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## Artists Reading Romance: The Tryst beneath the Tree

HOW MEDIEVAL READERS READ romances is something of a mystery; they are unlikely to have read them as we do.<sup>1</sup> Consider only the difference between medieval and modern circulation of the romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the morally improving and educative poem *The Prick of Conscience*. One version of the latter poem is still extant in nearly a hundred manuscripts from the Middle Ages, the highest number for any medieval poem in English; but it has been edited only once in modern times, by Richard Morris for the Philological Society in 1863. Despite a reprint by AMS in 1973, few are the libraries that hold it, and I would bet that there are even fewer living people who have read its 9,624 lines. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, is taught in almost every university class on the English medieval romance and is encountered in translation even by engineering students in their first year of university. It has been both edited and translated many times since Sir Frederic Madden's 1839 edition for the Bannatyne Club. But only one manuscript of

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of various pieces of this paper have been presented at the Department of English Colloquium, Dalhousie University (1999), at the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo (1999), and to the Canadian Society of Medievalists, Congress of Social Sciences and Humanities (2000). I would like to thank my audiences on those occasions for their comments, and am particularly grateful to Karen Berrigan for her research on the iconographical elements of these depictions. Thanks to Jane Gilbert for a useful discussion of the Morgan manuscript illustration at a very early stage of my thinking about it. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this work.

that poem survives from the Middle Ages. My point is that as readers we may be valuing, even seeing, different things than our medieval counterparts. What clue can we have as to how medieval readers actually read romances? One set of clues is visual, the appearance of scenes from the romances in artworks of the Middle Ages: how the scenes are presented and the context in which they appear can teach us something of the way in which they were remembered and understood by their medieval audiences.

This essay considers one episode from the story of Tristram and Isolde, an episode that has been called “the tryst beneath the tree.” The story of Tristram and Isolde is central to the romance genre, told and retold in different languages and in both poetry and prose from the twelfth century onward. The tryst episode appears in the Norman poet Beroul’s version of the story and it must have appeared in the Anglo-Norman poet Thomas of Britain’s; although the episode is not among the material preserved in the manuscript fragments of the poem, later versions based on Thomas, notably the English poem *Sir Tristrem* and the Norwegian *Saga of Tristram and Ísönd*, do contain it.<sup>2</sup> King Mark of Cornwall has been informed that his nephew Tristram and his queen Isolde are to meet beneath a certain tree where they are accustomed to rendezvous; he arrives ahead of time and conceals himself in the branches above. But when the lovers arrive, they spot his shadow (in versions derived from Thomas) or his reflection in a fountain beneath the tree (in Beroul and versions derived from Beroul). So they stand aloof, and speak to each other coldly as if they are joined by nothing more than their regard for Mark. Mark is de-

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<sup>2</sup> The editions I use are the following. Beroul, *The Romance of Tristan*, ed. A. Ewert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939, 1970); Thomas of Britain, *Tristan*, ed. and trans. Stewart Gregory, Garland Library of Medieval Literature Series A, 78 (New York: Garland, 1991); the Middle English *Sir Tristrem* in *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem*, ed. Alan Lupack, TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994); *The Saga of Tristram and Ísönd*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1973). Beroul’s version was written in the “last decade of the twelfth century” (Ewert 2: 36); Thomas of Britain’s c. 1170–80 (Gregory xi–xii); the English *Sir Tristrem* in the late thirteenth century (Lupack 143); the Saga in 1226 (*Saga* 1). I have arbitrarily picked spellings for the names of the characters from among the many used in the different manuscripts (English Tristram or Tristrem, French Tristan or Tristan; English Ysonde, French Iseult, Ysolte, etc.).

luded by their acting and concludes that he has been falsely informed: the pair are not lovers after all. The tryst episode is noteworthy because of its frequent representation in artworks of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in various media (woodcarving, ivory carving, and manuscript illumination are to be considered in this article) and in literary parody. It is instantly recognizable in pictures and carvings by its essential hallmarks, as identifying as St. Catherine's wheel or St. Andrew's sideways cross: a head in a tree, bearded and crowned and therefore belonging to a king; below, a lady, usually also crowned, and a knight; between them, some indication of the king's shadow or reflection. As it is the most frequently depicted scene from a romance, it is worth asking what sort of meaning the scene seems to have for its portrayers. What about it is "worthy for to drawen to memorie"?<sup>3</sup>

*In Mark's Beard*

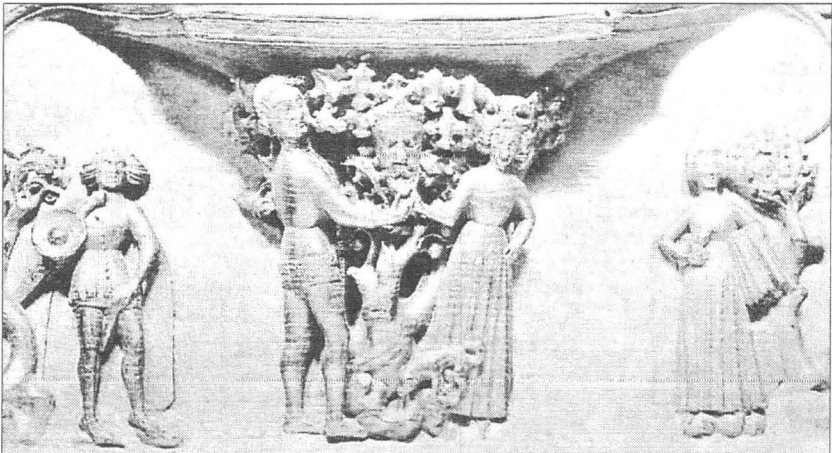


Plate 1: Chester Misericord.

