



Tristan: With the Tristran of Thomas

Gottfried von Straßburg , A.T. Hatto (Translator, Introduction, Notes) , Thomas of Brittany

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Gottfried's version of this legendary romance--in which Tristan and Isolde chance to drink a magic potion that causes them to fall in love--portrays Tristan in the round as an attractive and sophisticated pre-Renaissance man. While Gottfried adheres faithfully to the events as set down by Thomas, his chosen source, he is correct over questions of Christianity and religion, but no more. In fact his persona as narrator is oddly elusive and engaging. A virtuoso stylist, adept in irony and wit, he is subtle and almost unmedieval in putting across his own impressions of a love that transcends the bounds advocated by Church or society.

Tristan: With the Tristran of Thomas Details

Date : Published July 30th 1960 by Penguin Classics (first published 1210)

ISBN :

Author : Gottfried von Straßburg , A.T. Hatto (Translator, Introduction, Notes) , Thomas of Brittany

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Classics, Historical, Medieval, Fiction, Mythology, Arthurian, European Literature, German Literature, Literature, Poetry

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From Reader Review Tristan: With the Tristran of Thomas for online ebook

Sandra says

A very, very pleasant English translation by A. T. Hatto. Much recommended if you want to know how Gottfried von Strassburg's tale ends, as this includes the fragments of the 'Tristran' by Thomas de Bretagne, on whose version Gottfried's version was supposedly based. By a stroke of luck, we have the complete text by Gottfried (2/3 of the story), and history has left us the last 1/3 of Thomas' version too. Hatto here presents the whole tale, as best as he can, by combining several sources.

It really is a wonderful translation, much recommended!

Old-Barbarossa says

Very good translation.

The book is made from 2 manuscript sources translated and merged: the Von Strassburg (circa 1210 and based on the Thomas manuscript) and the Thomas (circa 1160), by a quirk of fate the surviving fragments of T's picking up where the Von S stops, both very different in tone. Flows very well on the whole with a slight jarring as the text changes authors.

The tale predates even the Thomas manuscript but no one seems sure of the first date for it, there are many parallels between the Tris/Izzy/Mark triangle and the Lance/Gwen/Arthur one, both end badly for most involved. The roots for the names are certainly old: Tristan from the Pictish name Drustan, and Isolde probably from the Germanic for Ice-battle (a "kenning" for summer? spring? dawn? She is certainly referred to as "dawn" often in the Von S).

Was the inspiration a Dark Ages marriage alliance between Dublin Vikings and a Pictish king that goes wrong? Mind you Pictish names turn up in other areas in the Arthurian tales, and Mark isn't local in origin. But what about the book?

As I said, very good translation. Lacking in notes though, I had to look up a few things (musical instruments, material, heraldic terms etc). Has appendices, but I found them somewhat lacking. The Von S text has some very sly humour and asides to the reader, but even though I found T's text slightly repetitive it is peppered with insight into the turbulent emotions of the lovers.

Kate says

Reading this right on the heels of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Parzival*, I was struck by just how modern *Tristan* feels. As someone else commented, it reads a lot like a novel. Tristan in particular made a sharp contrast to the good-hearted, simple, and always honorable Parzival. He's an intellectual, a polished courtier and a bit of a trickster -- the kind of guy who introduces himself as "Tantris" while incognito and is delighted with his own cleverness. I actually enjoyed him a lot.

Sophie says

Great Passages:

"Into her thoughts she had received him, he had come into her heart, and in the kingdom of her heart wore crown and sceptre with despotic sway."

"For now he laid hold of a new life, a new life was given him; so that he changed his whole cast of mind and became quite a different man, since all that he did was chequered with strangeness and blindness."

"In any event, she would have perished and died of her sorrow, had not hope refreshed her and expectancy buoyed her up, set as she was on seeing him, however that might be: and once having seen him she would gladly suffer whatever might be in store for her."

"But I must and will not afflict your ears with matters which are too distressing, since too much talk of grief offends them and there is nothing so good that it does not pall from being said too often."

"In the blossoming years, when the ecstasy of his springtime was about to unfold and he was just entering with joy into his prime, his best life was over: just when he was beginning of burgeon with delight the frost of care (which ravages many young people) descended on him and withered and blossoms of his gladness."

