Nature Imagery in the Courtly Versions
of the Tristan Legend

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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Chapter I
Introduction

Nature plays an important role in both Thomas the Anglo-Saxon's and Gottfried von Strassburg's versions of the Tristan legend, two of the versions commonly referred to as the "courtly versions." Nature imagery in the legend separates into two main categories, landscape and sea imagery, while the lesser images of the sun and moon form a third. This paper will investigate the way in which those images appear in episodes of the Tristan legend, and how Thomas and Gottfried differ in their presentations of the images.

Because only fragments of the two works remain, any such investigation must be part conjecture. But that conjecture is fairly safe; scholars generally accept an Old Norse version of the Tristan story, Tristan ok Isondar by a monk known as Brother Robert, as accurately reflecting Thomas' original, while the last fragment of Thomas takes up where Gottfried's otherwise whole work breaks off, just before Tristan's marriage. Since Gottfried usually also followed Thomas quite closely, the two versions, with the help of the Norse poem, can be patched together with some degree of certainty.
For Thomas of Britain's poem, I have followed a scholarly translation from old French by Roger Sherman Loomis,\(^1\) which uses the previously mentioned Old Norse version to connect the fragments. However, I also read a translation by Dorothy Leigh Sayers,\(^2\) which connects the fragments with Joseph Bedier's version (somewhat condensed). For the Gottfried von Strassburg verse rendition of the legend, I have relied mostly on A. T. Hatto's prose translation,\(^3\) though I referred occasionally to an older translation by Jessie L. Weston,\(^4\) also in prose. Hatto supplied the missing conclusion with Thomas' poem; Weston used a condensation of a lesser known work by Heinrich von Freiburg.

\(^1\) Thomas of Britain, The Romance of Tristan and Isolde, trans. Roger Sherman Loomis (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1923). All further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.


Chapter II
Landscape

Landscape in the Tristan legend, unlike the sea which will be discussed later, of necessity takes a passive role in the narrative. But it still carries significance as a backdrop to some of the most important scenes in the work. This aspect of the landscape appears more in Gottfried's version, with its complex use of symbols and subtle artistic shifts in tone, but is also noticeably present in Thomas' version. Two episodes in particular are of interest in discussing landscape imagery in the Tristan: the Spring Festival in the beginning of the legend, when Tristan's parents meet; and the Cave of Love episode, the climax of Tristan's and Isolde's love (in Gottfried, at least).

We lack Thomas' original of the Spring Festival scene, and must therefore rely on Brother Robert's and Gottfried's versions, which are, fortunately, in agreement. Both versions depict the spring landscape in a gentle, pastoral light. The landscape forms a very favorable background to Mark's court. The flowers are in bloom and the birds sing. Against this background the lords and ladies of the court celebrate Mark's feast, at which Tristan's parents, Rivalin, a Breton knight, and Blancheflor, Mark's sister, meet and fall in love.
Frederic C. Tubach, in his article "The Locus Amoenus in the Tristan of Gottfried von Strassburg," compared this setting to the setting of the Cave of Lovers episode and found the two similar. Tubach dismisses Bodo Mergell's idea that Gottfried was trying to link the two pairs of lovers, Tristan's parents and Tristan and Isolde, by linking the two landscapes, then advances his own theory that the similarity...is a direct result of a classical pattern of landscape presentation consistently applied..."5

Michael S. Batts, in his article "The Idealised Landscape in Gottfried's Tristan," refers to Tubach's theory and rejects both it and Mergell's idea completely. Batts argues that "The description of the beauties of maytime in Tintagel is...entirely dissimilar from the description of the grotto landscape, and it is precisely this lack of similarity which argues against the idea of a symbolic link between the two."6 Batts goes on to describe Gottfried's treatment of each scene, pointing out the conventionality and definite sense of time (season) in the May festival scene. He specifically


refers to the line (which I quote in English from Hatto), "Of all that May should bring, one found whatever one wished there: shade together with sunshine, lime-trees by the fountain, tender, gentle breezes regaling Mark's company each according to its nature" (p. 49). Batts compares this treatment to the grotto scene to which "Gottfried dedicates all his artistry..., delineating it in a wealth of subtle detail." Batts remarks on the lack of any reference to the passage of time, which he feels is especially important to the grotto's symbolic meaning. Like Batts, I find the two scenes dissimilar.

