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The Reversal of Courtly Love Tradition in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*: The Case of Tristan and Isolde[1]

MERİÇ TUTKU ÖZMEN[*] - ARŞ. GÖR. ŞAFAK HORZUM[**]

Abstract

Courtly love convention is a medieval European concept of ennobling love which helped the shaping of the society and in return which was shaped by the society during the Middle Ages. The concept has its roots in many traditions such as the literature of Ancient Rome period, Hispano-Arabic poetry and philosophy, Troubadour poetry, feudalism and Christianity. However, there are also writers who were critical and suspicious of courtly love convention. Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1410-1471) presents a subtle criticism of the concept in his *Le Morte Darthur* (1485), the first collection that brings together all the Arthurian stories in English. One-third of this work consists of a controversial love story, the case of Tristan and Isolde. Therefore, Malory's different treatment of the courtly love tradition and the Tristan story will be illustrated with the critical information on the Celtic sources of the legend and a comparative method to other significant characters involved in the courtly love in this work.

Keywords: Courtly love, Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, Tristan, Isolde.

THOMAS MALORY'NİN *ARTHUR'UN ÖLÜMÜ* ESERİNDE SARAYLI USULÜ AŞK GELENEĞİNİN TERS YÜZ EDİLMESİ: TRİSTAN VE İSOLDE MESELESİ

Öz

Saraylı usulü aşk, Orta Çağ döneminde toplumun şekillenmesine yardım etmiş ve karşılığında toplum tarafından şekillendirilmiş, Orta Çağ Avrupası'na ait, âşığı yüceltici bir aşk kavramıdır. Bu kavramın kökleri Antik Roma dönemi edebiyatı, İspanyol-Arap şiiri ve felsefesi, Trubadur aşk şiiri, feodalizm ve Hristiyanlık gibi pek çok geleneğe dayanır. Ancak aynı zamanda bu kavrama karşı eleştirel olan ve şüphe ile yaklaşan yazarlar da bulunmaktadır. Sör Thomas Malory (y. 1410-1471) de İngilizce yazılmış Kral Arthur

[1] This study is a re-evaluated and extended version of a part of the second chapter of Özmen's unpublished MA thesis entitled *Courtly Love Tradition in Malory's* Le Morte Darthur *Reconsidered* (2013).

[*] PhD (c), English Literature, Graduate School of Social Sciences, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey, merictutkuozmen@gmail.com, **orcid.org/0000-0002-9839-417X**

[**] PhD (c), English Language and Literature, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Social Sciences University of Ankara, Turkey, shafakhorzum@gmail.com, **orcid.org/0000-0003-4114-0387**

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hikâyelerinin ilk tam derlemesi olan *Arthur'un Ölümü* (1485) adlı eserinde bu kavramı ustalıkla hicvetmiştir. Bu eserin üçte biri asırlardır tartışmalara konu olan bir aşk hikâyesi içermektedir: Tristan ve İsolde'nin meselesini. Bu sebeple, Malory'nin saraylı usulü aşk geleneği ile Tristan hikâyesine olan farklı yaklaşımı, efsanenin Kelt kaynaklarıyla ilgili önemli veriler sunularak ve eserdeki saraylı aşk yaşayan diğer mühim karakterlere kıyaslama yapılarak verilecektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Saraylı usulü aşk, Thomas Malory, *Arthur'un Ölümü*, Tristan, İsolde

In "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyons" of *Le Morte Darthur* (1485), Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1410-1471) provides the only extant 15th-century narrative treatment of the Tristan story in English (Windeatt, 2009, p. 90). The extent of this book, which consists of the one-third of *Le Morte Darthur*, underlines the importance Malory sees in it. It can be claimed that "The Book of Sir Tristram," as Windeatt states, "stand[s] for the extended summer of Arthurian chivalry at the heart of his Arthuriad, between Arthur's youthful conquests and the inception of the Grail quest" (2009, p. 91). The significance of the Tristan story can be re-evaluated by means of the characteristics of love it incorporates and the characters entangled in this love. For that reason, the aim of this paper is first to explore the concept of courtly love convention in "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyons" of *Le Morte Darthur* with detailed comparisons of its characters to the more well-known personas in the Arthurian Romances – King Arthur, Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot. Then, it will be shown that Tristan and Isolde's[2] courtly love is reversed with elegant touches on the story by Malory.

Similar to the Uther-Igrayne-Gorlois love triangle in the Book I of Malory's work, the love relationship between Tristan and Isolde appears to conform to the norms of courtly love. As Koplowitz-Breier suggests, "the basic form of the *Fin'amors*" that is "the king-husband, the queen-wife, and the knight-lover" (2005, p. 2) can be applied to "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones." Actually, the Tristan legend has more characteristics which suggest that it can be considered as a case of courtly love: Mark is a king who is married to Isolde the Fair, who in return falls in love with a knight, Tristan. However, despite the fact that the first glimpse into the legend suggests that it can fit into the courtly love convention, there are many other factors which make the story not suited to be courtly. The Pictish origins of the

[2] The names of the hero and the heroine scrutinised in this article vary by works their story is narrated in; the hero is known with the names like Tristram, Trystan, Tristran and Drustanus, and the heroine is called with such names as Iseo, Yseult, Isode, Isoude, Isoud, Izolda, Esyllt, Isotta and Iseult. For the sake of consistency, their names will be used as Tristan and Isolde, the most common one to the eye of the contemporary reader, throughout this article except the ones in the quotations.

legend, Malory's "uncourtly" portrayal of the lovers, Mark's portrayal as a villain and the possibility of a clandestine marriage between the lovers make Malory's version of the Tristan legend not suitable to be considered as courtly love.