"How I dread this great wilderness! Wherever I bend my eyes I see the end of the world, wherever I turn I see nothing but desert, wasteland, wilderness, wild cliffs, and sea as wild. How the terror of it afflicts me! But more than this I fear that, whichever way I turn, wolves and other beasts will devour me."

"Having returned with his stick, he cut out the liver entire, and then severed the net and the numbles. He removed the pizzle from its limb. Seating himself of the grass, he took all three pieces, bound them firmly with his net to the 'fourchie', and then tied it round about with green bast."

"Tristan was ready to oblige as before. He took the pluck (I mean that on which the heart is strung) and cleaned it of all its appendages. He cut off half of the heart towards its pointed end and, taking it in his hands, cut it crosswise into four and threw this down on the hide. He then returned to his plush. He removed the milt and lungs, and the pluck was bare of its contents. When this had been placed on the hide, he quickly cut both pluck-string and gorge, about, at the curve of the breast. Then swiftly he removed the head and horns from the neck, and told them to place these with the breast."

"Now each of you cut your own withies and truss your portions separately."

"I like this craft so well that if I ever hunt again, I shall never hack deer into four, bit it hart or hind."

"We shall not allow anyone to wear it whose words are not well-laved, and his diction smooth and even; so that if someone approaches at the trot, well-poised and with an upright seat, he will not stumble there."

"All are agreed that anger besets a young man more relentlessly than a mature one."

"With a downward sweep he struck through skull and brain, ending only at the tongue, then at once plunged the sword into his heart. Thus the truth of the proverbs was evident which says that debts lie, yet do not rot."

"And so Morold went on hacking at his till he mastered him with blows, and Tristan, hard put to it to meet them, thrust out his shield too far and held his guard too high, so that finally Morold struck him such an ugly blow through the thigh, plunging almost to the very life of him, that his flesh and bone were laid bare through hauberk and jambs, and the blood spurted out and fell in a cloud on that island."

"King Gurmun the Gay was far from gay and deeply vexed and had every reason to be so; for in this one man he had lost his heart, his courage, his hope, and his vigour, and a fighting strength equal to that of many knights."

"And indeed these two - anchorless ships and stray thoughts - provide a good comparison. They are both so seldom on a straight course, lie so often in unsure havens, pitching and tossing and heaving to and fro. Just so, in the very same way, do aimless desire and random love-longing drift like an anchorless ship."

"Knowing the language, I shall stand outside myself."

"He now spurred back to his adversary, dismounted, and, resuming his battle just where he had stopped, fell to stabbing and hacking at his foe with his sword here, there, and everywhere till he had cut him to shreds in sundry places."

"Such paltry hardships will never buy me!"

"Dear ladies,' said the man in the bath, 'it is true that I have made you suffer, though under great duress."

"One should turn one's coat according to the wind."

"And so they stood, and so he lay."

"Rapacious feathered glances flew thick as falling snow, ranging from side to side in search of prey."

"There was much of such talk, and believe me, the Steward made a very sour face over it."

"No one spoke a word or a syllable."

"Your wrangling is superfluous."

"They blushed and blanched, blanched and blushed in swift succession as Love painted their cheeks for them."

"All that I know distresses me, all that I see afflicts me. the sky and sea oppress me, my life has become a burden to me!"

"He then recalled that l'ameir meant "love", l'ameir 'bitter', la meir the sea: it seemed to have a host of meanings."

"Surely, fair Isolde, the sharp smack of sea is the cause of your distress? The tang of the sea is too strong for you? It is this you find so bitter?"

"She is still alive, Isolde, you strange person."

"For (to take one's words from their own lips) the ladies have no greater harm or guile or duplicity in them of any description than that they can weep for no reason at all, as often as they please. Isolde wept copiously."

"The next day a little before noon Melot sneaked out on his way again, his bosom well stuffed with dissembled regrets and vile deceit, and went to Tristan."

"His command was duly performed - a rich and noble purple, most rare and wonderful and suitable broad, was spread on the table before him with a tiny dog upon it."

"And now the giant and his booty were approaching."

