

# Introduction

The late German medieval scholar, Arthur Thomas Hatto (1910–2010), reminds us in his introduction to his English translation of *Tristan*<sup>4</sup> that Gottfried von Strassburg is telling us an old tale that came down to him through his literary predecessors, especially Thomas of Britain. Yet ultimately, Gottfried's tale emerged from the murky hinterlands of ancient Celtic myth, issuing from Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, and, perhaps, Ireland. Gottfried's story is not one of simple entertainment. Rather, this German poet can be understood to offer a series of life lessons designed to heighten our appreciation of those universal themes that characterize our fundamental human existence.

The central dilemma of this tale is the tension between our duty to follow the ingrained patriarchal values of our society on the one hand and an in-depth realization of our holistic human nature on the other. Gottfried stresses following an authentic life over a prescribed one. In short, it is the dilemma between obligation and love—behaving correctly under surveillance (the watchful dictates of law or custom) or living by the spontaneous inclinations of the illumined heart.

Gottfried tells his listeners that he intends to busy himself with bringing pleasure and satisfaction to a select circle of “noble hearts,” as opposed to upper-class society in general. In his day, the well-to-do youth of the nobility were bent upon simply having a good time. But in Gottfried’s view, certain individuals were in fact capable of welcoming love in the totality of its profound antitheses—the bittersweet opposites—joyful sorrow, life and death, Heaven and Earth, all united in one single experience of love. Gottfried was so ardently devoted to this transcendent experience of love that he was willing to stand by it even if the Church condemned his soul to hell.

Unlike certain contemporary authors, who are set upon worshipping human instincts, Gottfried believed that true lovers must practice sympathetic self-sacrifice to its highest degree. If necessary, the suffering required of true *amour* must be accepted with sensitivity, patience, and courage. Gottfried’s ideal of love expounds *a unity of the sensual with the spiritual; of the earthly with the heavenly; of the feminine with the masculine psychological disposition, all joined into one indissoluble entity*. This elucidation is filled with both theological and psychological significance. Tristan and Isolde must suffer their way through the unification of the opposites just mentioned. This is the cross they must bear if they are to remain faithful to the integrity of their mutual love.

It is obvious that Gottfried is addressing neither instinctive gratification alone, nor sheer emotional infatuation, nor ethereal detachment. Rather, he is envisioning a more evolved notion of

love—a higher sense of the erotic experience of humankind—as it can develop, not in the average experience of ordinary people whose awareness is programmed by collective cultural habit, but in the lives of those very few unusual folk who possess *edele herzen* (noble hearts). The common herd—on average—craves pleasure and sensual titillation whenever and wherever the opportunity arises. It is unable and will, in fact, tenaciously avoid the need to tolerate the unified antitheses of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, life and death.

Gottfried proposes that love entails responsibility, compassion, empathy, and a certain amount of discipline, forsaking happiness alone as a goal. Consequently, authentic “honor” is not the result of birthright or public station in the social hierarchy, nor of power or egotistical conceit, nor the result of heroic deeds on the worldly stage. True honor is the rare mark of individual human integrity realized.

Gottfried assesses the typical love familiar to nobles in courtly society as relatively shallow and self-seeking, even dissolute and immoral. As Gottfried’s tale develops, the love affair of Tristan and Isolde is likened to the most holy sacrament of the altar in Catholic Christianity. This is far more than an embellishment of figurative language, as in love ballads in which the lover exclaims, “It is heaven to be with you like this.” On the contrary, Gottfried really means it! He is deadly serious about this transcendental approximation of love and Heaven, even though he has no intention of establishing a new religion.

At the end of his Prologue to *Tristan*, Gottfried writes the following, which reminds us of the liturgical language of the Christian Eucharist:

*Here is bread for all hearts that are noble. Now their death continues. We hear about their life, we hear about their death, so that to us this is bread that is ever sweet.*

*Their life and their death are bread. Their life goes on, accordingly their death also continues. So they are still alive although they are dead, and their death is our living bread.<sup>5</sup>*

Gottfried seems to be saying boldly that in the same way as communicants receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, just so, as we read the tale of Tristan and Isolde, we may take their tragic story into ourselves so that, together, they may resurrect from death to life within us and become our eternal sustenance.

Accordingly, Gottfried is intent upon raising sensuous love to the “noble” level of high mystical and spiritual fulfillment. The exaltation of Tristan and Isolde’s liaison to the level of sacrament occurs precisely when the lovers are banished from King Mark’s court because of a persistent suspicion of their adultery. The two

lovers enter the wilderness and find shelter in what seems to be a vast gemstone cave hidden deep within a forested mountain.

The lofty sacramental significance of their union in the grotto of love continues until, but only until, they lose their nerve and attempt to deceive King Mark and his men by hiding the physically erotic character of their liaison. The lovers do this after they suspect that they will soon be spied upon. They arrange to sleep, not entwined in each other's arms as is their habit, but on either side of a sword that Tristan places between them on the Crystalline Bed, which stands in the usual place of an altar.

