

A Sidelight on the "Tristan" of Thomas

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## A SIDELIGHT ON THE *TRISTAN* OF THOMAS.

Prof. Rajna's highly interesting and exhaustive treatment in *Romania*<sup>1</sup> of two Italian coverlets adorned with scenes from the story of Tristram adds to the striking testimony already afforded by the remains of secular medieval art to the extraordinary vogue of that story. Prof. Golther mentions in his book, *Tristan und Isolde in den Dichtungen des Mittelalters*<sup>2</sup>, six series of illustrations of the romance, outside of illuminated manuscripts, which have reached us in a more or less complete form through the centuries. Three others have come under my notice, including Prof. Rajna's coverlets and the subject of this paper. I doubt whether any other romance can show, apart from manuscripts, half that number of illustrative series. I tabulate below these nine groups of Tristram scenes in the order of their making.

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>
Chertsey Tiles <sup>3</sup>	ca. 1275	British Museum	England
Ivory Casket <sup>4</sup>	1300—25	Hermitage Museum, Petrograd	France
Tapestry <sup>5</sup>	1300—25	Kloster Wienhausen, near Celle	Germany
Tapestry <sup>6</sup>	1300—25	Kloster Wienhausen, near Celle	Germany
Table Covering <sup>7</sup>	ca. 1350	Erfurt Cathedral	Germany
Embroidered Hanging <sup>8</sup>	14th c.	South Kensington Museum	Germany
Mural Painting <sup>9</sup>	ca. 1390	Schloss Runkelstein, near Bozen	Tyrol
Coverlets <sup>10</sup>	1350—1400	South Kensington Museum, and Usella	South Italy or Sicily
Tapestry <sup>11</sup>	1539	Kunstgewerbe Museum, Dresden	Germany

<sup>1</sup> *Romania*, 1913, p. 517.

<sup>2</sup> pp. 408—12.

<sup>3</sup> M. Shurlock, *Tiles from Chertsey Abbey*.

<sup>4</sup> F. Michel, *Tristan*, I, p. lxxiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Archiv für Niedersachsens Kunstgeschichte*, II, Pl. 6; and J. Lessing, *Wandteppiche und Decken*, Pl. 12, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Archiv für Niedersachsens Kunstgeschichte*, II.

<sup>7</sup> *Anzeiger der Kunde der Deutschen Vorzeit*, 1866, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> D. Rock, *Textile Fabrics*, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> J. V. Zingerle, *Freskenzyklus des Schlosses Runkelstein*.

<sup>10</sup> *Romania*, 1913, p. 517.

<sup>11</sup> *Germania*, xxviii, p. 1. I have tried to make as complete a list as possible, but have excluded cases where the identification of the subject has been rashly assumed: for

Among the scenes on the Petrograd casket and the Runkelstein paintings is one which enjoyed a remarkable independent popularity—the assignation of the lovers, which King Mark watches from the branches of a tree. This scene was a special favourite with French craftsmen, for it appears on French ivory caskets of the early fourteenth century in the South Kensington Museum<sup>1</sup>, the British Museum<sup>2</sup>, the Metropolitan Museum, New York<sup>3</sup>, at the Schloss Kirche, Cracow<sup>4</sup>, and on one figured in John Carter's *Specimens of Ancient Sculpture*. Other French illustrations of the fourteenth century are three ivory mirror-cases, one originally in the Collection Spitzer<sup>5</sup>, one in the Vatican Library<sup>6</sup>, the third in the Musée de Cluny, a leather case for writing tablets at Namur<sup>7</sup>, and a wooden box in the South Kensington Museum<sup>8</sup>. A French comb dating from the early fifteenth century is in the possession of the Bamberg Historical Society<sup>9</sup>, and a carved corbel of about 1450 is in the house of Jacques Cœur at Bourges<sup>10</sup>. An English example of the subject is found on a misericord at Chester Cathedral<sup>11</sup>, and a German on a tapestry in the town hall of Ratisbon<sup>12</sup>.

The Chertsey Tiles have long been known to students of medieval art and archaeology, but seem to have escaped altogether the notice of students of medieval literature. They possess great interest as the earliest illustrations of the romance outside the manuscripts, and as the finest examples of tile-pavement design known. For the student of the romances they have the added value of following closely the version of Thomas (so far as we know it from the Norwegian and Middle English redactions, Gottfried von Strassburg, and the Oxford *Folie Tristan*), and of supplementing in a few details the evidence in regard to that version. While acknowledging the extensive scholarship

instance, the mural paintings at Florence mentioned in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, Ser. iv, vol. vi, p. 235. The tapestry at Langensalza mentioned by A. Schultz in his *Deutsches Leben im XIV. und XV. Jahrhundert*, p. 91, has attached to it a fragmentary inscription bearing the names of the lovers, but itself illustrates the legend of St Eustace. The scenes on an ivory comb (illustrated in Suchier, Birch-Hirschfeld, *Französische Literatur*, ed. 1913, p. 117) are simply conventional love scenes with no special relation to Tristram.

