passionate holiness,
> Nor the ardent hate which called on judgment's
> rod
> More hateful than the righteousness of God.[8]

8 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 124, ll. 25-28.

In her prayer, she exclaims to God:

> Do I not well, being angry? doth not hell
> Require them? yea, thou knowest that I do
> well.[9]

Ironically, her hatred exceeds in its passionate intensity the passionate love which she so abhors. Just as her malice causes Tristram's death, so, Swinburne would have us infer, hypocritical Puritan morality can destroy an ennobling, sanctifying love. Thus in _Tristram of Lyonesse_, there is a didactic purpose in the implicit criticism of the morality of Swinburne's age.

Although the didactic purposes governing the treatments of the Tristram legend by Arnold, Tennyson and Swinburne are different, each poet wrote for the Victorian age, and was influenced in his purpose by his view of the contemporary society and its problems. The differences in purpose thus arise chiefly out of differing views of that society. Arnold's rejection of the life of the senses was a reaction against the lingering influence of Romanticism, the consequences of which caused him concern both for his own future and for that of his age. Tennyson perceived in Victorian society the pernicious influence of ignoble materialism, and sought to combat the encroaching corruption by proclaiming the moral necessity of idealism. Even Swinburne's revolt against the Victorian distrust of passion reveals the

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9 "Tristram of Lyonesse," p. 125, 11. 3-4.

influence of his age, since the hypocrisy inherent in
its moral code inspired both his rejection of it and
his compensatory exaltation of passionate love. The
treatments of the Tristram legend given by these three
Victorian poets thus have in common a didactic purpose
and the influence of the age in which and for which
they were written, and differ according to the various
aspects of the age which the writers selected for
criticism and instruction.

Of the three Victorian treatments, Tristram
of Lyonesse is clearly the most faithful to the spirit
of the traditional legend. Arnold was prevented by
his distrust of passion and Tennyson by the demands of
his allegorical framework from giving the love story the
sympathetic treatment it received in the medieval
metrical romances. Only in Swinburne's poem is the
love story permitted to resume its former prominence.
The love which Swinburne depicts has neither the courtly
element of the love in Thomas's poem nor the mysticism
associated with it in the Tristan of Gottfried von
Strassburg. But in plot and characterization, and in
the thematic exaltation of love itself, Swinburne's
poem is refreshingly faithful to the spirit of the trad-
itional legend as it was narrated by Thomas and Gottfried
von Strassburg.

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