A misericord in Chester Cathedral, carved in oak around 1380, represents the tryst episode. It comes closest to the version represented in the English *Sir Tristrem* of which the only version that we

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<sup>3</sup> These words are of course the other pilgrims' judgement of *The Knight's Tale*, the first romance in *The Canterbury Tales*; see *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson et al., 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 1.3112.

have is in the late thirteenth-century Auchinleck manuscript;<sup>4</sup> this may simply mean that the Anglo-Norman version by Thomas is its source, since the English poem is thought to follow Thomas, but most of the relevant parts of Thomas's poem are missing. The crowned and bearded head must belong to a king; the lady below, also crowned, must be a queen, and her lover, a knight. But several details differ from its appearance elsewhere. The tree is specified as a pine in Beroul and other versions of the story, including the *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*,<sup>5</sup> but here the tree is clearly an oak, with rather conspicuous acorns. The type of tree is not specified in *Sir Tristrem* or in the saga, but the carver has chosen an oak for reasons similar to those that impel poets to select a pine. An illustrated page from the sixteenth-century MS Ashmole 1504 shows both oak and pine, with marginalia spelling out their associations: the babewynnes, one with musical instruments and one with an ass, the wild man with phallic club, and the bagpipe-playing fox/friar are all associated with sexuality, especially male sexuality in the case of the attributes of wild man and fox.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Tristan en prose* has the tryst scene, but in some manuscripts only. It differs in several particulars, one being that the tree is repeatedly specified as being a laurel. Mark is armed in the tree (with bow and arrows and sword), but such a detail would not likely show up in a woodcarving. The lovers see the king directly, rather than deducing his presence by his shadow or reflection, but in the carving the only indication we have of a shadow (or possibly reflection, if we imagine the circle of root to be holding water) is the behaviour of the dog. In the prose version, Brangain speaks to her would-be murderers of lending the queen a lily, not a smock; that the female attendant here carries a garment is the strongest indication that the source of the scene is one of the poetic versions, not the prose one. See *Le Roman de Tristan en prose: les deux captivités de Tristan*, ed. Joël Blanchard (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1976) 57–61.

<sup>5</sup> Ed. Ernest Hoepffner, Publications de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg, Textes d'Études 8 (Paris: Société d'Édition, 1938).

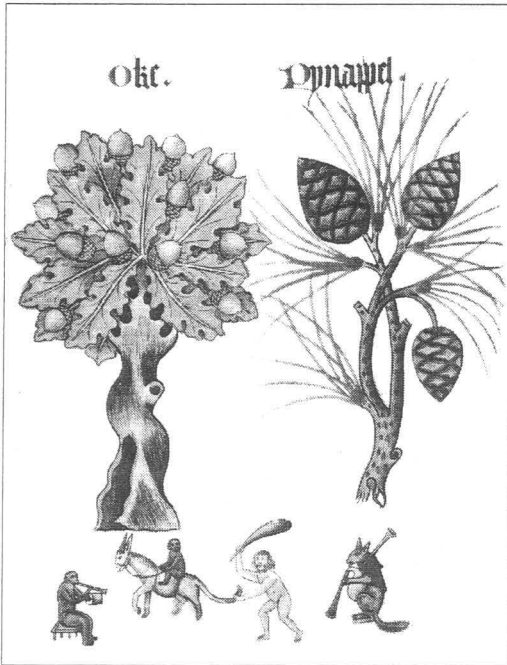


Plate 2: Oak and Pine, MS Ashmole 1504.

The dog staring fixedly into the roots of the tree in the Chester misericord hints at the shadow, and in its turn has a role to play elsewhere in the story: this is presumably Hodain, who will not leave the lovers because he too has lapped up some of the love potion that they drank by mistake when Tristram was escorting Isolde from Ireland to marry his uncle Mark. Rather than keeping a distance from each other to deceive the watching king, these lovers exchange a ring so close to Mark's face that their hands cross in front of his beard. The ring comes from another episode in both Thomas and *Sir Tristrem*, when Tristram is finally exiled and accepts a ring from Isolde; this ring, when he marries another Isolde, will play a role on his wedding night in reminding him of the first Isolde and forcing his decision to remain sexually faithful to her. But its exchange on this occasion, rather than ruining the function of the scene with Mark in the tree, serves to underscore how unobservant, how inept at interpreting what he sees, the husband actually is. The bringing together of the hands in his beard may suggest the phrase *maken his berde*, 'to delude him'; it certainly suggests