The theories concerning the origins and the background of the Tristan legend are various and this gives rise to problems in analysing certain aspects of the relationship between the characters. The legend is generally associated with the county of Cornwall; however, the title character's name leads researchers to a different area – to the Scottish highlands. Drustan is a Pictish name, and Drust, the son of Tallorcan, is a Pictish king in the late 8th century in Scotland (Radford, 1976, p. 72; Lupack, 2007, p. 371). According to Lacy, Ashe and Mancoff's account, Drust is a Pictish royal name, with such variants as Drostan, and the Welsh adapt it into Drystan and sometimes Tristan. Therefore, it has been argued that the nucleus of the Tristan legend is based on the Pictish origins (1997, p. 303). Another related theory is that the Irish hero Fionn MacCumhail, who had an impressive band of warriors, might be the source for the story of Tristan and Isolde as Fionn loses his beautiful young wife Grainne to one of his men, Diarmid (Putter & Archibald, 2009, p. 8). This theory seems to support the idea that the adulterous triangle that forms the basis of the Tristan story is from Celtic sources since it has long been claimed that by means of proper names that the tradition, in some form or other, must have passed from Pictland through Wales and Brittany into France and England (Loomis, 1930, p. 416).

John H. Fisher investigates the possibility of Pictish origins of the legend and claims that the Tristan legend has "the cultural background in which adultery might seem to be approved" (1957, p. 152). He claims that the "Pictish society might provide us with a setting in which ceremonial adultery was socially acceptable" (1957, p. 156). Fisher identifies "Tristan (Drystan ab Tallwch in the *Mabinogion*)" with "Drest filius Talorgen who reigned over the Picts from A.D. 780 to 785" and continues his argument by saying that "[a]mong the Picts down to the ninth century the sister's son inherited the throne, after the brothers of the Pictish ruler. As a result, the king was not allowed to marry. This would explain the relationship between Mark and Tristan before Mark's marriage" (1957, p. 154). In addition, such a tradition, a matrilineal and a polyandrous one, would have been unacceptable to the patrilineal Christian Celts and, as a result, they would have adapted the story to a Cornish setting and the polyandrous domestic arrangement may have been attributed to a supernatural agency, the love potion (Fisher, 1957, p. 156). Lacy, Ashe and Mancoff also argue that the traditions of Celtic queenship, which were no longer understandable in the Middle Ages, were dealt with anachronistic, and therefore misleading, interpretations and explain that "a Celtic queen was her husband's equal, in some ways superior, and could take lovers as a king could take concubines. Transplanted into the context of medieval wifely

duty, the story becomes different" (1997, p. 324). With her healing skills and fierceness when defending Tristan, as Zimmerman points out, "La Belle Isode of *Le Morte Darthur* also still bears a slight resemblance to her prototype of a warlike enchantress of the ancient Celtic legends" (2005, p. 68). Even with the changes which were made in the core of the legend, a sufficient part of the old tradition may have survived, as Fisher asserts, to give the Tristan story "a significance quite unlike that of classical or other Celtic love stories" (1957, p. 156).

Some critics, such as Rumble and Moorman, claim that the reason why Malory included a relatively detailed version of the Tristan legend is to prove that there is a general decline in the Round Table society and the values they uphold, "lest the adulterous love between Lancelot and Guenevere be thought an anomaly – a single flaw in an otherwise perfect world" (Rumble, 1956, p. 146); nonetheless, the evidence which can be found within the work supports otherwise. It is true that, as Moorman states, Malory robs the legend of its courtly glamour (1960, p. 172); yet, as Schueler argues, "the curtailment of courtly glamour in the affair of Tristram and Isode, rather than having pejorative effect, tends to humanize the lovers" (1968, p. 54). Malory's intention when he included Tristan and Isolde may have been to use them as a foil to Lancelot and Guinevere, and that might be the reason why he takes such pains to compare Lancelot and Tristan, Guinevere and Isolde, Arthur and Mark.

Malory makes an effort to illustrate the similarities between Tristan and Lancelot by putting them in a class of prowess by themselves and by building up a deep friendship between them that has no counterpart in the French romances. Whenever Tristan is mentioned within the context of knighthood, a comparison between Lancelot and Tristan is not far behind: "the man called now moste of proues excepte sir Launcelot" (1954, p. 364: IX.15), "the hardyeste knyght in batayle that now ys lyvynge excepte sir Launcelot" (1954, p. 580: X.88). The same thing applies for Lancelot too; whenever some other knight mentions Lancelot's worth as a knight, the Tristan comparison follows: "the man in the worlde excepte sir Trystramys that I am moste lothyst to have ado withall" (1954, p. 361: IX.14).

While the comparisons between the two knights are striking, Malory's intention might have been to contrast them at a deeper level, especially in terms of the adulterous situations in which each finds himself involved (Schueler, 1968, pp. 55-58). Schueler aptly puts it:

> Why did Malory take such care to compare the two knights? The answer . . . is that he wished, at a deeper level, to contrast them. No one can miss the surface similarities between Tristram and Lancelot, and the connections that Malory established between them make us all the more aware of the relatedness of their situations. Both are the greatest of the earthly knights, both are pledged to the service of their respective lords, and both are enmeshed in adulterous relationships with their lords' wives, relationships which eventually drive them to madness. Yet

> at every point, Malory has exploited these similarities only in order to underline the fact that the situations of the two knights are not similar at all. (1968, p. 58)

This dissimilarity is also underlined by the fact that although Tristan is established as a good and able knight at the beginning of the tale, the description of his identity as a lover is postponed. Notwithstanding the fact that he promises to be Isolde's knight as long as he lives when he is leaving Ireland, he seems to forget Isolde, falling in love with Sir Segwarides's wife and even marrying Isolde of the White Hands. While Isolde's love is obvious as expressed in this extract that "the joy that La Beale Isode made of sir Trystrames ther myght no tunge telle, for of all men erthely she love hym moste" (1954, p. 311: VIII.23), Tristan chooses his duty as a knight and gives Isolde to Mark: "this is my desyre: that ye woll gyff me La Beale Isode to go with me into Cornwayle for to be wedded unto kynge Marke, myne uncle" (1954, p. 311: X.24). King Anguish's, that is, Isolde's father, reaction to Tristan's wish is one of dismay: "I had lever than all the londe that I have that ye wolde have wedded hir yourself" (1954, p. 311: VIII.24). Although he wishes Tristan to be the one who marries Isolde, he gives Isolde to Tristan saying "to do with hir what hit please you, that is for to sey, if that ye lyste to wedde hir yourselff, that is me leveste; and yf ye woll gyff hir unto kynge Marke your uncle, that is in your choyse" (1954, p. 311: VIII.24). Tristan does not change his mind and Isolde marries Mark.

