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Béroul's *Tristan*: Emblems of Sublimation, Exhibitionism, and Castration Fantasy

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Abstract: The violence in Béroul's *Tristan* has discomforted many readers and even a few scholars. However, by examining the psychological motivations behind these graphic scenes, important structural elements are revealed. Mark and Iseut have fantasies of violence that lend themselves to analyses. The fantasies emerge from the subconscious, and they are the result of concealed resentment and repressed emotions. For Mark, the consequences are rage and murder. *Tristan* makes many boasts regarding his physical strength, but he has a propensity for avoidance and passivity, even when his authority is being challenged. Iseut uses an encoded rhetoric to facilitate what she wants, while she simultaneously preserves her own security. Nonetheless, in the end, *Tristan* and Iseut's affair is mostly sustained through King Mark's self-delusion. At a subconscious level, he must be aware of his wife's infidelity, but he cannot bring himself to recognize it. Failing to resolve his inner conflict, Mark redirects his rage and attacks his advisor, Frocin, the one character in the poem who appears committed to telling the king the truth. The plot continues as the love affair remains concealed, largely because the characters are motivated by subconscious forces.

Keywords: Tristan; *Tristan*; Isolde; Ovid; Arthurian romance; Béroul; aesthetics; Midas; medieval romance



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Béroul composed *Tristan* in a Norman dialect during the twelfth century. Beyond this, the author's life is practically unknown (Béroul 1989, pp. ix–xvi). The broad historical perspective observes a time of political instability and competing claims to power. England's civil war in the middle of the twelfth century is commonly known as 'The Anarchy'. A pause in the conflict witnessed the ascension of Henry II, whose marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine was intended to consolidate the power of the Angevins (they were cousins to the third degree). Nonetheless, the nuptials hardly created the security that was intended. Although little is known of Béroul's life, the poet lived during a time of domestic turmoil, international war, various forms of plague and disease, and political instability. Much of this history is dramatically reflected in Béroul's *Tristan*.

Given this history, it is not a surprise that Béroul's poem is fairly violent, and at times quite graphic. Norris Lacy expresses "shock" over a few scenes, and he is certainly not alone in this reaction. Even in the company of other violent literature, Béroul's poem stands out (Lacy 1971, pp. 21–29; Cormier 2004, pp. 67–76). The main characters in Béroul's *Tristan* are psychologically complex and require an interpretation that includes their fantasies and behaviors, as well as their concealed urges and unconscious desires. Otherwise, it might be assumed that the poet uses violence as a superficial justification for the characters' actions. In the case of Iseut, her rhetoric satisfies public authority figures while simultaneously expressing her genuine and often subversive desires, which are revealed through extreme fantasies. She has the sophisticated ability of speaking to placate different audiences at the same time.

Although Iseut's rhetorical ability reflects an inner psychology that is equally advanced, the same cannot be said for either *Tristan* or Mark. Unlike Iseut, the male protagonists are led by their subconscious urges without any self-awareness, and, as a result, these

urges are never effectively fulfilled by the characters' evasions and deferrals. They fail to sublimate their desires; instead, they rely on inadequate defense mechanisms and unsatisfying forms of displacement. Tristran has a propensity for avoidance, particularly regarding issues that are his direct responsibility. Even when his tutor tries to make him aware of his obligations, it is questionable whether it is successful. Despite this, Tristran still boasts about his strength, perhaps feeling the need to compensate for what he cannot physically bring himself to do. Although Tristran relies on avoidance, Mark's defense mechanism is a toxic form of displacement, and is equally ineffective. Instead of confronting his problems, Mark misdirects his excessive anger at undeserving targets. In fact, those he chooses to punish are the very people who might illuminate Mark's real problem: the anxieties he has about his wife's infidelity. Unlike the two male characters, Iseut is rewarded for her rhetorical capabilities and psychological self-awareness. In her performance during the judicial ordeal—a public ritual that explicitly tests Iseut's social acceptability—Iseut transforms Tristran's 'crutch', formerly a threatening symbol, into a pleasurable object.

