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Helias's *Yseult Seconde:* The Vindication of Isold of Brittany

by Yvette A. Guillemin-Young

EVER SINCE THE NEAR-MYTHICAL *ESTOIRE*, generations of fascinated writers and critics have kept alive the legend of Tristan and Isold, infusing variations into events and repeating perceptive paradigms for the characters. Collating documents from various sources, the great medievalist Joseph Bédier succeeded in assimilating disparate fragments into his remarkably coherent *Roman de Tristan et Iseut.*[1] However, he also contributed to the subtle corruption of *l'esprit du texte.*[2] In the preface, Gaston Paris praises this feat of "régénération organique" guided by "plus de choix et de goût" (iv); in other words, sifted according to Bédier's own mores and adherence to the classic rules of propriety.[3] Joseph Bédier knew that one can, at best, be in sympathy with l'*estoire* and that an authentic rewriting is "hélas! [une] chimère" (xii) albeit a chimera beckoning further developments of the tale.

Love remains the real adventure and perhaps the only immutable element at the core of the Tristan and Isold story. The love-passion is often reduced to a classic love triangle connecting Tristan, Isold of Ireland, and King Marc, when in fact it becomes a double triangle involving the six main characters whose lives are entwined: Tristan, Isold of Ireland, King Marc, Brangien, Isold of Brittany, and her brother Kaerden. The title itself, *Tristan and Isold*, spells ambiguity since it either includes or cancels one of the two Isolds. Isold of Brittany, better known as Isold of the Fair Hands, represents the shadowy double of the radiant Isold of Ireland, the Fair One. As the legitimate wife of Tristan of Loonois, Isold of the Fair Hands remains a traditionally forgotten character defined by unfulfilled love and a single act of lethal omission. Consistently defamed and misunderstood, she seems invisible in the wake of the seductive lovers. This is not to Pierre-Jakez Hélias's taste. In his play *Yseult Seconde* (1978), the Breton author revisits the legend with a new twist.[4] He rejects the pathetic role of second best held thus far by Isold of Brittany, instating her posthumously, so to speak, as an equal player in the Arthurian drama.

The quietude of King Hoël's manor has been disturbed by the fortuitous arrival of a mysterious knight who defeated the perfidious Count

Riol of Nantes and won the King's gratitude. That very night in the manor, the stranger plays his harp for the first and the last time, awakening love in the heart of the young princess Isold of the Fair Hands (also surnamed Serene Water by her kindred). Aloof and tormented, he brings with him "une fièvre sans nom, voilà qu'il nous apprend à vivre d'inquiétude, à trouver notre plaisir dans un secret tourment," remarks Rozili the bard (14). From the onset a tacit complicity binds the nameless stranger to Isold and her brother Kaerden. It is as if they were following the rules of a secret game which escape the others. While Isold resists her dawning feelings, she senses a remote force concealed in the haunting love songs. Rather testily, she prompts King Hoël to discover the knight's identity:

> Comment se fait-il que mon père et mon roi permette à un chevalier étranger de prendre tant d'importance dans son manoir et tant d'autorité sur ses sujets, y compris son propre fils, alors qu'il n'a pas révélé son nom ni sa famille, . . . alors que les accords de la harpe et les paroles du harpeur sèment le désarroi dans les esprits, rompent les courages et font presque désirer la mort par crève-coeur? . . . Obtenez de lui qu'il vous dise son nom et qu'il vous conte son histoire . . . il sera déjà moins extraordinaire et moins inquiétant quand il aura jeté son masque. (20–21)

For the princess, this marks the beginning of a long inquiry into the stranger's innermost self and her own. A merchant sailing through from Tintagel reveals Tristan's identity and the reason of his affliction. He speaks of passion, love philters, deception, and suffering. "Il n'y a pas un Breton dans les îles qui ne connaisse l'histoire de Tristan de Loonois et d'Yseult la Blonde, y compris le roi Marc lui-même" (27). When a malentendu leads Kaerden to suggest the marriage of his sister to Tristan,[5] proudly (and forewarned) Isold of Brittany lashes out: "Parce que vous admirez le chevalier d'outre-mer, vous êtes prêt à lui donner votre sœur comme vous lui donneriez votre cheval, votre épée ou votre fief s'il en avait envie" (31). She vehemently defines her own hopes: "Le mariage que je ferai sera ma propre aventure. . . . Cette aventure, je veux la mener seule et à ma convenance, dussé-je en mourir" (33). Isold of Armorica believes somewhat naively in ordeals and trials as a means to secure happiness but all she knows of love is its pale reflection in Rozili's conventional poems, a somewhat hieratic love resembling "l'embrassement parfait des âmes choisies et prédestinées," (47) a love-in-waiting which does not account for the tremors brought to the surface by the sound of a magic harp. At the close of the first act, the little princess Serene Water vows to break the chains and spells keeping Tristan in bondage, in exchange for her serenity and her innocence.