Another major factor which underlines the fact that the two knights are not much alike despite the appearances is their difference in the knightly and political world of the Arthurian realm. As Hodges aptly puts it, Tristan is "a provincial knight," at least politically (2005, p. 8). Lancelot takes part in the great English war and he is Arthur's companion, which actually leads to his involvement in national politics at the end of the day. However, Tristan stays in Cornwall and is inclined to avoid Arthur's court, even to the point of being averse to the idea of joining the Round Table (Hodges, 2005, p. 8). Although Hodges defines Tristan as a provincial knight as his concerns are more local when compared to Lancelot's, he also points out the fact that "[h]e is not even simply Cornish. Trystram serves many lords: Mark in Cornwall, Arthur in England, Angwysh in Ireland, and Howell in Brittainy, switching back and forth as convenient" (2005, p. 18). This differentiates him from Lancelot completely, who is devoted and loyal to only one king who is Arthur. When confronted with Arthur's desire that he "abyde in [his] courte" (1954, p. 427: X.6), Tristan says he "is lothe, for [he has] to do in many contreys" (1954, p. 428: X.6). According to Hodges, "[t]o deal with many 'contreys' requires a different kind of chivalry than dealing with one royal court, and Trystram's career shows more concern with individual advancement and personal alliances than with national service" (2005, p. 85). Even so, he is a remarkable knight and a man of amazing feats as he himself points out when Mark exiles him from Cornwall:

> Grete well kyng Marke and all myne enemyes, and sey to hem I woll com agayne whan I may. And sey hym well am I rewarded for the fyghtyng with sir Marhalt, and delyverd all hys contrey frome servayge. And well am I rewarded for the fecchynge and costis of quene Isode oute off Irelonde and the daunger that I was in firste and laste. And by the way commyng home what daunger I had to brynge agayne quene Isode frome the Castell Pleure! And well am I rewarded whan I fought with sir Bleoberys for sir Segwarydes wyff. And well am I rewarded whan I faught with sir Blamoure de Ganys for kyng Angwysh, fadir unto La Beall Isode. And well am I rewarded whan I smote down the good knyght sir Lamerok de Galis at kynge Markes requeste. And well am I rewarded whan I faught with the Kynge with the Hondred Knyghtes and the kynge of North Galys, and both thes wolde have put hys londe in servayge, and by me they were put to a rebuke. And well am I rewarded for the sleyng of Tauleas, the myghty gyaunte. . . . And telle kynge Marke that many noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table have spared the barownes of thys contrey for my sake. And also, I am nat well rewarded whan I fought with the good knyght sir Palomydes and rescowed quene Isode frome hym. And at that tyme kynge Marke seyde afore all hys barownes I sholde have bene bettir rewarded. (1954, p. 376: IX.22)

The different portrayal of Tristan and Lancelot as lovers and as knights is significant as given above. Still, the crucial difference between Lancelot and Tristan is the issue of loyalty. The feudal system was basically about the loyalty between a king/lord and his vassals. This was the essential foundation of the system. In the Arthurian legend, Lancelot is a vassal of King Arthur, who, by all accounts, is the embodiment of knightly and kingly virtues whereas Tristan is a vassal of King Mark, who is everything Arthur is not: a coward, deceitful, treacherous man in Malory's version. Furthermore, there is also the matter of courtly love and the loyalty of a knight to his lady. A knight should honour and obey his beloved lady above anybody and/or anything else. As a result, this creates conflicting loyalties for Lancelot and Tristan as they are supposed to be loyal both to their lords and their ladies. In their cases, this does not seem possible because of the fact that their ladies are the wives of their kings. Nevertheless, when Malory's account is taken into consideration, as Schueler asserts, he half suggests that in Tristan's case there is not much loyalty of any kind, much less a conflict of loyalty, to be concerned about (1968, p. 59). This can be explained through the knightly typology Malory uses in this work.

Beverly Kennedy investigates this knightly typology which is claimed to have affected the way Malory dealt with the theme of adultery. His treatment of adultery in *Le Morte Darthur* appears to be a function of his typology of knighthood. There are three types of knighthood – Heroic Knight, Worshipful Knight and True Knight – and each type has a distinct perception of what incorporates knightly honour and has a peculiar stance on the

matter of committing adultery (Kennedy, 1997, p. 63). According to this typology, each knightly type is defined primarily by his sense of honour and the most dramatic way which he exhibits that defining a sense of honour is in through his sexual behaviour, especially his behaviour concerning adultery (Kennedy, 1997, p. 63). Kennedy lists Gawain as an example of the feudal ideal of Heroic Knighthood, Lancelot as an example of the religious ideal of True Knighthood, and Tristan, the knight most like Arthur himself, as an example of the late medieval courtly and secular ideal of Worshipful Knighthood and states that the Worshipful Knight defines honour as a matter between individuals rather than as a matter concerning the family, as the Heroic Knight does, or as something between himself and God, like the True Knight (Kennedy, 1997, pp. 64-66). As the Worshipful Knight regards adultery as a serious moral offense partly because it entails the breaking of the mutual trust on which the matrimonial bond is based but sees no wrong in committing adultery with a married woman who is a willing partner so long as he himself is not obligated to be loyal to her husband as his kinsman, lord, vassal or retainer. However, this does not appear to be the case with Tristan and Isolde as Mark is both Tristan's uncle and his king. Kennedy claims that Malory altered the narrative of Tristan's love for Isolde "so that Tristram is able to preserve his 'worship' despite the adultery" (1997, p. 65).

In the investigation of the type of knighthood Tristan corresponds to, it needs to be underlined that Tristan's affair with Isolde was not his first one as he had a relationship with a married lady before: the wife of Sir Segwarides. This affair was the one which started the decline in the relationship between Mark and Tristan: "But as longe as kynge Marke lyved he loved never aftir sir Trystramys. So aftir that, thoughe there were fayre speche, love was there none" (1954, p. 297: VIII.14). Despite having had an adulterous relationship with another knight's wife, Tristan was able to preserve his "worship." From the ethical point of view of a Worshipful Knight, Segwarides does not deserve loyalty because he is the son of a Saracen king, an infidel, thus lacking proper loyalty to God. For that reason, a man who lacks loyalty to God is not a man of honour and, therefore, cannot be dishonoured.

