

## Courtly Obsessions: Music and Masculine Identity in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*

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Thirteenth-century views on the relationship of music, gender, and sexuality are generally hard to come by. Music, while prevalent in medieval culture as witnessed by the many extant collections of monophonic and polyphonic songs, rarely enjoys sustained interpretive treatment in medieval texts, with the exception of theoretical or pedagogical treatises. Of the many verse narratives produced in the Middle Ages, with or without musical interpolations, only Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (c. 1210) offers a lengthy and complex integration of musical performance into the plot, performance that is intricately woven into his portrayal of the politically and sexually charged relationships operating in court society.

Little is known of Gottfried von Strassburg's life except that which can be gleaned from his extant writings, two philosophical verses and the ambitious thirteenth-century rendering of the *Tristan* story. Left incomplete even after 19,548 lines, Gottfried's verse narrative is a *tour de force* of scholastic method, learned commentary, and literary allusions. He was clearly a well-educated cleric, familiar with Latin, French, and German literary traditions, and critical of the knightly class. Unlike any other chivalric *romance*, Gottfried's gives music a high profile in the story, both as a feature of Tristan's behavior at court and as a feature of his military savvy. The role of music in this work has received much scholarly attention—though

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not from musicologists—and I will consider here only a selection of the most significant studies from the vast bibliography of *Tristan* scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Music so permeates the plot of this medieval narrative that scholars have treated music as a theme-complex linked both to the central courtly love story of Tristan and Isolde<sup>2</sup> and to the large-scale structuring of the narrative.<sup>3</sup> In this article I examine how music forms an essential but problematic component in Gottfried's construction of both

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1. The following studies on music will be cited throughout this article: Louise Gnaedinger's monograph, *Musik und Minne im "Tristan" Gottfrieds von Strassburg* (Düsseldorf: Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann, 1967); Peter K. Stein, "Die Musik in Gottfrieds von Strassburg 'Tristan': Ihre Bedeutung im epischen Gefüge," in *Sprache-Text-Geschichte*, ed. Peter K. Stein et al. (Göppingen: Kummerle, 1980), 569-694; and Hannes Kästner, *Harfe und Schwert: Der höfische Spielmann bei Gottfried von Strassburg* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1981).

Many articles focus on music but subsume the notion of "musician" under the more general term "artist": Wolfgang Mohr, "Tristan und Isolde als Künstlerroman," *Euphorion* 52 (1959):153-74; W. T. H. Jackson, "Tristan the Artist in Gottfried's Poem," *Tristania* 1 (1975): 3-12; Waldemar Riemer and Eugene Egert, "The Presentation and Function of Artistic Elements in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*," *Seminar* (Toronto) 30 (1994): 95-106.

Music historians have paid little attention to Gottfried's narrative because the manuscripts do not include any notated music, as does the somewhat later French version referred to as *Roman de Tristan en Prose* (c. 1240). However, Ian F. Finlay published a brief survey of the references to musical performance in Gottfried's *Tristan* in "Music in Gottfried's *Tristan*," *Music and Letters* 33 (1952): 50-54.

2. Gnaedinger, *Musik und Minne* and Jackson, "Tristan the Artist," concentrate on the question of how music functions in relation to the primary theme of love or "*minne*." Jackson believes that music provides the means of expressing the "inner harmony" (371) and ideal love between Tristan and Isolde. Gnaedinger similarly interprets the role of music as the medium through which the *minne* story unfolds. She writes: "Schafft die Musik den Raum, in dem sich die unheimliche Geschichte von Tristan und Isot begeben kann, in dem Tristanminne bestehen und sich im glänzend polierten Rund ihrer Absolutheit darstellen" (7-8). [Music creates the space in which the bizarre story of Tristan and Isolde can occur, in which *Tristanminne* endures and is represented in the brilliantly polished orb of its absoluteness.]

male and female gender roles in the *romance*, and how music and notions of gender are inextricably linked in pivotal scenes of seduction and conquest.

### *Obsession, Identity, and the Gender of Music*

In contrast to other genres of medieval literature, verse *romances* such as *Tristan* foreground the individual and present a metathematic struggle for self-knowledge and social standing within the patriarchal structure of court society. Simon Gaunt writes:

It is argued that whereas *chansons de geste* are concerned with group solidarity, romance promotes a new construction of identity and an ideology predicated upon individuation.<sup>4</sup>

Verse *romances* fall within the tradition of courtly literature that, like the lyric *grandes chansons* of the *troubadours* and *trouvères*, focuses on a knight's obsessive love for a noble lady. In many of his Arthurian *romances*, Chrétien de Troyes illustrated the extent to which this obsessive love could turn knights into animals (*Yvain*), sloths (*Erec and Enide*) and common criminals (*Lancelot*). Yet, as Gaunt observes, "the masculine subject in romance...acquires his identity through a relationship with a woman."<sup>5</sup> *Lancelot* offers an obvious and succinct illustration of this program, for the hero is not named in the *romance* until

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3. See Stein, "Die Musik in Gotfrids von Strassburg *Tristan*." Stein considers Gottfried's use of music as a polyvalent theme-complex (570, 584) that operates on all levels of the narrative—from the quality of Gottfried's poetry (625) to the structuring of the plot (585-624), to a metatextual existential contemplation of worldly versus spiritual life (671).

4. Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 91.

