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The Singularity of *Sir Tristrem* in the Tristan Corpus

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The late thirteenth-century anonymous *Sir Tristrem*² seems a rather naïve and poor composition when measured against the great Tristan romances in French and German. However, a comparative study of the Middle English *Sir Tristrem*, its source, Thomas of Britain's Anglo-Norman *Tristan*, Gottfried von Strassburg's High German *Tristan und Isolt* and Friar Róbert's Old Norse *Tristrams Saga ok Ísöndar*³ will reveal the idiosyncratic singularity of the Middle English narrative within the Tristan corpus. The first two lines in *Sir Tristrem* already indicate an ambivalent and playful approach to the original: 'I was a[t Erceldoun] / Wip Tomas spak y ëare'. The Middle English poet merges the authorial figure of Thomas with the authoritative, pseudo-mythical figure of the visionary Thomas of Ertheldoun.⁴ He also transforms the written source into an oral tale. The alleged oral source, prior to a 'fixed' authoritative version of the text, facilitates a freer and less problematic alteration of the original. The direct connection with the author's imagined recitation of the poem also gives an illusion of authenticity. Thus there is an appropriation and displacement of the author and the text: the author becomes legendary and the text an oral story. Hence, the intended meaning of *Sir Tristrem* undergoes a process of manipulation, which results in an altogether different romance. In this article, I shall investigate how, from the rhetorical and topical manipulation of the source, a new Tristan emerges. I shall first refer to the unique position of the text within the English romance tradition. Subsequently, I shall examine how the lack of courtly elements in *Sir Tristrem* conforms to the compositional trends of Middle English romances as a whole, but also operates in a manner specific to *Sir Tristrem*. I shall focus my analysis on the development of *fin'amors*, the centrality of the forest and the impossibility of the hero's integration into society.
Sir Tristrem, *the English Romance Tradition and Courtliness*

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the gradual political and social separation of England from continental Europe enhanced the creation of a distinctive insular literary culture, rooted in both English and Anglo-Norman sources. Whereas Anglo-Norman romances were certainly addressed to 'gentle audiences', the status of their Middle English counterparts is more problematic. Although some of them may have been composed for the bourgeoisie or the peasantry, those of Anglo-Norman descent were probably written for the same high class public as their predecessors. Generally, both the Anglo-Norman originals and the Middle English romances show similar political concerns regarding the ambitions of the barons. In *Havelok the Dane*, for example, it is suggested that a king's power should lie in the consent of the barons to avoid corruption and tyranny. *Ipomadon* and Thomas's *Tristan* are the only two extant Anglo-Norman romances translated or adapted into Middle English whose focus is love. *Ipomadon* is faithful to the original in maintaining courtly elements and motifs, even if transformed. Conversely, what makes *Sir Tristrem* unique in the Middle English romance tradition is the particular appropriation of its source. It sweeps away the profusion of courtly features, replacing them with an action-based narrative typical of most Anglo-Norman and Middle English romances, yet one that does not maintain the baronial political overtones of the other texts.

*Sir Tristrem* is also innovative in its refusal to adopt from its source many of the sociological and rhetorical components ascribed to courtliness in general and to *fin'amors* in particular. Instead, transgression of courtly norms is at the axis of the composition. Even allowing for the reversed expectations of the Tristan romances, the Middle English narrative offers a more radical vision of the love affair between Tristrem and Ysonde than its French, German, and Old Norse counterparts. According to Geoffrey N. Bromiley:

> The author of the Middle English version, a late thirteenth-century romance with a complicated stanza form, also drastically cut Thomas's poem. No major episode is actually omitted, but long passages of psychological debate in particular are [...] eliminated.

Yet the omission of 'psychological debates' does not indicate a lack of rhetorical sophistication, but rather the idiosyncratic engagement of most Middle English romances with love, in a rhetorical practice in which an action-based narrative is
preferred to extended psychological insights into the life of lovers. In \textit{Sir Tristrem}, then, the language of courtesy is reduced to a minimum. This creates a sort of love which is set apart from social norms and conventions.