Hélias does not introduce Tristan until the second act, thus creating a dramatic delay. The young hero appears exhausted, restless and remote, fascinated by nothingness, still a stranger to all despite his recent union to Isold of Brittany. While she is hunting, he plays chess with his companion Gover-

nal. The astute Rozili observes: "Je crois que le vrai mal de Tristan est de chercher l'Autre Monde dans celui-ci. Son mirage est la mer d'Irlande et sa sirène Yseult la Blonde" (45). To Isold of the Fair Hands who complains bitterly of her husband's indifference towards her, the bard replies: "Yseult est le nom qu'il donne à sa prison. Il se croit captif depuis si longtemps et de telle manière qu'il n'ose pas ouvrir les bras de peur d'entendre le bruit de ses chaînes" (51–52). Both fugitive and quiescent, Tristan surrenders to his pathos, conscious that the greatest illusion is "croire que l'on peut tromper son destin" (42). He lets himself be moved through existence like a pawn in an unpredictable chess game: "Je ne joue pas, je suis joué. Et je ne sais même pas qui me joue. Je ne suis qu'une pièce du jeu. Fou du roi ou de la reine, peut-être même les deux ensemble. J'attends les ordres pour caracoler" (37). Although his knightly prowess is never at stake, Tristan does avert the usual engagements of life, increasingly drawn to cosmic solitude and the absence of self, doomed by fate to be torn between two worlds. Indeed that is how he appears to others, a knight "d'outre-mer," from beyond the seas, and even "d'outre-monde," from beyond the world (12). There is no doubt that his poetic quality is what attracts Isold of Brittany most. She will try in vain to engage Tristan in making the choice of life over death or in making a simple move in the game of existence, knowing all along that he will opt for the opaque mysteries of the universe beyond, and that she will remain "toujours seconde" (62).

Sailing away to the islands with the starry-eyed Kaerden, Tristan has left behind his harp as a token of his uneasy friendship and faith to his wife. Like Orpheus's lyre abandoned on the shores of Lesbos, Tristan's wondrous harp appears as a sacred object Isold dares not touch, an interdict comparable to a Celtic *geis*.[6] The harp-fae (or fairy harp) which introduced her to love is also perceived as "l'arme la plus dangereuse," (63) symbolic of carnal desire and the mysterious communion of souls. "Qui fait vibrer la harpe possède l'âme. Et quand la harpe est morte, l'âme est perdue. . . . Que reste-t-il de Tristan?" (63). This is the crucial point and precisely why, in an act of merciful lucidity, Isold the Second will "kill" Tristan, a hollow man who has lost his soul.

Before resorting to the fateful deception, Isold of Brittany makes every rational and passionate attempt to free Tristan from the spell and from himself: "Je voudrais qu'il m'aime assez pour trouver en moi son refuge et sa libération" (68). Yet Tristan "aime son mal plus que la guérison" (73). In a last effort to break the invisible chains, she endeavors to trivialize and deconstruct the enchantments of the *fol amor* binding Tristan to his Irish mermaid. First of all, "ces gens d'outre-mer savent jeter la poudre aux yeux . . . [avec] tout cet apparat," (77) and does an ermine cape make a queen? Were the three years spent in the Morois Forest an ordeal too harsh to endure to opt finally for King Marc's pardon instead of fleeing to the end of the earth for the sake of love? Three years "c'est peut-être une éternité quand on s'appelle Tristan. Mais je connais de pauvres gens, au

pays de Carhaix, qui s'aiment toute une vie, côte à côte dans la plus extrême misère, et qui ne se prennent pas pour des héros" (80). When Tristan blames the fateful power of the philter, his young wife rejects the argument scornfully:

> Sur le bateau qui venait d'Irlande, vous avez succombé à une faiblesse assez ordinaire. . . . Vous vous êtes réveillés honteux et désabusés. Vous vous êtes cherché des raisons et des excuses à la hauteur de vos ambitions. La première fut de baptiser philtre une simple boisson. . . . La seconde fut d'exalter votre petit péché pour en faire une passion sans mesure. . . . Magie et destin, au secours! Les harpeurs feront le reste. (81)

Moreover, what kind of love blossoms in the absence of the other and wilts in her presence if not an impossible androgynous yearning, a narcissistic illusion? "Vous n'aimez que vous-même, pauvre Tristan. Vous êtes homme et femme à la fois. Mais vous êtes surtout un enfant. . . . Le poète Tristan s'est trouvé. Il a enfermé son image dans une Yseult qui se trouvait là," (83) an Isold of Ireland who plays love games skillfully, scheming and duping a weak king without honor. "La reine Yseult fait ses devoirs envers son mari. Tous ses devoirs. . . . Je déteste le roi Marc, roi qui ne sait, roi qui ne veut" (82). Such misguided deeds and useless torments owing to a goblet of herbed wine!