5. *Ibid.*, 92.

the midpoint of the story when Queen Guenever—the object of Lancelot's desire—finally reveals his identity. Thus it is through this very obsessive love that the subject both loses and regains his individual masculine identity. This apparent valuing of women is counterbalanced, however, by a persistent tradition of misogyny stemming from Patristic biblical exegesis. In his book *Medieval Misogyny*, R. Howard Bloch notes three dominant trends in the conception of women in the Middle Ages:

- (1) a feminization of the flesh, that is the association, according to the metaphor of mind and body, of man with *mens* or *ratio* and of woman with the corporeal; (2) the estheticization of femininity, that is, the association of woman with the cosmetic, the supervenient, the decorative, which includes not only the arts but what Saint Jerome calls "life's little idle shows"; (3) the theologizing of esthetics, or the condemnation in ontological terms not only of the realm of simulation or representations...but of almost anything pleasurable attached to material embodiment.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, "woman, feminine or sophisticated beauty, is imagined to seduce not only because she appeals to the senses but also because she corrupts them, one by one."<sup>7</sup>

Out of this general ambivalence, where women are requisite for identity yet corrupting of the senses, flows an anxiety concerning abstract traits that medieval writers traditionally associated with the feminine, such as artifice, foreignness, sophistry, decoration; in sum, the trappings of the material world and the realm of the senses.<sup>8</sup> These traits also describe aspects of courtliness—the code of behavior that governs the hierarchical male realm of the court. The association of women with the seduction and "tricking" of the senses, however, aligns

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6. R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9.

7. *Ibid.*, 51.

8. *Ibid.*, 37-63.

most powerfully with the medieval figure of the *jongleur*. Bloch writes:

The riotousness of woman is, in the medieval thinking of the question, linked to that of speech, indeed, seems to be a condition of poetry itself. . . . She is in some fundamental sense always already placed in the role of a deceiver, trickster, *jongleur*.<sup>9</sup>

From the outset, Gottfried's Tristan stands apart from the typical heroes of the twelfth-century Arthurian *romances* of Chrétien de Troyes. These stories present the knight-protagonist winning honors and ultimately the love of a noble lady through battle. Attaining and preserving both honor and the love of a lady become the moral underpinnings of aggression, ideally supplanting such baser motivations as the joy of conquest and the acquisition of power or wealth. Erec, Yvain, and even the adulterous Lancelot show qualities of chivalric integrity and ethics in their behavior, especially with regard to issues of honesty and service. Gottfried's Tristan, however, is a trickster who combines his extraordinary natural talents with deceit in order to gain advantage at court and to curry favor with the king. In contrast to the heroes of the Arthurian *romances*, Tristan does not wander the countryside searching for adventure and winning love; rather, he initially stays at court (upon the advice of King Mark) and rapidly becomes the king's heir "before a single tournament is held, before a single battle is fought."<sup>10</sup> Battles and adventures befall Tristan more or less by accident; love and honor are won not through

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9. Ibid., 20. Kästner, *Harfe und Schwert*, 11, discusses the social standing of various types of *Spielleute* in the Middle Ages, and contrasts French and German classifications. He notes that in France the *jongleur* developed from a vagabond social class to an established order of court artists. The word *ménestrel*, from the Latin *ministerialis*, at first referred to anyone who worked in the service of a nobleman. In the thirteenth-century the *ménestrel* and *jongleur* became more strongly associated with court-employed musicians. Stein notes that in literature from the Rhine region, *ménestrel* is a synonym for *Spielmann*.

military valor but through outward displays of courtliness—eloquence, intellect, and, above all, musical skill.<sup>11</sup> However, the same musical prowess that allows Tristan to negotiate his position within the hierarchy of court, also paradoxically and subversively allies him with the professional class of the *jongleur* or *Spielmann*.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the story, Tristan uses his virtuosic musical performances to win the love of King Mark and to confound the “sense” of his rivals through their senses. Furthermore, because both music and trickster musicians such as *jongleurs* appeal to and confound the senses, Tristan’s musical skill can be construed as located in the realm of the feminine. As we shall see, in Gottfried’s *Tristan*, music serves as the initial object of courtly admiration and obsessive desire—one that obfuscates rather than clarifies identity, and one that immediately

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10. C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 102.

11. For a contrasting opinion, see Martin H. Jones, “The Depiction of Military Conflict in Gottfried’s *Tristan*,” in Adrian Stevens and Roy Wisbey, eds., *Gottfried von Strassburg and the Medieval Tristan Legend* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) (henceforth *Med. Trist. Leg.*), 45-65. Jones argues that Gottfried’s depiction of military conflict in *Tristan* is not a “deliberate strategy of undermining the Arthurian ideals” but rather a “commitment to a different kind of story, and...[a] commitment to a different tradition of writing, one which may be described as clerical (in the sense of educated or learned) and historical rather than chivalric” (63).

12. For studies that focus on the *spielmännlich* aspect of Tristan’s character, see Mohr, “Tristan und Isolde als Künstlerroman”; Jackson, “Tristan the Artist in Gottfried’s Poem”; “Artist and Performance”; and Kästner, *Harfe und Schwert*. Mohr’s thesis is that Tristan’s behavior reflects more the class of the *Spielmann* than that of nobility (157), and that Gottfried’s Tristan stands in a long line of “trickster” heroes (160-61). Jackson interprets Gottfried’s emphasis on Tristan’s musicianship as a cleric’s reaction to the literature of knighthood (“Tristan the Artist,” 365). For Jackson, Tristan is not just a *Spielmann*, but rather a highly educated artist (“Artist and Performance,” 4). Kästner investigates the contemporary reception of the “Spielmann-Komplex” (4).

complicates and threatens the collapse of the themes of masculine individuation and identity generic to medieval *romances*.