Although Tristan's affair with Lady Segwarides may be somewhat justified through the explanation that Tristan did not have any loyalties toward a Saracen and that he does not consider it as a dishonour, it is quite a different matter when it comes to his relationship with Isolde, Mark's wife. Mark is not only his uncle but also the person who made him knight and now retains him in his court. As a result, within the framework of the knightly typology, Tristan cannot be disloyal to Mark, without losing his "worship." Again, Malory changes the French prose *Tristan* in many and substantial ways so that in his version of Tristan and Isolde is both able to avoid dishonour by remaining loyal to their lord until such time as Mark proves by his treachery that he no longer deserves their loyalty when he sends Tristan

to Ireland with the hopes that he will be killed there, or when he sentences Isolde to be burned at stake without so much of a trial (Kennedy, 1997, p. 68). Malory sets Mark as an effective foil character to Tristan and Arthur. He is compared with Tristan in terms of knighthood and companionship, and with Arthur in terms of kingship. Mark is no longer the warrior he was at the beginning of the legend, and then the concept of honour is defined through Tristan, and sometimes by Arthur (Heikel, 2007, p. 28). Tristan proves to be the better lover and the better knight, which is also noted by Hodges that despite being a "subordinate in Cornwall, Trystram is superior to Mark in national influence and thus (love aside) a better match for Isode" (2005, p. 90). When he asks King Anguish to give Isolde to Mark as a wife, the king protest by saying "I had lever than all the londe that I have that ye wolde have wedded hir yourself" (1954, p. 311: VIII.24).

Malory establishes the relationship between Tristan and Mark much earlier in the text. Their first encounter occurs when Tristan comes to Mark's court to defend Cornwall from Ireland's champion, Sir Marhalt. From the moment Tristan sets foot on Mark's court, his loyalty and bravery are unquestioned. He becomes the champion of Mark and the Cornish court and does many chivalric deeds in Mark's name. Malory continues to omit all the indications of a sexual liaison between Tristan and Isolde that are to be found in his French source as Kennedy points out (1997, p. 68). Tristan's loyalty does not waver until Mark betrays his nephew, and actually even not then. The only reason Mark sent Tristan to Ireland to fetch Isolde was that he expected Tristan to be killed by the Irish to avenge the death of Sir Marhalt:

> So whan this was done kynge Marke caste all the wayes that he myght to dystroy sir Trystrames, and than imagened in hymselff to sende sir Trysrtramys into Irelonde for La Belle Isode. For sir Trystrames had so preysed her for hir beaute and goodnesse taht kynge Mark seyde he wolde wedde hir; whereuppon he prayed sir Trystramys to take his way into Irelonde for hym on message. And all this was done to the entente to sle sir Trystramys. (1954, p. 304: VII.19)

As is clear from the passage, Mark never expected Tristan to return and therefore never intended to marry Isolde; if Tristan happens to survive, Mark's marriage to Isolde could only be an unexpected extra gift.

Mark may not have originally intended to marry Isolde, yet he grows a jealousy for his young and beautiful wife. When Sir Andret tells him he saw Tristan and Isolde talking by a window, "kyng Marke toke a swerde in his honde and cam to sir Trystrames and called hym 'false traytowre', and wolde have stryken hym" (1954, p. 323: VIII.32). Tristan leaves the court after this incident, but he eventually agrees to return to his uncle's service. The peace in the court seems to be re-established until the episode of the magical horn. The horn was initially sent to Arthur by Morgan le Fay with the intention of exposing Lancelot and

Guinevere's relationship. Sir Lamorak, who holds a grudge against Tristan, forces Sir Driant to deliver the horn to Mark's court, but not Arthur's. "[T]he horne had suche a vertu that there myght no lady nothir jantyllwoman drynke of that horne but yf she were trew to her husbande; and if she sholde spylle all the drynke and if she were trew to her lorde she might drynke thereof pesible" (1954, p. 326: VIII.34). Of the hundred women who drink from the horn, only four manage to drink without spilling and the queen is not one of them. Consequently, Mark condemns all to be burned at the stake without any further inquiry or judicial procedure. Fortunately, the barons are able to prevent the burning, but, as a result of Mark's betrayal of Isolde by condemning her to be burned, the lovers start seeing each other in earnest: "*Than* sir Trystrames used *dayly and nyghtly* to go to quene Isode evir whan he might" (1954, p. 327: VIII.34; emphases added). Malory's implication cannot be clearer: the lovers no longer feel any loyalty towards a husband, an uncle, a king, who tried to have them killed without any evidence other than Morgan le Fay's questionable chastity test. Kennedy elaborates on this:

> By the ethical standards of the Worshipful Knight, Mark's acts of treason have broken the social ties which bound his nephew and his wife to be loyal to him and have also dishonored him. Therefore, just like Tristram's adultery with Segwarides' wife . . ., Tristram's adultery with Mark's wife is not dishonorable, for the king's own treachery and consequent lack of honor made it impossible either to dishonor him or to be dishonored by behaving towards him in a manner which would otherwise be dishonorable. Neither does the adultery dishonor Isode, given Mark's prior treason against her [sending her to the stake to be burned]. (1997, p. 69)

Malory's alterations are not just limited to the episodes mentioned above. As Moorman has also asserted, Malory has drastically reduced the courtly material found in his sources mainly in order to reduce the size of the legend, but partly also in order to change the nature of the Tristan story (1960, p. 172). The earlier accounts of the legend tended to be more focused on the obsessive and destructive passion of Tristan and Isolde, which was depicted as distressful, alienated, secretive and corrupt. However, later accounts preferred a much lighter version of the story, in which the adventures of the lovers mirrored and paralleled those of other characters, especially Lancelot and Guinevere's (Windeatt, 2009, p. 90). This is also the case with Malory. Moorman explicates that it can be clearly seen throughout the work that Malory systematically strips the legend of its courtly glamour and yet at the same time preserves the adulterous actions of the lovers in order to enforce a comparison with Lancelot and Guinevere (1960, p. 172).