A good example of the Middle English romance displacement of courtliness is provided in the love scenes. In Thomas' \textit{Tristan}, when the two lovers wake up in the morning and discover that Mark has been there, Tristan tells Iseult:

\begin{verbatim}
Je me'n voil aler, bele amie,
Vos n'avez garde de la vie,
Car ne porez estre provee
[...]
Fuir deport et querre eschil,
Guerpir joie, siouvre peril.
Tel duel ai por le departie
Ja n'avrai hait jor de ma vie.
Ma doce dame, je vos pri
Ne me metez mie en obli:
En loig de vos autant m'amez
Comme vos de près fait avez.
Je n'i os, dame, plus atendre;
Or me baisies au congié prendre.
\end{verbatim}

'[I must leave, fair love, / but you need have no fear for your own life, / since nothing can be proved against you. / [...] / to flee my pleasure and seek my woe, / to abandon joy and court danger. / Our parting gives me such sorrow / that I shall never in my life be happy again. / My sweet lady, I beg you / not to forget me: / when I am far from you, love me just as much / as ever you did when I was near. / My lady, I dare stay no longer here; / kiss me now, as we say farewell.]

In a parallel scene in \textit{Sir Tristrem}, the profusion of courtly language and conventions is reduced to one line: 'Po was her joie al newe' (l. 2559). The absence of conversations between the two lovers, not only here but in the whole romance, redefines the nature of the love theme. This displacement of courtliness has led Susan Crane to conclude that \textit{Sir Tristrem} 'has lost the significance developed for it by Thomas, and it has not gained a new one'. But the romance
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does have a new 'significance', that of *amor vincit omnia*. It is precisely the deliberate scarceness of traditional courtly aspects which gives the poem its own defining features in the Tristan corpus. Contrary to T. C. Rumble's assertion that 'the Middle English poet's alterations of his source suggest his desire to rationalize and to moralise the characters and events of the original', there is rather a conscious attempt to transgress social conventions. If the manners of courtliness serve to rationalise the *foudatz* of *amors* in the French and German texts, their absence from *Sir Tristrem* makes the poem the most transgressive of them all.

In Gottfried's narrative, the relationship between Tristan's parents, Rivalin and Blancheflor, is constructed along the lines of the courtly tradition:

'ach, süeze, waz hân ich getân?'
sprach aber der hövesche Riwalin.
si sprach: 'an einem friunde mîn,
dem besten, deu ich ie gewan,
dâ habet ir mich beswäret an.'

[...] der friunt, des si gewuoc,
daz was ir herze, in dem si truoc
von sînen schulden ungemach

(ll. 750-54; 765-67)

['Ah, sweet woman, what have I done?' was courteous Rivalin's reply. 'You have annoyed me through a friend of mine, the best I ever had'. / The friend she referred to was her heart, in which he made her suffer.]

The interchanges between the future lovers conform to courtly conventions. The personification of the heart and the playful language of the conversation generate the perfect atmosphere for *fin'amors*. The Old Norse saga, in its treatment of this episode, maintains the courtly components; however, *Sir Tristrem* reconstructs the original according to distinctly epic parameters. Lines 124-35, now lost, may have contained the first meeting and exchanges between Rouland ('Rivalin' in Gottfried and 'Kanelangres' in Brother Rôbert) and Blancheflour. But so few lines would have not allowed for an elaborate display of courtly language and imagery. In fact, the subsequent passage concentrates on Rouland's fear for his land not being a safe place for Blancheflour (ll. 136-43). Love is secondary to the urgent
mood of the narrative. There is no room or time for courtly pomp as renewed war with Morgan is approaching:

Rewþe mow he here  
Of Roulandriis þe kniht:  
Þre hundred he slouh þere  
Wiþ his swerd briht,  
Of al þo þat þer were  
Miht non him felle in fiht,  
Bot on wiþ tresoun þere  
Þurch þe bodi him piht.  
Wiþ gile  
To deþ he him diht–  
Allas þat ich while!

(ll. 199-209)

Epic motifs dominate the tone of this passage. Rouland is not fighting for his individual pretz, but for the collective objective of keeping his land free from subjection to Morgan. Rouland's destiny and that of his country merge together. The handling of the episode, with Rouland's out-of-measure heroic demeanour and tragic death caused by treason, is an instance of thematic topoi typical of chansons de geste. Although the action remains the same, the tone generates an altogether different narrative. Renaming the character, Rivalin becomes Rouland, echoing the French Roland of the Chanson de Roland, the epitome of an epic warrior, a daredevil knight dying through Ganelon's treason.17 Even if the author of Sir Tristrem was not familiar with the Chanson, the Middle English Charlemagne Romances were equally developed within epic premises. The chief difference between Sir Tristrem and the Charlemagne romances is that the latter were actually based upon French chansons, their tone remaining the same, whilst Sir Tristrem's transformation from courtly into epic alters the construction of the text. It displaces the more rhetorically elaborate love story of a roman courtois, replacing it with a more condensed narrative. Such a switch favours action both on the battlefield and in the love scenes at the expense of the characters' psychological tribulations on fin'amors. By suppressing the proliferation of courtly elements, the epic nature of Sir Tristrem defines transgression as the unifying theme which dominates the narrative.
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*Identity and Love*

The romance begins before Tristrem's birth. His future is determined when the illicit nature of his conception is revealed:

> To hir maistresse sche [a maiden] gan say
> ṭat hye was boun to go
> To ṭe kniht ḷer he lay;
> Sche swouned and hir was wo.
> So comfort he ṭat may,
> A knaue child gat ṭai tvo,
> So dere;
> And sephalt men cleped him so:
> Tristrem ṭe trewe fere.

