Frappier, Eilhart and *The Roman de Tristan*

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> Rien n'offre un caractère de simplicité dans les multiples questions qui concernent les romans de *Tristan.*
>
> —J. Frappier, *Cahiers de civilization médiévale.*

Extraordinarily rich and diverse in their plurality of story and theme, highly complex in matters of intertextuality, and yet still evocative of mankind's postlapsarian existence, the medieval *Tristan* texts challenge the curious and frighten the cowardly.

The story's compulsive passion, such as Eilhart von Oberg's raw version reveals, shows us a Tristan and Isolde[1] driven, for all intents and purposes, insane and irrational by their love. Their rash actions, in a society that greatly valued conformity, illustrate brutish behavior that admits of no resistance, no exceptions, and no logic. No manifestation of will power can overcome their undistracted death wish, their focused drive to self-destruction. From the hero's point of view, Isolde may be viewed as a metaphor for pride, i.e., Tristan's refusal to capitulate to a destiny associated with commonness.[2] As Shakespeare's proud hero in *Coriolanus* puts it so powerfully, "I had rather be their servant in my own way than sway with them in theirs" (II, i). Like Coriolanus, this *Chevalier du Soleil, Chevalier de l'Ombre,* Tristan cannot compromise with any aspect of his fateful life.

But space does not permit here an extended metatextual commentary. It is Eilhart's *Tristrant* (ca. 1170), a fascinating text in the *Tristan* universe, that represents for us a version heretofore insufficiently appreciated by many scholars. Arthurian critics, particularly on the Continent (west of the Rhine), have tried to ignore its importance—probably because it was readily available to them for so many years only in a kind of paraphrase, in English, found in Gertrude Schoepperle's two volume study first published in 1913.[3] Recently, the French scholar D. Buschinger published a thesis on Eilhart's *Tristrant,* and subsequently, a careful parallel edition and line by line French translation, with detailed textual commentaries.[4] Then, J. W. Thomas published his idiomatic English version with a full introduction in 1978.[5] It can be said that the text is receiving the attention it deserves, for of all the numerous surviving parts of the corpus, it represents a version related to the original *estoire*, or archetype.[6]

My stated purpose is to call attention to a few comparative matters raised by a close reading of Eilhart. Earlier critical treatments of several of the notions to be discussed lack sufficient nuance, notably those by Jean Frappier.

In his now classic 1963 article, the late Sorbonne professor deals with the *version commune*, *version courtoise*, reviews several previous scholarly studies on the *matière Tristan*, then analyzes in some detail the love potion question and the Ordeal of God/ ambiguous oath episode.[7]

Frappier's assessment takes pains to show how both Beroul and Eilhart's texts reveal the influence of *courtoisie* but not *fin'amor*, a "religion of love" that stresses Tristan's torments and nearly masochistic suffering for Isolde (as in Thomas d'Angleterre's version). Frappier emphasizes the parallel structure of Eilhart and Beroul's versions, seeing in them not an exquisite, ecstatic, highly introspective love casuistry, but rather a drama of fatality and illegitimate love. What is missing here is nuance: Eilhart does in fact describe love's torments on several occasions (e.g. the *Liebes-monolog*, Thomas trans. 75-77); elsewhere, Tristan is beaten, kicked and humiliated because of his love for Isolde (Thomas trans. 126-27). In addition to presenting the idea of love (*in nuce* at least) as its own justification, Eilhart also deals with the love philtre in an ambiguous way. Frappier discusses the love philtre theme at length (266-80) and argues that its magic effects end in Beroul so that the narrative can move the lovers out of the Forest of Morois—to continue the story. What is lacking here is an appreciation for the ambiguity in Eilhart: this author has it both ways, for the love drink is both fatal, forever, and yet wears off—more or less (Thomas trans. 102-103).

Let us now proceed to six key issues that need further clarification.