### *Music and Homosocial Desire*

Tristan begins his tenure at Mark's court as a foundling, having been abducted from the shores of Brittany by Norwegian pirates and then abandoned in Cornwall. To the courtiers who find him, Tristan tells a lie, claiming he is the son of a merchant. Thus Tristan enters the court in a subservient position, as a beholden member of a lower class. This class and power differential among Tristan, Mark, and the members of the court sets up a superficial, unidirectional flow of desire. Here I am using Eve Sedgwick's definition of the term "desire" as the potentially erotic "affective or social force, the glue... that shapes an important relationship."<sup>13</sup>

For obvious reasons, Tristan desires to forge a bond with Mark—Tristan is a foreigner without money or title, completely at the mercy of Mark's court. He quickly gains entry into court society by impressing Mark and the courtiers with his knowledge of foreign languages and fancy French hunting customs.<sup>14</sup> But when Tristan shows off his musical skills, desire between him and Mark begins to flow both ways. One evening a Welsh minstrel entertains the court. Tristan compliments the musician, at the same time showing himself to be a connoisseur. Asked to play, Tristan first feigns ignorance, then takes up the harp and begins to dazzle and charm his audience.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 2.

14. See Margaret Brown and C. Stephen Jaeger, "Pageantry and Court Aesthetic in Gottfried's *Tristan*: The Procession of the Hunters," in *Med. Trist. Leg.*, 29-44.

3561

Tristan, der niuwe spilman,  
 sîn niuwez ambet huob er an  
 mit vlîzeclîchen ruoche.  
 Sîne noten und sîne ursuoche,  
 sîne seltsaene grûeze  
 die harpfete er sô sûeze  
 und machete sî schoene  
 mit schoenem seitgedoene,  
 daz iegelîcher da zuo lief  
 dirre jenem dar nâher rief.

Tristan, the new minstrel,  
 began his new office  
 with assiduous concentration.  
 His notes and his prelude,  
 his unusual flourishes which  
 he harped so sweetly  
 and made so beautiful  
 with splendid string sounds,  
 that all came running,  
 calling one another.

3586

Do begunde er suoze doenen  
 und harpfen sô ze prîse  
 in britûnisher wise,  
 daz maneger dâ stuont unde saz  
 der sîn selbes namen vergaz.  
 Dâ begunden herz und ôren  
 tumben unde tôren  
 und ûz ir rehte wanken.

He played so sweetly and  
 harped so well  
 in the British style  
 that many there standing or sitting  
 forgot their own names.  
 Hearts and ears began  
 to play the fool  
 and desert their rightful paths.

Here Gottfried calls Tristan “the new minstrel” and deliciously mixes notions of courtliness and professionalism by describing Tristan’s performance as his new “office” or “occupation” (*ambet*).<sup>16</sup> Tristan’s fervor and virtuosity—his new identity as a *Spielmann*—enchant the courtiers, knocking them “senseless”

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15. All quotations of the Middle High German are taken from Friedrich Ranke, ed., *Tristan* by Gottfried von Strassburg, with a translation into modern German by Rüdiger Krohn (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980). All English translations are my own.

so that they forget their identities, their names, and their desires.

Indeed, Mark's heart has so deserted its "rightful path" that he coyly invites Tristan to play for him at night, in private:

3650

<p>"Dîne léiche ich gerne hoeren sol          underwîlen wider naht,          sô dû doch niht geslâfen maht.          Diz tuostu wol mir unde dir."</p>	<p>"Your lais I would gladly          hear another night, now and then          when you can't sleep.          Say you will do this for me and for          you."</p>
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This passage is saturated with the innuendo of a late-night romantic tryst with Tristan. Mark, so enamored of Tristan's talents, attempts his own song of seduction:

3721

<p>Der künec sprach:          "Tristan, hoere her          an dir ist allez, des ich ger,          dû kanst allez, daz ich wil:          jagen, sprâche, seitspil.          Nu suln ouch wir gesellen sîn,          dû der mîn und ich der dîn.          Tages sô sul wir rîten jagen,</p>	<p>The king said:          "Tristan listen,          you have all that I want,          you do all that I want to do:          hunt, languages, play a stringed          instrument.          Now let's be companions          I will be yours and you mine.          Days we shall ride hunting,</p>
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16. Gnaedinger, "Musik und Minne," 28, comments that Gottfried's naming Tristan as a *Spielmann* and literally giving him a new occupation (*ambet*) may be a somewhat ironic or humorous portrayal of Tristan's seriousness. Gnaedinger believes that the social category of *Spielmann* or professional musician was not pejorative but rather free or exempt from social ordering because of its location outside that court hierarchy. However, Tristan is still only known to Mark and his court as the son of a merchant. Jackson emphasizes, "it is as a merchant's son that he performs before Mark" ("Artist and Performance," 4).

des nahtes uns hie heime tragen	nights here at home we will sustain ourselves
mit höfſchlichen dingen:	with courtly things:
harpfen, videlen, ſingen,	harping, fiddling, ſinging.
Daz kanſtu wol, daz tuo du mir:	You can do theſe things well, do them for me.
Sô kan ich ſpil, daz tuon ich dir,	Then I can play a thing I know
des ouch dîn herze lîhte gert:	which your heart deſires:
ſchoeniu cleider unde pfert,	beautiful clothes and a horſe,
der gibe ich dir, ſwie vil du wilt.	I will give you all you want.
Dâ mite hân ich dir wol geſpilt.”	Thus with theſe things I ſhall have played well for you.”

Mark proposes an exchange of refinement for riches, and the metaphor for this exchange is exclusive musical performances, one man “playing” for the other. The relationship between Tristan and Mark has become suddenly symbiotic; Tristan needs Mark for wealth and power, Mark needs and desires Tristan to complete himself with courtliness.