By robbing the story of its courtly glamour, Malory also makes his characters more human and less courtly. According to Schueler, "[t]he tragic heroine of the Thomas poem,

and the courtly lady of the French prose romance are both discarded" (1968, p. 59). Malory's Isolde becomes a more attractive figure rather than a heartless courtly lady through an understatement of her stylized characteristics as a courtly heroine. She meets and falls in love with Tristan before she marries Mark and dotes almost lavishly on Tristan, and the love potion only enhances her love for Tristan, but it does not cause her to love him. One of the more important alterations that Malory makes in the legend is to omit the murder of Brangwayne, Isolde's devoted and loyal servant, who takes Isolde's place in the French sources so that Mark does not understand that Isolde is not a virgin. In Malory's version, Brangwayne and Isolde share a certain camaraderie, and Isolde never orders the murder of her handmaiden only to protect her secret. In other versions of the legend, as Isolde is not a virgin, Bragwayne takes her place in Mark's bed and later Isolde gives orders to kill her.

Isolde's language also supports the less courtly lady image Malory tries to portray. In what Zimmerman identifies as "the powerless language" (2005, p. 33) she uses a highly dignified form of address and even a lengthy apology when faced with Tristan's displeasure: "'Myne owne lorde,' seyde La Beall Isode, 'for Goddys sake, be ye nat displeased wyth me, for I may none othirwyse do'" (1954, p. 560: X.77). Zimmerman demonstrates the gravity of Isolde's speech:

> *Myne owne lorde* is a form of address more appropriate for a person of higher status, yet on a social scale Isode "outranks" Trystram, for he is a knight and she is the Queen of Cornwall. Likewise, her apology is unnecessary, as she has done nothing wrong. Perhaps Isode is being excessively polite to erase the status difference between her and her beloved Trystram. (2005, p. 44; emphasis in the original)

As Isolde is the queen, she may be intentionally weakening the power of her words so that they would not come out of her mouth as mere orders. Be that as it may, this humble and unassuming attitude is not that of a courtly lady. In courtly love convention, the knight is the humble one whereas the lady appears to be the ruler, the decision maker, the authority. Isolde definitely does not appear as the courtly lady who does not have any concerns as to whether she offended her knight or not. She is willing to apologise for an imagined slight so as not to displease Tristan. When compared to Guinevere, who appears to be the femme fatale of *Le Morte Darthur*, Isolde is "a rather colorless and passive creature" (Schueler, 1968, p. 64). Furthermore, as Davidson maintains, Isolde's "power lies largely in the impact of her beauty upon men, and it is seldom intentional. Malory does add a moment of byplay in which she seems conscious of the impact she can have on others" (2006, p. 24). Schueler furthers this argumentation by articulating that

> even when Tristram becomes mad on her account, it is because of a misunderstanding, not any wrong-doing on her part. From beginning to end of the

> Tristram section, she is consistently described as a doting leman, and Malory does not even remotely suggest any moral disapproval of her conduct. If anything, she is, by his standards, a "good" courtly lady, no more troublesome than his sources allowed him to paint her. (1968, p. 64)

Tristan is also made less of a courtly hero and more of an ordinary knight. Like Isolde, Tristan falls in love long before he drinks the potion, and also forgets La Bella Isolde and marries Isolde of the White Hands. When King Howell of Brittany is in need of help, he summons Tristan as he is considered to be the finest knight on the land. After Tristan "slew the erle Grype his owne hondys, and mo than an hundred knyghtes," he "was resceyved into the cyte worshipfully with procession" (1954, p. 330: VIII.36). With the influence of the king and his son, Tristan married the other Isolde, Isolde of the White Hands. On this issue, Eugène Vinaver, the first editor of the Winchester manuscript of *Le Morte Darthur*, asserts in his commentary that "Tristram's first duty is to knighthood, and his fidelity to Isode only serves as an occasional illustration of his chivalrous conduct" (Malory, 1954, p. 1447).

King Mark is another altered character in the work. Although Malory's alterations are towards the good in the cases of Tristan and Isolde, Mark's character is tarnished and he appears to be a coward, a murderer, a complete villain. According to Moorman, the reason behind this is to make the adultery of Tristan and Isolde more human, more understandable (1960, p. 173). As for McCarthy, he states that the logical thing for Malory to do while presenting the love triangle would be to make the husband sufficiently cruel and an older man who can be contrasted with the younger knight to draw the readers sympathy, but here Mark is so much more: "he is the positive blackguard who (almost) makes us overlook the illicit nature of the love of Tristram and Isolde, and throughout the book he forms a clear contrast to the uprightness of the hero" (1991, p. 33).

Malory advances his alteration of Mark's character by moving further than besmirching him. As Lupack asserts, good knights are compared to each other and contrasted with those who are less worthy and the same principle applies to the knights as lovers and to kings as rulers and worthy men (2007, p. 139). Just as Tristan acts as a foil to Lancelot in terms of knighthood and being a lover, Mark acts as a foil to Arthur and both men are compared as kings. "He is the picture of corrupt kingship, the man who uses public power for personal gain, [and in this sense] the black to Arthur's white" (McCarthy, 1991, p. 33). Through the mouth of Sir Lamerok, Malory clearly states that "the honour of bothe courtes be nat lyke" (1954, p. 334: VIII.38). While Arthur is depicted as a king who takes joy and pride in the achievements of his knights, Mark is depicted as jealous, mean-spirited, and treacherous, "a fayre speker, and false thereundir" (1954, p. 444: X.15). According to Cooper, "Mark's readiness to say fair words while planning evil deeds is especially condemned"

(1996, p. 196). He gives Tristan a drink which makes him fall asleep and puts him to prison (1954, p. 501: X.50), counterfeits letters from the pope (1954, p. 502: X.51), orders Tristan to challenge a battle-weary Sir Lamorak (1954, p. 325: VIII.33), "for this kynge Marke was but a murtherer" (1954, p. 434: X.10). King Mark even kills his own brother because of his jealousy: "Whan kynge Marke wyste this he was wondirly wrothe that his brother sholde wynne suche worship and honour. And bycause this prynce was bettir beloved than he in all that contrey, and also this prynce Bodwyne lovid well sir Trystram, and therefore he thought to sle hym" (1954, p. 472: X.32). In McCarthy's words, "throughout the book King Mark is a byword for villainy. The occasional tarnished knighthood of Gawain in the central books pales in significance beside the persistent shoddiness of Mark, whose only fellow among Round Table knights is Meliagaunt" (1991, p. 79) who is used as a representative of evil in the Arthurian legend.