1. *The King of Ireland.* In the so-called *version courtoise*, Tristan sails to Ireland to bring back *the woman*, the one whose beautiful hair ostensibly prompted Tristan's uncle, King Mark of Cornwall to ask for her hand. Tristan's wooing expedition is motivated in both versions by the evil, suspicious barons who hate the young hero and fear him as Mark's potentially designated heir.[8] The *version courtoise* clearly stresses more the role of Queen Isolde, the princess' mother, the motivation for which is that she knows herbs and salves to treat and heal Tristan's dragon wounds. On the other hand, Eilhart's version emphasizes more the character of Isalde's father (the Morholt's brother); he is a forceful and well sketched character truly grieved at the loss of his warrior kinsman.

In a lively scene where Tristrant is placed at a physical disadvantage—in a bathtub—Eilhart's Isalde at first threatens to avenge her uncle's death, then realizes through the eloquent intercession of Brangene, that if Tristrant dies, she, Isalde, will be forced to marry the deceitful steward, the royal cupbearer who falsely claimed he slew the dragon. As Eilhart describes it, Isalde "[...] thought for a moment and again became kind to him. The inner turmoil left her, and forgetting her deep grief, she ordered [...] new clothes [...] for him" (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 70).

Isalde then appears before her father to wield from him a rash boon, i.e., that he will grant a pardon to the knight who killed the dragon.[9] The maiden suggests that before a feudal court of law, the cowardly steward will be proven a liar and that she can bring forward the one who knows precisely how and where the dragon died. Thus, before his

assembled prices and dukes, the king is obliged to kiss Tristrant as a sign of his pardon. And of course, in a brief verbal joust, Tristrant outscores and humiliates the lying high steward, who then is exiled in shame—just as in the *version courtoise* (Friar Robert, *Saga*, trans. Schach 70). Now Tristrant must ask, on behalf of his uncle, for the hand of the beautiful maiden Isalde. Her father the king consents, charges Tristrant by oath to care for her with honor, while exhorting ominously (and ironically) the hero that King Mark should indeed possess her,

> [...] for you have caused her much grief, and I am afraid that, if she should begin to brood about this, you two would not live as you should (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 74).

By stressing the feudal context—the allusions to blood revenge, the council of barons, the word and gesture of pardon for the killing of a kinsman—Eilhart's version of the episode is more logical and better motivated, even as Isalde's intercession before the assembled court, on behalf of Tristrant, convinces everyone concerned of the hero's valor (cf. also Robert's point about the barons' threats to withdraw from Mark's service unless he marries; *Saga*, trans. Schach, p. 50).

2. *Tristan's Banishment*. Because Tristrant strove for honor, virtue, glory, and fame, the jealous barons slander him. This is the true sense of the biting wound by the black dragon that afflicts the Knight of the Sun. As Eilhart puts it in a "moralizing digression,"[10]

> they envied him because they themselves were not upright and brave. That has often happened since, and still occurs to many an honest man that a worthless fellow concedes him nothing and belittles his fame. When he hears any praise of the upright man that he can't contradict, he may just go away and say, 'it's a lie.' That ill befits any of you if you consider it carefully, for no one ever won lasting fame and honor in love by such behavior (Eilhart, Thomas trans., 83)

But unlike the confused, oscillating, and rather unconvincing King Mark in the *version courtoise*,[11] Eilhart's character simply discovers Tristrant and Isolde *in flagrante delicto*—

> ... the king left the lords to retire and found beside his bed the bold Tristrant with the queen in his arms. He was kissing her and pressing her against his breast very lovingly. Dismayed, he flew into a terrible rage and said to Tristrant, 'that is evil love. How can I keep my honor with a traitor like you causing me such grief?' (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 85)

Tristrant must leave the court forthwith, but of course the lovers cannot survive for long in separation. Surprised and caught in broad daylight, Eilhart's adulterers appear unquestionably guilty—for the moment at least, or until Mark can begin to forgive them (as he does in Beroul), after the telling tryst under the pine tree (linden tree in an orchard for Eilhart, Thomas trans. 86-88). In a similar situation in Gottfried, the banishment is in fact quite unmotivated and Mark acts *volens-nolens* (Gottfried, Hatto trans. 258). We will return to this problem later.

