

# Love as symptom in Beroull's Tristan: the original text and its film version



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Thanks largely, if not entirely, to Shakespeare, audiences today can immediately recognize the promise of a romance in any title featuring the names of two characters. "Before Romeo and Juliet, there was Tristan and Isolde," croons the leading tagline of the 2006 adaptation of the Celtic legend. But even if Tristan & Isolde had not felt the need to make this heavy handed claim to authority by evoking the lovers' more famed Shakespearean successors, (perhaps in an attempt to capitalize on the success of the similarly stylized Romeo + Juliet a decade earlier) audiences likely would have made the association on their own anyway. As it happens, the film does not belie the promises of its tagline, and audiences looking to the 2006 production for a traditional, if predictable and ultimately fledgling, tale of tragic romance will not be disappointed. Audience members turning to Beroul's *The Romance of Tristan* for a similar experience, however, likely will not find the same satisfaction.

Despite literary critic John Halverson's claim that "in all its forms, the story of Tristan and Iseult is above all a love story," Beroul's adaptation largely eschews this classification, or at least any of its recognizable modern conventions (273). Readers expecting in Beroul the passionate confessions of undying, tortured love exchanged between the silver screen's Tristan and Isolde will find little of the same between Beroul's Tristan and Yseut. Instead of tragically tortured star-crossed lovers, Beroul's readers find accidental and largely unwilling lovers, who calmly excuse and occasionally bemoan their love as the inconvenient result of an unfortunate mistake: the accidental drinking of a love potion.

Interestingly, the love potion that is the driving force behind Beroul's tale is notably absent from the film version, creating, I propose, the central distinction between these two adaptations. In the literary world, much is made of the role of the potion in Beroul's version and beyond. In her survey of the legend's best known early incarnations, Beroul's included, Molly Robinson Kelly goes as far as to assert that the drinking of the potion is the most unifying and integral feature of the legend, uniting its various texts as the "paradigmatic core" around which all versions center (180). Kelly goes on to emphasize the importance of the potion throughout the legend's literary tradition, calling it "the legend's most archetypal moment" as well as insisting that the drinking of the potion supersedes the lovers' first meeting as the text's first "pivotal moment" (181, 182). Amongst so much scholarly concern dedicated to the role of the potion across multiple versions of the legend, its complete absence from the film adaptation can hardly be ignored. What this absence does for the film, however, is ultimately less interesting than what it reveals about Beroul's text. The film's removal of the love potion simultaneously removes a confounding and much debated question of the validity of the lovers' romance. Free of this complication, the film is free to soar to the predictable heights of the conventional Hollywood romance. In contrast to the easily recognized silver screen romance of Tristan & Isolde, Beroul's tale emerges not as one of love, but of fate, in many ways more akin to the Greek tragedy than the Shakespearean romance. Mired in the unclear implications of the love potion, love in Beroul is not a driving force, but a mere symptom of the ironic twists of fate that propel the hero to his tragic end.

I.

The love potion is not only pivotal within the legend itself, but is also of crucial concern within literary scholarship surrounding the Tristan romance, and Beroul's work is certainly no exception. In defining what the potion's absence means for the film—and, more importantly, what it illuminates about its presence in Beroul—it may be helpful to first survey common interpretations of the potion as it functions in *The Romance of Tristan*. Broadly, I see the potion serving two main and potentially overlapping functions. First, the potion raises a question as to the validity of the love between the tragic lovers. That is to say, the presence of the potion invites the question of how real or “true” a love generated by a potion can be. Second, the potion surfaces in answer to the debate concerning the lovers' complicity in adultery. Depending on one's stance regarding the implications of the love potion, it can be used to exonerate the lovers from blame.

As Norris J. Lacy neatly summarizes, “The traditional view of Tristan and Isolde is that they are a young couple tragically condemned to an illicit passion which neither of them wants” (21). They are not tragic lovers who doom themselves by falling in love of their own accord. Rather, according to this view, they are accidental lovers who would not have fallen in love at all were it not for the unfortunate intervention of the love potion. This reading is the one most likely to exonerate the couple, treating their love and resultant trysts not as acts of their own accord, but as the inevitable result of the potion over which they have no control. This provides an excuse for their conduct—indeed, one the couple themselves repeatedly turn to in an attempt to defend their actions, claiming that they cannot be held liable for <https://assignbuster.com/love-as-symptom-in-berouls-tristan-the-original-text-and-its-film-version/>

their illicit affair if their feelings are not their own and are merely the product of a potion—absolving them of sin and reconciling both the reader's and the narrator's famed sympathy for the lovers despite their obvious moral transgressions. This reading is, I believe, the one best supported in Beroul's text, wherein the love between Tristan and Yseut is repeatedly referred to as a "mistake" and at times even a "misfortune," implying that their relationship is not one born of true love and would not have occurred at all were it not for Brangain's fateful mix up with the love potion (44, 78).