the phrase *in his berde*, 'to his face.' The supporters of this misericord are unusually interesting, and tightly integrated with the central scene. To the right is a woman bearing a very small dog and some cloth. This is Brengwain, Isolde's gentlewoman, carrying Peti Crewe, the little multicoloured dog given by Tristram to Isolde. The cloth must be a metaphor made real, Brengwain's smock. After a bride-bed trick in which Brengwain agrees to substitute for the no-longer virgin Isolde, the queen becomes doubtful of her loyalty and sends men to kill her. But Brengwain talks her way out of the situation by persuading the murderers to remind the queen that, when Isolde was to lie by the king and realized that her own smock was dirty, Brengwain let her borrow her maiden's clean one. The supporter on the left is Ganardin, brother to Isolde of the White Hands, the Isolde whom Tristram marries. His fierce expression and ostentatious weaponry show him to be bold and worthy of the love of Brengwain; that boldness and worthiness are an explicit issue in *Sir Tristrem*, where Brengwain becomes furious at Tristram and Isolde and nearly betrays them to Mark because they got her involved sexually with a man like Ganardin, who returns to Brittany when all four are surprised in a tent rather than staying to fight Mark's men. Ganardin does later return to fight in a tournament and demonstrate his prowess. But his dagger, like Tristram's hanging straight in front of his groin rather than to the side, and his conspicuous grip on it draw attention to the motivating power of sexual desire. The distinguishing design of the hilt is missing, together with much of the hand, but the position and size suggest that the dagger is either a baselard with a disk-shaped hand-protector at the base of the grip (like Tristram's) or a ballock-knife, with two lobed hand-protectors. William Reid describes the ballock-knife thus: "Any doubt one might have about the sexual significance of the phallic handle springing from two rounded lobes is dispelled by contemporary illustrations, which show it hung on a low-slung belt, the blade between the thighs of its wearer."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Arms Through the Ages* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 49. An excellent picture of a ballock-knife is to be found in *Weapons: An International Encyclopedia from 5000 BC to 2000 AD*, ed. David Harding (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980) 32, number 2. Although Reid remarks that such a knife was worn by "a civilian," Harding's comment seems more accurate: "a dagger was commonly worn by men of all classes for self-defense, for eating and also as an ornament" (32).

By comparison, a Lincoln misericord of the same scene has relatively little distinction. The crowned head in a tree (much of which tree is now missing), the knight and lady exchanging a ring in front of the king's beard (this area is damaged, and therefore hard to decipher) make it clear that this is the famous tryst episode from the story. Again, a dog stares at the roots of the tree, presumably Hodain implying for us the shadow of Mark. Brengwain is again a supporter, but without her smock over her arm; she carries a small dog in front of her, but her dress and stance are prim and decorous. The male supporter on the opposite side is now headless, and dressed in a gown rather than action-ready tunic and hose. His short sword is off to the side, under one arm, rather than being such an extraordinarily significant focus of attention as the weaponry is in the Chester piece. The Lincoln misericords, thought to be carved by the same group of craftsmen as executed Chester's series, came after Chester, and this one simply does not reproduce the full richness of the earlier version. However, by its simplification of elements so that the base scene—the episode of Mark in the tree—is relatively unadorned with elements from other episodes, it does allow us to concentrate on the point of that scene alone in answering the question, why is it here? Why does a scene from *Sir Tristrem* (or the *Tristan* of Thomas, or some other version we no longer have, but which contains the same episodes) crop up in a cathedral misericord?

Another such misericord may help with the answer. Secular scenes are plentiful in such places, but relatively few pertain to identifiable romances. One other in Lincoln, however, is clearly a scene from an identifiable romance; it comes from *Ywain and Gawain*. That misericord might be the answer to the question: How does one carve invisibility? In the centre, the viewer sees a castle entrance; the portcullis is down, and has cut off the back end of a horse in being lowered. The horse's behind is still in position, caught by the portcullis. Supporters on either side are the heads of knights, in helms and with chainmail gorgets. If we know the English romance, or its source, Chrétien de Troye's *Yvain ou le chevalier au lion*, we know that Ywain is inside, trapped within the gatehouse of the baron whom he has just killed. Armed men will come hunting for him, but they will not find him because a sympathetic lady, Lunet, has given him a ring that makes him invisible:

Thi famen sal be als the blynd.  
 Both byfor the and byhind,  
 On ilka side sal thou be soght. (*Ywain and Gawain* 785–87)<sup>7</sup>

Failure of perception is a running theme in misericords, not the subject of all of them, but of many; the Ywain misericord is a brilliant example since the subject is invisible not only to his foemen but to us. Both the Chester and the Lincoln tryst misericords develop the same theme: they depend upon the viewer recognizing the central episode, remembering that Mark is deluded by the young lovers who themselves perceive accurately (they see the shadow on the ground, and interpret that indirect evidence quite correctly as a sign that Mark is above them in the tree, spying to determine their real relationship) but who stage what Mark sees and hears so that he interprets it feebly. The carvers of the misericords exaggerate the extent of his failure of perception: in the misericord versions of the scene, Mark has to be blind to visual evidence right under his nose—the gift of the ring—in order to accept the delusion that the two are not lovers.