Bérout's narrative threads a pronounced strand of fantasized violence into the minds of its characters. For Iseut, whose role as queen makes her illicit sexual affair a potential matter for political scandal, the hagiography, as a genre, informs her intense imagination—a wild and fiery spectacle. The intertextual significance might foreshadow Iseut's own martyrdom, but when that expectation is disappointed, the audience realizes that Iseut possesses an agency and mental acuity to avoid the fate of many of her literary predecessors (Classen 2005).

Similar to Bérout's *Tristran*, the medieval hagiography has its fair share of graphic imagery (Huot 2003, p. 73). As genres, the medieval hagiography and the romance appear to have influenced each other (Campbell 2008, p. 195). In the romance genre, for example, a lover's promised death does not signify celibate devotion, but it retains an intense passion that often sounds very close to spirituality, especially in Bérout (Glendinning 1992). Death becomes preferable to a life of unsatisfied desire, so the lover becomes secular and sensual, at once staining the virginal purity of the Church and, diametrically, sanctifying the temple of Bacchus. Of course, Iseut has the distinction of not having to sacrifice her body for the sake of her desires and, in this way, she retains an agency not found in many of her intertextual counterparts, religious or secular. Although she is threatened with burning and later forced to undergo a public ordeal, she avoids punishment in both cases and affirms her own social role while never having to deny her own desires.

Iseut acts as the inverse of the religious martyr, describing the nature of her passion in terms that invoke the virginal purity of the saint: "Li rois pense que par folie,/Sire Tristran, vos aie amé:/Mais Dex plevis ma loiauté,/Qui sor mon cors mete flaele,/S'onques for cil qui m'ot pucele/Out m'amistié encor nul jor!" (Lord Tristran, the king thinks that I have loved you sinfully; but I affirm my fidelity before God, and may He punish me if anyone except the man who took my virginity ever had my love) (Bérout *Tristran* 20–26). In the *Vie de Sainte Agnès*, the martyr's exaltation is also predicated on the testament of her virginity (Campbell 2008, p. 56). The connection between female sainthood and virginity is essential: "Sexuality is thus a crucial element in the construction of female sainthood and medieval depictions of female saints indicate that medieval culture was obsessed with virginity" (Gaunt 1995, p. 185). Intriguingly, Iseut violates the moral conventions of the saints she is modeled on, and the poem's narrative appears to reward her for that.

Iseut contorts her language to satisfy the technical demands of the oath (King Mark did not take her virginity, so he does not have her love). As a saint would promise her virginity to God as a sign of devotion, Iseut's deceptive oath announces her love to her secret lover and does so with a language traditionally coded for saints and martyrs. She establishes the terms of her own passion through her absolute devotion to a forbidden partner, and she uses her virginity (falsely) as the crux for that symbolic action. The fact that she does not value her chastity in the way her community thinks she ought to does not seem to bother her conscience.

The intense nature of her passionate sensuality swells into a fantasy of vivid self-immolation: “Mex vouldroie que je fuse arse,/ Aval le vent la poudre esparse,/ Jor que je vive que amor/ Aie o home qu’o mon seignor;” (I would rather be burned alive and have my ashes scattered in the wind than ever in my life love any man except my lord) (Béroutl *Tristan* 35–38).¹ Again, Iseut fools Mark, who thinks himself to be “seignor”.