"And indeed, Urgan had calculated that, once he had joined his hand to his arm in good time before it was quite dead, by a means that he was versed in, he would have emerged well from this peril with his hand, though minus an eye. But this was not to be."

"They would not have given a button for a better life, save only in retrospect of their honor."

"Women do many things, just because they are forbidden, from which they would refrain were it not forbidden."

"In this way he was cheated of both: he desired yet did not desire Isolde and Isolde."

"Abstinence breeds hatred."

"I do not complain of his love, but I am very unhappy that you have made me your dupe so that you can gratify your malice."

"Have you ever heard this saying "Empty room makes wanton woman"? or "Opportunity makes a thief"? or "Wanton woman, empty house"?"

"Yet it may still happen so: for if I am to drown here, and you, as I think, must also drown, a fish could swallow us, and so, my love, by good fortune we should share one sepulture, since it might be caught by someone who would recognize our bodies and do them the high honour befitting our love."

Brent says

Good on the whole, but it would have been better as a verse translation.

Kira Emily says

Sehr abruptes Ende ???

Melissa Rudder says

Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (with Thomas' ending as Gottfried never finished it) is the first "romance" I've read for my Arthurian Romance class that I actually enjoyed.

Gottfried's story is longer than Chrétien de Troyes' and more focused than Gregory of Monmouth's, so that he is able to really construct interesting characters and an emotionally intriguing plot. Though generally Gottfried's characters are the problematic but idealized knights and damsels (both attractive, desired, courtly), his characters differ slightly, as both are extremely well-learned. I particularly enjoyed reading about Tristan's childhood, where his cunning and varied talents helped him lift himself from the position of a homeless orphan to the king's heir.

Also enjoyable were the approaches Gottfried took when presenting women. He contrasted a very chauvinistic view of women (though the concept of chauvinism is anachronistic, I'm sure) with a more egalitarian view, as, in one kingdom, women were mere commodities and toys, and in another, the intelligence and skill of a women often led her husband, the king, to recommend that she take charge of a situation in his place.

The story's plot revolves around the ingestion of a love potion (quite literally, as one literary critic argues that the physical structure of the story is constructed deliberately with the event at its center). Love potions, when dealt with critically, are potentially very interesting, introducing questions about the nature and power of love and the role of discretion in falling in love.

I regret that Gottfried did not finish his story, as, once Thomas' text comes in, the story becomes much less interesting and more drawn out. Thomas concentrates more on the characters' emotional turmoil, and, while that usually interests me, in this case, it was just tedious and annoying.

Overall, I would recommend *Tristan*, especially if you're looking for something in the genre of authentic Arthurian Romance. *Tristan* would also be a good candidate for analyzing in a paper.

Chris says

This is a good example of why modern editors are so important. Whilst there are some sections of interest he spends pages rambling about his favourite poets, the characters wardrobes or moaning about women's infidelity. Better off with the Beroul version.

Nikki says

I really liked this. I thought the translation was very good: it's engaging and interesting and doesn't get too dry, as some translations are prone to doing. Of course, it seems like a lot of that is down to the original text, which I do wish I could experience. But the translation is well done, I think. The descriptions are gorgeous, in places, and the imagery is lovely.

I really enjoyed learning about Tristan's history, too, with his foster father and how he grows up. He's a bit of a "Gary Stu", as fandom would put it: he's a bit too perfect. A bit of a Lancelot all round, really (I don't really like most portrayals of Lancelot).

The problem with enjoying this is how shameless Tristan and Isolde are. They trick Mark and make him feel guilty for ever suspecting them, and then respond to his love for them by cuckolding him again. They don't seem to make any real effort to hold back. And Tristan mistreats the other Isolde (of the White Hands), and Isolde the Fair's treatment of Brangane is ridiculous. Of course, these problems that are there for a modern reader might not be, for the original audience -- I'm aware of that, and it doesn't actually affect my rating of it because I enjoyed reading it so much. Still, it's hard to sympathise with the characters when they do things like that.

There are some great passages, though -- really affecting, and you can really feel for the characters. I had more sympathies for Mark than I'd expected.

