

Bad tristan and jolly good king mark



The themes of misinterpretation and passivity are threaded throughout Beroul's text "The Romance of Tristan": characters often misread signs and events, as well as each other. There are several key misinterpretations in the story that reveal where the author's true sympathies lie. Because most of what happens to Tristan can be attributed to people or events that are out of his hands, he is blamed by neither the other characters nor himself, and never assumes a truly penitent role. Though this may be Tristan's romance by title, he is certainly not the character with whom readers are intended to empathize. King Mark often misinterprets circumstances as well, but to vastly different ends. His indecisiveness is at times endearing, and though he is the enemy of our "hero", his character is ultimately cast in a more positive light than the titular protagonist. The events that take place in the text are rarely motivated by Tristan's hand: Tristan makes few, if any, decisions on his own. A pattern emerges in which Beroul repeatedly reveals Tristan's inefficacy to the reader, but because the other characters in the text do not see Tristan's flaws, he remains the hero. He is in love with Isolde, but it is only because of a potion: "[t]he wine they drank, which caused them so much torment" (Beroul 250) is at fault. The fact that even though Tristan loves Isolde he could choose not to give in to his desires is never discussed. In fact, "as a symbol, the potion is quite uncourtly since it stands for an emotion totally unrelated to courtly values" (Kunzer 149); even the means through which Tristan finds love casts him in a negative light. It is Governal who provides Tristan with a way to escape his execution, by giving him a sword and hauberk and urging him to refrain from returning to rescue Isolde: "If his master had not urged him not to go, he would have returned in spite of all the people of Tintagel, without fear for his life" (Beroul 238). Tristan is

ready to make a hasty and unwise decision, and stops only because he is advised against it, enabling him to reunite with his lover. Later, it is Isolde who contrives a plan (Broul 262) in which Tristan dresses as a leper, thereby freeing them from the justified accusations held against them. Nothing that happens is Tristan's doing: he is a fugitive, at odds with his lord and uncle, but only because the King's barons are bent on destroying him out of hatred. Though they are completely within the bounds of their duties in informing the king of Tristan's illicit activities, having actually witnessed "Isolde with Tristan in a compromising position; and several times they had seen them lying naked in King Mark's bed" (Broul 234), they are cursed as "evil men". Once Tristan and Isolde become outcasts and outlaws, the lovers flee with Governal to hide in the forest. At one point, Governal beheads a baron that had been one of Tristan's nemeses, and brings the head to Tristan (Broul 246). When the baron's hunting party finds him cut to pieces, they retreat to court, and the incident becomes common knowledge throughout Cornwall. Broul's diction is particularly important here: he writes that the people realize that the baron who had been beheaded was one "who had caused trouble between Tristan and the king" (Broul 246). They have no knowledge of who actually committed the murder, but because the baron is identified only in relation to Tristan, Tristan becomes the one responsible in the minds of the citizens. "All the people were afraid, and they avoided the forest... [they] feared that the valiant Tristan would find [them]" (Broul 246). The baron's hunters, along with the people of Cornwall, assume that Tristan is the one who dispatched the baron. They not only misinterpret the event, but do not hesitate in swiftly placing responsibility on the most convenient head. The murder of the baron moves along the plot; with people afraid to enter