3. *The Wolf Trap in Mark's Court:* After the pitiful life in the forest episode, Eilhart's Tristan finally does go into exile and takes up with the Knights of the Round Table, led by King Arthur. Through another deceptive rash boon, the hero finds himself re-admitted to Mark's court, but this time the *faulx,* or the sharp blades of a wolf trap, wound and cut him sharply, as he tries to return to the arms of his beloved: "[...] the blood swelled so strongly from the cuts that the several thicknesses of cloth would not hold it back and his leg became all bloody" (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 108).

It is Sir Kay who devises a sadistic way to conceal the evidence from Mark—as Tristrant is "bleeding like a stuck pig" (108). After Gawain pushes Kay down onto it, all the Knights of the Round Table fall onto the blade board, become wounded and bloody, suffer excruciating pain, and in the commotion, provide cover for the lovers' twilight tryst. Like monsters storming around in the night (as Mark describes them), the knights limp away, thus mocking the host-guest relationship.

This humorous fabliaux-like episode recalls Beroul's account of the *escondit* ordeal at the ford when Isolde spreads her legs wide and mounts on Tristan the pilgrim's back to cross the water.

Another analogy in the *version courtoise* is the bloody ordeal of the white flour stratagem whereby Tristan the long jumper gets caught, although, not surprisingly, Gottfried's King Mark remains still undecided because he sees no footprints in the flour.[12] Put simply, Eilhart prefers directness, graphic realism, and truculent humor to the delicate pirouetting and ethical ambiguities inherent in the story, particularly for a Thomas d'Angleterre or a Gottfried von Strasburg.

(One can further argue this point by noting, for example, the handling of the episode of blocking the sun from Isolde's face in the forest. For Eilhart, Mark simply places his glove on her person, even though there is no mention of the sun. For Beroul, the glove on the branch covers a ray of sunlight that is shining on Isolde's lovely countenance. Brother Robert has it this way also, but Gottfried, ever more florid, has Mark stop up the window of the grotto with foliage and flowers.)[13]

4. *Isalde of Karahes.* In another adventure, Tristan the brave wins the hand of Havelin's daughter, the sister of Kehenis, but the marriage is not consummated. "The noble lady bore this patiently" (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 117). While riding one day across a brook, water splashes up under her dress to Isalde's thigh. "'Wasser, du bist fremde!'"—"'Water,'" she said, "'you surprise me! Bad luck to you! How dare you jump further up under my dress than any knight's hand dares to go or ever went?'" (117). This audacious splash incident touches off a major confrontation between the now shamed and humiliated brother, Kehenis, and the ostensibly impotent Tristrant. The latter exculpates his unusual behavior by claiming that his spouse Isalde of Karahes has not treated him kindly enough to deserve his intimate approach. In answer to his brother-in-law he argues:

> You shouldn't get angry before you know how things are. There is a lady who for my sake, alone and in front of others, treats a dog better than your sister has treated me (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 118).

This of course leads the two to "Tintanjol" where Tristrant can win his wager and demonstrate how sweetly his beloved Isalde caresses Utant the hound (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 120-22).

In the *version courtoise,* Tristan excuses his behavior by describing his undying love for a maiden whose beauty and gentility greatly eclipsed that of his spouse (i.e., Kehenis' sister!).[14]

5. *Isalde's Hair Shirt.* Eilhart has his hero undergo an ignominious and humiliating experience that is then counterbalanced by Isalde's sympathetic self-mortification. Tristrant the leper appears in disguise before his beloved, is recognized by her, then beaten, kicked, and driven off by her squires—apparently because he committed a tiny infraction against her honor. Not unmindful of certain scenes in the Lancelot-Guenevere story, this rude scene assuages Isalde's wrath as she laughs in glee at the pitiful sight. But then, in expiation, Isalde takes to wearing a hair shirt, or *hemd härin,* the "leather corselet" of Thomas d'Angleterre's version.[15] The *chemise de crin* or *cilice* irritates her soft and tender white skin, inflicts anguished fretting and painful agony, and reminds her that she must make amends for the blows suffered by Tristrant. This motif has been attributed to Thomas to underscore the "religion of love" he exalts, a concept fraught with ascetic joys and scrupulous titillation (Frappier, *Tristan* 265). However, the notion already exists fully in Eilhart's version, even if it does appear in a somewhat elemental and primitive form.