(ll. 102-110)

Rivalin and Blauuncheflour father Tristrem outside matrimony. In Gottfried's and Brother Róbert's versions, they get married as soon as they return home. Even if the High German and Old Norse texts also set up the future development of Tristan as a transgressor from birth, the wedding legitimises Tristan in the eyes of the law. Again, however, *Sir Tristrem* defies social conventions: the marriage between the hero's parents is implied in Rohand's words, "Phis maiden schal ben oure, / Roulandriis to wedde" (ll. 156-57), but never confirmed.¹⁸

Subsequently, Rouland dies at the hands of Morgan, and Blauuncheflour perishes giving birth to their son. Morgan gains control over Ermonie, while Rohand takes care of Tristrem. It is at this juncture that Rohand changes his name to Tramtrist to keep the young boy safe. By way of contrast (most probably following Thomas's original) in both the High German and Old Norse stories, the renaming episode takes place later. Tristan/Tristram himself opts for Trantist for purely practical reasons: he going back to Ireland after having killed Morold; thus he needs to hide his real identity. Crucially, by changing Tristrem's name at a different point, the Middle English romance enables a distinct allegorical interpretation absent from the other texts. If at a purely literal level, the name change prevents Tristrem from being discovered by his father's felonious enemy, in the realm of allegory, thanks to his new identity, the young Tristrem can live and learn according to the courtly and social laws as long as he is unaware of his
real self. A feigned personality keeps him safe from his otherwise unavoidable destiny.

Sir Tristrem's conception of destiny differs not only from the other Tristan narratives but more importantly from the official position of the Catholic Church of the time, which broadly agreed with Augustinian dictates:

We assert both that God knows all things before they come to pass, and that we do by our free will whatsoever we know and feel to be done by us only because we will it. [...] But it does not follow that, though there is for God a certain order of all causes, there must therefore be nothing depending in the free exercise of our own wills, for our wills themselves are included in that order of causes which is certain to God, and is embraced by his foreknowledge, for human wills are also human actions.¹⁹

Not only does Sir Tristrem challenge coercive social conventions, but it also seems to ignore the Church's belief in liberum arbitrium since the general impression that the hearer/reader gets is that at all times Tristrem is subject to a major force which dictates and prefigures his future, thus liberating him from all responsibility for his acts.

Fortuna, through the manipulation of two of the four elements, air and water, decisively contributes to the attainment of Tristrem's destiny. First, the winds lead him to England; afterwards, the winds again drive him to Ireland. In England, he finds out his true identity; in Ireland, he meets Ysonde. The discovery of his identity imposes limitations on Tristrem's acts, whereas love becomes the one and only reason for his existence. In chivalric romances, the revelation of identity normally appears as a climactic moment in so far as the hero's avanture is usually established at the same time. In Chrétien de Troyes' Chevalier de la Charrette, for example, Lancelot knows that he is the Elect as soon as he lifts the tombstone to fulfil the prophecy of the liberator knight (Il. 1900-1933). Identity and destiny are intimately linked. Lancelot's rescue of Guenevere signifies Arthur's court's recognition of his worth as a knight. Even if ironically, this is the catalyst for Lancelot's integration into the feudal world. In Sir Tristrem, however, Tristrem's discovery will not conform to the traditional pattern of an ultimate chivalric mission which transforms the main character into the best knight in the world, finding a place for himself in society. To the contrary, his avanture will determine his exclusion from society.
The same two elements of water and air are the prime movers in bringing about the lovers' ultimate desire. The Old Norse saga also relates that: 'Nú rak þá svo lengi í hafi fyrir vindi og straumi, að þeir vissu ekki, hvar fóru' (p. 75) ['The ship was driven by winds and waves on the high seas so long that they did not know where they were sailing.']. At this point, both texts project an identical image in which the lovers' fate depends on the works of *Fortuna*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ysonde briht of hewe} \\
\text{Is fer out in þe se.} \\
\text{A winde ohain hem blewe} \\
\text{Þat sail no miht þer be.} \\
\text{So rewe þe knihtes trewe,} \\
\text{Tristrem, so rewe he,} \\
\text{Euer as þai com newe--;} \\
\text{He on ohain hem þre--} \\
\text{Gret swink.} \\
\text{Swete Ysonde þe fre} \\
\text{Asked Bringwain a drink.}
\end{align*}
\]