Mark lacks courtliness because he lacks the proper motivation for that refinement, namely a woman. Tristan’s courtliness—epitomized as musical skill—thus becomes itself an object of desire, substituting the effect and affect of a woman for the woman herself. Brown and Jaeger note that: “In the center of a monarchic state reality tends to become aestheticized. Events, acts and human beings tend towards the condition of a work of art.”<sup>17</sup> Many critics have noted that Tristan brings “cultural superiority in ‘höfſchlichen dingen’ (3729) which the king himself lacks.”<sup>18</sup> Tristan’s courtliness aestheticizes and legitimates King Mark’s court in the absence of a queen who would have provided that aestheticizing and legitimating presence. Thus Tristan, ever the changeling in the

17. Brown and Jaeger, “Pagentry and Court Aesthetic,” 41.

18. Kerth, “Marke’s Royal Decline,” in *Med. Trist. Leg.*, 107.

story—courtier and *Spielmann*, nobleman and merchant, stranger and relative—initially fills the void of the woman at court. Mark's infatuation with Tristan can best be described as a manifestation of what Eve Sedgwick calls "homosocial desire"—the social bonds between persons of the same sex that are potentially erotic. Sedgwick further explains that "to draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual."<sup>19</sup> Gottfried's portrayal of Mark plays upon this very continuum.

As Mark enjoys refinement without the proper motivation of a real woman, he becomes like a woman himself—passive, complacent, and fearful, while Tristan fights his battles. When Tristan volunteers to fight Morold, a bully of an Irish duke who is exacting a tribute of children from various regions of Cornwall, Gottfried does not mince words in feminizing Mark and his panic at the thought of Tristan's possible death:

6521

Der guote künic Marke  
dem gie der kampf sô starke  
mit herzeleide an sînen lip,  
daz nie kein herzelôsez wip  
die nôt umbe einen man gewan.  
Er enhaete keinen trôst dar an,  
ez enwaere Tristandes tôt.

The good king Mark was so  
deeply racked with heart-sickness  
in his body about the fight,  
that never did any most timid woman  
suffer so for a man.  
He had no trust  
that Tristan would not die.

This "undoing" of King Mark's masculine identity is a function of the absence of a real woman in the *romance*. As the story progresses we see that Mark is perfectly content without a woman at court—content with the purely homosocial contract as it stands.

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19. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 1.

8358

Marke sprach: "Got der hât uns einen guoten erben geben. Got helfe uns, daz er müeze leben! Tristan die wîle er leben sol sô wizzet endelîche wol sone sol niemer künigîn noch vrouwe hie ze hove gesîn."	Mark spoke: "God has given us a good heir. God help us by keeping him alive! As long as Tristan lives know it once for all there will never be a Queen nor a lady at this court."
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Recalling Sedgwick's continuum between homosocial and homosexual desire, this last passage raises the question as to how close to the sexual end of the continuum the "courtly love" between Mark and Tristan extends. Rüdiger Krohn has written on the homoerotic nature of the relationship between Tristan and Mark before Isolde enters the story.<sup>20</sup> Krohn begins his argument from the position that

homosexuality existed and was known in the Middle Ages. It was considered a grave sin and was as a rule very harshly punished because it grossly offended against the church as well as against secular norms.... Thus this explains that the vice of "sodomy" in the fictional poetry was altogether not thematized—or, on the contrary, only thematized in a carefully disguised form.<sup>21</sup>

Later in his article Krohn comments on Mark's resistance to marriage:

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20. "Erotik und Tabu in Gottfrieds *Tristan*: King Marke," in Rüdiger Krohn, Bernd Thum, and Peter Wapnewski, eds., *Staufzeit: Geschichte, Literatur, Kunst* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978), 362-76.

21. "Homosexualität hat im Mittelalter existiert und war bekannt. Sie galt als schwere Sünde und wurde in der Regel sehr hart bestraft, weil sie sowohl gegen kirchliche als auch gegen weltliche Normen gröblich verstieße.... So erklärt es sich denn, dass das Laster der "Sodomie" in der fiktionalen Dichtung überhaupt nicht—oder doch nur wie unten zu zeigen sein wird, in sorgfältig getarnter Form—thematisiert wurde," *ibid.*, 365.

The resolve of the king to remain unmarried to advance his favorite, is brought automatically in connection with the numerous always harmlessly disguised allusions to his possibly homosexually tinged relationship to Tristan. Gottfried thus achieves a masterpiece in the area of hair-fine calculated innuendo.<sup>22</sup>

About medieval views concerning the bachelorhood of King Mark, Kerth writes:

There is ample evidence to suggest, however, that for the medieval audience, the absence of a queen, and, therefore, the impossibility of a legitimate heir would have been the focus of concern, not to say disbelief at Marke's dereliction of royal duty, long before the appearance of Tristan.<sup>23</sup>

The observations of both Kerth and Krohn present a convincing argument for a "calculated innuendo" of homosexuality in Gottfried's characterization of King Mark. Krohn, however, seems to overlook similar innuendos with regard to Gottfried's characterization of Tristan and implies that Tristan remains a passive object of desire rather than an active participant in the erotic seduction that occurs between him and Mark. Indeed, King Mark presents a less subtle encoding of sexuality and power relations in comparison to Tristan—a bluntness in keeping with Gottfried's characterization of Mark as an unrefined, two-dimensional figure. Thus the relative neglect of Tristan in Krohn's analysis is, to a certain extent, justifiable, for while it is clearly feasible that King Mark's behavior prior to the introduction of Isolde encodes homosexual attraction, Tristan and his overpowering musicality nevertheless present a more complex

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22. "Daß des Königs Entschluss, seinem Günstling zuliebe unverheiratet zu bleiben, unwillkürlich in Verbindung gebracht wird mit den zahlreichen, stets harmlos getarnten Anspielungen auf sein möglicherweise homophil getöntes Verhältnis zu Tristan. Gottfried vollbringt dabei ein Meisterstück im Gebrauch haarfein kalkulierte Innuendos," *ibid.*, 373.

23. Kerth, "Marke's Royal Decline," 114.

encoding of sexuality and gender, and the relationship of these, to issues of identity.