6. *King Mark's Oscillation.* Of all the characters in the *Tristan* romances, Mark remains the most problematic. As Hatto has observed (Intro. 27-28), Mark's magnanimity and devotion toward the child issued from his sister's elopement, his blind passion for Isolde, and his courtly and often selfless behavior are offset by the tyrannical cuckold's black fits of rage. Mark wavers at the flimsiest suggestion of Isolde's innocence and succumbs again and again to his lust for a wife who loves someone else. Doubt and suspicion are followed by crass certainly that rips away the scales of illusion. This heart, also noble, cries out with tragic implications, although only a modern reader would appreciate such a viewpoint. Deceived husbands are just comical or pathetic in medieval literature; and unchaste wives or queens are punished.

Eilhart's Mark oscillates between punishing and forgiving the lovers because of a) his shame over the loss of honor from the adulterous situation; and b) because he cherishes his dear nephew and beautiful wife. This idea appears *in nuce* in Eilhart's text and became amplified at length in the *version courtoise*, where it takes on a moral dimension. When, for example, Mark receives the letter of repentance (written by Ugrim) from Tristrant, his generous nature emerges:

> ...he told his counselors how they had been lying when he found them in he forest and swore that Tristrant had never had her as his woman, that he only had always been kind to her and too fond of her (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 102).

Thus does the King of Cornwall continue to delude himself regarding the truth.

Unfortunately, this brief sketch cannot permit a more extensive foray into Eilhart's varied feudal usages. A study of the love rhetoric so mindful of the *Roman d' Eneas, Chrétien's Cligés,* and Heinrich von Veldeke's *Eneide* must be postponed. The gloss-like miniature Joy of the Court in Eilhart's Gariole-Nampetenis episode will be examined elsewhere. We must pass over as well Eilhart's fascinating narrative technique that allows for numerous puns, forward references, a "guarantee of authenticity," and the frequent inclusion of audience perspectives (quite unlike Thibaut de Champagne's lyrical style).[16]

We can perceive behind his tale a dark, male-oriented, and somewhat less sophisticated temperament that, while not exactly relishing moral ambiguities (as found in Beroul, Thomas d'Angleterre, and Gottfried), find irresistible the attraction of the dilemma faced by the two lovers.

But Eilhart's version reveals aspects of the story heretofore recognized only in the French tellings or later Germanic tradition. Eilhart provides a greater role for Isalde's father (a stress that Gottfried reiterates); this is a distinction that adds logic to the familial context in Ireland.

For Eilhart, the true reason for Tristrant's banishment from Mark's court is the fact that the King catches them red-handed. The German author prefers pedestrian realism to gray amorality. His graphic and truculent style can be appreciated especially in the episode of the wolf trap blades. It offers to Eilhart and his readers/listeners a chance to snigger at Arthur's noble knights.

A further distinction may be noted in Eilhart's handling of the Isalde of Karahes/ audacious splash episode. The subtle difference—namely, that Eilhart's version stresses Tristrant's complaint about Isalde's unkind treatment of him—strikes us as crucial in assessing Eilhart's interpretation of his model. *The version courtoise,* on the other hand, emphasizes Tristan's fidelity in love to his star-crossed Isalde of Ireland.

Similarly, the focus of our discussion on the hair shirt worn by Tristrant's dear Isalde—to empathize with her lover's suffering—urges scholars to use the term "courtly" with more caution and nuance. Finally, King Mark's wavering attitude toward the lovers turns up as early as Eilhart's telling, i.e., Mark's simultaneous shame over the dishonor of the doubtless adulterous situation and inability to act decisively because of his devotion to his wife and nephew, form part of Eilhart's version. Mark's oscillating character was not invented by Thomas d'Angleterre.