For all the deceit, the turmoils, and the heartbreaks, what if this all-consuming love were nothing more than the sublimed mirage of adventure born of the lure of the sea, a wistful wanderlust for "l'abîme gris-vert des horizons, le regret du soleil, la nostalgie des îles de mirage, le désir de n'arriver jamais nulle part et la félicité de l'attente, le goût merveilleux de la mort au fond du cœur," (83) the quest for the last *immram*? This is when Isold of the Fair Hands realizes than Tristan will always be an enigma and remain the unattainable knight ``from beyond the seas." However much her indictment attempts to reduce the love tale, the circumstances, and the heroes to common terms, it proves unable to demystify the poetic essence of the marvelous passion. This is why her last endeavor is doomed to failure. The marvelous needs neither proof nor logic to be.

``Jalouse. On dira que j'étais jalouse. On ne trouvera rien d'autre à dire" (92). That is precisely what *they* said (i.e. the texts, the critics, and the public voice) to explain the deceit of Isold the Second when she purposely misidentifies the color of the sail, thus precipitating Tristan's death. Jealousy, perfidy, and revenge. It seems so evident.[7] The purported jealousy of a Mrs. Tristan de Loonois, domiciled in Carhaix, rings as a singularly bourgeois and pedestrian notion to P-J. Hélias. During a personal interview, he flatly rejected such an interpretation.[8] "Absurde! La jalousie dans l'amour conjugal—tel que nous l'entendons—n'existait pas, tout simplement. Au moins Eilhart Von Oberge l'a compris. Dans un contexte celtique, la femme n'est pas considérée comme possession et la fidélité n'est pas exaltée comme vertu, point de vue Gréco-Romain et par

suite petit bourgeois." His perspective is shared by Jean Marx who studies medieval love triangles and remarks: "C'est la femme qui, dans la littérature celtique, choisit, conquiert, lie et enchaîne l'homme souvent contre son gré" (76). P-J. Hélias pursues mischievously: "Du reste, la jalousie et la vengeance, c'est un peu . . . mesquin pour une fille bien née, et de chez nous." This *raison de cousinage* cancels all arguments of course!

Then why the celebrated "lie" when Isold the Second identifies the sail as "toute noire. Aussi noire que la mûre" (97)? If we choose to believe Hélias's dramatic rendition of the legend, Isold acts for Tristan's sake and because she wants to *know* the depths of his passion for the other Isold. Through storm and dead calm, even nature plots to delay the return of the sun, symbolically the solar character of the Fair Isold. When Kaerden horrified by his sister's act exclaims ``Vous l'avez tué!" she answers:

> Je l'ai fait mourir. Il avait le cœur trop grand pour ce monde. Il gémissait d'y être enfermé. Maintenant il vit. Il navigue déjà vers les Iles Fortunées. . . . Il ne voulait pas tricher avec ce qu'il croyait son destin. Ni lui sans elle, ni elle sans lui. Mais une chose est sûre, Kaerden: il ne comptait que sur moi pour le délivrer. J'ai eu ce courage. (98–99)

Unable to counter fate, Isold of Brittany had to end the endless langor for only *she* understood "le mal Tristan" to be the impossibility of living or dying while feeling absent, degraded by his passion: "Je voyais clairement que plus il était près d'elle et moins il l'aimait. Si ma beauté à moi est inutile, la sienne l'enchante et le repousse à la fois" (67). In a strange act of mercy, Isold of the Fair Hands *delivers* Tristan and frees the passage to his real world, the Other World where he will no longer be a stranger.

The second motive for Isold's lethal choice of words in Hélias's play is the need to know whether that love was pre-ordained and shared, or else contrived and sustained by self-deception. She justifies her act as a rational way to test the lovers: "les réunir à jamais, s'ils le méritent, ou les séparer pour toujours. Je vais enfin savoir s'ils sont le corps et l'âme l'un de l'autre. Et puis, je sortirai de leur histoire, les mains vides" (94–95). When Isold of Ireland expires, her body and soul joining with Tristan's, Isold of Brittany realizes that the greatest illusion was her own desire to unveil that which can neither be witnessed nor explained. Immersed in the lull of death, she concludes: "Tout est dans l'ordre. . . . J'ai sauvé toute l'histoire. Elle ne finira plus jamais. . . . Yseult ne m'a rien pris, je n'ai rien à lui prendre" (101). Lucid and resigned to her own fate, Isold the Second dies alone, after ensuring there would always be the sea between her and the lovers, unaware that in an imperfect world, no mortal can preclude love from reaching out beyond the grave toward a perfect eternity.