(ll. 1651-1661)

The author deploys the elements (in particular the wind) to reunite the hero with his illicit love. In both Gottfried's *Tristan* and *Sir Tristrem*, Tristrem (Tristan) and Ysonde (Ísolt) erroneously drink the love philtre. Nevertheless, the metaphor of the love drink operates at two different levels. In the Middle High German romance, Tristan and Ísolt had shown signs of their mutual attraction before they drank the magical beverage. The drug is simply the accelerator of an already existing feeling. It is a device which will help them to lose their inhibitions about social restrictions. Their guilt, though existent, will be diminished as the drink can now take the blame. By way of contrast, in *Sir Tristrem* there is no previous attraction between the two lovers. The beverage functions as the only catalyst and initiator of love. The sense of the workings of magic outside the courtly and feudal domains is much stronger. The potion and its connection to the world of magic displace their love to the realm of the Other. From then on, they are excluded from society and its rules. The Christian, civilised and ordered domain of the court contrasts not only with their extramarital relationship but also with the fear and mystery of the non-civilised world, which in the latter part of the romance is also represented by nature and the forest. Once again, the two lovers
are deprived of their free will. Yet *liberum arbitrium* operates in a completely different way in the saga and Gottfried. In the latter, for example, as Hugo Bekker argues, after drinking the love potion Tristan absolves Brangane of all responsibility (ll. 12,494-502). Tristan and Isolde assert their free will to continue their love relationship to the extent that there is no need to mention the love drink again. This freedom to choose is absent from the Middle English romance.

On their first night together the lovers consummate their passion. The last fragment found so far of Thomas' *Tristan* corresponds to this section of the narrative. The discourse articulated is that of *fin'amors* as delineated in the troubadours' tradition. After a sophisticated wordplay with 'amer' and 'la mer', which accords with the language of courtliness, the lovers:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Entr'els i ad mainte emveisur,} \\
\text{Car ambedeu sunt en espeir:} \\
\text{D'i ent lur bon e lur voeir,} \\
\text{Baisent, enveisent e acolent.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(II. 74-77)

[are very affectionate with each other / since both are hopeful: / they talk about their happiness and their desire, / while they kiss and caress.]

Even when it is implied that they have sexual intercourse – 'Tuz lur bons font privème, / E lur joië e lur deduit, / Quant il poënt e jur e nuit' [In private they enjoy / their joy and their pleasure, / all day and all night] (II. 82-84) (my translation) – the text emphasises the psychological pains of their attempts to ignore their feelings and the *jois* of their confession. In *Sir Tristrem* these elements are absent:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tristrem in schip lay} \\
\text{Wiþ Ysonde ich niht,} \\
\text{Play miri he may} \\
\text{Wiþ þat warþli wiht} \\
\text{In boure niht & day.} \\
\text{Al bliþe was þe kniht,} \\
\text{He miht wiþ hir play;} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(ll. 1684-1690)
The poet's insistence on the sexual aspects of their love and the aforementioned absence of the courtly components present in the French, German and Old Norse versions suggest that the essence of the passion can only be defined along the lines of Andreas Capellanus' *amor mixtus* (I. 473); that is to say, a kind of love based upon sexual desire, as opposed to *amor purus* (love without consummation, I. 470). The more morally acceptable *assai* (*concobitus sine actu*) of *amor purus* is replaced by the *fach* or act of copulation. Such a double transgression would have been regarded as scandalous. Ysonde has betrayed her betrothed (a religious offence against the sacredness of marriage), while Tristrem has violated the very essence of the feudal hierarchy: the vow of loyalty to his lord. Happiness through the *jois* of *amors* will only be accomplished outside feudal/Christian institutions, whose premises the lovers have just undermined.