Even among his own barons, Mark is not respected or favoured. Although he has some condemning proof against Tristan and Isolde, he cannot take any action towards them because of his barons' interference. They oppose Mark's decision to burn Isolde and the other ladies of the court who could not pass the chastity test of the horn and will not allow Mark to execute Tristan; instead, they force him to send Tristan on an exile. In each and every conflict, they take Tristan's side. Thus, reaching the conclusion that "Mark is despised not because he is a cuckold, but because he is a bad knight" (Edwards, 1996, p. 47) would not be wrong. Malory makes a similar comment through Sir Lamorak:

> Cornewayle, wherein there dwellyth the shamfullist knyght of a kynge that is now lyvynge, for he is a grete enemy to all good knyghtes. And that prevyth well, for he hath chased oute of that contrey sir Trystram that is the worshypfullyst knyght that now is lyvynge, and all knyghtes spektyh of him worship; and for the jeleousnes of his quene he hath chaced hym oute of his contrey. Hit is pité . . . that ony suche false kynge cowarde as kynge Marke is shulde be macched with suche a fayre lady and a good as La Beale Isode is, for all the worlde of hym spekyth shame, and of her grete worshyp as ony quene may have. (1954, p. 431: X.8)

Throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, "the villains are marked by destructive hatred, unable either to love the good or to put any social or political bonds above their own jealousy" (Cooper, 1996, p. 196), and Mark's portrayal is entirely dominated by his personal animosity towards Tristan. As a result, "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones" becomes "the exploration of the knightly fellowship and the envy and the treachery that results when fellowship is absent" (Lupack, 2007, p. 139; Lynch, 1997, p. 98). In Moorman's words, by altering his sources, Malory "whitened the character of Isode by eliminating her role in the attempted murder of Brangwayne, humanized Tristan (and, of course, Isode) by having him fall in love with Isode

long before the administration of the love potion, and thoroughly blackened the character of King Mark so that the lovers may have some measure of sympathy" (1960, p. 88).

Tristan and Isolde's relationship is somewhat justified and the moral problems which would be expected to follow such an affair do not seem to matter as a consequence of the depiction of Mark's character as a treacherous king, "cowardly kyng Marke" (1954, p. 442: X.15). Neither Malory nor his critics seem to judge this part of the narrative morally precarious. Apart from the fact that Mark is portrayed as a total villain, the circumstances of Tristan and Isolde's meeting for the first time also remove the lovers from the domain which is occupied by Lancelot and Guinevere: "Contradicting early twelfth century versions of the Trystram-Isode romance, here [in *Le Morte Darthur*] the relationship is described as having begun well before King Mark has had any opportunity to hear about Isode" (Koplowitz-Breier, 2005, p. 10). The lovers meet and fall in love before any encounter between Mark and Isolde takes place. Furthermore, the text clearly indicates that Tristan is the one who has Isolde's father's blessing in terms of her marriage to a man: "I had lever than all the londe that I have that ye wolde have wedded hir yourself" (1954, p. 311: VIII.24) and "do with hir what hit please you, that is for to sey, if that ye lyste to wedde hir yourselff, that is me leveste"(1954, p. 311: VIII.24). In the late medieval era, the marriage is considered to be on the basis of the consent of the familial elders. For the woman, the paternal parent or a male guardian in charge of her life and also dowry had the privilege to honour a marriage by holding the right to give his consent for the suitor and therefore the marriage (Sheenan, 1994, pp. 162-163). This actually means that there was no need the damsel-to-be-married to express her opinion on her "own" marriage. In addition to the father's or a male guardian's right to make decisions about the life of the daughter, the right to control her dowry or finances belonged to the same patriarch. In case of a marriage in such a "Christo-hetero-patriarchal" logic (Horzum, 2017, p. 48), all those rights of hers were past into the hands of the husband.

As can be understood from the examples provided above, any interaction and the relationship between Tristan and Isolde is definitely different than that of Lancelot and Guinevere: the former met and fell in love before Mark had any claim on Isolde, and, by having a relationship with Isolde, Tristan was not doing anything particularly wrong as he had the blessing of King Anguish, Isolde's father, "to do with hir what hit please you, that is for to sey, if that ye lyste to wedde hir yourselff, that is me leveste"(1954, p. 311: VIII.24). Moreover, according to Koplowitz-Breier, the first separation episode for Tristan and Isolde may be explicated as another sign of the contract between them, or even, a secret ceremony of their union or marriage (2005, p. 4). After Isolde heals Tristan's wound, which he got when he fought Sir Marhalt, and before he returns to Cornwall, the lovers exchange promises and rings:

> "Madam," seyde sir Trystramys, "ye shall undirstonde that my name ys sir Trystrames de Lyones, gotyn of a kynge and borne of a quene. And I promyse you faythfully, I shall be all the dayes of my lyff your knight." "Gramercy," seyde La Beale Isode, "and I promyse you there agaynste I shall nat be maryed this seven yerys but for your assente, and whom that ye woll I shall be maryed to hym and he woll have me, if ye woll consente thereto."
>
> And than sir Trystrames gaff hir a rynge and she gaff hym another. . . . (1954, p. 294: VIII.12)

Tristan takes an oath of permanent loyalty to Isolde, and she, in turn, vows not to marry any man without his approval for about seven years, and rings are exchanged between them before Tristan's leaving. Before promising to be his knight for the rest of his days, Tristan makes sure to identify himself as fully as possible. This, in a way, resembles the marriage ceremonies, where both the bride and the groom identify themselves.

