

Aspirations and anxiety in tristan and isolde essay

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Aspirations and Anxiety in Tristan and Isolde Truly the medieval period during which Tristan and Isolde (Hatto, 1967) was written was one of great dynamic change. It seemed that for once there became a period of treaties and interchange between kingdoms and territories, as opposed to the pure feudalism and warring of localities seen prior to this.

Naturally this opened up a new area of opportunities for not only royals, but all elites. This feeling of opportunity through the change of the times provided a great sense of renewed aspirations for those with the abilities to travel abroad. Treaties were signed, relationships kindled and the houses of royals and elites' fortunes were now thrown together. Unfortunately, this growing together touched with some leftover medieval cynicism also provided a sense or feeling of great anxiety. There was the anxious feeling always of having opened oneself up to potential treachery and resultant tragedy.

The stories of Tristan and Isolde, along with other literary expressions of the time, look into, explore and then develop this anxiety and aspiration found among the elites. Through its text we see this paradox over and over. The more aspirations and opportunities seized, the more anxiety there came with them. Never could the heroes truly relax. In some fashion, the stories show just how complicated the lives of the elites could now be.

In the simpler feudal system, there was no anxiety that came with these overarching aspirations. The local elites expected constant land challenges and learned not to trust. This all changed by the time of Tristan.

His story is rife with accepted and rejected treaties, accepted and rejected loyalties. A perfect exploration of this is found in what becomes the prelude to Tristan's life. It is the initial vignette of Rivalin. His life is the story of Parmenie, Brittany, of France. Somehow Rivalin overcomes the existing rivalry of reality between the relations of France and England; a mistrust that would only grow as did the future empires and kingdoms of both realms. It is as if Rivalin can now not hold himself back. This is found in the elites of the time.

The dynamism of the moment nearly obligated them to seek opportunity and change and knowledge. Thus Rivalin became a foreign traveler and went to Cornwall in England. His aspirations landed him in good stead with King Mark at Tintagel and they were bound by loyalty. This is an important concept to understand and be aware of and sets this time period apart from the prior era. Loyalty is offered, whereas the earlier fealty is forced. Fealty betrayed is expected, while loyalty betrayed is treachery.

It is the latter that creates a built in anxiety - something that is shown through these stories. This is true of the continued experience of Rivalin, forebear to Tristan. Had he no aspirations, he would have had no such anxiety.

It is through his gaining access to King Mark's court that he then gains access to the highness' sister, Princess Blancheflor. Once this aspiration is consummated, the anxiety of the deed is simultaneously present. This anxiety grows until Rivalin feels compelled to hide from reality and escape back to France. Thus is this tension between the period's aspirations and

anxieties of elites clearly demonstrated. There is a constant back and forth between the two, with absolutely no balance. The dynamic period with this ebb and flow does nothing to relieve the pressure. It is analogous to the rise of beautiful mountain ranges - the aspiration of the land upwards is only brought on by the anxiety of land masses crushing together.

There must be escape from this precarious existence in order to aspire to its later beauty. Nowhere is this clearer than in the offspring of Rivalin and Blanche-flor. His name alone, Tristan, is derived from the word for sorrow. We are expected, then, to understand that again, aspirations crushed by anxieties will only result then in sorrow. The complicated social world ensures this. The rest of the tale of Tristan and Isolde considers this point through its many stories. It is the demonstration of this lifelong tension that is reflective of the era long tension found in the elite's world.

Over and again, Tristan aspires to previously unknown opportunities. Over and again his aspirations create within him great anxiety. This anxiety is far from unfounded. Apart from any examples of this theme involving warfare, the clearest one is an early moment. It is the chess match between Tristan and the Norwegian. This is an obvious declaratory moment.

Tristan is the hero of elite's aspirations. The Norwegian represents an area of opportunity. But again, this is not an easy time. What better way to explain aspiration and anxiety than through a chess match? This game of strategy, of attempting to gain ground while not revealing oneself is the game that the elites were playing. It is the game that Tristan was playing. The anxiety is a result of anticipated treachery, of being unwittingly

outflanked and disappointed. This is especially true when opposing parties, as in the chess match, have conflicting aspirations. Then one of them must come away frustrated in his efforts.

The rest of the works regarding Tristan, and later Isolde, are more pictures of this give and take. For each aspiration, anxiety comes along. This is particularly true when the aspirations of the person are somehow lacking morally.

Then the full angst of the situation occurs. Half-truths and outright lies begin to accompany the goals. This is quite the cynical observation of the times! It shows a built in mistrust, and the anticipation and anxiety of treachery. This anticipation makes the person to protect himself, as in Tristan's cover ups about whom he is. At all times, Tristan must keep himself from being too fully known - to King Mark, who he doesn't tell he is related, to Queen Isolde, who he tells he is married and must get away, to his dual roles as Tantris the Minstrel and Tristan the knight. The partnership of aspiration to greater things and anxiety from perhaps reaching too far and being discovered is constantly a part of the tales. Thomas, when he picks up the story relates this anxiety to the symbol of poison.

The anxiety surrounding treachery, that of being thwarted in one's efforts at advancement, poisons the hopes. By common sense, this should be avoided. But Thomas is commenting that the elites cannot do away with their aspirations, and then determine to run the risks. They only hope that their anxiety is not fulfilled.

But this of course cannot always be. Secondary literature of this time shows that this is a pervasive theme. Walther von der Vogelweide, a German poet, expressed this very idea in many of his writings (Hone, 1832, p. 121). Most obviously, this was demonstrated in A Mournful One: "A mournful one am I, above whose head A day of perfect bliss hath never past; Whatever joys my soul have ravished, Soon was the radiance of those joys o'er cast.

And none can show me that substantial pleasure Which will not pass away like bloom from flowers; Therefore, no more my heart such joys shall treasure, Nor pine for fading sweets and fleeting hours." In this poem the 'joys' are the aspirations of the person able to dream such dreams: the elite. But simultaneously these joys are overcast and fade. The anxiety is omnipresent. It is the exact idea expressed at length in the story of Tristan and Isolde. The great transformations that took place in Europe, both mainland and England, brought equally great hope. The social and political elites were coming out of their feudal shells. They sought the newfound opportunities found in foreign travel and treaty.

New loyalties were sought and made. These were the times of the elite's aspirations. Experience from the previous times, though, poisoned the hopes with the anxiety of fear and treachery.

Through Tristan and Isolde and the poetry of Vogelweide this precarious balancing act is found, putting the paradox of aspiration and anxiety fully on display. References Hatto, A. (1967). Gottfried von Strassburg: Tristan with the Stories of Tristan of Thomas. New York: Penguin. Hone, W. (1832). The Year Book of Daily Recreation and Information.

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