Iseut’s fantasy of violence portrays the disintegration of her corporeal unity, “la poudre esparse”: a startling vision where the wake of desire leaves no remnant of the physical body. In this context, Iseut’s imagined self-obliteration has dark implications for the stability of the political order. The medieval corporeal metaphor, most famously used in John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, likens the authoritative dominion of the State to the coherence of the metaphorical body; the king is the head, the peasants are the feet, and so on (John of Salisbury 1990; Meyerson 2004, p. 10). By projecting the fantasy of incineration onto her own body, Iseut imagines a conflagration of the political hierarchy, at least in how it implicates her role as the queen. The ‘public’ and the ‘political’ become hostage to her, ready to sacrifice her regal identity to declaim the vast nature of her passion (McCracken 1998, pp. 78–79). Tristan also fantasizes about being burned alive:

Por Deu, le fiz Sainte Marie,
 Dame, ore li dites errant
 Qu’il face faire un feu ardent;
 E je m’en entrerai el ré.
 Se ja un poil en ai bruslé
 De la haire qu’avrai vestu,
 Si me laist tot ardoir u feu;
 Qar je sai bien n’a de sa cort
 Qui a bataille o moi s’en tort

[In the name of God, the son of the Virgin Mary, lady, tell him immediately to have a hot fire made, and I will enter the pyre. If even a single hair is singed on the hair shirt I will be wearing, then let him have me consumed by the fire; for I know that there is no one at court who will dare confront me.] (pp. 148–56)

A not uncommon response for the young man; what Tristan lacks in rhetorical eloquence, he compensates with the threat of brute strength. On the other hand, Iseut’s language shows how political authority can be subverted with rhetoric. In both cases, the fantasy of self-immolation posits an implicit threat to the political order.

Tristan’s own rhetoric is fairly boastful, but his repeated retreats from the court prevent him from having to act on his threats. Even when it comes to dispatching the first baron, whom the narrator charges as an immediate threat to Tristan, the task falls to the warrior’s elderly tutor, Governal. The older man decapitates the baron and hangs his head on a forked limb in the famous bower, the wooded house of nature of Tristan and Iseut’s love affair. During this entire incident, Tristan is asleep. When Tristan finally awakens, he is shocked by the head hanging in front of him. Although some have reasonably viewed Governal’s execution of the baron as a representation of Tristan’s extended authority (Miyashiro 2008, pp. 520–21), this does not explain Tristan’s pattern of inaction nor the grisly scene of the baron’s hanging skull. Governal forces Tristan to reflect on his propensity for avoidance and deferral, and seeks to shock Tristan into action. The scene clarifies Tristan’s own psychic disposition rather than delineating his authority, which appears to be under severe interrogation by his tutor.

Rather than using descriptive terminology to establish Tristan’s authority, the narrator describes a sequence of events that reveal Tristan’s propensity for deferral. The narrator tells the audience that we are to learn about the fate of one of the three barons who betrayed the lovers (Béroutl *Tristan* 1656). We are then told that the people of Cornwall feared the woods of Morrois because of the threat of Tristan: “Il les feïst as arbres pendre” (he [Tristan] would hang them from the trees) (Béroutl *Tristan* 1666). To his dismay, Governal sees the baron in the woods while Tristan is asleep in the bower with his arms “tightly

around the queen" (Béroul *Tristan* 1674–1675). The narrator also emphasizes Tristan's personal injury, which, during this time period, entailed his responsibility: "Nus retourner ne puet fortune/Ne se gaitoit de la rancune/Que il avoit a Tristan fait", (No one can escape fate:/He was not on his guard against the anger/he had inspired in Tristan) (Béroul *Tristan* 1697–1699).

Of course, the anger the barons inspire in Tristan finds no direct outlet. The action is instead taken up by his old tutor, the man who raised him, now in old age and trying to occupy the role of the sagacious counselor. The narrator signifies Tristan's absence when he describes the court's assumptions when they discover the headless body, "Bien quident ce ait fait Tristan", (They were sure that this had been done by Tristan) (Béroul *Tristan* 1717). In reality, "this" had been done by Govenal while "Tristan se jut a la fullie" (Tristan lay in his bower) (Béroul *Tristan* 1729). Tristan's earlier boasts conveyed a lot of anger and directly targeted the barons. Tristan fails to substantiate his claims; as a result, his affected emotion loses its potency, even as a rhetorical device (Copeland 2021, pp. 10–21).