These exchanged words reveal an agreement or a contract between the two, but its exact nature is ambiguous (McCarthy, 1991, p. 26; Koplowitz-Breier, 2005, p. 14). It is a possibility that they refer to a contract of marriage to be actualised in the future. As Cherewatuk states, a "vow made in future tense indicates the partner's intent to wed; that taken in present tense indicates that the couple are wed, particularly if consummation follows the vow" (2006, p. 6). Furthermore,

> [a]ccording to the precepts of canon law this Exchange constitutes an agreement to marry, but because the agreement must be confirmed at a future date, it is not consent *per verba de presenti* (in words said in present tense) but *per verba de futuro* (in words said in future tense). A decree of Pope Alexander III, known as *Veniens ad nos,* declared that there were two ways for a couple to legitimatize their marriage: by a voluntary decision to marry immediately (*per verba de presenti*) and by a decision to marry at some future date (*per verba de futuro*). The difference between them is that *per verba de futuro* marriage became valid only after consummation. (Koplowitz-Breier, 2005, pp. 14-15; emphases in the original)

What is more important than the words is the exchange of rings, which again brings to mind a marriage ceremony in which, after exchanging vows, the couple exchange rings. Koplowitz-Breier explicates that each one's swearing an oath followed by an exchange of rings signifies much more than mere courtesy, but rather hints at a private marriage ceremony and "in itself signifies marriage so that no verbal confirmation is necessary" (2005, p. 15). For Hostiensis, an Italian canonist of the 13th century, the act of exchanging rings constitutes a marital agreement even without oral affirmation, an agreement to be realised in the future and he resembles this act to giving some advance in a trade exchange as the advance means the trade contract to be sealed, so the exchanging rings comes to mean that the marital agreement is sealed (qtd. in Kelly, 1973, p. 449). Although, for Hostiensis, the

exchanging rings is enough to conclude a marriage, a union that is realised by consent *per verba de futuro* according to Pope Alexander III must also be consummated (qtd. in Koplowitz-Breier, 2005, p. 16).

The consummation of the marriage between Tristan and Isolde in *Le Morte Darthur* is a little vague when compared to another earlier version in which Brangwayne had to take Isolde's place to prevent Mark from learning that his bride lacked virginity. Despite the ambiguity surrounding the consummation, Malory hints at a certain possibility. When the lovers are on the ship on their way to Cornwall, they accidentally drink the love potion which was prepared by Isolde's mother to ensure the security of the marriage between Isolde and Mark. The potion is claimed to guarantee an unending love for the couple. The function of the love potion has long been discussed. This element of the plot appears in the earlier versions of the legend, yet in various ways. In some of these versions, like Béroul's *Tristan*, the effect of the love potion wears off after some time passes. Malory also adds the twist of the potion but he does not use it like the earlier versions: "[T]he love potion of the *Morte* neither inflames passion without substance nor bases it upon hatred (as in several early versions), but imbues an existing love with a lifetime connection" (Koplowitz-Breier, 2005, p. 12). As a result, in *Le Morte Darthur*, the love potion does not have any importance concerning the relationship between Tristan and Isolde: their affair is not the product of a magic potion. Although Malory uses the theme of the love potion, he makes it clear from the start that the love growing between Tristan and Isolde has its roots before the couple drink the potion. When Tristan was in Ireland, in Isolde's care, they started to form a sort of affection: "And therefore sir Tramtryste kyste grete love to La Beale Isode, for she was at that tyme the fayrest lady and maydyn of the worlde. And there Tramtryste lerned hir to harpe and she began to have a grete fantasy unto hym" (1954, p. 288: VIII.9). This scene takes place long before the preparation of the potion, or even before Mark hears about Isolde.

In spite of the fact that the potion is not the cause of the love between Tristan and Isolde, it is the reason why the lovers consummated their love, "cementing a love which had already been burgeoning" (Karr, 1997, p. 246). Though Malory explicitly states, early in the story that a love has blossomed, after the lovers drink the potion,

> they lowghe and made good chere and eyther dranke to other frely, and they thought never drynke that ever they dranke so swete nother so good to them. *But by that drynke was in their bodyes they loved aythir other so well that never hir love departed, for well nother for woo. And thus hit happed fyrst, the love betwyxte sir Trystrames and La Beale Isode, the whyche love never departed dayes of their lyff.* (1954, p. 312: VIII.24; emphasis added)

Although Malory employs magic, it is nothing like the dark and harmful magic of Morgan le Fay: it is what Corinne Saunders categorises as white magic and natural. She claims that the

portrayal of the love potion as natural magic and the one who prepares it, Isolde's mother, as a physician, not an enchantress, enabled the romance authors to present Tristan and Isolde's love in more positive terms (2010, p. 132). Both Isolde and her mother are described as "noble surgeons" (1954, p. 288: VIII.9), and although the ingredients of the potion is never told, as the people who prepare it are powerful practitioners of natural and healing magic, it is implied that this potion is another form of natural magic and the intentions behind the preparation of such potion is not malignant: Isolde's mother only wanted to secure her daughter's union with Mark. The description of the potion, "hit semed by the coloure and the taste that hit was noble wyne" (1954, p. 311: VIII.24), in natural terms also helps to enforce this conclusion. "Just as the potion employs natural ingredients, herbs and wine, but combines them to unnatural effect, inciting love arbitrarily, so the experience of love is rooted in natural instincts and desires but these are manipulated, manifesting themselves with unnatural, arbitrary, and ultimately tragic force" (Saunders, 2010, p. 134). Malory reduces the importance of the love potion for the love of Tristan and Isolde and portrays their love as natural, without any interference from outside: "But the joy that La Beale Isode made of sir Trystrames there myght no tunge telle, for of all men erthely she loved hym moste" (1954, p. 311: VIII.23).