It really isn't Arthurian at all, incidentally. There are a couple of references to King Arthur, but Tristan isn't a knight of the Round Table here. I'm still 'shelving' it as Arthurian, though, because of how strongly linked the Tristan and Iseult story has become with the Arthurian stories.

Mark Adderley says

This is the best version of the Tristan story, and Hatto's translation is masterful--it reads like a novel.

Bruce says

The story of Tristan (Tristram) and Isolde (Iseult, Ysolt) traces back to the early twelfth century and exists in at least two versions or groups of versions. One, the earlier, is Celtic and "courtly," exemplified by the poetry of Thomas of Britain, the other and later being the "common" or prose branch, the most well known example being that of Chrétien de Troyes. Gottfried von Strassburg, who died early in the 13th century, based his work on that of Thomas. Gottfried's version breaks off abruptly – it is not known whether this was intentional or whether he did not have time to finish it – but Thomas' earlier version, much of the earlier portion of which has been lost, picks up just in time to finish the story.

Gottfried's is a gentler and more non-Arthurian version of the story than I've been familiar with. Yes, Tristan is idealized and often improbably perfect, yet this does not detract from the credibility of the tale. Chapter 7 is a brief departure from the narrative, an opportunity for Gottfried to address the reader directly on the subject of poetry and narrative. He then continues the story, describing Tristan's career as a knight and his killing of Morold, all background material to the narrative used by Wagner in his opera (Gottfried's is the version that Wagner used for his work). The language is courtly, suggesting a courtly audience. As the narrative continues, everyone everywhere is impressed with Tristan. Unlike in many other Tristan narratives, however, this Tristan is often presented as a trickster, his schemes and duplicities being as notable as his obvious bravery, although always in worthy causes.

Inevitably, the love of Tristan and Isolde leads to dire complications, presaging the events that are well known. Forced at last to part, the lovers pledge faith to each other before Tristan leaves. Gottfried's narration

ends with Tristan's involvement with Isolde of the White Hands. In this present edition, the version of Thomas continues the story to the deaths of the protagonists.

Gottfried's prose is lyrical and compelling. It varies from straightforwardly descriptive to stylized to fanciful, even magical, as he occasionally digresses in such passages as his allegorical description of The Cave of Lovers. Always he maintains psychological credibility, at least within the framing device of the love potion. Thomas' prose is very different from Gottfried's, denser and far more repetitive, and I found myself reading it primarily to finish the narrative rather than out of any joy in its style. Thomas' frequent generalizing digressions retard the flow of the story and are distracting.

For those readers interested in the legend, including those, like me, fascinated and enchanted by Wagner's opera, this edition provides one version of the story that is beautifully told and fluidly compelling. I often listened to a recording of the opera while reading the book, intensifying the experience.

Othy says

Beautiful. It has been far too long since I have read a love story like this. Not in any way for the faint of hearted, who might quail at the sight of page-long paragraphs where the author muses upon all that comes with love, the good and the bad, Tristan is for a reader who wants to sit and exist with a tale, allowing it to flow all around them and encourage their imagination.

What a great and beautiful story!

Steve says

Color me surprised by this one. I picked it up from Heather and Rich when borrowing Wuthering Heights and Gogol. As I was walking out the door Rich handed me this one...and I put it on the shelf for 8 months. It just didn't appear that inspiring and being from the 1200's makes me feel, eh... Finally dove in in Mid August and I was pleasantly surprised. It wasn't written in such complex language to take the joy out of it (note translation, but still...), until the end.

Nuts and bolts - this is a typical male adventure story until you get into the yucky love stuff (yes, I just said yucky). Tristan is almost super-human - slays dragons, fights giants, laughs in the face of adversity. I like to see a battle royal cage match between Tristan, Cotton Malone, Jason Bourne and Aragorn. All are super human intelligent and athletically gifted and seem to weasel their way out of every situation. I can't find the time to catch up on all my episodes of Newsroom. It must be nice not having a job I guess. But I digress. What separates Tristam is his "ruses." He's always got a scheme and a disguise - which are remarkably good considering there was no movie make up in the dark ages. Oh, and he plays a mean lute. But...I enjoyed it.