There are two scenes characterized by the representation of leprosy, and in the center of both stands the image of the *puiot*, "a crutch"; a symbol that will transform itself with its altered repetition. The initial scene portrays the *puiot* as a threatening and potentially violent object. After discovering the queen's infidelity, Mark considers a public burning, which would ironically enact Iseut's imagined martyrdom. However, Yvain, the representative voice for the colony of lepers, stokes the king's desire for personal vengeance and outlandish retribution. Yvain promises Mark unspeakable punishments: "Païor fin dame n'ot mais une:/Sire, en nos a si grant ardor!" (No lady ever had a worse fate:/Sir, our lust is so strong!) (Béroul *Tristan* 1194–1195). The revulsion that such lines produce in the audience are unequivocally echoed in the unified dissent of the community within the poem:

Tuit s'escriënt la gent du reigne:
"Rois, trop feriez lai pechié,
S'il n'estoient primes jugié.
Puis les destrui. Sire, merci!"

[All the people of the kingdom cried: "King, you would be committing a terrible injustice/if they were not tried first;/wait until afterwards to kill them. Sir, have mercy!"] (Béroul *Tristan* 884–887)

The uniformity of the objection reinforces the immoral and unethical nature of the sentencing; "all the people of the kingdom" cried out in one voice. *Escrier*, 'to cry out', invokes a rhetoric of lamentation that is finally resolved with the plaintive outcry "*Sire, merci*". The community's collective interjection is a public and political admonishment aimed at Mark, for a violation of moral convention as king; the transgression is compounded when he declares his commitment to the immoral deed even if he were disowned "Par cel seignor qui fist le mont" (by the lord who created the world) (p. 889).

Notably, the community does not directly protest the outrageous form of the punishment but the king's usurpation of legal jurisdiction: "they were not tried first". The poem's ethical construction of justice is further articulated by the proximate vocabulary: *justise* (1127, 1165), *justise durra* (1168), and *sanz jugement* (1097). In Lacy's translation of the accusation, "Rois, trop feriez lai pechié", the judicial bearing is explicit: "King, you would be committing a terrible injustice". However, a more literal translation reveals a further inflection to the king's legal breach: 'King, you would sin against the law' or 'King, you would sin against the lay'. As the community is referring to its own legal conventions, translating *lai* as law is preferable; however, this does not discredit a suppressed meaning of 'lay', which allows the narrator to silently echo the community's ethical framework onto the poem itself. He is a tyrant and transgresses the morally encoded customs of family, kingdom, God, and, not least of all, the author's narrative framework.

King Mark, who acts as the center of political authority, gives Iseut to the lepers because a public burning feels insufficient, not quite brutal or shameful enough for the king. There is nothing subtle about Mark's intentions. He delivers Iseut to the lepers

under the unmistakable suggestion that rape will be a condition of her punishment: “Et l’estovra a nos coucer” (and [she] has to sleep with us) (Bérout *Tristan* 1206). The *lex regis* reveals itself as capricious and brutal: “The association of leprosy and carnality also explains Mark’s decision to hand Iseut over to Yvain’s band of lepers, who will provide for her a far more horrible fate than the penalty traditionally reserved for the convicted adulteress” (Blakeslee 1989, pp. 71–72; Brody 1974, p. 181). Leprosy was associated with grotesque expressions of sexuality, so one would expect that a moral taint attended the disease. In that sense, Iseut’s punishment was intended to be symbolically related to her own crime (Brody 1974, p. 22).

I detect a phallic image at the symbolic center of Iseut’s *contra passo* in an otherwise odd bit of detail for the colony of lepers: “N’i a celui n’ait son puiot”, (Not a single one was without his crutch)² (Bérout *Tristan* 1232). The phallic associations are justified by a historical context that associates leprosy with carnality, the declaration that Yvain makes of his lust, and the implications of an “unspeakable punishment”. Suspicious of Freudian anachronisms, some may still object to the argument for a double entendre on *puiot*. If the present evidence is not sufficient, the second scene involving leprosy should justify this observation.