**The Forest and the Boundaries of Society**

If in all *Tristan* romances or the saga the lovers are constantly under suspicion at court and never completely secure from their enemies, the three short periods of time they spend in the forest permit them to enjoy their love outside the strict social conventions of the genre. Characteristically, the Middle English romance dwells upon these flights to the forest. The first such moment takes place just after Tristrem rescues Ysonde from an Irish earl, who has won her by slyness due to Mark's negligence as a husband and lover. The author manages to justify the lovers' relationship to some extent. They find a hut, in which they devote themselves to 'gamen' (pleasures) and 'play' (amorous intercourse) for seven days (ll. 1915-1922). Crane suggests that 'the poet has so little affinity for Thomas' *fine amor* that he reduces the lovers' encounters to entirely physical playing'. Nevertheless, one might see the emphasis on the exclusively sexual aspects of desire, which leaves no room for courtly interchanges, as quite intentional on the author's part and a distinctive feature of his composition. The structural counterpoint of court and forest underlines the fact that the lovers can only achieve their *jois* in the latter.

The literary elements of Tristrem and Ysonde's second stay in the forest accentuate even more the asocial traits suggested previously. The lovers' eviction from Mark's court must also be interpreted as an expulsion from society. In the Middle High German romance, Mark expresses his love towards the lovers (ll. 16,591-16,602). The courtly and the civilised dominate the scene. Even Tristan
and Îsolt's reaction, full of distress and regret (ll. 16,627-16,631), conveys their attachment to courtly life. The manner of their departure, bidding a sad farewell to Brangane and taking gold, harp and weapons with them, prefigures their intention to recreate the courtly life in their exile in the forest. Significantly, in Sir Tristrem and in the saga there is no conversation between them and Mark. Neither is there a mention of the utensils they take with them. The Middle English simply states 'Bliþer, wiþouten wene / Neuer ere nar ðay' (ll. 2452-53). The Old Norse text subtly differs at this point, stating that 'ihugudu þau þá lít, hver þeim skyldi fá vín og vistir, því að guð mun vilja gefa þeim nokkura næring, hvar sem þau voru' (pp. 170-71) [they gave little thought as to who would give them food and drink, for they felt certain that God would provide them with nourishment, (p. 101)]. By not mentioning God, Sir Tristrem creates a singular set of connotations, in which the amor vincit omnia theme is stressed once more. When it comes to their passion, not even God is necessary; only in the wilderness can they enjoy such freedom. Thus, whereas Schultz claims with regard to the other Tristan romances that the lovers' 'natural habitat is the court, not the forest', textual evidence in Sir Tristrem undermines such assertion, once again indicating its own distinctive identity within the corpus.

Furthermore, the lovers' decision to take shelter in the forest, rather than going somewhere else (for instance, to Ermonie, Tristrem's homeland), implies their awareness that desire outside the bond of matrimony can find no place in a repressive social ambience. They live in a cave:

No hadde þai no wines wat,
No ale þat was old,
No no gode mete þai at;
Þai hadden al þat þai wold
Wiþ wille.
For loue ich óþer bihalt,
Her non miht of óþer fihte.

(ll. 2491-2497)

This passage dramatically highlights the amor vincit omnia theme: facing all sorts of privations, and living almost like animals, the two lovers are mutually dependent. A life led according to their impetus naturae negates the very ideals of reason, civilisation and society. There is, one might go so far as to say, a symbolic displacement of time and place suggesting a pre-Christian mythic vision, where
they cannot feel the burden of their sin. The more psychologically elaborate narrative of Gottfried's *Tristan und Isolt* develops similar notions:

\[
\begin{align*}
daz selbe hol was wilen ê \\
der der heideneschen ê \\
vor Corinëis járen, \\
dô risen dâ hërren wâren, \\
gehouwen in den wilden berc. \\
(\text{ll. 16693-97})
\end{align*}
\]

[The cavern had been hewn into the wild mountain in heathen times, before Corynaeus' day, when giants ruled there. (p. 261)]

Albeit via Christian symbols, the allusions to the times of heathens and giants work to conceptualise the cave as a symbol of the lovers' flight into the uncivilised past. The typical *locus amoenus* is displaced and replaced by a much less pleasant spot in which even food is lacking. Notwithstanding all the adversities, the lovers enjoy their existence thanks to their commitment to love above all. Such a radical shift in location detaches their love from the conventions of courtly literature.