An alternate reading, however, sees the potion as a metaphor, therefore rejecting the idea that the potion renders their love artificial. Instead, this reading suggests that the potion's powers, because they are irresistible, make the love between Tristan and Yseut all the more real. In this reading, the potion comes to function as a metaphor for the intoxicating and inevitable powers of love. While this reading is certainly more palatable for readers looking to Beroul for a traditional and recognizable love story according to modern conventions, I see little support for it in the text. Even if one takes the romantic approach of seeing the accidental love as fated rather than manufactured, Beroul still treats love as secondary to fate, a mere symptom rather than a cause.

Readers primarily concerned with the lovers' innocence tend to favor the former reading, while those who take true love as their primary concern often trend toward the latter. By removing the presence of the love potion altogether, the film adaptation avoids this complication, simply painting Tristan and Isolde as a tragic couple whose love, as a tearful Isolde declares against the cinematic backdrop of a stormy Irish coast, is no less true simply <https://assignbuster.com/love-as-symptom-in-berouls-tristan-the-original-text-and-its-film-version/>

because it cannot be. While the absence of the potion also eliminates any chance of pardon on behalf of the lovers, their adultery is not likely to cause the same qualms among a twenty-first-century audience as those Beroul's sympathetic portrayal of the sinners may have caused among twelfth-century readers. Ultimately, the absence of the love potion in the film is simply a useful device by which the storyline is simplified into a more palatable love story, in accordance with the conventions of the genre in Hollywood today. The film disposes of this element of the story to eliminate some of the more uncomfortable, and decidedly unromantic, implications of the mystical origins of Tristan and Ysuet's love, conforming the story into the predictable modern romance promised in the tagline. In noting that the absence of the love potion transforms the tale into a conventional love story, it becomes clear that Beroul's commitment to the presence of that element signals a different reading. As Kelly argues, "When the lovers drink the potion, the legend shifts from conventional romance to something radically new: a tale driven by the dark forces of magic and fate" (181). While I disagree that there is anything "radically new" about such a tale, I too argue that Beroul offers a tale of fate rather than the one of love viewers of Tristan & Isolde would expect.

II.

Like most classic tales of twisted fate, Beroul's Romance of Tristan relies heavily on irony, an element almost entirely absent in the film adaptation. Lacy makes much of Beroul's use of irony, citing it as the root of the "esthetic distance between the reader and the story," a detachment that makes it possible for a reader "to enjoy the story intellectually without <https://assignbuster.com/love-as-symptom-in-berouls-tristan-the-original-text-and-its-film-version/>

criticizing it ethically" (22). While my reading takes little concern with the ethical implications of the tale, the irony Lacy points out does create significant distance between the reader and the characters, as he elaborates, " Understanding Beroul's irony, we then view the lovers with a detachment which the traditional attitude toward them does not afford. This distance prevents our identifying with them." This inability to identify with Beroul's characters explains the unfamiliar technique of characterization that Alan Fedrick, in the introduction to *The Romance of Tristan*, numbers among the text's " strange features" that alienate readers accustomed to modern practices and conventions of fiction (Frederick 14). Beginning with the exclusion of the potion, the film eliminates these ironic figures and episodes in an attempt to erase this distance and establish the modern conventions of characterization that audiences will expect from a love story.

Beroul, meanwhile, relies on ironic twists of fate which the film transforms into unironic acts of love. As has already been discussed at length, the main action of Beroul's tale begins with and is propelled by the accidental drinking of the love potion, a twist of fate, while the film version instead presents two lovers who meet and fall in love organically, well before that love becomes complicated by extenuating circumstances. In fact, while Beroul uses irony to emphasize the role of fate over that of love, one of the film's only ironic episodes ultimately reinforces the validity and intentional nature of the love between Tristan and Isolde. In the film, upon first meeting Tristan, Isolde lies about her identity, giving him a false name. They fall in love and later separate, assuming they will never see each other again. When the King of Ireland later holds a tournament in which he promises his daughter, Isolde,

to the winner, Tristan has no idea he is fighting for the hand of his beloved. By the time the discovery is made, to the sincere regret of both characters, Tristan has already promised Isolde to King Marke. While the film makes it clear that Tristan would not have promised Isolde to the king had he known it were her, there is no such implication in Beroul's version, in which Yseut has been promised to the king well before she and Tristan fall in love. In the film, it is an ironic twist of fate that separates the partners, not one that unites them to begin with. In Beroul, love arises as an inconvenience, the impediment to the already agreed-upon transaction.

