

# Tristan and Isolde

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USA

A Medieval Story of Love and Betrayal



*Our cover image is repeated here in its entirety as it shows Mark, King of Cornwall, peaking around the corner at the lovers Tristan and Isolde. Mark plays a significant role in this story. The painting is named 'The End Song' and was created by Edmund Leighton, in 1902.*

Arthurian legend is filled with epic tales of tragic romance. The *ménage à trois* of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot is the story most focused on in contemporary film and literature. Merlin and Vivienne have had their fair share of air time, albeit often as a subplot to the Arthur and Guinevere saga. But, aside from a poorly received 2006 film, recent media has largely ignored the story of Tristan and Isolde. Since it is a legend that the reader may be unfamiliar

with, we shall begin with a re-telling of the story, followed by historical analysis. It should be noted that this tale, like all of the legends in Arthuriana, has many variations.

## The Legend

In the days of the old Celtic kingdoms, King Anguish of Ireland has attempted to subjugate Cornwall by demanding the country pay tribute or risk invasion. Mark, King of Cornwall, who

possesses as much Celtic pride as any Irishman, cannot accept this. Mark challenges Anguish to a duel of champions. If the Irish champion wins, Cornwall is off the hook. But if the Cornish champion wins, Ireland must withdraw their demands. Anguish sends his brother-in-law, Morholt, to do battle with Mark's champion; his nephew, Tristan.

When the dust of the duel has settled, Tristan is the victor, killing Morholt. However, our hero has sustained an injury that will be fatal if it doesn't heal. Ireland is renowned as having the best healers in the land, so Tristan assumes a false identity to travel into enemy territory for treatment. As fate would have it, Tristan is nursed by the daughter of King Anguish, the beautiful Isolde. Not realizing his true identity as the man who slew her kinsman, the two young people strike up a friendship. During his convalescence Tristan returns Isolde's kindness by teaching her to play the harp.

When Tristan has recovered, he learns that a

fearsome dragon has been tormenting local villages. Anguish offers his beautiful daughter's hand in marriage to any knight who can slay this beast. Tristan accepts the challenge. But, hoping for a treaty through marriage to end the feuding between the two kingdoms forever, Tristan secretly accepts the challenge not for himself, but for King Mark. And this is where all the trouble begins.

Being the hero that he is, Tristan could naught but slay the beast. And so the hand of Isolde was won for Tristan's much elder uncle. When the truth is revealed, Isolde is furious and declares her hatred for Tristan. She begs her father not to send her to Cornwall. Being a man with a strong sense of honor, Anguish will not go back on his word. Isolde must accept her fate and begin preparations for the voyage immediately.

The marriage of young maidens to much older men was common during this time. But, that did not make the situation any more palatable for women in Isolde's position. In an attempt to remedy her fear and the revulsion she might feel on her wedding night, Isolde asks a witch to brew a love potion for herself and her future husband. The witch obliges and mixes an elixir possessed by a very powerful magic. Isolde is told that in order for the spell to be complete, the mixture must be drunk by the intended lovers together.

It is now time for Isolde's voyage to meet her new lord and king. Mark will allow no one but his trusted nephew, the greatest champion in the land, to escort his young bride. And so, the two board the vessel that will transport them over the sea to Cornwall.

By this time, Isolde's hatred of Tristan has become overshadowed by the dread of her new circumstance. While at sea, Tristan attempts to comfort her, and Isolde is reminded of why she and Tristan had once been fast friends. As girls do, Isolde discussed this with her friend and servant, Branwen, and the two hatched a scheme. Isolde would trick Tristan into drinking the liquid with her. Meanwhile, Branwen, who bore a striking resemblance to Isolde, didn't



*This painting of Tristan and Isolde was created by John William Waterhouse, in 1916.*





*Another painting entitled 'Tristan and Isolde' and created by Herbert James Draper (1863-1920)*

half mind the idea of receiving the treatment of a queen, so she would assume Isolde's place in the marriage bed.

Their plan went off without a hitch, and the threesome managed to fool King Mark for some time. But, like any deception, the lovers were discovered in their trickery. Being a man of great pride, Mark could not let this treachery go unpunished. He challenged his nephew to a duel. This time, Tristan is not victorious. It may be that he could not bring himself to raise a hand against his beloved uncle, who had been like a father to him. Likewise, Mark's great love for his nephew trumped his wounded pride. But treason cannot go unpunished. So, Tristan is sentenced to banishment, rather than death. Tristan must depart Cornwall forthwith, and he travels to the nearest Celtic kingdom, Brittany, across the sea.

Tristan begins a new life in a new land, but remains faithful to Isolde for some time. Traveling through Brittany, Tristan performs

many heroic feats. After a time, he meets a beautiful woman who also bears the name Isolde. She is known as Isolde of the White Hands. Because her beauty reminds him of his own Isolde, Tristan marries this woman. He is happy for a time, but never forgets his true love over the sea.