When Tristan dresses as a leper, he performs the role of the societal outcast, and contorts his identity into a public spectacle of self-abasement and shame. This is consistent with his general pattern of avoidance. Still, above all, Tristan’s performance reveals the extent of Iseut’s gained agency. In yet another of Bérout’s inversions, the chivalric warrior sacrifices his public persona in the service of his own desire for submission. Iseut asserts her absolute possession over Tristan in an emphatically exhibitionist form: “Tor la ton vis et ça ton dos:/Ge monterai conme vaslet’. Et lors s’en sorrlist li deget,/Torne le dos, et ele monte./Tuit les gardent, et roi et conte./Ses cuises tient sor son puiot”, (‘Turn your face away and your back toward me,/and I will straddle you like a man’. Then the leper smiled./He turned around, and she mounted./Everyone watched them, kings and counts alike./She kept her thigh pressed against his crutch) (Bérout *Tristan* 3929–3935). I agree with Lacy when he says that the phallic significance of this crutch is difficult to ignore (Bérout *Tristan* 235–236). However, I further suggest that this crutch recalls and affirms the symbolic significance of the former *puiot* from ln. 1232. The double entendre is guaranteed by the structural signification of the repeated image; in other words, the *puiot* that was a potential metonym for the sexual threat has been transformed into the literal object of Iseut’s explicit (and simultaneously concealed) sexual desire. Iseut ‘rides’ Tristan over a muddy wasteland, crossing the symbolic bridge from object to agent (and in her transcendence, Tristan goes from agent to object). Whether staining or purifying, the muddy wasteland does signify a baptism of a kind, though one rooted in sensuality. As an emblem of transformation, the *puiot* symbolizes metamorphosis itself, a keystone to the poem’s architecture of sublimation. Iseut has redeemed the image of the crutch, disarming its threat by appropriating it as an object that she uses for her physical pleasure.³

Considering that she knows that Tristan is wearing a disguise, Iseut uses the publicly perceived threat of leprous contamination as a charade of her faith in God.⁴ Her hidden knowledge of Tristan allows her to manipulate the public ordeal by accommodating it into a sensually satisfying experience (Burch 2008, pp. 145–54). Many critics have noted the power of secrecy in this love affair, but in this scene, Iseut’s erotic enjoyment demonstrates subversive exhibitionism. She undercuts the moral order in the presence of its unknowing authorities (McCracken 1998, p. 80). It has been argued that the ride on the leper constitutes part of the legal trial, and “is more specifically a refutation or rejection of the charges: it is prefigured and formative, a preconditioned legal defense, a statement which is expected to be a denial of the charges” (Miyashiro 2008, p. 515). If this is correct, Iseut’s exhibitionism is politically and legally subversive as well.

Fulfilling a convention of the medieval romance, Mark is the cuckolded king; a personal misfortune that has implications on his political authority (Adams 2005, p. 177). He falls within the literary (and historical) tradition of royally deceived husbands, not least

of all King Arthur, who makes a brief appearance in Bérout's poem. Arthur's presence in the poem is intriguing, mainly because Guinevere's own infidelity was so essential to the dramatic background of the Arthurian genre throughout the Middle Ages. Arthurian mythology may have had a significant influence on Bérout, whose characters likewise define themselves by violating social taboos surrounding violence, disease, magic, and infidelity (McDonald 1991). Mark, like Arthur, cannot simply ignore his queen's infidelity. The combination of personal and political anxieties makes Mark unable to fully repress the truth, which results in grisly visions of his misplaced rage. The king's instincts are revealed when he punishes a character who fulfills a different medieval convention, the poem's truth-teller, an advisory dwarf named Frocin. In the end, Mark's intimate and political anxieties over the queen's affair is expressed, though not completely satisfied, through his mortal punishment of the conventional truth-teller.

Frocin appears to be aware of Tristan and Iseut's affair, and he is committed to exposing it to King Mark, even though his repeated attempts threaten his personal safety. In his initial plot, Frocin leads Mark to a tree where they can potentially catch the lovers in the act.⁵ Tristan and Iseut successfully fool Mark, almost too willing to be deceived. Then, Mark projects the anger that had been swelling against his wife onto the dwarf, who must flee to Wales to escape the king's wrath.