the forest, Tristan and Isolde are given free reign over the area, with little fear of being discovered. However, the fact that they alone reside in the forest casts them in a rather negative light: the forest is associated with evil and darkness, and is now home to two people who, despite winning the sympathies of the populace, are in fact criminals. The fact that Broul uses the word “fear” to refer to the people’s feelings about Tristan tells the reader how to feel about the lovers. Though the people may interpret their own fear as admiration for a “valiant” knight, the author describes it differently. Tristan is indeed dangerous, even if he has not committed the crime of which he has been accused. This is perhaps why Broul does not simply have Tristan murder the baron: because Broul offers flashes of Tristan’s character to which the other characters in the text are not privy, the reader is allowed to be more objective when making moral judgments. Though the reader sees Tristan as inactive, the other characters in the text do not view him this way. As a result of his inertia, the reader begins to see Tristan in a very negative light: “The accidental love of Tristan and Isold[e], an emotion initially unwelcome to them both, is uncourtly” (Kunzer 149). The love is neither welcome nor earned. According to the criteria of courtly love, a man must earn affection through “purifying travail in her service...before he becomes worthy of, and is entitled to, his reward” (Kunzer 142). Tristan obtains Isolde’s love without any trial in her service; basically, he is undeserving. Courtly virtues include loyalty, discipline, and patience, none of which the lovers possess. Even though the other characters in the text overlook his considerable flaws, Tristan is loyal to nobody and demonstrates remarkable impatience and immobility. From the beginning, King Mark is described as Tristan’s opposite: a constantly changing character: a “well-

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known characteristic of the king is his quickly changing mood, the duality of his feelings” (Tyson 69). This is revealed in the very opening lines of the text, where we first see Mark leaning against a tree, listening to the pretend lamentations of his wife and nephew. “ He was so overcome by pity that nothing could keep him from crying. His sorrow was great, and he hated the dwarf of Tintagel” (Broul 230). Mark is an emotional character, easily moved by feelings and passions. He is inspired to hate the dwarf in mere moments, despite the fact that this diminutive person is only trying to help him. The reader is also aware that the dwarf is telling the truth. This tactic of revealing truths to the reader while hiding them from the characters not only builds tension, but enables the reader to recognize the human folly of the characters. We immediately see that Mark is as susceptible to deception as anyone else. Like Tristan, he often makes decisions based on what others tell him, rather than on his own thoughts and beliefs. He is also immensely impressionable, and the language he uses when he is first encountered in the text warns the reader to be wary of this tendency. He weeps, “ the dwarf deceived me! He has made me climb this tree and has shamed me completely. He made me believe a lie” (Broul 230). The fact that someone was able to “ make” the king climb a tree is the first sign that perhaps the king is a little too trusting. The dwarf certainly did not force the king to believe his information; it was freely received and believed. Mark could easily have chosen to distrust his veracity. Instead, he is left feeling like a fool for having believed the dwarf. Mark is very easily deceived, and though it is a fault, the fact that he recognizes his failings makes him more likeable: “[He] is himself aware that he is gullible and that this impairs his judgment... he regrets having believed the dwarf” (Tyson 70), so much so that he vows

that “[n]ever again would he mistrust them because of what a slanderer said” (Broul 232). Although he is susceptible to others’ opinions, when he does make judgments on his own they generally stem from pity or kindness. When Mark comes upon the lovers in the forest, they are not touching bodies, they are clothed, and a sword lies between them. Upon seeing this, Mark assumes that he was mistaken, and that Tristan and Isolde are not really lovers; he exchanges rings with Isolde and swords with Tristan, and leaves his gloves as a sign that he means the two no harm (Broul 249). Mark’s gross misreading of the situation occurs for several reasons. On one level, it is a technique used to delay the ending of the story. Without confrontation, the characters must continue to read one another’s behaviors (often incorrectly) rather than duel or communicate via words. More than anything, however, Mark’s interpretation of the situation is intended to show us that he has feelings – feelings that are his own and that occur out of real love, without the assistance of a potion. He admits to himself that “[n]ow that I have seen how they behave together, I do not know what to do” (Broul 249). This admission stands in direct contrast to Tristan’s tendency to make hasty decisions without thinking, or even feeling. Mark’s folly is that he is human: we see this also in his sincere desire for the approval of others. He says that had he awoken them and someone had been killed, “ people would condemn my actions” (Broul 249). Even in the heat of passion, Mark is able to stop, change his mood, and alter his emotions. This is something that Tristan not only does not do, but does not even attempt. Mark is deeply gullible, swayed in any direction by an even mildly persuasive argument, and naively blind to the illicit love harbored by Tristan and Isolde. Mark is also, however, an extremely sympathetic and kind person. He says, “ I do not