The medium itself embodies the theme of failure of perception. Misericords are situated in choirs of cathedral churches; the parish congregation therefore had no access to them in the Middle Ages, and even for the canons who used them as perches they would have been invisible much of the time. For those who are not familiar with the structure of a misericord, I should explain that each choir stall is assigned to a particular canon, a member of a regular order like a monk. That canon can sit on a fold-down bench on any occasion on which sitting is permitted (for example, to listen to a sermon). But for the most part, the role of a canon in the service was to stand and sing. As a ‘mercy’ (Latin *misericordia*) elderly and infirm canons were allowed to rest their weight on little shelves, located on the underside of the raised bench seat, and therefore located high enough that a canon perched on one looks as if he is standing. The misericord is the little shelf, with the decorative carving underneath, and supporter carvings to the side, all on the underside of the bench proper. The misericord is not

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<sup>7</sup> *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell, Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).



visible at all if the bench is down; nor is it visible when up if it has a canon perched on it, or standing in front of it; and even when up and vacant, many are visible only to someone squeezed in awkwardly behind the row of stalls in front of them. Hard to see as the misericord carvings are, designed as they are to provide a visual illusion (that the canon is standing when he is not), they are an apt vehicle for scenes about failure of perception, and the carver uses the vehicle to emphasize how badly King Mark sees.

### *An Unboly Hunt*

The tryst episode appears in greatest numbers in ivory carvings from northern France in the first half of the fourteenth century. In these the scene represents Beroul's version: each time it appears, the face of the king is reflected in a fountain (the fountain in Beroul is under a pine, though the carvings invariably use an oak).<sup>8</sup> One context in which it appears is as part of the decorative scheme of small ivory caskets, probably meant as a gift given to a woman by her suitor on the occasion of betrothal or marriage. There are seven such caskets that, rather than representing the tryst as part of a sequence of illustrations of the Tristram story, instead give it a different context.<sup>9</sup> Reading the carvings on the Victoria and Albert casket as a program, and relating the significance of the carvings to the function of the casket, Susan Smith has argued that they develop the topos of the power of women.<sup>10</sup> This may well be true, but for several of the scenes depicted the sense of women's power is heavily pervaded with a sense of the danger and folly for men in submitting to that power: the aged philosopher Aristotle caught

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<sup>8</sup> The prose version, where it exists, has no shadow or reflection, the *Folie de Berne* does not mention this scene, the *Folie d'Oxford*, like the English poem and the Norwegian one, has a shadow below the tree; in the case of the *Folie d'Oxford*, the tree is specifically a pine.

<sup>9</sup> The seven are in: the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (Koechlin 1281); the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Koechlin 1282); the British Museum, London (Koechlin 1283); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Koechlin 1284); Cathedral Treasury, Cracow (Koechlin 1285); Bargello, Florence (Koechlin 1286); and the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham (Koechlin 1287). The standard catalogue of ivory carvings is by Raymond Koechlin, *Les Ivoires gothiques français*, 3 vols. (1924; Paris: F. de Nobele, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995) esp. 168–86.

being ridden by a young woman is an obvious example of such an assertion. The carving most closely associated with the tryst scene is a frequent medieval motif, the capture of the unicorn; it is paired with the tryst on one end of each casket. Medieval bestiaries tell us that the unicorn can be captured only when he lays his head in a virgin's lap. The capture of the unicorn is often allegorized as the incarnation: in a Holy Hunt, the unicorn Christ comes to the Virgin Mary and allows Himself to be caught and crucified.

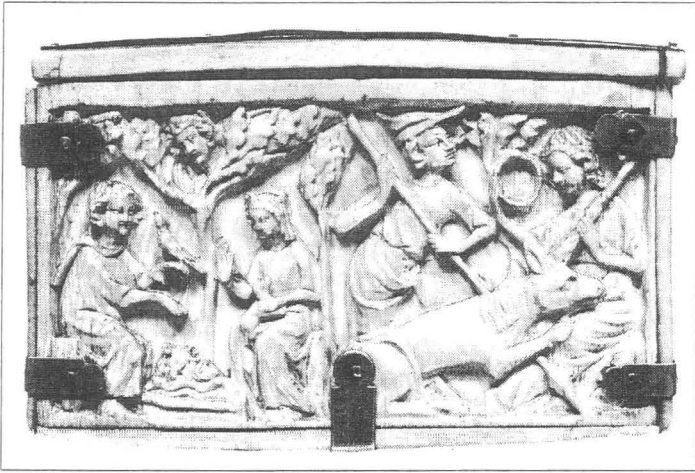


Plate 3: British Museum Casket.

But in the ivory caskets, the seductive caress of the unicorn's horn implies a sexual reading instead. The maiden holds a mirror, like a siren; in this mirror the unicorn sees himself, and thus is entranced by her and dies in her lap.

