

**ON THE LEGEND OF TRISTAN:
ITS ORIGIN IN MYTH AND ITS
DEVELOPMENT IN
ROMANCE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649259960

On the legend of Tristan: its origin in myth and its development in romance by Edward Tyrrell
Leith

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

EDWARD TYRRELL LEITH

**ON THE LEGEND OF TRISTAN:
ITS ORIGIN IN MYTH AND ITS
DEVELOPMENT IN
ROMANCE**

Presented to the writer -
with compliments
to

The Bodleian Library

Oxford

March 13th }
1869. }



On The Legend of Tristan:

ITS ORIGIN IN MYTH AND ITS DEVELOPMENT
IN ROMANCE,

BY

EDWARD TYRRELL LEITH, LL.B. & LL.M.

Trinity Hall - Cambridge,

and of
the Middle Temple.

Barrister at Law.

Read before the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society,
April 9th 1868.

Bombay:

PRINTED AT THE
EDUCATION SOCIETY'S PRESS, BYCULLA

1868.

ON THE LEGEND OF TRISTAN.

AMONG the themes of mediæval Romance few possess such striking elements of poetical interest as the Legend of Tristan. I fear, however, that it is not so widely known as it deserves to be, and I may therefore be pardoned for briefly giving those main outlines of the story which are common to most of the versions that we have.

Tristan of Lyonesse, the hero, is royally descended. The mysterious gloom, which shrouds the very threshold of his life, appears prophetic of the tragedy about to be unfolded. His mother, on learning that his father has fallen in battle, dies in giving him birth. Kept in ignorance of his parentage, the orphan Prince is secretly brought up by Rual, a trusty follower, and educated by him in all knightly accomplishments. When grown to man's estate, Tristan presents himself at the court of his childless uncle King Mark of Cornwall, who, on hearing his history, adopts him as a son. To save his country from paying a shameful tribute of men and money to the neighbouring Irish, Tristan slays Morold, their champion, in single combat. The youthful victor, however, at the same time receives a dangerous wound from the poisoned weapon of his foe, which no native art can cure. He, therefore, absents himself from his uncle's court, and lands disguised in Ireland, where he is fortunately cured by Isolde, surnamed the Fair, daughter of the Irish King. Tristan eventually returns to Cornwall, and paints the charms of the Princess in such glowing colours, that Mark resolves to make her his Queen. Tristan undertakes to woo her on behalf of his uncle, and journeys to Ireland for that purpose. On his arrival at the Irish court, he learns that the King has promised his daughter's hand to the man who should rid the land of a terrible dragon. Tristan succeeds in killing the monster, and claims the prize in his uncle's name. The King gives his consent, and Tristan sets sail with Isolde the Fair for Cornwall. On the voyage they both unwittingly drink of a Magic Potion, entrusted to the care of Brangæne a waiting-woman, and destined for King Mark. This Potion possesses the property of making those who partake of it

deeply enamoured of each other; and it is upon this effect on Tristan and Isolde that the whole story turns. Isolde becomes the wife of Mark, but continues devoted to Sir Tristan. Mark discovers the attachment, and persecutes the lovers, who practice various deceptions in order to effect a meeting, and even succeed in making their escape together. Isolde the Fair afterwards returns to her husband, while Tristan, driven to despair, weds another Isolde, named "of the White Hand." Our hero vainly endeavours to forget his first love in deeds of reckless daring. On again receiving a grievous hurt in battle, he sends for her who alone can work his cure. His messenger is instructed to hoist, on his return, white sails should his errand prove successful, and black sails if the reverse. Isolde of the White Hand, jealous of her rival, tells Tristan that she descries a black sail on the horizon, though in reality the sail is a white one. Bereft of hope he dies, and Isolde the Fair, finding on her arrival that her aid has come too late, dies also, of grief, by his side. King Mark, when he hears of the Magic Potion and its unhappy effects, causes the lovers to be buried in one tomb, on which he plants a rose and a vine. These afterwards grow up so closely entwined one with another that none can ever separate them.

This legend, which struck the key-note of Romance, was, from its very nature, likely to captivate the imagination of mediæval writers. Sir Tristan's knightly prowess and Isolde's queenly beauty were the representative types of the heroes and heroines of chivalry. Their ill-starred loves formed the favourite theme of the poet, while their constancy under every misfortune became proverbial throughout Europe. The thoroughly human interest which attaches to the legend alone makes it an attractive study to the modern reader; yet its history is no less instructive and curious, as I shall attempt to show in the present paper. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of cultivated minds at the present day is the intense interest with which they follow every attempt to clear the early history of man from the mists which have hitherto shrouded it from modern gaze. All branches of knowledge are being pressed into the service of the scientific explorer, but few equal Comparative Mythology in importance. The history of the Tristan Legend is, I venture to say, an interesting contribution to that science. The germ of the tale is to be found in one of a class of myths widely diffused over the old world, and to it a gradual accretion of myths,

belonging to other classes, appears to have taken place. These various materials were subsequently moulded by Romance into the legend we have before us. In view of these facts, I propose to deal with its early mythic origin, its development in mediæval Romance, and its reappearance in modern Drama.