In view of Brother Robert's similarly uninspired description of the festival as given in Loomis (p. 3), it seems safe to assume that Thomas and Gottfried both meant only to present a traditional background for Rivalin's and Blancheflor's first meeting.

The Love Grotto, however, represents a much more complicated set of symbols in any analysis of nature imagery in the legend. As Donald Hoffman explains in his article "Cult and Culture: The Courtly Life in the Cave and the Forest," the cave "is neither entirely natural nor entirely artificial (cultural)," but "the

7 Batts, "Idealised Landscape," p. 227.
8 Batts, "Idealised Landscape," p. 227.
artifact of giants."9

Even having thus sketchily defined the cave's place in the society of the legend, the problem of the difference between Gottfried's version and Thomas' (that is, Brother Robert's) remains. In the Loomis translation of Thomas, the description of the forest life comprises two paragraphs, giving a spare depiction of an idyllic existence in benevolent natural surroundings. A tree shades the cave, the water is clean and fresh, the grass and herbs sweet; Tristan and Isolde pass their days in "great pleasance and joy...for they had night and day their lust and solace" (p. 178). The cave is a mere respite from the suffocating tension of the court, where the lovers had to plot constantly to guard themselves from vicious (if accurate) gossip. Of course, that gossip eventually resulted in their expulsion from (and freedom from) the court.

But for Gottfried, the forest life becomes the climax of his poem. He gives the entire forest episode intensely allegorical treatment, using all his artistic abilities to lend the episode stature and importance.

Once the lovers have left the court, they immediately enter an idyllic world which seems to have no connection

to the real world of the rest of the plot. As Batts pointed out, the grotto is timeless, seasonless; Gottfried later discards any sense of location as well. The cave obviously represents more than just a retreat or haven for these two lovers in exile; it is the place where all true lovers worship the Goddess Love. This interpretation was also presented by Batts in his book Gottfried von Strassburg, who substantiated the theory by pointing out that "the manner in which the details of the grotto are explained by Gottfried is derived from the method by which church writers exemplified the Christian truths through reference to the structure of the church..."10

This use of conventional religious allegory definitely indicates that Gottfried meant to present a lovers' religion, with the grotto as its church.

Gottfried interprets his allegory for his audience, explaining that the roundness of the cave signifies "Love's Simplicity," its breadth "Love's Power," its height aspiration to the "Crown of Virtues" represented by the keystone (p. 264). The "white, smooth, and even" wall symbolized Integrity, the green marble floor Constancy, the crystalline bed Love itself (p. 264). The bronze doors which can only be opened from within,

never from without through "Deceit or Force," has two bars on the inside to guard it, one of cedar representing the "Discretion and Understanding of Love," one of ivory "for her Purity and Modesty" (pp. 264-65). The lever which works the latch of the door is of tin, which symbolizes Intent, the latch itself is Gold, standing for Success. Hatto remarks here that "some erotic double entendres are lost in translation" (p. 265). Three small windows -- Kindness, Humility, and Breeding -- let in light -- Honour -- from above (p. 265).

The location of the cave also has significance, for the grotto is "hidden away in the wilds" (p. 265), the path to it fraught with difficulties; but, Gottfried assures us, the prize for travelling that path to its end is well worth the danger and suffering along the way. In connection with the religious allegory of the cave itself, the trip to the cave becomes a pilgrimage; therefore this assurance takes on added symbolic meaning. Gottfried finally reinforces the allegory of the cave episode by saying that he has been to the cave many times, though he has "never set foot in Cornwall" (p. 266), emphatically removing it from the trappings of the plot.