The difficulty comes in assigning roles to the figures in the unicorn scene of the caskets if they are to be seen as a parallel to the Tristram scene with which they are paired. Isolde is clearly the woman who entraps the unicorn with her sexuality. But who is trapped, Tristram or Mark? In the tryst scene, Tristram is Isolde's lover; the unicorn is clearly attracted to the maiden. And consider the placing of the figures in the British Museum casket. Tristram and Isolde and maiden all sit; even the unicorn sits on his haunches, leaning forward into the maiden's lap. Mark and the hunter are positioned above, Mark in the tree, and the hunter standing, thrust-

ing the lance down through the unicorn's body. Spatial arrangements, then, suggest a simple identification of Mark with the hunter and Tristram with the fated unicorn. The parallel is made unmistakable in the Barber casket, where the hunter perches in an oak tree just like King Mark. But consider too the mirror. The mirror in the maiden's hand is not present in all independent illustrations of the trapping of the unicorn, but it is present in the scenes on the ivory caskets. Traditionally, the unicorn is attracted by his own reflection in the mirror, and his parallel should be Mark, who gazes at his reflection in the mirroring fountain, not Tristram. But the position of the mirror in the carvings is such that the unicorn cannot possibly see himself. The maiden holds it right beside her face, and from the tilt of the hunter's head in the British Museum casket, it is evident that the hunter is not looking at the beast he is killing, but is instead gazing at either the mirror or the maiden. As we shall see in the discussion of the Morgan manuscript illumination below, mirror and maiden are in a sense equivalent. That Mark and the hunter both gaze at reflecting surfaces suggests again that Mark is understood as the hunter. But the traditional entrapment of the unicorn by means of the mirror also suggests that there is little difference between hunter and hunted. Mark and Tristram are both drawn to the bait.

### *The View From the Tree*

Why Mark is so vulnerable to being duped is suggested by the pear tree episode in the twelfth-century Latin comœdia of *Lydia*, an episode that provides a visual parody of Mark and his failed observations.<sup>11</sup> Written in the second half of the twelfth century—that is at about the time that the Tristram stories were put into form by Thomas, Beroul, and others—the story of *Lydia* has its climax in a scene in which a husband looks down from a pear tree to see his wife and her lover below busily engaged in sex. But the husband has been set up to accept that what he sees is not actually happen-

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<sup>11</sup> Two modern critics have noted parallels between the episode of the tryst and the pear tree story: Helaine Newstead, "The Tryst beneath the Tree: An Episode in the Tristan Legend," *Romance Philology* 9 (1955–56): 278–79; and Doris Fouquet, "Die Baumgartenszene des Tristan in der mittelalterlichen Kunst und Literatur," *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 92 (1973): 360.

ing: that the tree causes delusions, specifically delusions for someone in its branches that those below are carnally entangled when in fact they are properly chaste. The husband finally decides to destroy the tree as the cause of uncomfortable illusory perceptions. This trick on his wife's part has been preceded by three other tricks, three instances in which she demonstrates the seriousness of her passion for her lover by harming her husband but passes off each instance of harm as a demonstration of wifely love; yet he cannot entertain the idea that what appears to be violent aggression actually *is* violent aggression. *The Comedy of Lydia* exposes the folly of Mark by exaggeration, implying that misinterpretation is not simply a matter of failing to find ocular proof, but depends on a disposition to be deceived by what one sees.<sup>12</sup>

Where does that disposition come from? The answer is in the tree. Much is made in the comœdia of the name of the lover: he is *Pirrus*, the tree is *pirum*, the fruit is *pirus*, and the wordplay is incessant. This poem alone would be sufficient to establish an iconographical connection between the pear tree and masculine libido, with the fruit representing male genitals, if it were not for the suspicion that this might be a nonce use. After all, the role of pears is made so explicit in this piece that no previous knowledge of such an analogy on the part of the reader is required:

Arboris in fructu fructus amoris erat.

In the fruit of the tree was the fruit of love. (230–31, l. 512)

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<sup>12</sup> *The Comedy of Lydia* is to be found with parallel translation into English in Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, eds., *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971) 206–33. Other analogues given by Benson and Andersson involve the Merchant's Tale plot, with the lovers in the tree and a blind husband on the ground: Adolphus's "The Blind Man and His Wife" (a tale in Latin, fourteenth century 234–37); "A Rich Man and His Wife" (Italian, thirteenth century 238–41); and "About a Blind Man" (German, fifteenth century 242–55), which involves apples and a linden tree rather than pears. Boccaccio keeps the configuration from *Lydia*. The illustration of the tryst scene with Mark in a pear tree is in British Library MS. Additional 11619, and is printed and discussed by Tony Hunt, "The Tristan Illustrations in MS London BL Add. 11619," in *Rewards and Punishments in the Arthurian Romances and Lyric Poetry of Mediaeval France: Essays Presented to Kenneth Varty on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Peter V. Davies and Angus J. Kennedy, *Arthurian Studies* 17 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987) 45–60.