### *Tristan the Professional*

In Arthurian *romances*, knights wield swords to conquer enemies and to win riches and honor. Most scholars recognize that throughout Gottfried's narrative, Tristan uses music in much the same way. Gottfried makes the "music for sword" substitution most explicit in the episode of Tristan's encounter with Gandin the knight, in which musical instruments become the only weapons wielded by both Tristan and Gandin. When the wandering knight Gandin comes to Mark's court carrying a rote, Mark entices Gandin to play by offering to grant him anything he wishes in return. After playing, Gandin requests Isolde and, rather than risk perjuring himself or engaging in battle, Mark relinquishes her. Tristan sets out after Gandin to recover Isolde and, choosing minstrel guise over armor, tricks Gandin with his own musical performance, proclaiming:

13414

Wan daz ir mit dem rottenspiel	That which with your rote-playing
dem küenege Marke ertruget an	you tricked from King Mark,
daz vüere ich mit der harpfen dan.	I have taken away with my harp.

This victory not only signifies a victory of the professional class over nobility, but also of master courtiers over chivalric dilettantes. Upon returning Isolde to Mark, Tristan scolds:

13441

"Herre" sprach er "wizze crist	"Sire" he says "Christ knows
sô lieb als iu diu küenegin ist	how dear the queen is to you

sô ist ez ein michel unin  
 daz ir si gebet sô lîhte hin  
 durch harpfen oder duch rotten.  
 Ez mac diu werlt wol spotten,  
 wer gesach ie mêre künigîn  
 durch rottenspil gemeine sîn?"

so it is a great folly  
 that you give her away so easily  
 on account of harp or rote.  
 Now the world can well laugh,  
 whoever saw a queen made  
 common by a performance on a  
 rote?"

Just as Gandin uses a rote in place of a sword to rob King Mark of Isolde, so too does Tristan use a harp to triumph over Gandin. These musical conquests not only show how music takes the place of traditional weapons, but also reveal a hierarchy of musical prowess that takes the place—indeed, that is the very inverse—of military prowess. Here the king sits at the bottom of the hierarchy, entirely lacking in musical skill and easily overpowered by the knight Gandin. Gandin, however, performs on a rote which was “a stringed instrument...easier to play than the harp and hence regarded as an inferior instrument.”<sup>24</sup> Thus Tristan’s greater musical skill allows him to triumph over the chivalric class of both knights and kings.<sup>25</sup> This is the ill-fated consequence of courtliness if not fully mastered—if not performed by a professional.

But what does it mean to be a professional courtier?—for that is, indeed, the best way to describe Gottfried’s Tristan. To what social class does Tristan belong? To what gender? The co-existing codes of chivalry and courtly courtesy were somewhat at odds with each other: while chivalry celebrated physical strength and demanded a display of virility through battle, courtliness celebrated erudition and humble service.<sup>26</sup> The former concerned masculine power, the latter concerned the

24. Jackson, “Artist and Performance,” 7.

25. Stein, “Die Musik in Gottfrids von Strassburg ‘Tristan,’” (594) describes Gandin as a “künstlerisch hochqualifizierte Dilettant” [highly qualified artistic dilettante] in comparison to Tristan. Gnaedinger, “Musik und Minne,” 51, considers the Gandin episode a “burlesken Szene.”

civilizing of that power. Cutting across these two codes is the ideology of courtly love—necessarily unrequited love that was sublimated in the activities of the knight and the courtier and that ennobled those activities. Courtly romances attempted to harmonize these contrasting codes in the character of the perfect knight “who joins in his exemplary person the leading qualities of *arma*, *amor*, and *litterae*—the valor of the fighter, the refinement of the true lover, and the sophistication of the educated man of society.”<sup>27</sup>

Criticisms of courtliness, however, reach as far back as the eleventh century, and by the mid-twelfth century “court satire” had practically become a literary genre in its own right, developing its own set of common themes.<sup>28</sup> From the beginning, court critics complain about the weakening of the chivalric class by effeminizing vanities, the invasion of foreign customs, and a preoccupation with novelties, especially of dress.<sup>29</sup> German and English court critics were most antagonized by the importation of French court customs. French courts were, as Jaeger puts it, “ingenious and imaginative in their shaping of style. The ‘novelties’ wrought there went beyond common practice at the imperial courts and so captured the imagination in Germany and the North.”<sup>30</sup>

One common theme in court criticism was the feminization of men by the trappings of French courtly behavior. The twelfth-century German critic Ordericus Vitalis writes of Frenchified courtiers as *effeminati* who “unrestrainedly pursued their revels and shamelessly gave themselves up to the filth of sodomy.”<sup>31</sup> In England, Walter of Malmesbury (c.1120)

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26. See Aldo Scaglione, *Knights at Court: Courtliness, Chivalry, and Courtesy from Ottonian Germany to the Italian Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 7-8.

27. *Ibid.*, 112.

28. Jaeger, *Origins of Courtliness*, 55.

29. *Ibid.*, 178-9.

30. *Ibid.*, 179.

31. *Ibid.*, 180.

complains: "To compete with women for softness of body, to break stride with a cultivated negligence of gait, and to walk with the hips thrust forward: this was the epitome of style for youth."<sup>32</sup> Now recall, if you will, that Gottfried (a German) is writing about Tristan who appears as a foreigner from a place called Parmenie to a court in Cornwall and immediately out-styles his rescuers by introducing a novel hunting custom and French courtly terminology. Tristan uses several "foreign" words to describe the hunting customs of Parmenie such as "forkîe" and "curîe." To show the extent of the "foreignness" of these words, the bewildered courtiers claim they could better understand Arabic ("wir vernaemrn sarrazênesc baz," 2964). Clearly Tristan's courtliness outweighs his chivalry and, in light of the contemporary criticisms of courtliness as "foreign" and feminizing, Gottfried's Tristan presents a problematic figure—one who embodies "otherness" and who is suspiciously, even unnaturally, aligned more with the feminine than with the masculine.