Once Mark accepts the lovers back into society, however, earlier conflicts reappear. Interestingly, Mark admits them to his favour again, when he finds them sleeping together with Tristrem's sword between both. Mark interprets this as a proof of their not having had sexual intercourse. Helaine Newstead points out that, in the European literature of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a naked sword placed between two sleeping people was a motif which presupposed the couple's intention to preserve chastity. At any rate, in Gottfried, Mark's willingness to forgive Tristan and Isolt is attributed to the king's blindness, caused by his love for Isolt: 'schœne daz ist hœne' (l. 17,807) ['in beauty there lurks danger' (p. 275)]. The action-based *Sir Tristrem* does not mention this, creating a very different characterisation of Mark. In *Tristan und Isolt*, Mark is generally viewed in a more positive light than in either the Middle English romance or the saga. At the beginning Gottfried represents him as a sophisticated courtly monarch and as a caring father figure for Tristan. Mark is reluctant to marry Isolt because he does not want to jeopardise Tristran's future as the king of Cornwall (ll. 8362-8368). The saga takes the middle ground insofar as it focuses on the legalistic aspects of Markis's succession in detail. Whereas Tristram presents himself as the rightful heir ('lóglegur erfingi') to
Markis because he has no children (p. 58), Markis is more than happy to marry after his counsellors, not Tristram, tell him that he should not die without heirs (p. 82). The Middle English romance alters Mark's image profoundly. Mark becomes less courtly and fatherly but certainly more lecherous: he would make Tristrem his heir only if he gets him Ysonde (ll. 1333-1337). In accordance with the less courtly style of the narrative as a whole, Mark's honourable behaviour needed to be minimised to prevent any chance that he might become a more likeable character than either Tristrem or Ysonde.

*Impossibility of Integration*

Instead of being compatible, *amor* and *militia* operate as two mutually exclusive categories in *Sir Tristrem*: Tristrem can only ever be either a good knight or a good lover, but not both at once. When forced to separate from Ysonde, for example, Tristrem endeavours to recover all the chivalric honour he had lost: 'For he ne may Ysonde kisse, / Fiht he soht aywhare.' (ll. 2298-99). On this occasion, Tristrem for the first time seems to exercise his free will. The frenetic series of knightly adventures which follow show Tristrem questing after something more than knightly *pretz*. He is now trying to become a useful member of society again. In Spain, he is said to have slain three giants: the hero who had disobeyed religious and social conventions now performs the role of the civilising knight, bringing the courtly world to places where it does not exist. In the High German romance and in the saga, the cause-effect relation between Tristran/Tristram's banishment and his willingness to integrate through knightly service is equally present, but much more tenuously. It is the rapid concatenation of events in *Sir Tristrem* that elucidates this aspect of the narrative more clearly.

 Nonetheless, while Tristrem sincerely attempts to return to conventional society, the text creates a tension between his rational inclination to reintegration within society and his uncontrollable passion for Ysonde:

Mark, mi nem, hap sinne,
Wrong he hap ous wrouht;
Icham in sorwe & pine;
Þerto hye hap me brouht.
Hir loue, Y say, is mine,
The boke seyt it is nouht
Wip riht.

(ll. 2665-2671)

Tristrem's blind *foudatz* leads him to deny conventional social norms. His song for Ysonde represents his inability to integrate and, at the same time, foreshadows the future failure of his enterprise. In his world of reverse values, the harmony of the song, which should mediate between the earthly realm and divine truth, is a reaction against both terrestrial and celestial power. This subversion of the feudal/Christian world, where the legitimate husband becomes the vile enemy and illicit love is transformed into the source of all virtues, is a recurrent *topos* in the poetry of the troubadours, whose influence through Thomas's original is evident in this passage. The Catalan troubadour Cerveri de Girona's 'No l prenatz lo fals marit' is a perfect illustration of this:

No l prenatz lo fals marit,
Jana delgada!
No l prenatz lo fals jurat,
que pec es mal ensenyat,
Yana delgada.
No l prenatz lo fals marit,
que pec es ez adormit,
Yana degada.
Que pec es mal ensenyat,
no sia per vos amat,
Yana delgada.
Que pec es ez adormit,
no jaga ab vos el lit,
Jana delgada.
No sia per vos amat,
mes val cel c'avetz privat,
Yana delgada.
No jaga ab vos el lit;
mes vos y valra l'amich,
Yana delgada.
[Do not take your false husband, Sweet Jana! / Do not take your false husband, / Who is a rustic fool, Sweet Yana. / Do not take your false husband, / who is foolish and indolent, / Sweet Yana. / He is a rustic fool, / do not love him, / Sweet Yana. / He is foolish and indolent, / Do not allow him to sleep with you, / Sweet Jana. / Do not love him, / the secret lover is better, / Sweet Yana. / Do not allow him to sleep with you; / your friend is a better option, / Sweet Yana.]