There are, of course, other interpretations of the Cave of Lovers. Batts also mentions the theory that the grotto represents the Garden of Eden, with Tristan
and Isolde as "archetypal man and woman living at one with themselves and their surroundings."\textsuperscript{11} Ulle Erike Lewes, in her monograph "The Life in the Forest: The Influence of the St. Giles Legend on the Courtly Tristan Story," discusses hagiographic elements in the episode of the grotto. The "vulgar" versions of the legend (those of Beroul and Eilhart von Oberge, for example) depict the forest life as a time of great hardship for Tristan and Isolde. Lewes contends that the utopian forest life of the courtly versions originates from hagiographic influences (particularly from the life of St. Giles) in which "the flight from the joys and beauties of the world is glorified."\textsuperscript{12} These influences presumably occurred when Thomas came into contact with Guillaume's \textit{St. Gilles} at the court of Eleanor of Acquitaine, where both the romance and tales of saints' lives were admired. All three ideas may be applicable (I believe the first certainly is) and should be taken into account in analyzing the episode.

Having taken his audience far from the plot with his allegory, Gottfried then returns to Tristan and Isolde. He tells of their life, how they passed the

\textsuperscript{11} Batt, \textit{Gottfried von Strassburg}, p. 65.

days telling one another sad tales of past lovers, singing, and hunting. As in Thomas, nature is benevolent and full of beauty; here, also, are shade trees, a cool stream, "bright flowers and green grass." And the birds sing -- "even lovelier here than elsewhere" (p. 262). Tristan and Isolde are free, as they have never been before. But in Gottfried, this period is obviously more than just an interim between periods of close surveillance at court. At the grotto, Tristan and Isolde reach the pinnacle of their love.

Nevertheless, Tristan's and Isolde's time in the forest is short. While Mark is out hunting, he discovers the pair asleep. They are lying apart with Tristan's sword between them. In Thomas, the separation is by chance: "They had lain down for to rest them for the great heat, and for this cause they slept so far either from the other..." (p. 180). In Gottfried, the lovers hear King Mark's dogs barking and make a plan to protect themselves: "They returned to their couch and lay down again a good way apart from each other, just as two men might lie, ...and thus they fell asleep" (p. 27). Mark, convinced of their innocence and entranced by Isolde's beauty, leaves a token to summon the two back to court. They return and take up their former positions, with all the accompanying honor and glory. But, certainly in Gottfried and somewhat in
Thomas, a feeling of anticlimax prevails. Having been able to develop their love to such a high level in the Grotto, it seems a lowering of them to return to their former deceiving and plotting. Gottfried remarks, "Tristan and Isolde were never free and open again" (p. 274). They regained their worldly honor, but Tristan and Isolde relinquished part of the love that developed in the quasi-natural world of the grotto.

Thus, in the courtly Tristan legend, landscape imagery occurs in two scenes, the Spring Festival and the Cave of Lovers. In the first case, the imagery is conventional, merely forming a background for the court. In the second case, however, the landscape forms a very important part of the episode. Even in Thomas the landscape has significance, for the grotto offers the lovers the only true freedom they ever know. However, as stated above, the entire episode lacks the climactic weight it carries in Gottfried, as proven by the added length and heavy emphasis on allegory of the episode in Gottfried's version.
Chapter III

The Sea

Despite the significance of landscape in the Tristan, that landscape obviously cannot take as active a role in the plot as the sea. Sea imagery appears in several episodes, its role varying. Margaret S. McCroskery, in her article "Tristan and the Dionysian Sea: Passion and the Iterative Sea Motif in the Legend of Tristan and Isolde," gives an excellent analysis of the sea in the Tristan Legend. Taking all the versions of the legend as a single body, McCroskery analyzed the sea in the legend "as a structural device, as the eternal symbol for passion, and as the very personification of the life force."13 Some of her observations, particularly on the last point, apply more to the later adaptions of the legend than to Thomas and Gottfried (for example, I am not convinced that either of them intended Isolde's threatened death-by-water at the end of the voyage to equal "the suppressed violence of sexual love."14


14 McCroskery, p. 419.
However, many of her ideas, particularly those on the correlation between the sea and the love of Tristan and Isolde -- both representing freedom from society's restrictions -- are well worth investigating further.