Frocin's unflagging truth-telling fails to be rewarded. On the contrary, the narrator conditions the reader to detest him as an importunate instigator (not to mention the outright bigotry the narrator routinely utters). To create such a figure, Bérout's narrator relies on a crude type of similitude: a physical disability reflects a deformed spirit. However, whereas the narrator's hate is often expressed through bigotry, there is a hidden resentment. If Frocin were to expose the lovers, the plot of the romance would be threatened.

Frocin appears to be the only one of Mark's councilors willing to tell him the truth, and unlike the barons, who are constantly scheming, there is not even a hint that Frocin has regal ambitions. Although the narrator disparages him, Frocin fulfills a few exemplary qualities of the good advisor, a role codified in a tradition of medieval literary and political writings generally referred to as the *speculum principum*, 'the mirror of princes'. The pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum* is a foundational work for the genre, and its endorsement of the truth-telling councilor is unequivocal: "he sholde be cvnnyng in dyuers sciences, he sholde bene Sothefaste in worde and dedd, and lowe throuth abowe al thyng, and hate lesynge" (*Secretum Secretorum* chp. 48, pp. 11–13). In Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower forms his own 'mirror for princes' by providing a comprehensive summation of the genre that is grounded in its most influential works: Godfrey of Viterbo's *Speculum regum*, Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*, Brunetto Latini's *Li Livres dou Trésor*, and—perhaps above all—the *Secretum Secretorum*. As a further example, John Gower emphasizes the value of truth: "Among the vertus on is chief,/ And that is Trouthe, which is lief/ To God and ek to man also" (John Gower *Confessio Amantis* 7.1723–25). As the king's lone advisor, Frocin's commitment to truth-telling should not be observed in a literary vacuum. Given the popularity and influence of the *specula principum*, a medieval audience, maybe even a courtly audience, would nonetheless appreciate that Frocin fulfills a conventional, if not exemplary, role of the frank advisor. His physical deformity makes him a social outcast, but he never appears incompetent or disabled of agency (Classen 2017). On the contrary, his scheming reveals a mental acuity, and he shows himself to be physically independent on the several occasions he has to flee the king's wrath.

Without any other evidence, one could suspect that I have overemphasized Frocin's dedication to truth-telling in order to justify a relevant association to the 'mirror for princes' genre. The literary history of the medieval 'dwarf' will provide further corroboration. Due to the influence of Arthurian romance on current scholarship, and the influence of Chrétien in particular, the medieval literary trope of the dwarf is often represented through a bigoted and nasty stereotype. He is frequently mean-spirited, ugly, shifty, and slightly mystical. However, this fails to consider the variety of medieval representations that informed the image of the dwarf within the Arthurian tradition.

From the Celtic tradition, Iubdan, the dwarf king of the leprechauns, is noted both for his veracity and his magical abilities, not often thought of as kissing cousins (Harward 1958, pp. 6–16). In the legend of Cuchullain, epic hero to Ireland, the god-king threatens to pilfer the magical items of a dwarf that he pulls from the river, but the smaller man is a harpist, and his song casts a somnolent spell over the king. Like the story of Mercury and Argus, which itself reverberates across the medieval era, this scene reflects the capacity of art to pacify and disarm authority, a form of sublimation seen earlier with Iseut.

Vernon Harward's survey of the literary representation of the dwarf extends to Walter Map and Giraldus Cambrensis, where we find literary characters who are "truth-loving and noble-minded" (Harward 1958, p. 12). Given this entire literary context, Frocin's role as truth-teller cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. It is cultivated by a history of many ennobled representations, and within this history, Frocin is a unique synthesis: at once a grotesque target of the narrator's scorn and a symbol of truth-telling and even prophecy. The role of dwarf gains further intertextual significance by the *aetas Ovidiana*. In Bérout, Frocin literally enacts an Ovidian allusion. This is another similarity with Walter Map's story, which explicitly states that the dwarf looks like the satyr, Pan, and his wedding feast is held in the palace "described by Naso" (Harward 1958, pp. 9–10).