The above remarks lead us to the inevitable conclusion that Eilhart von Oberg's seminal, powerful, and original text needs re-evaluation both by *Tristan* scholars in particular and by Arthurian scholars in general.

Notes and References

[1] Tristrant and Isalde are forms used here to describe Eilhart's characters; Tristan and Isolde will designate the characters in general terms. See further, R.J. Cormier, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1980.

[2] See Eilhart von Oberg, Thomas trans. 107, *Tristrant*.

[3] G. Schoepperle, *Tristan and Isolt*. For earlier editions of Eilhart by German scholars, see the bibliography in David J. Shirt, *The Old French Tristan Poems*, 57.

[4] Danielle Buschinger, *Le Tristrant d'Eilhart von Oberg*; Eilhart von Oberg, Eilhart von Oberg, *Tristrant*, ed., tr. D. Buschinger.

[5] Hereafter referred to as Eilhart, Thomas trans.

[6] Buschinger (intro., ed./tr. XI, XVII-XXVI), with regard to the *estoire*, interprets Eilhart's poem as an *adaptation courtoise* of a lost Old French romance.

[7] See Bedier, *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas*; Jean Frappier, "Structure et sens du Tristan."

[8] Friar Robert, *The Saga of Tristram and Isönd*, trans. Schach, 51; cf. Gottfried von Strasburg, *Tristan*, trans. Hatto 180ff. See Cormier 1980: 69-75.

[9] See Friar Robert, *Saga*, trans. Schach 77. See also Frappier, "Le Motif du 'don contraignant"; R. Dubuis, "Yvain et Iwein;" Ph. Ménard, "Le Don en blanc," argues rightly for folkloric, i.e., non-Celtic origins.

[10] Eilhart, *Tristrant*, ed., tr. Buschinger, p. 245.

[11] See, for example, Friar Robert, *Saga*, tr. Schach 81-94 (includes the Ordeal of God episode). On this topic, see below.

[12] Gottfried, *Tristan*, tr. Hatto 242. See below.

[13] Eilhart, *Tristrant*, Thomas trans., p. 100; Beroul, *Romance of Tristan* 184-85. (Ewert provides bibliographic references and details on this motif.)

[14] Thomas d'Angleterre, *Roman de Tristan*, trans. Hatto 320. Cf. Friar Robert, *Saga*, trans. Schach 126. Otherwise, an old wonld and a promise to Our Lady keep him from performing in bed, as told to Isolde of the White hands (Bédier, 166).

When Tristrant becomes angry at Queen Isolde because of the beating he suffers from her squires, he leaves and joyfully consummates his marriage with his wife (Eilhart, Thomas trans. 127).

[15] Eilhart adverts to it seven times: Thomas trans. 128, 130 (2 mentions), 131 (3 mentions), 135; cf. Eilhart, ed., tr. Buschinger, vv. 7164-7170 (*hemdlein herin*, mentioned in all three manuscript traditions). Cf. also Thomas de'Anglterre, Douce Fragment, vv. 741-771, trans. Hatto, 336. See Jean Larmat, "La Souffrance dans le *Tristan* de Thomas" 369-385 (esp. on the cilice 376, associated with Thomas d' Angleterre).

[16] Cf. M.J. Delage, "Quelques notes" 211-219, interfaces between *Erec et Enide*, Cligés, the "joie de la Cort," and the *Tristan*.

For an example of a pun, see Eilhart, Thomas trans. 59, where Tristrant speaks scornfully to Morholt: "That's all the tribute you'll get" (*Der Zins*)—referring both to the splinter from his sword and to Morholt's purpose in coming to Cornwall.

For authorial assurances, see Buschinger ed., vv. 9456-57 (p. 751): "Ebhart (=Eilhart) gutten gezug hat,/dass ess recht alsuss ergat" (E. qui s'appuie sur de bons témoins,/vous assure que c'est bien ainsi que tout s'est passé). For audience perspectives, see F. Goldin, ed., tr., *Lyrics* 443-53.

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