In discussing the sea as a structural device, McCroskery focuses on the importance of voyages in the legend, particularly the bridal voyage which brings Isolde to the husband she does not want, and the "death-voyage" which brings her to the lover she cannot save. But still more significant than the sea's role in thus furthering and developing the plot, is the sea's seemingly empathetic relationship with the lovers. This relationship, perhaps meant to reflect God's favor, appears in three, possibly four, episodes.

Early in the story, when Tristan is abducted by Norwegian traders, the sea begins to rage and storm. The traders, believing that the storm is God's punishment for their sin against Tristan, release him, and the sea becomes calm again. This reaction obviously supports the traders' view of the sea as an instrument of God, but it should be mentioned that only in this episode is God actually named as the cause of natural events which benefit Tristan and Isolde.

Be it God or destiny at work, the sea again aids

15 McCroskery, p. 419.
Tristan when he needs healing from the wound Morold deals him with a poisoned sword. In Thomas (Brother Robert), Tristan sails from Cornwall with no set destination; he merely wishes to relieve his friends of the burden he has become because of his festered wound. Tristan drifts on the sea to Ireland, the only place he can be healed. Gottfried, as in the Cave of Lovers episode, leaves less to chance, more to planning. In his tale, Tristan deliberately sails close to Ireland, then drifts in a small boat until the sound of his music attracts the attention of two Irish fishermen. But, even so, Tristan risks his life on the sea, and the sea does not fail him.

The sea not only protects Tristan, as it does in these two episodes, it also seems to reflect his and Isolde's emotions in Gottfried's version of the love potion episode. Tristan and Isolde unwittingly drink the potion while the ship is in a harbor and everyone else is ashore. When Brangaene, who alone knows the effects of the potion, returns to the ship, she throws the rest of the potion overboard in her horror. (This occurs only in Gottfried; in Thomas, Brangaene keeps the potion, which is served to Mark on the wedding night.) A. T. Hatto, in the introduction to his translation, points out that, "when the ships put to land, the sea is such that they can make good headway, but,
as the love drink falls into its lap, we are told that it is wild and raging" (p. 29). Hatto ascribes this phenomenon to the nature of the potion. But Batts, who makes no mention of the "wild and raging" sea, but rather emphasizes that the ship is now in a calm harbor, does remark on the "inner turbulence" of the lovers.  

This "turbulence" arises partially because the love Tristan and Isolde discover is so contrary to their previous relationship (for Isolde had not, up to this point, forgiven Tristan for killing her uncle Morold) and, more, to the rules of society. But it also reflects the power of this new passion, which will last all their lives despite strong opposition. McCroskery, in her discussion of this passage, asserts that Strassburg "invited us to identify passion [i.e. freedom] with this wild and raging sea," for from the moment Tristan and Isolde declare their love, land becomes an enemy, a hostile trap, and a place of sterile half-life."  

This last statement certainly applies to the world of society (the court) on land. But Gottfried may have intended the sudden wildness of the sea only to heighten the drama of the moment and to mirror the emotional state of the characters.

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17 McCroskery, pp. 415-16.
Having set up this apparent empathy between the lovers and the sea, a problem arises with the last voyage in the story, Isolde's journey to Brittany to heal Tristan of a second mortal wound. In this episode, for which we have only Thomas' original, the sea works against the lovers. First, a storm blows up, taking the ship off course, then a calm settles on the sea, further delaying Isolde's arrival in Brittany. McCorskery describes the sea's behavior as a "death-chant," claiming that the sea is foretelling Tristan's end and acting as "an instrument in her (Isolde's) destiny and Tristan's." This idea does explain the inconsistency of the sea's hindrance of Isolde; the two lovers were fated never to meet again. The sea is also reflecting a major disturbance in the lives of Tristan and Isolde. However, I doubt that the entire statement accurately fits Thomas' intentions. Gottfried might have written the scene with these symbolic overtones, but Thomas does not generally use symbolism in such complex fashion. I believe Thomas meant, at most, to show the capricious hand of fate in the tale's tragic end. And, of course, the plot of nearly all versions of the legend requires that Isolde arrive at Tristan's bedside too late to save him; the sea is the most convenient excuse for the delay.