Lydia all but drools. In later analogues of this tale, the best known example of them being Chaucer's Merchant's Tale, the husband's metaphorical blindness is made literal, and the triangle is inverted, with the husband on the ground and the lovers in the tree. But in that tale, as in most analogues, the tree remains a pear tree.<sup>13</sup> In a thirteenth-century novellino the woman expresses a keen longing for its fruit:

E' m'è venuto voglia di quelle pere che sono in suè  
quello pero, che sono cosie belle.... Io me ne cholglierò  
pure io, ch'altrimenti no' mi ne gioverebbe.

I have conceived a desire for those pears which are up  
in that pear tree and are so beautiful.... I will pick some  
myself because I would not enjoy them otherwise.

(238–41)

Her appetites are like those of May in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale:

I moste han of the peres that I see,  
Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me  
To eten of the smale peres grene.

(*Canterbury Tales* iv.2331–33)

Other medieval texts draw on the pear tree in a sexual context, for example the French fabliaux of *Joulet* and *Le Dit de la gageure*.<sup>14</sup> In the former, excessive indulgence in pears leaves a young man incapacitated for his duties as a bridegroom; in the latter, a victory of male genitalia (the deployment of which turns a sexual scene from one of humiliation for the man to one of tri-

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<sup>13</sup> See Karl Wentersdorf, "Imagery, Structure, and Theme in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction*, ed. Leigh A. Arrathoon (Rochester, MI: Solaris Press, 1986) 35–62, for answers to the question: "Why does May choose a pear tree ... as the place where she and Damian will satisfy their amorous desires?" (49).

<sup>14</sup> *Joulet* is to be found in *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux (NRCF)*, 5 vols., ed. Willem Noomen and Nico Van Den Boogaard (Assen, Pays-Bas: Van Gorcum, 1983– ) 2: 187–203; *Le Dit de la gageure* in *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles*, 6 vols., ed. Anatole de Montaiglon et Gaston Raynaud (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1877) 2: 193–98.

umph for him and humiliation for the woman) is just in passing cited "Desouz le perer Jahenyn" (*Recueil général* 2: 195). The implications of the pear tree do not have to be spelled out but can be invoked simply by mention, a strong argument for the pervasiveness of the linkage between pear trees and male libido. That an illustration of the tryst episode has survived in which Mark is actually depicted up a pear tree could equally well mean that its artist independently recognized the iconographic suitability of the pear tree for the king's perch, or that its artist was knowingly invoking the scene in *Lydia* as a parody of the tryst scene.

Up in the pear tree, then, the husband in *Lydia* sees his wife's misbehaviour but does not believe what he sees. Why? Because he cannot afford to. The pretence that the pear tree causes illusions proves to be true. Pirrus and Lydia pretend that it causes the illusion that those below it are engaged in sexual congress; but it really allows the illusion that they are not. Without the pressure of his own desire for Lydia, could her husband have been convinced to disregard the evidence of his eyes?

And up in the oak tree, could Mark have been persuaded to *accept* the evidence of his eyes without the similar pressure of his desire for Isolde? To accept the evidence (as in the narration of the story) or to disregard it (as in the pictured version of the scene represented by the misericord carvers) amounts to the same thing: it is to allow what Mark wants to govern his interpretation of what he sees. *The Comedy of Lydia* presents us with a reflection of the scene from the story of Tristram, and insists on the power of masculine desire to deceive:

vitium fuit arboris; illa,  
Esse potest, alios ludificabit adhuc.  
it was the fault of the tree;  
Perhaps it will mislead others again. (232–33, ll. 551–52)

### *Further Reflection*

A last sardonic comment on the tryst scene is offered by Pierpont Morgan manuscript 245 of *Le Roman de la rose*. One episode of the *Rose* that is often illuminated is the one in which Narcissus, under a pine tree, gazes into a well and becomes infatuated with his own reflection. The scene shares the pine tree, the well, and the gazing with Beroul's episode of Mark's observation, but otherwise is visu-

ally quite different in obvious ways: usually Mark is up the tree, not lying on the grass by the well; Mark is crowned and bearded as befits a king, not curly-headed and bare of chin as befits a handsome youth; it is the lovers, not Mark, who look into the well and see the reflection, while Mark himself is observing them; indeed Narcissus is quite alone in the version of his story in the Rose, without even Echo, whereas Mark is shown with both Tristram and Isolde. But the curious illustration of the Narcissus episode in this Morgan manuscript shows a bearded, crowned man up in the tree, looking down at his own reflection in the well, while nearby and unregarded, two young lovers embrace each other.



Plate 4: Narcissus Scene, Pierpont Morgan MS 245.

