

Tristan und Isolde

I thought you might like to see where Wagner obtained the story of Tristan and Isolde. One of the numerous treasures of the National Library of Austria is a manuscript (No.2537) of the prose version of "Tristan", sumptuously illustrated by the Master of Bedford from the library of the Duc de Berry, dated about 1410.



Here is a pertinent extract, translated in 1978, from the old French, by Gabriel Bise.

"King Mark was getting old, his beard was now grey. It was time for him

to marry, in the hope of leaving an heir, if only to silence the jealous barons and assure the succession to the throne of Cornwall. He shared his feelings with Tristan, who swore to find him the ideal woman. Had he not spoken most approvingly of the beauty of Isolde the Fair, whose hair was so diaphanous that, when caught in a sunbeam, it looked, like a piece of gold? There could be no doubt that returning to Ireland meant enduring the storm-tossed sea and confronting a hostile feudal world. But it did not matter: Tristan could not depart from his oath. Together with Curvenal and an escort, he set sail on a richly adorned vessel, and the winds of Cornwall sweeping down from the cliffs soon swelled his white sail.

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Ireland had now been left far behind, as the young man joyfully returned with the beautiful promised bride to King Mark. His eyes dwelt longingly on the womanly shapes which could be discerned under her long robes; his heart was heavy with regret at the thought of abandoning the beautiful Isolde, whom he had conquered, to the bed of his uncle. But away with sly thoughts! The sea was beautiful and life on board ship reminded him of the splendid living at court. On the strings of his harp Tristan played a plaintive melody, and, leaning over the chess table, he followed Isolde's hands as they ran across the board. One day, as they were approaching Cornwall, the winds dropped, the sun beat down hotter and hotter, and the white-sailed vessel became becalmed near a row of cliffs. Everyone was thirsty and called for water to drink.

Through a misunderstanding which Fate must surely have willed, Curvenal and Brangane, Isolde's lady companion, offered the two young people the golden goblets containing the magic potion which gave love to those who drank it. It had been jealously kept for King Mark and his young bride. At once, the loyalty of our chivalrous hero vanished. Tristan's eyes stared ever more insistently into those of Isolde the Fair, while his hands touched hers in an embrace which was to seal forever the great passion which devoured the two lovers.

Having finally been convicted of adultery, to the immense grief of King Mark, the lovers were delivered to the royal tribunal: Tristan was to be burnt alive, and Isolde sent to live among the lepers. While he was being taken to the place of execution Tristan escaped from his warders and took Isolde with him. The two fugitives reached the depths of the forest of Morrois so as to be quite safe. After galloping for many hours through the brush they came to the towering gates of a castle. They parleyed for a while under the white walls, but soon the charms of Isolde, seated on her white horse, moved the lord of the castle to open up and offer the two young people and their friend's hospitality. Far from the bustle of the court, the days and nights went by happily for the lovers, while Curvenal stood guard at their door to keep away the indiscreet gaze of strangers".

Peter Dundas for the Opera Guild of Rochester
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