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History 50-Craft

### The Virtues of Iseult

In Joseph Bedier's *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, Iseult was portrayed as a beautiful woman possessing the important virtues of a woman in the High Middle Ages in Europe. She was called "Iseult the Fair" and "The Lady of the Hair of Gold", "...whose beauty already shone like the breaking dawn."<sup>1</sup> This showed that she was more beautiful than was usually expected. By comparing her beauty to dawn, the author invokes all the goodness and hope that goes with the rising sun. Iseult was the quiet glory of daybreak, not the showy splendor of sunset, or the mysterious loveliness of nighttime. She was simple and forthright, just like the dawn.

Iseult had many other virtues in her repertoire, besides that of her acclaimed beauty. Another virtue ~~that~~ Iseult possessed was that of her healing power. She was so skillful that "she alone" could save Tristan from his wound.<sup>2</sup> She also was the peacemaker, forcing her father to keep his promise to forgive Tristan. Once Tristan and Iseult found love together, Iseult followed the noble path and did not love any other man but Tristan, even though she was married to another man. She even sacrificed her precious virginity to her lover, Tristan,

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Bedier, *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 19, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Bedier, *Romance*, 21.

instead of *properly* keeping it for her husband, King Mark.<sup>3</sup> This showed Iseult's virtue because she kept her ideals of romantic love, an important concept in the period, rather than follow her duty. Because Tristan slew the dragon, he was the proper person to have her hand in marriage. When he sacrificed possible marriage to Iseult because of duty, he was maintaining his virtue. Iseult maintained hers by loving the man that she was meant to be with, who had rightfully won the property of her body and her hand in marriage.

For Iseult, her marriage to King Mark caused her "sadness."<sup>4</sup> She knew that the honorable thing for her to do was love the man she was destined to be with, Tristan, but she was forced to maintain a pretense of love with King Mark. Because Iseult had the virtue of honesty, she found this <sup>dual</sup> life difficult. The deception ~~that~~ she had to maintain in the face of her husband's love was tortuous for Iseult. The only person who knew Iseult's secret was the maid Brangien.

This was a crisis for Iseult. In order for Iseult to maintain her dignity and live with the disparity of loving one man and being married to another, she ordered Brangien, the maid, killed so that no one could learn her secret. Although it was wrong to have people killed, Iseult was merely disposing of the life of one of her chattels (Iseult had been disposed of by her father, who was her master, but into marriage, not death.) In order for the greater deception of marital love to be maintained, and have the important party, the personage of King Mark, not be dishonored by his wife loving another man, Iseult chose to make a small sacrifice. However, the assassins set out to kill Brangien were unable to follow

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<sup>3</sup> Bedier, Romance, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Bedier, Romance, 50.

their orders. When they told Iseult the lie of Brangien's death, Iseult was upset at the thought of losing her "only friend" and "dear companion."<sup>5</sup> Although Iseult tried to preserve her farce of a marriage by Brangien's death, her conscience held in the end. Iseult decided that the sacrifice of a life was not worth repressing the possibility of exposure.

Some of the virtues that Iseult was portrayed as possessing were beauty, love, honor, and respect. *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* illustrated that Iseult was an honorable person and tried to follow the ideals of the period, including romantic love. Iseult remained one of the most virtuous characters of the High Middle Ages in Europe, possessing many of the qualities necessary to be the ideal woman.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bedier, Joseph. *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

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<sup>5</sup> Bedier, Romance, 53-54.