Unfortunately for Frocin, fulfilling this convention does nothing to spare him from the king's rage. The violence of Mark's fantasy foreshadows Frocin's fate, itself a grisly extension of the king's unfocused emotions:

Il ne me pout plus ahonter;
De mon nevo me fist entendre
Mençonge, porquoi ferai pendre.
Por ce me fist metre en air,
De ma mollier faire haïr.
Ge l'en crui et si fis que fous.
Li gerredon l'en sera sous:
Se je le puis as poinz tenir,
Par feu ferai son cors fenir.
Par moi avra plus dure fin
Que ne fist faire Costentin
A Segoçon, qu'il escolla
Qant o sa feme le trova.

[He made me believe a lie about my nephew, and for that I will have him hanged, for he stirred up my anger and made my wife hate me. I believed him and thus acted the fool. He will get what is due him: If I get my hands on him, I will have him burned to death! He will meet a worse fate at my hands than that inflicted by Constantine on Segoncin, whom he had castrated when he found him with his wife.] (Bérout *Tristan* 268–280)

Mark's castration fantasy culminates into a moment of shock, a moment where language announces its own semantic failure: a "worse fate" than castration. Mark, having been symbolically castrated by his own nephew, projects that rage onto a man who is constantly ridiculed for his size. Ultimately, as the realized extension of the previous fantasy, Mark will decapitate Frocin. If Mark is having anxieties about who has access to his wife's body, then it is appropriate that he would fantasize about castration, in an attempt to control that access. It is also predictable that his attempt to realize this fantasy was entirely unsatisfying. Mark kills the person who illuminates and reveals the affair, which is what thing he has been trying to uncover for most of the poem. Specifically, Mark is aware of Iseut's infidelity due to Frocin's scheme in the bedroom, where the flour across the floor becomes a page on the bedroom floor, inscribed with the incriminating ink of Tristan's blood.⁶ Mark eventually kills Frocin in what, at first, appears to be an odd supernatural digression, but an allusion to Ovid nonetheless.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Midas's barber discovers that the king has the ears of a beast, though they are normally hidden beneath his hair. The story suggests that not even the society's most esteemed figures are immune from some hidden and repulsive traits. This exposure also indicates that attempting to hide such qualities may prove to be futile. Indeed, Midas swears his barber to secrecy, but, unable to contain himself, the barber digs a hole, whispers the king's secret into the ground, and buries it. From this spot, reeds grow, and, with the help of the wind, will occasionally 'sing' the tale of Midas' ears.⁷ The story is less refined in Bérout's *Tristan*. Remarking to a group of barons that the king places a great deal of faith in him, the dwarf assures the would-be plotters that he is sworn to a secret. After he inebriates himself, he reveals the secret of Mark's own bestial ears to a hawthorn bush. The barons overhear him, and when Mark finds out what has occurred, he decapitates Frocin. If Frocin was fulfilling the conventional role of the truth-teller, as I have argued above, then it is significant that revealing the hidden truth about the king predicates his demise.

Aside from some of the dwarf's vague prophetic abilities, Mark's hidden ears are the only explicitly supernatural phenomena in the poem. The image of his ears is striking and, on first reading, feels a little out of place, especially if the reader discounts the intertextual relevance. However, the uniquely framed allusion announces its own importance, which explains the startling effect of the imagery. Ultimately, the Ovidian intertextuality symbolizes King Mark's earlier problem: his advisor possesses the knowledge of something that he wishes to repress. As a result, the violence against the dwarf has little to do with Frocin as a person, even though the narrator completely disparages him. Rather, the execution emphasizes the king's misplaced rage, just as it happens in Ovid. The allusion provides a heuristic frame for the reader to interpret a scene that reenacts its own intertextuality.