### *Music, Magic, and Seduction*

As the story unfolds, Gottfried portrays Tristan's musicality as increasingly unnatural and, indeed, supernatural. The association of music with magic comes to the fore with the introduction of Isolde into the story. When Tristan suffers a wound from a poisoned blade that only Queen Isolde (Isolde's mother) can cure, Tristan assumes the identity of a *höfischer spilman* (courtly minstrel, 7560) named Tantris in order to gain admittance to her realm.<sup>33</sup> In a scene analogous to his entry into Mark's court, Tristan again tells a story of being ambushed and

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32. *Ibid.*, 181.

abandoned by pirates and literally charms the villagers by his magical ability to sing and play despite being wounded.

7513

Nu sî begunden nâhen  
 und dannoch nieman sâhen  
 nu gehôrten s'al dort her  
 suoze unde nâch ir herzen ger  
 eine sîeze harpfen clingen  
 und mit der harpfen singen  
 einen man sô rehte suoze  
 daz sîz in z'eime gruoze  
 und ze âventiure nâmen  
 und von der stat nie kâmen  
 die wîle er harpfete unde sanc.  
 Diu vröude diu was aber unlanc  
 die sî von im haeten an der stete,  
 wan swaz er in dâ spiles getete  
 mit handen oder mit munde  
 daz engie niht von grunde.  
 Daz herze danz was niht dermite  
 So enist ez ouch niht spiles site  
 daz man'z dekeine wîle tuo  
 daz herze daz enstê darzuo.  
 Al eine geschehe es harte vil,  
 ez enheizet doch niht rehte spil  
 daz man sus ûzen hin getuot  
 âne herze und âne muot.

Now they drew near  
 and though they saw no one,  
 they heard there  
 the dulcet and heart-gladdening  
 sounds of a sweet harp and  
 a man singing so enchantingly  
 that they took it  
 for a greeting and a  
 marvel,  
 and no one moved  
 while he harped and sang.  
 But their joy from the sounds  
 that came from him to the shore, did  
 not last long,  
 for whatever he played  
 with hands or with mouth  
 did not come from the depths.  
 His heart was not in it.  
 So it is with playing  
 that one cannot do it long  
 if the heart is not in it.  
 Though it happens often,  
 it cannot be called playing  
 when one does it superficially  
 without heart and soul.

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33. Kästner, *Harfe und Schwert*, 18-20, believes that Gottfried used the incongruous pairing of "courtly" and "minstrel" to distinguish Tristan's alter ego Tantris from the social strata of "outcast" musicians and to identify him as a musician from the educated clerical class that was employed by the nobility.

Gottfried implies that Tristan must be playing superficially because he is mortally wounded, but there is something uncanny about the fact that he can nevertheless produce enchanting music. It is not music Tristan performs, but magic.<sup>34</sup>

A learned priest—the tutor of Princess Isolde, accomplished in music and languages and described as a true connoisseur of courtly pursuits—brings Tristan to Queen Isolde. Thus for a second time Tristan's advancement has been facilitated by the network, brotherhood if you will, of professional musicians. Both the tutor and the Welsh minstrel are pale doubles of Tristan; all three men use music as a commodity. It is to this professional class that Tristan truly belongs—the class of clerics, merchants, and minstrels. These personae are his alter egos, the characters he plays in order to get ahead in the world.

Queen Isolde requires that Tristan, a.k.a. Tantris, instruct Princess Isolde in book learning and the playing of instruments as payment for the Queen's medical attention. Here again, Tristan's refinement becomes a commodity in a system of exchange—the Queen's medicinal charms for Tristan's social charms. On the surface, the exchange takes place between those who possess and the seemingly dispossessed. But who occupies which position? After all, Tristan's chief attribute is his power of seduction—his power to possess. This is the skill he imparts to Isolde through music.

8107

Diu junge süeze künigîn  
alsô zôch sî gedanken in  
ûz maneges herzen arken,  
als der agestein die barken

The young charming princess  
drew thoughts from the many  
hearts which contained them,  
like the lodestone drew the

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34. Neither Mohr, "*Tristan und Isold* als Künstlerroman"; Gnaedinger, "Musik und Minne"; nor Jackson, "Artist and Performance" attempt to interpret Gottfried's reported incongruity between Tristan's wound and his nevertheless enchanting singing.

mit der Syrênen sange tuot.  
 Si sanc in maneges herzen muot  
 offenklichen unde tougen  
 durch ôren und durch ougen.  
 Ir sanc, den s'offenklichen tete  
 beide anderswâ und an der stete,  
 daz was ir sûeze singen,  
 ir senftez seiten clingen,  
 daz lûte und offenkliche  
 durch der ôren künirîche  
 hin nider in diu herzen clanc.  
 Sô was der tougenliche sanc  
 ir wunderliche schoene,  
 diu mit ir muotgedoene  
 verholne unde tougen  
 durch diu venster der ougen  
 in vil manic edele herzeleich  
 und daz zouber dar in streich  
 daz die gedanke zehant  
 vienc unde vâhende bant,  
 mit sene und mit seneder nôt.  
 Sus haete sich diu schoene Isôt  
 von Tristandes lère  
 gebezzeret sêre.

ships with the Siren's song.  
 She sang into many hearts  
 openly and secretly, stirring  
 thoughts through eyes and ears.  
 Her song, which she openly  
 sang in both this place and elsewhere,  
 that was her own charming  
 singing and calming string-playing  
 that sounded and rang  
 openly through the kingdom  
 of the ears down into the hearts.  
 But her secret song  
 was her wondrous beauty  
 that with its rapturous music  
 crept hidden and secretly  
 through the windows of the eyes  
 into many noble hearts,  
 and there bowed that magic  
 which at once took thoughts  
 prisoner and taking them,  
 fettered them with yearning and ob-  
 sessive desire.  
 Thus did the beautiful Isolde  
 from Tristan's instruction  
 improve herself.