One day while riding through the Breton forest, Tristan comes across a fair maiden being encircled by six brutes about to do her harm. Tristan charges to her rescue and singlehandedly defeats the men six to one. However, he is mortally wounded, and the maiden manages to help him onto his horse, who knows the way home.

Upon reaching the castle, Tristan tells his friend, Sir Kahedin, who is his wife's brother, that he can be cured only by Isolde, the former, if he can get a message to her. Kahedin, loyal as any knight can be, vows to retrieve Isolde from Cornwall. Impatient to receive the news as soon as possible, Tristan asks Kahedin to use

white sails upon his return if King Mark agrees to release Isolde for this voyage, and black sails if he does not. Kahedin agrees and sets sail immediately.

Despite everything that had occurred between them, King Mark's affection for Tristan is so great that he allows his wife to journey to the aid of her former lover to once again nurse him back to health. Thus, Sir Kahedin returns to Brittany with white sails raised. However, Isolde of the White Hands has heard whispers of this other Isolde and her liaisons with Tristan. Not willing to risk losing her husband to his long lost love, Isolde, the latter, lies to Tristan, saying that black sails bedeck Kahedin's ship.

Hearing this terrible news, Tristan's desperation was overwhelming. Believing that he will never see his love again, the only one who can cure him, he has no will to live. Our brave hero dies of a broken heart just before Isolde the former is able to reach him. Isolde's heart is crushed to have arrived too late. She collapses in tears over the lifeless body of the love of her life. Isolde, too, dies of her grief. And thus ends a tragic tale of two young lovers who were wrenched apart by family obligations, and reunited only when it was too late.



*'Tristan and Isolde' by Rogelio de Egusquiza, 1915*

### Historical Background

Although the story of Tristan and Isolde is not often considered as inspiration for William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," we can see some obvious similarities. A pair of young lovers who were never supposed to be

together, dying young while one waits for the other, falsely thinking all is lost, and the female character collapsing over the body of her dead love. We cannot know if Shakespeare had Tristan and Isolde in mind when he wrote his masterpiece. But, we can be sure that he would have been well aware of this story.

The romance of Tristan and Isolde is speculated to pre-date Shakespeare by approximately one thousand years, and may be based on an historical person. In fact, there is more evidence for an historical Tristan than there is for a real Arthur. There exists in Cornwall a megalith known as "the Tristan Stone." The stone is thought to date from the 6th century A.D. Inscribed upon it are the words (in translation) "Here lies Drustan, son of Cynvawr." This stone is placed close to Castle Dore, which is thought to have been occupied by local chieftains between the 5th and 7th centuries. Cynvawr is strongly considered to be one of these chieftains. Furthermore, a monk named Wrmonoc recorded in the 9th century that Cynvawr was the same person as King Mark.

Another early source are the Welsh Triads which discuss "Drystan, son of Tallwch." There was a Pictish king known as "Drust, son of Tallorcan" who is known to have lived in the late 8th century, giving another plausible historical origin to the figure of Tristan. Triad 71 mentions "Drystan, son of Tallwch, for Essylt, the wife of his uncle March." Though the details of this early version of the story differ from the version described above, the names are clearly variations of each other.

Like the other Arthurian legends, Tristan and Isolde's story is probably an amalgam of many influences. Very similar plots are found in the medieval Irish tales, "Diarmaid and Grainne" and "The Wooing of Emer." It is said that despite many differences in the various versions of this story, the fact that Isolde is always depicted as an Irish princess may point to an Irish origin, or at least a strong Irish influence.

Whatever its true origins are, it seems likely that legends of Tristan began independently



of those about Arthur. Perhaps the Irish tales mentioned above were grafted onto legends of a true Cornish prince. Eventually, this tale was merged with Arthurian legend, and Tristan became a knight of the round table.

By the high middle ages, Tristan and Isolde's love story had become extremely popular. The story first circulated among the Celtic lands mentioned above, as well as in Celtic Brittany. From there it traveled outward among the Anglo-Normans and over to audiences in France and Germany. As Arthurian legend evolved over the centuries, tales of Tristan as a knight of the round table continued to be told, as well as his and Isolde's own independent love story. Their last medieval mention is in Thomas Malory's famous fifteenth-century masterpiece, "Le Morte d'Arthur." Afterwards, the story falls off the radar, apart from two minor exceptions, until the 19th century.

Scottish poet Sir Walter Scott reignited interest in our two lovers in a poem about them which was included in his "Minstrelsy of the Scottish

Border," published in 1802. Subsequent writers and poets who found inspiration from Tristan and Isolde include Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Thomas Hardy, John Updike, and Diana Paxson. Perhaps the most famous is Richard Wagner, who featured them in his German language opera of the same name.

Most recently, Tristan and Isolde appeared as the main characters in a 2006 film produced by Ridley Scott. Starring James Franco and Sophia Myles, the film sadly received poor reviews by both critics and movie-goers. It may be high time to bring this romance into the 21st century. Perhaps, if he isn't busy filming another medieval epic, Peter Jackson would be up for the challenge. It doesn't hurt to ask!

#### Bibliography:

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Snyder, Christopher (2000). *The World of King Arthur*. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd.

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