Where they lost me a little, the love potion. I can stand a dragon, but a love potion typically gets me to sign off. Post love-potion there were more "situations," "ruses," etc. But again, enjoyable. Perhaps I could have done without the entire chapters of them gazing into each other's eyes which provides enough sustenance that food is unnecessary. This I consider yucky love. Not that I'm looking for raunchy, but spare me the poetic love. Although, I must say there was more raunch than I would have expected in the 11th century.

The biggest issue with Tristam, outside of the yucky love, was that, similar to Gogol, its unfinished. Oddly, Strassburg (who no one know's anything about), re-wrote the story from Thomas. And 3/4 through it he died. Thomas (who also is totally unknown), apparently had 3/4 of his story lost, but, conveniently, it was the part that Strassburg didn't finish that exists. So, we have a full story (sort of), as long as you are not bothered by implication of plagerism.

In terms of style Strassburg is engaging, interesting and, surprisingly, it holds up. Thomas, not so much. Its dry, boring and frankly spoils the ending. If this had started the book, I wouldn't have gotten far. Take this with a grain of salt as both are translations. Maybe the translator took some liberty. Its hard to say.

Final thought...if you like a good ol' fashioned adventure story with some mind games you'll probably like this. Just be mindful of the dreamy eyes sprinkled in...

As mentioned above, borrowed from Rich and Heather - although I'll need to have a conversation with them about books that weren't finished...

Ryl says

Out of all the Knights of the Round Table, Tristan's always seemed to be the one that fit in the least, mainly because he's so wrapped up in his own adventures that he doesn't join in with the other knights on theirs. Turns out that's because he's not really one of Arthur's knights. His legend originally stood on its own and only later got mixed into the Arthurian cycle.

Tristan's legend is a lot more interesting than the traditional Arthurian tales. At least I think so. That may be because I'm sick of King Arthur. There's been so much crap written about him over the years that it's refreshing to read a knightly romance without Arthur in it. (Or mostly without him. He does show up a couple of times in passing as a historical figure.) In this story the only king is Mark who, like Arthur, is also betrayed by everyone he loves, but he's not so much of a dope about it. Mark figures things out and takes steps to keep Tristan and Isolde from making a fool of him. It all ends tragically but that's also how it began so it's no real change.

The story begins with Mark's sister who falls in love with a knight at a tournament. She sleeps with the knight, gets pregnant, and runs off to France with him. They get married just before the knight gets involved in a fatal duel. When she learns of her husband's death, the princess falls on the floor in fits (like you do), gives birth, and dies. The knight's steward adopts the baby and, since he was born an orphan, names him Tristan after *triste*, the medieval French word for sadness.

As a young man Tristan is kidnapped by pirates and carried over the Channel to Cornwall where he wins his way into King Mark's court by field-stripping a deer. (Really.) Eventually the truth of Tristan's ancestry comes out and Mark, rejoicing that he's found his dear sister's child, names him his heir. Tristan later kills an Irish knight who's been kidnapping Cornish youth which wins him the eternal enmity of the the knight's sister and niece, Isolde Sr. and Isolde Jr. They swear vengeance on the man who killed their beloved kinsman...right after they nurse a cute bard named Tantris back to health.

It takes the Isoldes entirely too long to figure out that Tantris is Tristan backwards. By the time they do, Isolde Jr. has been betrothed to King Mark. Her mother gives her maid a love potion for the royal couple to drink on their wedding night. Instead Tristan and Isolde mistake it for wine and drink it on the ship. Star-

crossed romance ensues. The rest of the story involves the Queen and her knight being passionately in love with each other and sneaking off for sexy times until they get caught one time too many and are separated. Eventually they all end up dead because happy endings hadn't been invented yet.

This particular edition contains two versions of the same story. The first part is the story as told by German poet Gottfried von Strassburg based off of an older version written by Thomas of Britain. Both versions are incomplete; Gottfried's because he died before he finished it and Thomas's because time is not kind to medieval manuscripts. Fortunately there's enough left of Thomas's version to finish up the tale that Gottfried began. Let us all thank the literary gods for giving us a complete version of the legend of Tristan and Isolde. It's not often that they are so merciful.

Cross-posted from The Eclectic Reviewer

Ali says

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