Aldo Scaglione writes that "by his musical talents, Tristan casts a truly magic spell on the court, and Isolde will learn from him the same art."<sup>35</sup> Through his instruction, Tristan invests Isolde with his own musical/magical skill which won for him the heart of Mark, thus providing her symbolically with the means to do the same. Tristan essentially "finishes" Isolde—giving her the final touch that will make her femininity irresist-

ible, even to Mark.<sup>36</sup> As Isolde is empowered by music, so Gottfried empowers the word “music” with a metaphorical dimension. More than a pleasurable aural sensation, music also becomes a metaphor for Isolde’s visual beauty—her “secret song” that her audience “heard” through their eyes, like sound drifting through an open window. Thus music becomes the term to describe both aural and visual modes of seduction—modes that enchant and entrap the unsuspecting.<sup>37</sup>

But what about the suspecting? Mark becomes so enchanted with Tristan that he relinquishes his material inheritance and biological potency. By choosing Tristan as his heir, Mark effectively creates a social disaster that demands repair. Unnerved, the courtiers accuse Tristan of sorcery, perhaps an encoding of homophobia in recognition of Tristan’s dangerous changeling quality and his “otherness” with which they cannot or dare not compete. In order to stay alive (literally), Tristan offers to procure for Mark (and the court) a woman. Not just any woman, however, but a woman, namely Isolde, who is an

35. Scaglione, *Knights at Court*, 153. Kästner, *Harfe und Schwert*, 77, notes that the connection of magic, music, and healing has roots in the Old Testament story of David as well as the figure of Orpheus from classical antiquity.

36. Jackson, “Tristan the Artist,” 369, writes: “In the teaching of Isold, Tristan has taken the first step towards their ultimate harmony. He raises her to the same musical level which he has himself already attained; he gives her the power over men which his own music gave to him.” Jackson, however, is less interested in the transmission of the powers of seduction than in Tristan’s imparting *moralitas* or “mores” to Isolde. “*Moraliteit*, however, is something higher. It links the higher spirits and pleases the divine.... The fact that his description of the training in music is followed immediately by the mention of this quality would seem to indicate that this is so. Harmony of character and of soul come through music” (370).

37. Gnaedinger, “Musik und Minne,” 69, writes: “Isoldes Schönheit ist sozusagen der visuelle Aspekt, der optische Ausdruck ihrer Musik, durch die sie das Reich der *gotinne Minne* in schwebend sehnsuchtsvoller Stimmung vergegenwärtigt.” [Isolde’s beauty is, so to speak, the visual aspect—the optical expression—of her music, through which she represents the realm of the goddess Minne (Love) in floating, yearful tuning.]

extension of himself, who now shares or possesses Tristan's musical/magical powers of seduction. Isolde becomes Tristan's bargaining chip, the new commodity in the homosocial economy, and the long-awaited female object of desire that will set both King Mark and the story of the romance "straight." Tristan has effectively transferred the burden of the feminine component to a bona fide woman—but a woman who is yet another alter ego of himself, akin to the minstrel Tantris. Nevertheless, whether the feminine component exists in Tristan or in Isolde, that component is identified with music, which is magic, which is seduction. Given this series of equations, it is no wonder that the "true love" that binds Tristan and Isolde is represented by a magic potion—liquid seduction, or liquid music, for just as the musical sounds generated by Tristan and Isolde ensnare those who listen, so the magic potion ensnares Tristan and Isolde. Appropriately, the episode in which the two drink the potion ends with a lyrical segment implying a short song.

11871

Si dunket schoener sît dan ê.	She seems more beautiful since than before.
dâ von sô tûret minnen ê	And so endures Love's law.
diuhte minne sît als ê	Were Love to seem just as before,
sô zegienge schiere minnen ê.	So would quickly melt Love's Law.

Here Gottfried uses the word "ê" to end each line of verse, re-percussing the same sound but playing on its double meaning of "law" and "before." In this way Gottfried sonically illustrates both the separate state of Tristan and Isolde "before" the potion and their post-potion state of unity and accord under "Love's Law."

## *An Isolde by Any Other Name: Mistaken and Shaken Identity*

In his book *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, R. Howard Bloch argues that the ever-present trope of changing clothes and ill-fitting garments in these stories denotes the *jongleur's* dangerous mobility between categories of social class or gender and metaphorically expresses a deep mistrust of poetic invention and of language itself. Bloch explains:

These tales merely make explicit what is less focussed elsewhere—the importance of the metaphoric equation of language and clothing, the insufficiency of both to cover what is conceived (as presence) to be the Naked body of Nature.<sup>38</sup>

Gottfried's Tristan is essentially a *jongleur* who constantly spins new tales about himself, who dons new personae as if new garments, and who seduces his adversaries by clothing and cloaking them with music. The cloth of music, like poetry, veils and hinders perception. Tristan's musical spinning pulls the wool over his listener's eyes and literally spins them round, causing "hearts and ears to play the fool and desert their rightful paths" (3591-3). Similarly, Isolde, like a Siren, "drew thoughts from the many hearts which contained them" (8108-9). Indeed, all terms collapse into this comparison: Isolde as Siren—that is woman as music personified, and music as a cloak of sound that paradoxically unravels and pulls on the loose threads of the hearer. Isolde as Siren becomes a new instrument and a new outfit for Tristan. Bloch summarizes: "The displaced robe of representation is the sign of an always implicit transvestism."<sup>39</sup> Thus Tristan both invests Isolde with music and invests in

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38. R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 34.

39. *Ibid.*, 43.

Isolde as a new means of cloaking himself within the social economy of the court.

It is the great ruse of the courtier actually to be a *jongleur*: a professional trickster, a social and sexual changeling who feigns steadfastness and loyalty in order to earn the king's support. But in the end, Tristan falls prey to the tricks of his own profession. After Tristan brings Isolde to court, Mark discovers that Tristan and Isolde are lovers and Tristan flees. On his journey he meets another Isolde (Isolde of the White Hands), and the two women, like the sound of their name, become indistinguishable in his mind.