McCarthy states that the sexual aspect of relationships was not Malory's central concern and, therefore, he showed "a soldierly lack of fuss about sex" (1991, p. 55). He asserts that moral concerns were rarely ever involved and the modern embellishments concerning sexual matters were almost always lacking. He concludes by also asking "[i]f Malory tells us that a man and a woman are in bed, what is there to add?" (1991, p. 55). Though Malory tends to be ambiguous when it comes to the physical aspects of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere, "there is," as McCarthy asserts, "no discreet ambiguity surrounding the love of Tristram and Isolde" (1991, p. 62) and the splendour of their love is something to be proclaimed openly (1991, p. 28). The first time they consummate their relationship when they drink the potion is an example to this. Malory, therefore, describes a first-time event which is an expression of love between Tristan and Isolde. Since the couple is already established as madly in love with each other since their first meeting, it must be assumed that what Malory refers to when he says "thus hit happed fyrst, the love betwyxte sir Trystrames and La Beale Isode" (1954, p. 312: VIII.24) is the sexual act, their first time together, which is something openly stated in the earliest versions of the story. Also, later in the book, when Sir Driant brings Morgan le Fay's horn to Mark's court, Isolde is one of the women who cannot pass the test, showing clearly that she had not been true to her husband. Thus, as Koplowitz-Breier explains, the marriage of Tristan and Queen Isolde,

sealed by physical union after consuming the potion, must be accepted as valid (2005, p. 16). In this case, Isolde could not have married King Mark on legal terms.

The same argumentation may apply to the marriage between Tristan and Isolde of the White Hands. When Tristan goes to Brittany to heal from his wounds, he is healed by King Howell's daughter, another Isolde, "a woman of noble bloode and fame" (1954, p. 330: VIII.36). King Howell liked and admired Tristan very much, "[s]o by the grete meanes of the kynge and his sonne there grewe grete love betwyxte Isode and sir Trystrames" (1954, p. 330: VIII.36). In Brittany, Tristan "had allmoste forsakyn La Beale Isode" because he "had such chere and ryches and all other plesaunce" (1954, p. 330: VIII.36). Malory's choice of words like "forsakyn" shows that the relationship between Isolde the Fair and Tristan is not just a passing fancy, and, thus, can garner a severe reaction from Lancelot:

> Fye uppon hym, untrew knyght to his lady! That so noble a knyght as sir Trystrames is sholde be founde to his fyrst lady and love untrew, that is the quene of Cornwayle! But sey ye to hym thus . . . that of all knyghtes in the worlde I have loved hym most and had most joye of hym, and all was for his noble dedys. And lette hym wete that the love betwene hym and me is done for ever, and that I gyff hym warnyng: from this day forthe I woll be his mortall enemy. (1954, p. 331: VIII.36)

When Isolde the Fair writes a letter to Guinevere, "complaynyng her of the untrouthe of sir Trystrames" (1954, p. 333: VIII.37), Guinevere comforts her, treating Isolde the Fair as the wife who is betrayed by her husband and Isolde of the White Hands as a sorceress who stole the husband away. Guinevere tells Isolde the Fair not to be sad "for she sholde have joy aftir sorow: for sir Trystrames was so noble a knyght called that by craftes of sorsery ladyes wolde make suche noble men to wedde them. 'But the ende', quene Gwenyver seyde, 'shulde be thus, that he shall hate her and love you bettir than ever he dud'" (1954, p. 331: VIII.37).

Despite Lancelot, Guinevere and Isolde the Fair's belief that he was not true to his lady, Tristan never consummates his union with Isolde of the White Hands:

> And so whan they were a-bed bothe, sir Trystrames remembirde hym of his olde lady, La Beale Isode, and than he toke suche a thoughte suddeynly that he was all dismayed, and other chere made he none with clyppynge and kyssynge. As for fleyshely lustys, sir Trystrames had never ado with hir: suche mencion makyth the Freynshe booke. Also hit makyth mencion that the lady wente there had be no plesure but kyssynge and clyppynge. (1954, p. 330: VIII.36)

Although he was assumed disloyal to Isolde the Fair in the beginning by marrying and almost forsaking her, at the end Tristan remains faithful to Isolde the Fair. His virgin wife never knows that there are other pleasures to the marriage bed other than kissing and

cuddling, and she is left behind when Isolde the Fair summons him and his wife to the court. The distinction between Tristan's two Isoldes is explained by Hodges as such: "one whom he loves secretly, with private consummation but public deception; the other his acknowledged wife, but privately a virgin" (2005, pp. 101-02).

To conclude, all the alterations Malory made to the Tristan legend illustrates the fact that he was trying to make the love between Tristan and Isolde acceptable somehow. Although, on the surface, the story of Tristan-Isolde-Mark fits "the prototype of the courtly epic love triangle" (Heikel, 2007, p. 14), it is actually "a departure from stylized courtly love" (Fritscher, 1967, p. 18). Their story is what Hodges describes as "a triangle of good knight, bad king, and queen" (2005, p. 100) and the narrative within the book supports this idea. Malory's portrait of Mark is very different from the earliest sources and slightly altered from the unsavoury character of the French sources. As Kerr puts it, "[i]n the earliest times, before the beginning of medieval romance, we meet with a general and warrior playing an important part in early Keltic legends, March the captain and the master of the swineherds" (1894, p. 37), but Malory makes Mark "an out-and-out villain" (Pearsall, 2003, p. 93), and does his best to disparage his reputation even more. The answer to the question why Malory put so much effort to portray Mark the way he did is simple: "since Mark is a corrupt and wicked king, Tristram is not obliged to serve him, and so his adulterous behavior has no dire consequences" (Schueler, 1968, p. 60). In addition, the changes in the characters of Tristan and Isolde are significant. Instead of portraying them as a perfect knight and a perfect courtly lady, Malory makes Tristan a somewhat provincial knight who is more concerned with his achievements than that he is with love and national politics, an opposite to Lancelot, and Isolde as a woman who is not as assured of her powers as a female as Guinevere and who is more than ready to welcome her lover who married another woman so that she can be close to him. The clandestine marriage between the lovers and the love potion are other two factors which make this love triangle different from others and which makes it not suitable to be considered a case of courtly love. As Tristan and Isolde can be considered as married even before Mark knew Isolde, the physical aspect of their relationship cannot be regarded as adultery. Furthermore, the marriage between Mark and Isolde cannot be binding as one of the parties was already married and consummated that marriage with the help of the love potion. Malory also makes it quite clear that the couple starts falling in love long before the preparation of the potion that only functions as an affirmation to what has long been determined by the fate.

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