This tactic is done merely to show to give the impression of a sexless character regarding their love affair. But this motive results in self-betrayal! These two have abandoned their dedication to stand faithfully and openly for their sacramental integration of the spiritual and the sensual—of the earthly and the heavenly. As a Freudian psychologist would put it, they have succumbed to the Super-ego at the expense of the Id. They have followed the moralistic ethos of their society instead of the paradoxical integrity of their love—a love that unites all the opposites and binds them together unto death.

Much of received opinion in the Middle Ages departed from Saint Augustine's explicit teaching confirming the actual physical and sexual nature of our first parents. Augustine firmly believed that physicality, sex, and guilt-free pleasures of many kinds were real and valid paradisiacal experiences actually intended by the

Creator. Augustine's notion of the fall of humanity neither condemned the body nor the instinctive drives, but rather censured the distortion and miss-use of these impulses through what we today might term *self-centered egotism*—displacing God by *me, myself, and I*—by a grandiose ambition that rebelled against the Creator.<sup>6</sup>

However, in Augustine's time, and increasingly in the later Middle Ages, it became popular to believe that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had not lived in physical bodies like ours but within incorporeal envelopes that were created not of animal flesh but rather of an ethereal, angelic substance. Consequently, salvation required that men and women must discard their physicality and reassume their original, angelic, sexless dispositions. Accordingly, for religious folk, life in the flesh became increasingly perilous! Union with God could not occur while one was alive in the flesh but only *after death* when the soul was finally released from its imprisonment within the body so as to enjoy a purely spiritual existence.

What had been a holistic Faith subtly devolved into beliefs and practices that were plainly dualistic, opposing spirit and flesh. As a result, sex was itself assumed to be sinful, synonymous with the first disobedience. Monks and nuns who vowed to abstain from sex all their lives were considered to live on a higher plane than married persons. The church even taught that the sin of fornication was conceivable within marriage, that is, if any sexual pleasure was enjoyed.

Just as sexual pleasure associated with romantic love both within and without marriage was condemned as wrong, women as the vessel of sexuality were believed to be inferior to men. Received Christian opinion had it that the Bible depicted the advent of sin in the world as the result of the seduction of Eve by the devil-serpent, whereas the first man, Adam, was merely the victim of Eve's wily, alluring nature. As a result, the original fault was Eve's, not Adam's. Death was caused by a woman and not by a man. The patriarchal Church taught that Eve's culpability in the loss of Eden was inherited by all women throughout the ages down to the present. It was emphasized that sexual love did not exist in Eden but was initiated by the Fall. Even the conception of children became necessary only later due to the loss of this eternal bliss of God's first creation and thereby the beginning of death. So, in the prevailing view, even the world itself, including all of humanity, was considered to be degenerate, representing a falling away from the original ethereal or spiritual intentions of God.

In contrast, medieval courtly or chivalric love literature depicted noble women on a higher plane than men. Such women, by their mere presence and demeanor, possessed the ability to inspire young knightly gentlemen to great deeds of heroism. A fair damsel exuded an erotic allure that did not degrade her lover but rather moved him to nobler feats of service to humanity. However, such ladies were not portrayed as three-dimensional human beings. In such a one-way situation, there obviously

could not be a truly reciprocal relationship between two noble partners.

In Gottfried's tale of *Tristan*, on the contrary, Isolde is portrayed as a three-dimensional, flesh-and-blood human being who is every bit as assertive and active as the male. Her sexuality is just as hot-blooded as Tristan's. Unlike the typical ethos of the Middle Ages, Isolde is presented as a woman who possesses the power of choice according to the inclinations of her own heart. She is not subject to patriarchal control in a marriage contract arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom.

In this period, the Church emphasized the Biblical tradition that Mary conceived Christ without the agency of any sexual relationship. According to the Bible as supported by church tradition, Jesus himself abstained from sex throughout his lifetime. The Incarnation of God was viewed as an ethereal, sexless phenomenon, occurring far outside of human existence. There were other, far more profound ways to understand Jesus's virginal conception, but, generally speaking, an anti-sex and anti-body view of the matter prevailed as opposed to the central theme of a transcendent, Almighty Creator assuming complete earthly personhood in the space-time of history.

In the medieval world, erotic love was thought to be in tension with the welfare of society in general. However, many medieval writers outside the strict limits of theology scarcely dealt with the stressful imbalance between love—especially sexual love—and the demands of an orderly Christian society. Gottfried von



Strassburg is nearly the single exception, since in *Tristan*, he met the conflict most painfully head on: He presented a thoroughly humane, earthy, and sexual love, which was at the same time genuinely spiritual—virtually a sacrament of God in irresolvable tension with all the worldly mores of society. This was the tragic image that Gottfried von Strassburg offered to the European imagination for the first time in its history.

g  
u  
t  
t  
e  
r

ARCHWAY  
PUBLISHING