18990

sô ime Isôt sîn herze ie mê  
 in dem namen Isôte brach,  
 sô er Isôte sach.  
 Vil dicke sprach er wider sich  
 a dê benê, wie bin ich  
 von disem namen verirret!  
 Er irret unde wirret  
 die wârheit und daz lougen  
 mîner sinne und mîner ougen.  
 Er birt mir wunderliche nôt.  
 Mir lachet und spilt Isôt  
 in mînen ôren alle vrist  
 und enweiz iedoch wâ Isôt ist.  
 mîn ouge, daz Isote siht,  
 daz selbe ensiht Isôte niht.  
 Mir ist Isôt verre und ist mir bî  
 Ich vûrhte, ich aber g'îsôtet sî  
 zem anderen mâle.

The more Isolde broke his  
 heart in Isolde's name, the  
 more gladly he saw Isolde.  
 Often he would say to himself  
 "Ah God have mercy, how I have  
 been confused by this name!  
 It hinders and confuses  
 the truth and the lie  
 in my reason and my eyes.  
 It sets me in the strangest quandary.  
 Isolde laughs and plays  
 in my ears continually  
 yet I do not know where Isolde is.  
 My eye which sees Isolde  
 does not see Isolde.  
 Isolde is far from me yet near.  
 I fear I have been Isolde'd  
 for a second time."

Here, just as Bloch has observed, woman is equated with a confounding and seducing of the senses, and with the deceptiveness of language. Tristan's once courtly obsessive love for Isolde has now become an obsession with sound. What's in a name? Here, everything is in the name—the name Isolde (now in its third incarnation) holds the power to trick even Tristan's reason.

Names themselves hold a paradoxical position in medieval literature. On one hand, they are cosmetic and misleading, as the names Tantris and Isolde of the White Hands illustrate. Yet on the other hand, names betray identity in a summarial fashion by way of reputation, and can thus provide immediate profiles for possible enemies.<sup>40</sup> It is the immediacy of names that confuses Tristan—the paradox of a name's cosmetic yet defining property. As previously discussed, the relationships between women, names, and masculine identity are fundamental to the genre of the medieval *romance*.<sup>41</sup> Recall that in the Arthurian *romance*, *Lancelot* by Chrétien de Troyes, Lancelot is not named until the mid-point of the story when his beloved Queen Guenever finally reveals his identity. The episode of Isolde of the White Hands—curiously, the last extant episode of Gottfried's *Tristan*—reverses this medieval program. Tristan exclaims, "Ich vürhte, ich aber g'isôtet sî zem anderen mâle" (I fear I have been Isolde'd for a second time), and thus Tristan's masculine identity is jeopardized simply by the name of his beloved. The name Isolde itself becomes an active verb—a

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40. In Arthurian *romances* such as Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* or *Yvain* the re-naming or not-naming of the protagonist serves as narrative device that signifies the character's state of self-knowledge and spiritual development. In his commentary on Chrétien's *Perceval*, D. D. R. Owen writes that "a man's name was believed to be an integral part of his personality (cf. *Perceval's* mother's insistence that one knows a man by his name, line 562)" (D. D. R. Owen, trans., *Chretien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances* [London: Dent, 1987], 523).

41. See Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 91-113.

grammatical changeling—used to denote woman's ability to effect a change in men: in other words, to feminize them.

The recycling of the name Isolde can be read in yet another way: all women can be collapsed into one woman, and, in the same manner, one woman can signify all women.<sup>42</sup> Hence Isolde is every woman—determined yet indeterminate. Tristan's masculine powers of reason dissolve under the influence of Isolde. The question of which Isolde is moot. Tristan's reason is led astray by the music of the name—literally, by its purely sonic property; metaphorically, by the ultimate schism between words and reality.<sup>43</sup> In the face of this schism, language reduces to music—seductive sounds turned loose from representation.

Music, as a corollary of the feminine and as the reduction of language, threatens not only the perception of gender boundaries, but also the very means of describing and defining difference, the very means of knowing. Music, or sound that is not just ill-fit to describe a referent, but that is completely non-referential, gives rise to an epistemological crisis. Any word said over and over soon becomes meaningless, becomes a sound without a referent. I am suggesting that Gottfried's literary repetition of the name Isolde produces the same effect, and that

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42. The three Isoldes in Gottfried's *Tristan* (Queen Isolde, her daughter Isolde, and Isolde of the White Hands) are reminiscent of the three Marys that mourn at the foot of the cross in John's version of the crucifixion of Jesus (John 19:25): Mary, mother of Jesus; her sister Mary, wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene. In these two monomial triads, both familial and non-familial relations are represented yet collapsed into a single generic identity.

43. Gnaedinger, "Musik und Minne," 88, makes a similar point: "Anderseits sind Tristan und Isot von Arundel der verselbständigten Macht der Musik wehrlos ausgesetzt und preisgegeben. Sie sind dem Zauber des Klanges unwillentlich verfallen, können ihm gar nicht entgehen." [On the other hand, Tristan and Isolde (of the White Hands) have stopped and surrendered defenseless to the autonomous power of music. They have succumbed unwillingly to the magic of the sound, entirely unable in the face of it.]

with the collapse of language, and especially names, comes the collapse of gender and identity.

As a literally charming aspect of both Tristan's courtly prowess and Isolde's magical beauty, music affiliates the two lovers through a particular means of seduction and conquest that disrupts gender categories. Tristan's courtliness, however, can be read as a *jongleur's* performance, and Isolde as his artistic creation and vesture. Gottfried's own verse *romance* of Tristan and Isolde, then, tells the story of the love that binds a jongleur to his art and the consequences that ensue when art becomes obsession.