While the film follows a conventional paradigm of introducing a series of obstacles to impede the lovers' relationship, Beroul sees love itself as the obstacle that obstructs the normal course of events. For this reason, Beroul's characters repeatedly reject and deny their love. While the Isolde of the film makes sweeping declarations asserting the value of their love, vowing, " We both know this cannot be. We've known that from the start. That doesn't mean it isn't true. It is," her Beroulian counterpart argues the opposite, claiming that their love exists only " because of a draught that I drank and he drank." Meanwhile, Beroul's Tristan echoes his lover, also denouncing their love as the mere result of the potion (79). In addition to the lovers' decidedly unromantic habit of literally denying their love for each other, Beroul's Tristan and Yseut do not even truly suffer in the way tragic lovers are expected to. As Halverson points out, Tristan and Ysuet's suffering is, not unlike their love itself, " an incidental matter, never raised to the level of theme and rarely even to the level of awareness" (285). Likewise, both Halverson and Lacy note that when the effects of the love potion wear off,



neither character mourns the loss of their love. Instead, both characters immediately turn to pragmatic concerns of material loss, expressing only “ a desire to regain the comfort and wealth of which passion has deprived them” (Lacy 25). Halverson elaborates, noting that, unlike traditional lovers in distress as a result of “ separation and fulfillment,” Beroul’s Tristan and Yseut endure their most conscious suffering not when they are apart, but in fact when they are together in the forest: “ When the effects of the potion wear off, they are acutely aware of their own and each other’s suffering, and the source of it is explicitly not in each other but in their wretched way of life; their misery is that of separation from civilization” (285). While the film appeals to mainstream audiences with a conventional love-centric plot detailing the struggles Tristan and Isolde endure for the sake of their love, in Beroul’s Romance of Tristan, both the author and his characters repeatedly treat love as a secondary concern.

The film diverges from Beroul’s text again at its conclusion, and once again, this divergence reflects the film’s initial rejection of the love potion plot, illuminating Beroul’s submergence of love beneath the dominant element of fate. In Beroul’s tale, Tristan dies in tragic irony when his wife deliberately lies to him about the color of the sails, leading him to believe Yseut has denied him. In the film, there is no such ironic twist of fate, with Tristan instead meeting his demise in a battle ignited by the discovery of his affair with Isolde. Once again, the movie treats its characters as victims of love, while Beroul sees them as victims of fate. Both incarnations of the tale conclude with the famed image of the intertwining trees growing out of the grave, illustrated in Beroul: “ The story is told of two trees that grew

miraculously, one from Tristan's tomb and one from Yseut's; their branches intertwined over the apse." In the tale's concluding line, Beroul returns once again to the love potion, coyly revealing that "some" attribute the indomitable powers of the trees to the presence of the love potion in Tristan and Yseut's bodies (165). In the film, however, a still-living Isolde plants the trees, once again turning one of Beroul's acts of fate into a deliberate act of love.

Viewers of *Tristan & Isolde* encounter a comfortable and familiar Hollywood romance that steadily, if tepidly, checks off all the boxes when it comes to satisfying the expectations of the genre. As one *New York Times* critic notes, "There is something undeniably pleasant about an entertainment like *Tristan & Isolde* that delivers exactly what it promises, no less, no more" (Dargis). Beroul's *Romance of Tristan*, however, will not afford the same satisfaction to fans of the movie looking to its literary predecessor for a continuation of the film's predictable adherence to generic norms. Instead, readers of Beroul will find a tale of tragic fate in which love functions almost incidentally, as a rather inconvenient side effect. In his dedication to weaving a tale of fate, Beroul tells a love story between Tristan and Ysuet no more than Sophocles can be said to tell one between Oedipus and his mother. Time and again in *The Romance of Tristan*, love emerges as a mere symptom of fate—incidental, accidental, and never a driving force. Beroul's romance is by no means the Shakespearean love story its silver screen adaptation promises. It isn't a love story at all.

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