The figure of the husband is diminished and satirised. The sacred bond of matrimony is replaced by the pure sentiment of fin'amors. The spouse's rights, such as the debitum conjugale, are displaced and social conventions criticised: owing to the virtuous aura of fin'amors, the only one allowed to lie in bed with the domna should be the ami and not the husband. This mentality is applicable to Tristrem; but with this code of values in his mind, integration will prove impossible.

Indeed, paradoxically, the more Tristram tries to integrate, the more he separates himself from social conventions. His marriage to Ysonde of the White Hands represents his attempt to become a worthy member of society: 'Wip Ysonde, pat may/ Wip pe white hand,/ He spoused pat day.' (ll. 2677-79). If in the fin'amors tradition, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the male lover symbolically yearns to substitute the figure of the husband in a landless knight's fantasy of power and possession, Tristrem's act is a double perversion of the wife-husband relationship. Not only was he figuratively taking Mark's place when he was with Ysonde, but now he is re-inventing his former lover in the person of Ysonde of the White Hands. In Thomas's Tristan this rationale for Tristan's marriage is explicitly given:

Qu'il volt espuser la meschine
Pur saveir l'estre la reíne.
[...]  
A sa dolur, a sa gravance
Volt Tristrans dunc quere venjance;
A sun mal quert tel vengement
Dunt il doblera sun turment;
De paine se volt delivrer,
Si ne se fait fors encombrer;
Il en quida delit aveir
Quant il ne puet de sun voleir.

('Le marriage de Tristan', ll. 206-07 / 214-21)

[because his wish was to marry the maid / so as to discover what the queen's life was like. / [...] / So, Tristan was seeking to find a way to free himself / of grief and pain, / seeking a means to be free of love's malady / which, however, would only double his anguish: / he sought to free himself of pain, / but only succeeded in heaping more upon himself. / He thought he might find his pleasure with the other, / since he could not with the object of his longing.]

The Anglo-Norman roman expands the idea implicit in Sir Tristrem. As opposed to the sketchy accounts of the lovers' psychological state in Sir Tristrem, Thomas of Britain constructs a more elaborate image of the hero's desire: Tristan wants to be able to experience what a social being feels after having been an alien for such a long time. Interestingly and significantly, he thinks that he is dissociating himself from Ysonde, who lives as a member of society in spite of all. He needs to think about her as another individual to separate his destiny from hers. In this way, he will exercise his free will definitively. The Anglo-Norman poet, however, also announces the unsuccessful outcome of his plans. As soon as the ring Ysonde gave him drops from his finger, all Tristan's efforts to become a socially accepted courtly knight collapse inasmuch as he can no longer fight his unavoidable fate. His new renunciation of the social conventions will finally conduct him to Ysonde again. And again his desertion from society will force him into the world of non-civilised nature. Allegorically, he returns to the frontiers of social disapproval and exclusion.

A final displacement occurs when Tristrem, having conquered the giant Beligog, and taken over his castle, orders him to erect the hall of images in his own former property—now belonging to Tristrem. The location of the place itself, a giant's castle, denotes a further emancipation from the real world. It represents a parallel sanctuary where the hero can relive his former jois. This signifies his ultimate repudiation of integration. As in the cave, Tristrem challenges temporal and natural time since he cannot defy eternal time. The more elaborate composition of the passage in Thomas' original puts across a courtly description of the scene where Tristan's traits as a fin amant are unveiled:

Por iço fist il ceste image
Que dire li volt son corage,
Son bon penser et sa fole errur,
Sa paigne, sa joie d'amor,
Car ne sot vers cui descovrir
Ne son voler, ne son desir.

('La sale aux images', ll. 45-50)

[He made that statue/ because he wanted to tell it what was in his heart, / his good thought, and his wild misconceptions, / the pain he felt, and the joy of love, / since he knew not to whom to disclose/ his longing and his heart's desire.]

As well as the recreation of past events, which is also present in *Sir Tristrem*, Thomas constructs the passage to project Tristan's image as a *fin amant* whose demeanour suffers constant shifts from joy to pain. He also talks to the image as if she were the real Iseult. While on the one hand the notion of self-alienation is even more palpable, in comparison with the Middle English text the transgressive elements are softened by the presence of the language of courtliness and *fin'amors*.

Tristrem's last secret meeting with Ysonde takes place in a forest once more: 'Tvo niht per þai lye / In þat fair forest' (ll. 3136-37). Although the conclusion of the romance has not been preserved, all other versions of the story end in death. *Sir Tristrem* may differ from those sources in the ways described above, but it shares the illicit love theme based on *foudatz* which determines that ending. Society could not accept such a love and so, in terms of the narrative outcome, death must follow.