German writers, such as Von Groot,* Mone,† and Kurtz‡ have attempted to elucidate the origin of the legend by comparing it with various ancient myths. The singular resemblances, which were thus brought to light, led them to trace it to a common source in the deification of the powers of nature. The earliest objects of mythological worship were unquestionably personifications of the phenomena observable in the physical universe. Nature's mysterious powers, before which man found himself so helpless, would be worshipped as good or as evil divinities, whose aid was to be supplicated or whose anger was to be averted, according as they were likely to assist or thwart his undertakings. There gradually arose by the side of these another class of deities. Mortals, who during life had been distinguished for their physical or their mental qualities, were raised after death by the popular imagination into heroes. In course of time these latter, from being looked upon as the guardians of the national fortunes, were confounded with the earlier gods, and became in their turn objects of divine worship. The wondrous legends associated with their names in popular tradition thus grew up into the myths of a national Pantheon. In these myths we find the relations of human life employed to symbolize the operations of nature as shown forth in the seasons and the movements of the heavenly bodies. Such fables were embodied by the priesthood into Religious Mysteries, in which it was not improbably sought to preserve esoteric truths from the gaze of the vulgar under the veil of allegory. Most prominent among these truths would be the close relation between the material and spiritual worlds, the struggle between good and evil, and the existence of a future state.

* VON GROOTE. *Tristan, von Meister Goltfrid von Strassburg, mit der Fortsetzung des Meisters Ulrich von Thurheim*: Berlin, G. Reimer, 1821.

† MONE. *Einleitung in C. von Groot's Ausgabe von Tristan und Isolde. Also Ueber die Sage von Tristan, etc.* Heidelberg, 1822.

‡ KURTZ. *Tristan und Isolde, Gedicht von Gottfried von Strassburg*: Stuttgart, Becher, 1847.

In the Mysteries the departure of Summer, the gloomy reign of Winter, and the approach of Spring were celebrated almost universally under the allegory of a beautiful youth, the Sun-god, violently slain, and mourned by his true love Nature until he is at length restored to life. The Egyptians symbolized this by the murder of Osiris at the hand of his brother Typhon, who flung the corpse of his victim, enclosed in a chest, into the river Nile. After a sorrowful search, his consort Isis found it, and succeeded in bringing her lord to life again. Osiris becomes the King of Amenthe, the realm of the dead, where Isis under the name of Nephthys shares his throne for half the year. Hindu Mythology describes the death and resurrection of the god Kama in a similar manner. The Phœnicians yearly commemorated the untimely end of Thammuz on the banks of the stream, whose waters were said to have been stained purple with his blood. Hence arose, also, the Grecian fable of the fair Adonis, whose loss Aphrodite so passionately mourned, that Persephone, Queen of Hades, restored him to her for a portion of the year. In Phrygia we meet with Cybele's wild grief for Atys her shepherd lover, her wanderings in search of him and his return once more to life. The people of Cius in Bythia held sacred the memory of Hylas, carried beneath the stream by nymphs enamoured of his beauty. Festivals, also, were held in Greece in honour of Dionysus-Zagreus the Wine-god, who, having been cruelly torn in pieces by the Titans, came to life again, and sought his mother Semele in the Underworld. Similar tales were told of the tragic deaths of Linus, Hyacinthus, Narcissus and Heracles, of the Thracian Corybas, of the Cabiric Esmun, of Melicertes at Corinth, Mitras in Persia, and of the Scandinavian Baldur and Sigurd. The allegory was, also, sometimes presented under a different form, as in the rape of Kore by Pluto, or in the touching tales of Orpheus and Eurydice, of Admetus and Alceste.

Besides this tale of the suffering god, there is also another, which is often found interwoven with it, and which belongs to the same family of solar myth. I refer to that of the god or hero triumphant in combat with giants and dragons. Thus, probably also, as some suggest, were commemorated the sanguinary struggles caused by dynastic changes, foreign invasions, and the introduction of new religions. We see, however, underlying such tales, the deeper truth of the great conflict between good and evil, in which the former is ultimately the victor. In

Egypt war was waged by Seb the serpent and his giants against Ophion the Good Principle; in India by Vrita against Indra; in Persia by Ahriman against Ormuzd; in Greece by the Titans against the Gods; and in Scandinavia by Fenrir against Odin and the Æsir. Of a similar character is the terrible vengeance wrought by the Huns on the Burgundians, with which the "Nibelungenlied" so tragically ends. The same idea is expressed in the tale of the valiant hero rescuing a beautiful maiden from the power of a malignant monster, and receiving her hand as his reward. I will merely point, for example, to the legends told of the Egyptian Perseus or the serpent Typhon, of Perseus and Andromeda, of Apollo and the Python, and of Theseus and Ariadne, in which we may notice the singular parallels that even many of the names suggest.*

In the Tristan Legend we recognise traces of the same old fable of the Sun-god, whose yearly death the great goddess Earth or Nature mourns. At the same time it is allowed, that the hero himself may well have been, nay probably was, an historical character, whose memory continued to live in the traditions of his country. Tristan, like Perseus and other ancient heroes, by slaying a monster, wins a Princess as his prize. His love for the two Isoldes resembles the double union of Adonis to Aphrodite and Persephone, and of Osiris to Isis and Nephthys on Earth and in Hades. It is also worthy of notice, that as Osiris is said to have abolished the custom of eating human flesh, so too the victory of Theseus over the Minotaur, and of Tristan over Morold put an end to a tribute of human beings,—stories supposed to signify the abolition of human sacrifice from the national worship. The incident of the Black Sail is told in the Theseus legend in connection with the fate of the aged Ægeus. A woman's bitter jealousy of her rival is the indirect cause of the deaths both of Tristan and Siegfried. The sad search of Isis for Osiris, of Neptun for her daughter Isis, of Demeter for Persephone, and the mourning of Nanna for Baldur find parallels in the wanderings of Rival after his fosterchild Tristan,

* Kurtz (p. lx.) points out, that the dragon *Phelan*, which appears in the legend of "Wigalois," bears a name curiously resembling Python and Typhon.