18 McCorskery, p. 419.
So, in the four episodes in which the sea plays a major role, it acts as an instrument of God, an aid and protector (and, as in the last episode, a plot device--Tristan must get to Ireland somehow), an empathetic mirror of the lovers' feelings (in Gottfried only); again as a plot device and, perhaps, a reflection of fate's effect on the lovers' deaths.
Chapter IV
The Sun and Moon

Although landscape and sea imagery are the two major types of nature imagery in the Tristan legend, several references are made to the sun and the moon. In Gottfried the sun is linked to Isolde and the moon to Brangaene. Tristan, in describing Isolde to Mark's court, says, "...see how the new Sun, following on its Dawn [Isolde's mother, also named Isolde], Isolde after Isolde, shines across Dublin into every heart!" (p. 150). Later, when Tristan has returned to Ireland and been wounded by a dragon plaguing the land, he awakes to find both Isolde and Brangaene bending over him. He exclaims to himself: "Three lights encompass me, the rarest in all the world--Isolde, the bright Sun; her mother Isolde, the glad Dawn; and noble Brangaene, the fair full Moon!" (p. 166). At the final duel for Isolde's hand, Gottfried, as narrator, uses the simile: "And so Queen Isolde, the glad Dawn, came leading by the hand her Sun, the wonder of Ireland, the resplendent Maiden Isolde" (p. 185). And later, "...noble Brangaene, the lovely Full Moon, came gliding in..." (p. 187). But in the plot of the legend, the sun has significance chiefly as a source of heat, not light. The sun's heat excites Isolde's passion, causing her to arrange a dangerous tryst with.
Tristan just after their return from the forest, in Gottfried's poem. In Thomas, heat causes Tristan's thirst on the ship, which leads to the drinking of the love potion. The moon plays a minor role in two episodes at court. When Tristan's friend and roommate, Marjodoc, awakes to find Tristan missing, the moon is shining brightly, clearly revealing the footprints Tristan made in the snow on his way to the Queen's chamber. But later, when Mark and his dwarf, Melot, are hiding in a tree, expecting to catch Tristan and Isolde in a tryst, the moon comes out just in time to show Tristan and Isolde their shadows. However, none of these points will bear much emphasis or analysis, for they are merely interesting incidents and probably not greatly significant. The simile linking Isolde and Brangaene to the sun and moon respectively is fairly conventional (especially as Isolde is invariably a blonde, Brangaene usually dark) and Gottfried does not seem to try to carry it out consistently.
Thus, nature appears often in the Tristan legend, with varying degrees of significance. In the more important episodes involving nature—the abduction, the Cave of Lovers, the three major voyages—nature only affects the two lovers; Mark, Isolde of the White Hands, and all other significant characters remain apart from and untouched by nature. With the exception of the last voyage, nature benefits Tristan and Isolde, either separately (as in Tristan's abduction and his drifting to Ireland) or together. At court, nature is stifled, as are the lovers themselves, and she plays only a small role. But, once outside the restrictions of society, both nature and the lovers come into their own. This aspect of nature is especially evident on the bridal voyage, where Tristan and Isolde first conceive and consummate their love, and in the grotto, where that love reaches its climax. Both of these scenes take place against a background of empathetic, encouraging nature, and, as stated above, outside society. It therefore seems to me that, in these courtly versions of the Tristan legend, nature has a positive role, aiding and empathizing with the hero and heroine, enhancing their love. Society, on the
other hand, has a negative role, smothering the lovers, forcing them to sully their love in lies and deceptions. And because society is the stronger force, even within the lovers themselves (for Isolde marries Mark after she falls in love with Tristan, and the lovers do return from the grotto at the first indication that they will be accepted into the court again), Tristan's and Isolde's love is doomed from the start.
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