In *Yseult Seconde*, the marvelous allows P-J. Hélias to reopen the Tristan and Isold file and to seize the moment of vindication. Impudent and dissident, in costume but holding its mask between playful fingers, the marvelous opens new venues to the imagination. Enter Pierre-Jakez Hélias

who rejects the idea of Isold of Brittany pigeonholed in the unsavory role of the villain interacting with Tristan in a purely vegetative or reactive way, only to vanish inconclusively at the end of the story. Here at last she is allowed to speak for herself and eventually to rehabilitate herself. In this play, Hélias's courtly compatriot becomes a complex character and the equal of Isold of Ireland. In fact, from the onset, King Hoël of Carhaix perceives Tristan de Loonois as a suitable match for his daughter: "Si vous vouliez, tous les deux, nous aurions ici une cour de chevalerie aussi brillante que celle de notre cousin le roi Arthur à Kerduel. On y viendrait de toute la Celtie. . . . Et toi, ma petite eau dormante, je veux que ta gloire égale au moins celle de la reine Guenièvre et de la reine Yseult la Blonde" (69–70). To Tristan, Isold the Second is no more than a tragic namesake. With Hélias she becomes Tristan's alter ego, striving for self-definition, growing wiser and stronger as the melancholy knight declines towards psychological and physical impotence since he can no longer satisfy his heliotropic need for the light of his lady's eyes. In her rational deconstruction, Isold the Second strives to understand the powerful mechanism of their love. She nearly succeeds except for the harp she dares not touch. For if the harp is an obscure taboo, it also represents Tristan's *anima,* the poetic and spiritual power of love. "Peut-on être jaloux d'une harpe, Kaerden?" she asks (74). She may have been. It may be that Isold of Brittany really dies from "la mort triste" because of the heavenly sounds of a harp she heard once.[9] Once and nevermore.

The whole play has an air of *grâce justifiante,* that is to say the abstract ability to render justice elsewhere, in an imaginary court of appeal. Hélias writes and rewrites legends. The regenerative function of his works is to recover the traces of a fragile Breton literary tradition within French textual appropriation, and to obtain reparation for all the past silence and disdain suffered by that particular minority culture. In *Yseult Seconde,* poetic truth is served at last through the vindication of Isold the Second and of Brittany itself.

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Notes

[1]I refer to Joseph Bédier's *Roman de Tristan et Iseut* for comparative analysis and quotations.

[2]Evidently one must think of "les textes" since the elusive *estoire* probably was already a composite from common Indo-European sources. The subsequent versions of Béroul, Eilhart, and Thomas, exhibit notable similarities with (among others) Celtic tales such as *Diarmaid and Grainne* and Persian stories such as *Wis and Ramin.* The multitude of interpretations attest both to the complex intertextuality and to the seduction of the legend.

[3]Bédier's value judgment and sense of "bienséances" compel him to denounce often the promiscuity of genres and the simplistic bawdiness of the "contes à rire en vers" in his study *Les Fabliaux* (Paris: Bouillon, 1964).

[4]Two versions of this play by Hélias are published. In Breton, it is titled *An Isild-A-Heul*

and in French *Yseult Seconde*. I will quote from the latter version translated into French by Hélias himself.

[5]During one of his frequent fainting spells ("le mal Tristan"), Tristan utters the name Isold, causing Kaerden to believe the knight secretly loves his sister.

[6]The *geis* represents an absolute interdict or a judgment by ordeal which cannot be transgressed without grave consequences. The Celtic *geis* is the pronouncement of a god, a druid or a sorceress. Cf. Jean-Paul Persigout, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie celte* (145).

[7]In Thomas's version (based on the Douce MS), Isold of Brittany acts out of "mult grant irrur" and "felunie." In the *Donnei des Amants*, a rhetorical segment of the poem presents a colorful etymology of the word "gelus" (vv. 91-136) reminiscent of the equally colorful *Etymologies* of Isidore de Séville (VIIth Century). Much more sober, the Scandinavian *Tristam's Saga* based on Thomas speaks of "evil thoughts" (661). For all these texts, cf. Daniel Lacroix and Philippe Walter's compilation *Tristan et Iseut* (Paris: Librairie Générale, 1989). J. Bédier's version invokes both jealousy and the formidable revenge of a scorned woman (199–200).

[8]I interviewed P-J. Hélias in his summer retreat of La Forêt-Fouesnant (Finistère) on 14 June, 1990.

[9]A reference to an episode of Cyrano de Bergerac's *Etats et Empires du Soleil* (1662) where the soft melancholy bird songs suffocate with poetic sorrow those condemned to the "mort triste."

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