Thomas of Britain, another author of the *Tristan* legend, also alludes to Ovid to substantiate his own hermeneutics. Thomas writes that Tristan, having defeated a giant, has his captive construct a hall of statues, one of which resembles his former lover, Isolt. Tristan interacts with the sculpted object, and he responds to it as if it were alive. He feels joy, he becomes jealous, and he sensually embraces it. The nod to Pygmalion reveals an authorial self-consciousness about Thomas' own artistry and evokes the Ovidian link between poetic invention and disconnected love:

Por iço fist il ceste image
 Que dire li volt son corage,
 Son bon penser, sa fole errur,
 Sa paigne, sa joie d'amor,
 Car ne sot vers cui descobrir
 Ne son voler ne son desir

[For this he made the image: because he wanted to speak to his heart, to think on what is good, to follow his madness, his pain, his joy of love, for he had no one to whom he could reveal his desires] (Thomas of Britain 45–50, Turin fragment)

Having no other way to vent his grief, Tristan subdues a giant, an emblem of his own exaggerated instincts, and harnesses that force to create a physical representation of what he has lost. Symbolically, Tristan uses art to fill the void of his grief. In Bérout's version, the story is very similar. The characters possess complex psychologies, and when left out of balance, the consequences are violent and self-destructive. Tristan and Mark rely on dissatisfying mechanisms because they lack the awareness to transform or effectively express their underlying urges. Iseut, on the other hand, is a master of her own psychology. Through her rhetoric, she can avoid punishment without being dishonest, and during her ordeal, she subverts a legal proceeding in a way that facilitates her own pleasure. The depth of these characters complicates some of the assumptions in the *Tristan* scholarship. It is true that Bérout's poem is incomplete; however, even in the early episodes, the attitude of the narrator toward the lovers' infidelity is more sympathetic than the narrative voice in Gottfried or Eilhart. Additionally, although Bérout is often paired with

Eilhart as the ‘common’ or ‘vulgar’ version, Iseut’s subversive, multi-layered rhetoric in Béroul is much less pronounced in Eilhart. This is not to discount the traditional groupings of the texts; however, it does suggest that Béroul created a poem with an emphasis on female subjectivity that would become increasingly important in later medieval romances. From this perspective, Béroul’s early version of the *Tristan* legend forecasts many literary developments found in the Arthurian genre over the proceeding centuries.

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Notes

- ¹ Iseut’s declaration is reminiscent of Saint Catherine, who also imagines her physical dismemberment and obliteration: “I fear neither pain nor torture that you can inflict on my body, whether you chose to burn it or quarter it” (Macbain 1987, p. 166).
- ² I have modified Lacy’s translation, which reads, “each one with his crutch”. The meaning is the same, but the negative conjunctions in Béroul offer an emphasis of ownership not conveyed in Lacy.
- ³ Earlier, I noted how Iseut adopts the language of the martyr of hagiography in order to describe the nature of her ‘passionate’ devotion. Her control over Tristan, ‘the leper’, continues her own self-construction as a saint of love. Indeed, it has already been noted in the scholarship how Iseut’s contact with a leper connotes the idea of her own sainthood (Burch 2008, p. 148).
- ⁴ The material disguise of leprosy also allows Iseut to exhibit her sexual desire without the fear of retribution: “The lovers are not playing with but manipulating truth. Their goal is to use the dual capacity of clothing to reveal and conceal simultaneously—to appropriate the legitimacy in the service of untruth . . . These two characters possess an impressive facility in choosing the context that will best accomplish their desires” (Wright 2008, p. 12; Adams 2003, p. 15).
- ⁵ The need to witness the event may speak to contemporaneous legal practices, which required visual documentation (McCracken 1998, pp. 63–70).
- ⁶ The similarities to Lancelot are apparent.
- ⁷ The reeds have an added significance, as they are the same medium that Pan uses to construct his renowned flute. In Ovid, the secret of the king’s gross deformity is transformed and sublimated by a sonic expression intimately related to the production of art.

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