<sup>1</sup> W. Maskell, *Ivories in South Kensington Museum*, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of Ivory Carvings in British Museum*, p. 125; *Burlington Magazine*, v, p. 303.

<sup>3</sup> *Collection Spitzer*, i, Pl. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Romanische Forschungen*, v, p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> *Collection Spitzer*, i, p. 49; Molinier, *Arts Appliqués*, i, Pl. 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, Ser. III; vol. xxxiii, p. 399.

<sup>7</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire d'Architecture*, iv, p. 505.

<sup>8</sup> No. 2173, '55.

<sup>9</sup> Becker and Hefner, III, Pl. 13; Suchier, Birch-Hirschfeld, *Französische Literatur*, ed. 1913, i, p. 115; Hefner Alteneck, ed. 2, vol. iv, Pl. 252.

<sup>10</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire de Mobilier*, II, p. 157.

<sup>11</sup> *Chester Archaeological Journal*, v, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Germania*, XVIII, p. 276.

and sound judgment which are embodied in M. Bédier's monumental reconstruction of Thomas's *Tristan* for the Société des Anciens Textes Français, I believe that it requires revision in three minor points in the light of this evidence.

The Chertsey Tiles were recovered in a fragmentary state over fifty years ago from the site of Chertsey Abbey. Dr Manwaring Shurlock, their discoverer, made a large collection of them, which is now deposited in the British Museum. The tiles on which Tristram scenes occur are for the most part round, and about nine and a half inches in diameter. They are of a dark terra cotta colour, with the design inlaid in white clay. Their date, according to the evidence of the armour depicted on them, lies between 1270 and 1280.

In 1885 Dr Shurlock published a handsome monograph entitled *Tiles from Chertsey Abbey*. It is unsatisfactory, however, from two points of view: the plates are not accurate reproductions of the tiles, and much of the text is worthless since the identification of the scenes is based on Walter Scott's edition of *Sir Tristrem*. The latter defect was to a large extent remedied in a recent article on these tiles by Prof. Lethaby in the Second Annual volume of the Walpole Society. I had been working independently at the identification of the subjects, and our results have been in most cases similar; but in no instance where I have found that our results differed, have I seen reason to change my first conclusion. I give below a summary of the results of my attempt to identify the tiles with the aid of the four derivatives of Thomas—the Saga, *Sir Tristrem*, Gottfried von Strassburg, and the Oxford *Folie Tristan*. In some cases I have had to resort to mere guesswork, and these I have indicated by an asterisk. The scenes are given in the order of their occurrence, and the numbers are those of Shurlock's plates<sup>1</sup>. The letters refer to five fragments at the British Museum, of which Shurlock gives no illustration. The page references are to Bédier's *Tristan*, volume I.

	PAGES
*32 Rivalen receives a message that his lands are invaded . . . . .	19
*A The boy Tristram is trained in archery . . . . .	29
1 Tristram plays chess with the Norse merchant . . . . .	34
*B A huntsman sounds the mort of the deer . . . . .	47
20 The huntsmen bring Tristram before Mark . . . . .	49
2 Tristram plays the harp before Mark . . . . .	52
4 The porter of Mark's castle opens to Roald . . . . .	57

<sup>1</sup> The plates which illustrate the romance of *Richard Cœur de Lion*, and those which represent combats or hunting scenes which seem to have no clear connection with either romance, I have omitted from consideration.

	PAGES
39 The lords of Ermenie do homage to Tristram . . . . .	64
*7, *10 Tristram stands before Duke Morgan . . . . .	65
9 Tristram draws on Duke Morgan . . . . .	66
11 The barons of Cornwall and their children lament the prospect of separation . . . . .	79
C They implore the drawers of lots to have mercy on them . . . . .	79
5 Mark kisses Tristram, who has accepted the challenge of Morhaut.	80
6 The barons and their children follow suit . . . . .	81
*D The ambassadors of Gormon before Mark . . . . .	81
12 Morhaut wounds Tristram in the thigh . . . . .	87
13 Tristram deals Morhaut his death-blow . . . . .	88
14 Morhaut's body is carried from the scene of combat . . . . .	89
*8, *27 Gormon runs to see the body of Morhaut lying in state . . . . .	90
15 Mark visits Tristram, who is suffering from the wound of the poisoned sword . . . . .	92
24 Tristram, adrift in a boat, solaces himself with his harp . . . . .	93
25 Tristram teaches Isolt to play the harp . . . . .	97
*E Tristram lands at Tintagel . . . . .	103
*36 He rides up to the castle . . . . .	103
17, 18 Tristram encounters the dragon . . . . .	116
3, 21 He gives his gage to Gormon . . . . .	129
26 Tristram returns with Isolt to Cornwall . . . . .	143
37 He offers the love philtre to Isolt . . . . .	144
16 Tristram in disguise comes to Isolt to carry her across the river . . . . .	208

Let us now take up the discussion of the three points on which the evidence of the tiles inclines me to differ from M. Bédier's reconstruction of Thomas. Turning first to Plate 20, there can be no question, I think, that this represents the huntsman with the 'stake gift' in his hand, pointing out Tristram, who kneels behind him, as a master of the craft of venery. Now let us note the two standing figures on the left, one of whom is distinguished by his scrip and bourdon as a pilgrim. The Saga expressly says that the pilgrims accompanied Tristram to Mark's court<sup>1</sup>. M. Bédier has omitted this detail without assigning a reason. Until the omission is justified, I must believe that Thomas included the pilgrims in the triumphal return from the hunt.