This illustration makes sense only as read doubly, as incorporating both Narcissus and Mark. The king in the tree cannot be other than Mark, but the gazer at his own reflection must be Narcissus, and indeed the picture is carefully labelled in the banderole to the right, "or voyez ceste compaignie; cest Narsisus & sami." The text of the *Rose* itself does not mention Mark, Tristram, and Isolde; it must be knowledge brought to the picture by the viewer that allows the Mark episode into this one manuscript of the *Rose* as a comment on Narcissus. This allusive use of the Mark-episode suggests that the illustrator felt he or she could depend upon a ready recognition of its elements; otherwise the illustration degenerates into a botch of the text uncharacteristic of this illuminator.<sup>15</sup>

Like Narcissus, Mark is so absorbed in his own desires that what he sees is only what he wants to see; like Mark, Narcissus sees what is under his eyes, but uses no judgement to interpret it. The lovers are obviously lovers, but Mark misses seeing them as such because, the illustrator emphasizes, he lacks the will to perceive them. This is another illustration, not of clever and cool-headed trickery on the part of the lovers, but of obtuse failure of perception on the part of the betrayed one, who needs only to turn his head to see directly all the evidence that he thinks he is looking for while instead he gazes unwaveringly into the fountain. It is true that a fountain, like any other mirroring surface, can reflect not only the viewer but also part of the world around, but notoriously the reflection will not be as reliable as direct perception: *videre per speculum* is *videre in aenigmatate*; to see through a glass is to see darkly. The reflection is distorted by ripples and darkened by the blue of the water; the illustrator emphasizes the point that what Narcissus and Mark see is neither ideal nor real, but an inaccurate image of the viewer. The other man in the scene is positioned to parallel the head in the tree: standing on slightly higher ground than the woman he embraces, he is on the same level visually as Narcissus or Mark, his head is bent at the same angle, and his pleasant young face is very similar in features, colouring, and ex-

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<sup>15</sup> The Narcissus episode can be found in the edition by Félix Lecoy, *Les Classiques français du moyen âge* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1976–1982) vol. 1, ll. 1423–1508; and in the English translation by Charles Dahlberg, *The Romance of the Rose* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) 50–51.



pression to the disembodied face in the tree. Just as Mark/Narcissus gazes into the well, the young lover gazes into the face of his lady. As Chrétien de Troyes says of Enide,

Ce fu cele por verité  
 Qui fu fete por esgarder  
 Qu'an se poïst an li mirer  
 Ausi com an un mireor.  
 Truly, this was she  
 Who was made to look at;  
 Upon her one could gaze  
 As upon a mirror.<sup>16</sup>

What might a man see in such a mirror? "It is his own image perfected, his own form enhanced by every courtly grace and virtue. As he believed the lady was a mirror of perfection, so he believed that in casting his own image in that mirror he would be united with the ideal, the light of the world, the living form of Beauty."<sup>17</sup> And yet look at the lady's face in the picture. The rest of the picture is intricate in its detail (not visible in the photograph are fine details of foliage and flower on the lady's gown, executed with care and precision); the face of the male lover is fresh and fair; the man in the tree, apart from his beard, looks almost identical; but the lady's face is a mess, blurred, unclear, distorted. This could be a matter of painter's mistakes combined with later damage to the manuscript, a substrate painted over to correct its errors that now appears because the top correcting layer has been lost. But I don't

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<sup>16</sup> *Erec et Enide*, ed. Mario Roques, CFMA 80 (Paris, 1952) ll. 438–41; Chrétien was a contemporary of Thomas and Beroul. Here I adopt the reading "gaze upon" for "se mirer" following the persuasive argument of Sarah Kay, "Love in a Mirror: An Aspect of the Imagery of Bernart de Ventadorn," *Medium Aevum* 52 (1983): 283n14.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1967) 97–98. Goldin distinguishes among various uses of the mirror in medieval literature, and particularly in courtly lyric, where the trope of the lady as mirror is frequent: "We look to her to know what we ought to be, and therefore what we are. It is for *us* that she exists. She is there to be consulted, like a mirror, by every courtly person. She reflects our future condition, the goal of our striving. She makes visible for us what would otherwise be mere concepts dissociated from experience: *ricor, pretz, valor, cortesia, digz belhs, grans onors*—we know what these things are because we know *her*" (78).

think so. I think that this mirror too, like the well that reflects Narcissus, is dangerous because it distorts, because the image that the male lover sees in it is not truly “the living form of Beauty” and therefore will not unite him with the Ideal at all. This painter draws freely on the notion of the mirror as a deluder. What is seen in it does not really exist, as writers of Beroul’s time acknowledged. One of Marie de France’s *Fables* turns on an exploitation of the lack of truth in reflection. A peasant is able to convince her husband that she has not really had sex with the priest, although the husband has actually seen her do so. Led to a barrel of water and asked to look in and see his own reflection, he admits that although his reflection is in the barrel, he really is not; therefore he accepts the conclusion that whatever he sees is not necessarily real.<sup>18</sup>

The crowned head Mark sees reflected and framed in the fountain perhaps shows the dignity appropriate to a king; it looks somewhat sillier in its context, up a tree, to those of us looking from another perspective, from outside the scene. The painter has clearly shown the flaws in Mark’s observation: the crown shows sharply, larger than life; it extends even beyond the boundaries of the fountain, violating naturalism to draw our attention to something Mark finds important, his dignity and power as king. But the face below the crown appears distorted by ripples and discoloured by the blue of the water. Mark’s story hints that Narcissus is not only one who projects, who desires what he himself is, but also one who ignores. For the Narcissus in this picture there is a model of mutual love at which he will not look, which he will not acknowledge; his gaze is only into his own eyes, and his vision of the world is so poor that he cannot distinguish between the disembodied image that is his own reflection and the living reality of the lovers near him.