**Conclusion**

The uniqueness of *Sir Tristrem*, then, lies in the way in which it retranslates the Tristan myth. Structurally and rhetorically, the agile narration of events and the amalgamation of scenes replace the courtly ornamentation and the more overtly psychological approach to Tristan and Iseult in earlier versions. This obliteration of courtly components accentuates the subversive nature of the poem's view of religious and social order and precepts. In the same way, although it has been argued that some elements belonging to the troubadour tradition have survived in Thomas's original, the absence of courtly conversations in the particular composition of *Sir Tristrem* draws attention to the sexual desire of the two lovers,
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giving the impression that, in Andreas Capellanus' terms, their passion should be regarded as *amor mixtus*. Yet, in the Middle English romance, owing to Tristrem and Ysonde's reversed vision of the world, the apparently negative connotations of the term are re-codified as a positive, desire-led relationship.

The conception of unavoidable destiny further challenges contemporary philosophical and religious ideas. The impossibility of participating in society leads the lovers to enjoy their most precious moments of *jois* in the forest: a place where courtly conventions are not present. Allegorically, they are transported to a secluded pseudo-mythical world prior to the establishment of society and religion. Both the forests and the hall of images, therefore, operate as destabilisers of feudal and Christian precepts, where even temporal and natural times are altered. Such a single-minded passion is governed by the *foudatz* of lovers and is devoid of any kind of chivalric *mesura*. Consequently, Tristrem cannot be a good lover and a good knight at the same time (indispensable elements to become the best of knights), but can only devote himself to one thing at a time. Individual *jois* displaces the socially constructive deeds of knighthood. As well as the dearth of courtly motifs, subtle plot alterations also contribute to the impression that *Sir Tristrem* is the most subversive of all the Tristan romances. The transgression of order at all possible levels—socially, religiously, philosophically—through love constitutes the overarching theme that gives narrative unity to *Sir Tristrem*. 
NOTES

1 I would like to thank Ruth Evans and R. D. S. Jack for commenting on drafts of this article. I would also like to acknowledge the financial help of the British Academy, which has allowed me to pursue my research on medieval and early modern literature.

2 Sir Tristrem survives only in the Auchinleck Manuscript: <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/tristrem.html>.


4 Thomas of Ertheldoun (or Erceldoune), who lived in the thirteenth century, was a very popular prophetic figure especially in Scotland. He is mentioned in chronicles, and historical romances such Barbour's Bruce (c. 1375) and Hary's Wallace (1476-78). A romance about his life and prophecies survives in four different manuscripts. See Thomas of Erceldoune, ed. by J. A. H. Murray, EETS o.s. 61 (1875), p. xi.


7 Crane, Insular Romance, p. 203.


11 For the original Anglo-Norman text, I use the following edition: Tristan et Iseut: Les poèmes français; La saga norroise, ed. and trans. by D. Lacroix and P. Walter (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1989).


13 Crane, Insular Romance, p. 195.


Although traditionally Roland has been regarded as a knight lacking knightly *mesure* as opposed to the wise Oliver, in recent years scholars such as Robert F. Cook have argued that it is not *demesure*, but his duty as a knight owing to his vows to Charlemagne that makes Roland act in such a daredevil manner. Robert F. Cook, *The Sense of the Song of Roland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 147-59.

In Marie de France's *Lais*, for example, marriage is not as important as love. It is either an impediment for lovers to be together in *lais* such as 'Guigemar' or 'Yonec', in which marriage is seen as a prison, or less often it is portrayed in a positive light as long as it is subservient to love in *lais* such as 'Le Fresne'.


The *Prose Lancelot* goes further than Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* is so far as Lancelot and Guenevere's transgression is allegorised as one of the key causes of the fall of King Arthur's court.

The flight to the forest is the development of an elopement theme very popular with the Irish': John H. Fisher, 'Tristan and Courtly Adultery', *Comparative Literature*, 9 (1957), 150-164 (p. 153)

Mark promised the earl to give him anything he wanted if the latter would agree to play his harp (ll. 1827-1830). When the Irish earl demanded the queen, Mark had to choose between his wife or his word. As a knight, he cannot break his promise, which represents his failure as a husband and lover. This clearly contrasts with Tristrem's extreme attitude, since he sacrifices everything in the name of his single-minded passion for Ysonde.

The Singularity of Sir Tristrem in the Tristan Corpus


29 The saga also alludes to the ancient times of the heathen (p. 101).


33 *Tristan*, ed. and trans. by S. Gregory.