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want them killed, either by me or by any of my men” (Broul 248), despite the fact that he is completely within his rights to murder them both on the spot for their betrayal. “ In the forest hut episode, his tenderness in wanting to shield [Isolde] from the sun is obvious” (Tyson 71): he “ gently placed [his] gloves so as to block the sun’s rays from Isolde’s face” (Broul 249). Mark’s misinterpretation of the scene is just that: a pure, human, naive misinterpretation. It leaves him precisely as he was before: a kind, somewhat simple-minded, cuckold. When Tristan and Isolde awaken, Tristan makes his most crucial misinterpretation of a situation. Though Mark left his possessions in good will, Tristan jumps to a vastly different conclusion. He tells Isolde that “[Mark] left us only to come back and capture us later...I’m sure he plans to capture us” (Broul 250). Tristan’s assumptions stand in stark contrast to Mark’s comments just a few moments earlier. Tristan does not stop to think; he is hasty, irrational, and does not ask himself questions. Why would Mark leave a sword if he was coming back to capture them? Why would he give Isolde his ring? Why would he not have killed them in his sleep, which was his right? The lovers also misread Mark’s character: Broul writes that “ they knew the king was of a violent and angry nature” (Broul 250), choosing the word “ they” to convey the fact that the characterization is the perception of the lovers, not necessarily a factual representation of the king. In truth, Mark is quite level-headed and rational. Even as he has his sword raised, poised to kill them, he takes time to analyze the situation: “ I wanted to kill them; I won’t touch them, but I will calm my anger” (Broul 249). He actually pauses to think in an emotional moment: something that Tristan completely fails to do. Instead, Tristan makes a rash decision, one of the only decisions he makes on his own in the course of the story. He

decides to flee to Wales, taking Isolde with him. Though other events in the romance may not be Tristan's doing, this undeniably is: Tristan alone decides to keep the lovers in exile. The fact that Tristan flees is also unbecoming of his character. A recurring theme in courtly romances is the testing of the knight: he must go on adventures, which serve "to demonstrate a higher knightly self...not developed until repeatedly proven in duels of knight against knight...The obvious neglect of the warrior aspect of knighthood in Tristan has been widely commented upon by literary critics" (Kunzer 34). The scarcity of such adventures in Tristan's tale can only indicate a degradation of Tristan's knighthood and knightly values. Despite appearances to the contrary, Tristan is not meant to elicit the reader's sympathy: he is ineffectual, makes hasty decisions, and fails to take control over his own fate. Though he may appear weak-minded at times, Mark is truly a rational, good king; he acts as a king should. Mark takes advice from his advisors, punishes his adulterous wife and disloyal vassal, and takes the time to think about situations. "His kindness and pity, his capacity for love, his sensitiveness and ability to imagine the suffering of others contribute to the tragedy because they impair the objectivity of his judgment" (Tyson 74), and allow the reader to empathize with him. Tristan, on the other hand, lacks all of these winning traits. Even given the chance for redemption, he fails. When Broul takes away the power of the potion, in effect giving the lovers the chance to try, "as responsible human beings, to come to terms with life and with the demands of society" (Curtis, 34), they do not succeed. The story ends with Tristan on his way to yet another tryst with Isolde. Through the frequent misinterpretations of events and the passivity of the characters, Broul allows us to interpret the characters for ourselves. Broul gives the

reader the chance to decipher who the characters truly are by allowing us to read them on several different levels, thereby forcing us to consider them at a deeper level than may be seen at first glance. BIBLIOGRAPHYTEXTSBroul. The Romance of Tristan. The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation. Ed. James J. Wilhelm. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994. 225-76SECONDARY WORKSCurtis, Rene L. Tristan Studies. Mnchen: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1969. Goldschmidt Kunzer, Ruth. The Tristan of Gottfried Von Strassenburg: An Ironic Perspective. Berkeley & Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1973. Tyson, Diana B. “Some Thoughts on the Character of King Mark in Broul’s Tristran.” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 20 (1981): 67-75