M. Bédier, on page 61 of his reconstruction, describes the shield of Tristram as blazoned with the figure of a boar. He bases this on Gottfried's description of Tristram's cognizance (line 9490), and on the fact that in the Saga, chapter LI, Mariadoc has a dream of a boar, which is interpreted as a symbol of Tristram. Neither of these pieces of evidence is at all conclusive. On the other hand, Plates 12 and 13 of

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Koelbing, chap. xxi, p. 23, ll. 9—11.

the Chertsey Tiles both represent Tristram bearing a lion rampant on his shield. *Sir Tristrem*, describing the combat, says that Morhaut 'smot him in the lyoun, And Tristrem that was wîzt, Bar him thurch the dragoun, In the scheld'.<sup>1</sup> Finally the Saga itself, in the account of Tristram's knighting, says he was given a war-horse covered with a red housing, in which the figures of lions were worked in gold<sup>2</sup>. Now since it was frequently the custom to decorate the caparison of a knight with his armorial emblem, this last piece of evidence is highly significant, and, taken in conjunction with the testimony of *Sir Tristrem* and the tiles, seems to establish the fact that Thomas assigned the royal beast to his hero as his cognizance<sup>3</sup>.

Let us turn now to Plate 24. This illustration of Tristram's first voyage to Ireland shows him alone in the boat. M. Bédier, on the authority of Gottfried and *Sir Tristrem*, supplies him with Governal as companion<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, besides the evidence of the tile, the Oxford *Folie Tristan*, of which M. Bédier himself says that 'les allusions concordent toujours avec la version de Thomas'<sup>5</sup>, supports the version of the solitary voyage. The testimony of these two, which closely follow Thomas, is certainly to be preferred to that of the very free redactions of Gottfried and the Middle English poet; and we should have no hesitation in maintaining that they represent here the original account of Thomas, were it not for the fact that the Saga gives us pause. Brother Robert, without stating explicitly that Tristram had companions, or who they were, says<sup>6</sup>: 'Now they were driven about on the sea by storm and wave so long that they knew not where they were: at last, however, they reached Ireland.' This use of the plural is surprising, since during the ensuing visit to Ireland Tristram alone is mentioned: there is no hint of any companions. If we regard for a moment the account of the voyage which scholars have ascribed to Thomas's hypothetical source, we find them in entire agreement on the point that in that source, the voyage was conceived of as a solitary and aimless drifting, which by accident brought Tristram to Ireland. That this was also the conception of the tile designer may be

<sup>1</sup> St. xcv, ed. Koelbing, ll. 1040—43.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Koelbing, chap. xxiv, p. 27, ll. 12—14. For examples of horse trappings bearing arms of the owners, see J. R. Green, *Short History of England*, illustrated ed., I, pp. 236, 239, 293.

<sup>3</sup> According to a list of the arms of King Arthur's Knights contained in an early 16th century edition of *Gyron le Courtois*, Tristram bore 'de sinople a ung lyon dor arme et langue de gueulles.' But King René in the *Livre du Cuer d'Amours*, ed. Quatrebarbe, p. 114, describes Tristram's shield thus 'd'or à une bande de pourpre.'

<sup>4</sup> p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> p. 145, note.

<sup>6</sup> Ed. Koelbing, chap. xxx, p. 36, ll. 1—3.

inferred from the fact that two extant fragments of inscriptions belonging to the Chertsey Tiles bear the words, in one case SANS : GOVERNAIL, and, in the other, SANS : GUVERNAIL, referring doubtless to the rudderless boat. Since, therefore, the version of Thomas's original and the versions of the *Folie Tristan* and the tiles, both of which conform closely to Thomas, agree on this point, is it not probable that they give Thomas's own version, and that the embarrassing plural of the Saga is due simply to a mistranslation of an impersonal construction or other vague expression used by Thomas? The theory of such a slight blunder on the part of Brother Robert seems to me more plausible than the theory that he omitted to mention at the outset of the voyage and throughout Tristram's Irish sojourn the companions with which, according to M. Bédier, Thomas provided him—a theory which also involves the assumption that *Sir Tristrem* and Gottfried's *Tristan*, which abound in obvious departures from the original, should here have preserved the original version, while the comparatively faithful *Folie Tristan* and Chertsey Tiles abandoned it<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In the series of philological studies issued by the University of Illinois I am hoping to publish a full account of the tiles accompanied by reproductions, in which the defects of Dr Shurlock's monograph will to some extent be remedied; and I shall gratefully acknowledge any corrections or improvements which readers of the present preliminary article can suggest to me.