

ARTHURIAN LEGEND: TRISTAN AND ISOLDE

The story of Tristan (Tristram) and Isolde (Yseult) rivals that of Lancelot and Guinevere as one of the great romantic love stories of the Middle Ages. It tells how Tristan, orphaned nephew of King Mark of Cornwall, goes to Ireland to be cured of what would otherwise be a mortal battle wound by the skilled Isolde. Mark falls in love with Tristan's reports of Isolde, and sends Tristan back to Ireland to woo her for him. Isolde accepts. On the return journey from Ireland to Cornwall, Tristan and Isolde inadvertently drink a love philtre intended for Mark and Isolde. The rest of the story concerns Tristan and Isolde's resulting love and the conflict between this love and the allegiance which both lovers owe to King Mark; Mark's alternate suspicion of the lovers and the stilling of that suspicion; Tristan and Isolde's exile; and Tristan's unconsummated marriage to another Isolde, Isolde of the White Hands, for her name's sake.

Ultimately, Tristan is again wounded by a poisonous weapon. Only the Irish Isolde can heal him. He sends for her, arranging as a sign that the sail of the ship sent for her should be white if she agrees to come to him, and black otherwise. Isolde comes and a white sail heralds her arrival, but Isolde of the White Hands, motivated by jealousy, tells Tristan that the sail is black. He dies of despair. Isolde arrives and kills herself.

The romance in this form was probably known from about 1150, and formed the basis for two twelfth-century French verse romances, Thomas of Brittany's 'courtly' and Bérout's 'vulgar' version. These in turn constituted the respective sources of the German versions by Gottfried von Strassburg and Eilhart von Oberge. The courtly version is marked by more rational development and action than the vulgar, more logic in the characters' behaviour and motivation, and a courtly concern throughout for the depiction of the birth, growth and sufferings of love. A French prose Tristan which appeared in about 1230 links the Tristan story with the wider Arthurian legend and is the source of later Spanish, Italian, Russian and English versions of the tale, including Malory's. Matthew Arnold, John Masefield and Thomas Hardy have been among modern authors to retell the Tristan story.

As an iconic legend which has appeared in many countries in various artistic forms, this display complements the exhibition 'Icons of Western Literature' in the Library's exhibition hall.

Morte Darthur

Sir Thomas Malory

Chelsea: Ashendene Press, 1913

[S.L.] III [Ashendene Press - 1913] fol.

The medieval English prose story of Tristan and Isolde in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, finished in 1470, is based on the French prose *Tristan*. Malory has Tristan appear as a fully-fledged knight of the Round Table, for example, jousting with Sir Kay and (unknowingly) with Sir Lancelot, and saving King Arthur's life. The volume shown is one of 243 copies printed by the Ashendene Press, a leader in the nineteenth-century revival of fine English printing. It is a facsimile of the edition printed by William Caxton in 1485, divided into 21 books, but with modernised punctuation. The Press, which set all of its editions by hand, worked for three years on the volume.

Morte Darthur

Sir Thomas Malory; ill. by Aubrey Beardsley

London: Dent, 1903

[E.D.M.L.] (XV) Bc [Malory]

This edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur* follows Caxton's text but modernises spelling and punctuation. It is the first of two editions published by Dent and illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley (the second followed in 1909), whereupon the text was redistributed. Beardsley was unknown as an artist when Dent appointed him in 1893 to illustrate the edition, which was intended to rival the luxury editions of William Morris's Kelmscott Press on lower production costs. Beardsley provided nearly 500 drawings for the work, ranging from chapter headings, decorative initials and borders to double-page illustrations. Here Tristan drinks the fateful love philtre, intended by Isolde's mother for Mark and Isolde on their wedding day.

Sir Tristrem: A Metrical Romance of the Thirteenth Century

Thomas of Erceldoune; ed. by Sir Walter Scott

Edinburgh: R. Cadell, [1834?]