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<sup>18</sup> Fable 44, “Del vilein ki vit un autre od sa femme,” “The Peasant Who Saw Another with His Wife,” *Marie de France: Fables*, ed. and trans. Harriet Spiegel, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 32 (1987; Toronto: U of Toronto P and Medieval Academy of America, 1994) 134–37. Goldin cites Plotinus and Augustine among the earlier writers who develop the argument of the illusory nature of both the mirror and the matter it reflects (*Mirror of Narcissus* 6–7); this idea is always available to, and often drawn upon by, later medieval writers exploiting the trope of the mirror.

Other aspects of this illumination mock Mark and Isolde for her adulterous transgression. The king is up a tree; the text of the *Rose* (like the original Narcissus passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and the text of Beroul tell us it is a pine tree; pine and fountain are paired in the *Rose*, in Ovid, in Beroul's *Tristan*; the pine is masculine,<sup>19</sup> the fountain feminine. This tree, however, droops like a willow, lacking the masculine associations of the pine.<sup>20</sup> The fountain is in the Bible associated with the spouse: "Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa, / Hortus conclusus, fons signatus" (Canticles 4.12 [Vulgate]); it is the idea of the garden enclosed and the fountain sealed that encouraged the transfer of these metaphors to the Virgin Mary, perpetually unpenetrated. But the fountain in this picture is ostentatiously not a fountain sealed. One corner is missing, in such a way that the water would have to flow out; the lady's gown in turn flows towards the fountain, and draws our attention to its permeability. This is the point at which the two halves of the picture connect visually; the waterlike flow of the lady's blue gown crosses the centre of the scene and enters the Mark/Narcissus side at the opening in the labial pink fountain walls, drawing our eyes with it. Our attention is further drawn to this area by the artist's pushing downward of the bottom margin of the picture to accommodate the wayward gown.

The Tristram and Isolde story became one of the central myths of Western culture, defining the power of romantic love. For us, after the Romantic era and after Wagner, the memorable episode of the story is likely to be the drinking of the fatal love potion that motivates a passion both terrible and beautiful. But for generations of medieval readers the memorable episode seems to have been the tryst. Peter of Blois, secretary to the Queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, wrote in the late twelfth century of the tears that the story of Tristram evoked:

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<sup>19</sup> The reason for the recurring association of the pine with the masculine in medieval literature is hard to miss in springtime, when the tree is covered with a mass of erect candles.

<sup>20</sup> In a fifteenth-century English poem, *Sir Corneus*, the cuckolded husbands at King Arthur's court wear willow-garlands on their heads. See *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems*, ed. Melissa Furrow (New York: Garland, 1985) 281, 1.59.

de Arturo et Gaugano et Tristanno fabulosa ... referunt histriones, quorum auditu concutiuntur ad compassionem audientium corda et usque ad lacrimas compunguntur. the story-tellers relate tales of Arthur and Gawain and Tristram, the hearing of which moves to compassion the hearts of the audience and drives them all the way to tears.<sup>21</sup>

But however sympathetically medieval readers may have taken the sad story of Tristram and Isolde's sufferings for love of each other, there is clear evidence in depictions of the tryst that many medieval readers took part at least of the story with a grain of salt, a sense of the humour of the follies it displays.

The metaphor that late twentieth-century scholars are apt to apply to Mark's obtuseness is *misreading*: for example, William Calin observes that "To some extent Beroul's Tristan romance is a romance of interpretation, a text in which the characters are compelled again and again to distinguish illusion from reality and to read the signs presented to them."<sup>22</sup> But for medieval readers, many of whom were not readers in our sense of the term at all but rather hearers of story, the failure is one of seeing. What Mark sees is distorted by his desires and by his medium of perception. The point of the scene is not the cleverness of the tricky lovers but rather Mark's failure to see aright what is going on under his nose. These versions of the tryst scene distance us from full sympathy with not only Mark, but also Tristram and Isolde, and instead invite our amused recognition of their all-too-human follies. In misericord, illumination, and parody, the lovers flaunt their love, secure in the power of the husband's own desires to keep the obvious concealed. With the creatively adapted unicorn hunt of the ivory casquets, Isolde escapes appearing merely as passive bait for an entrapped Tristram, to emerge instead as a merrily successful siren who attracts both doomed lover and besotted husband. This distancing amusement is far from being the only reaction to the Tristram story recorded in the Middle Ages: if we are to believe Peter of

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<sup>21</sup> Peter of Blois, *Liber de confessione sacramentali*, *Patrologia Latina* 207, 1088B.

<sup>22</sup> *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994) 47.

Blois, some readers and hearers shed tears in compassion; some didacts reacted with irritation and disdain. But the amusement is a certifiably medieval reaction, and it must be taken into account when we try to construct a “horizon of expectations” for the medieval readers and hearers of romance.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The quoted words are Hans Robert Jauss's well known formulation; see “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” trans. Elizabeth Benzinger, in *New Literary History* 2 (1970): 7–37, a translation of chapters 5–13 of his *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* (Konstanz: Druckerei und Verlagsanstalt Konstanz, 1967).