



The Tale of TRISTAN and ISOLDE

There are many different tellings of Tristan and Isolde. The events of the many versions differ from author to author as well as the spelling of Isolde's name (in some places she is called "Iseult"). It was a popular medieval romance and not originally connected with the King Arthur legends. Some of the time, Tristan is said to hail from the imaginary kingdom of Lyonesse, an island kingdom which eventually sank beneath the sea.

One Version of the Tale

Tristan, a valiant knight, goes to Ireland to bring back the fair Iseult for his uncle King Mark to marry. Along the way, they accidentally ingest a love potion that causes the pair to be madly in love for three years. Although Iseult marries Mark, she and Tristan are forced by the potion to seek one another out for adultery. Although the typical noble Arthurian character would be shamed from such an act, the love potion that controls them frees Tristan and Iseult from responsibility. Thus the author presents them as victims. The king's advisors repeatedly try to have the pair tried for adultery, but again and again the couple use trickery to preserve their façade of innocence. Eventually the love potion wears off, and the two lovers are free to make their own choice as to whether they cease their adulterous lifestyle or continue.

As with the Arthur-Lancelot-Guinevere love triangle, Tristan, King Mark, and Iseult all hold love for each other. Tristan honors, respects, and loves King Mark as his mentor and adopted father; Iseult is grateful that Mark is kind to her, which he is certainly not obliged to be; and Mark loves Tristan as his son, and Iseult as a wife. But after they go to sleep every night, they would have horrible dreams about the future. Tristan's uncle eventually learns of the affair and seeks to entrap his nephew and his bride. Also present is the endangerment of a fragile kingdom, the cessation of war between Ireland and Cornwall. Mark gets what seems proof of their guilt and resolves to punish them: Tristan by hanging and Iseult by trial by ordeal and then putting her up in a leper house (a leper colony). Tristan escapes on his way to the stake by a miraculous leap from a chapel and rescues Iseult. The lovers escape into the forest and take shelter there until they are discovered by Mark one day. However, they make peace with Mark after Tristan's agreement to return Iseult to Mark and leave the country. Tristan then travels on to Brittany, where he marries (for her name and her beauty) Iseult of the White Hands, daughter of Hoel of Brittany and sister of Sir Kahedin.



Tristan in *Le Morte D'Arthur*

Over time the story of Tristan and Isolde became associated with the legends of King Arthur. When Malory retold the Arthurian legend, he made Tristan a common character, a knight of King Mark who also served the High King Arthur. One of the

central books of *Le Morte D'Arthur* takes a side route from its central characters to tell the story of Tristan and Isolde.

Malory changes the traditional ending of the story though. In his version, Tristan is wounded by the poisoned blade of Morholt and lies dying. Word is sent to Isolde of his condition. The maiden sets off at once. Her knowledge of herbs alone can save him. But a jealous woman who is tending Tristan tells him that his love is not coming to his aid. Tristan despairs and dies of a broken heart. When Isolde reaches Cornwall and beholds her dead lover, she too dies out of love. Upon the spot where the two died, two trees grew up and intertwined so that they could never be torn asunder.

- 1. It is believed that *Tristan and Isolde* led to the creation of the Launcelot and Guinevere romance in the story of Arthur. The affair between Launcelot and Guinevere did not appear in the earliest versions of the tale. How are is the relationship of Tristan and Isolde similar to that of Launcelot and Guinevere?**

- 2. In both versions of the story given here, the ending is not a happy one. This is a story that many people enjoyed. Today, most people enjoy stories that end happily. Why is that? And why would the people of ancient Britain prefer stories with bitter endings? Explain.**

- 3. Never-ending Love is a constant theme in stories, songs, and poems of the past and the present day. What is another story of unending love that you have heard, seen, or read? How is it similar to the story of Tristan and Isolde? Explain.**