[D.-L.L.] (XIX) Bc [Scott]

This is the first English version of the Tristan story, dating from about 1300. It is a northern verse romance of 3,344 lines in distinctive 11-line stanzas. The attribution to Thomas the Rhymer, also known as Thomas of Erceldoune (in Berwickshire), is now acknowledged to be spurious, and the source probably Thomas's French poem. The poem exists in a single manuscript, the Auchinleck Manuscript (1330-40), a page of which is reproduced here. Sir Walter Scott's edition of the poem first appeared in 1804. The edition shown includes a preface disputing the Erceldoune authorship in which Sir Walter Scott believed.

Die Histori von Herren Tristrant und der schoenen Isalden von Irlannde

Munich: Hyperion, 1909

[E.D.M.L.] CC10 [Tristan]

This Tristan story is a facsimile of the edition published by Anton Sorg in Augsburg in 1484, the former of two German editions published during the incunabula period. It is the first of many prose chapbook versions to appear in Germany between 1484 and 1664. In the picture shown, Tristan has just escaped from the window of a chapel in which he has been imprisoned, while his captors guard the door. The image shown is from no. 17 of 100 copies printed.

The Story of Tristan & Iseult

Gottfried von Strassburg; trans. by Jessie L. Weston

London: Hutt, 1910

[S] XWK G67H 910

Gottfried von Strassburg's Middle High German tale, from about 1210, is one of the best-known versions of the Tristan story. The text, which is unfinished, comprises 19,548 rhyming couplets. A representative of the courtly branch of the tale, it is based on Thomas's *Tristan* and complements it nicely: Gottfried's text breaks off just where the extant portion of Thomas begins. Gottfried shows awareness of wider Arthurian matter in his tale, conducting a literary feud with Wolfram von Eschenbach, author of *Parzival* (the German hero of the quest for the Holy Grail).

The Romance of Tristram and Ysolt

Thomas of Britain; trans. by Roger Sherman Loomis

New York: Columbia University Press, 1931

[S] XTJ T46P 931

Thomas's Anglo-Norman verse tale of Tristan is generally dated to between 1165 and 1175. It has come down to us in eight fragments from five different manuscripts, beginning with King Mark's discovery of Tristan and Isolde in an orchard as undeniable lovers, and Tristan's consequent hasty departure. The translation on display is complemented by translation from the Icelandic *Tristrams saga ok Isondar*, from a Norwegian version by one Brother Robert in 1226; the Norse version is important for being the fullest complete version of the courtly branch of the story.

Tristan und Isolde

Richard Wagner

Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, [19--]

ML M782 [Wagner]

Richard Wagner wrote his opera, based on Gottfried von Strassburg's version of the legend, between 1857 and 1859 and published it in 1860. It was first performed in 1865, having been considered unperformable in the interim. The opera runs for four and a quarter hours. One of Wagner's major works, the opera is famous for its stylistic innovations. Wagner pared the story down to essentials to concentrate on just three main dramatic situations, one in each act. He altered the origin of Tristan and Isolde's love: whereas in Gottfried's text the love potion causes their love, according to Wagner Tristan and Isolde are already in love and the philtre merely quickens their passion.

Tristram of Lyonesse and Other Poems

Algernon Charles Swinburne

London: Chatto & Windus, 1882

[S.L.] I [Swinburne - 1882]

Tristram of Lyonesse is Algernon Swinburne's major Arthurian creation. Its nine cantos deal with themes which preoccupied Swinburne more widely, as Swinburne tell of Tristram's love for Iseult, subsequent sufferings, marriage to Iseult of Brittany and death. The poem continues an earlier interest in the Tristan story indicated by Swinburne's *Queen Yseult* (unfinished; Tristan's story of from birth until marriage) and 'Joyeuse Garde', about the love of Tristan and Isolde. *Tristram of Lyonesse*

reflects Swinburne's disdain for Tennyson's handling of the lovers in his idyll 'The Last Tournament'. Its descriptions of landscape also reflect Swinburne's personal experiences of Northumberland, the Longships lighthouse and Cornwall.