

Barbara Benjamin

## Explication: TRISTRAM of the Tristram Story

The Tristram story is a parallel to the Arthur story. The structure of the story is a lead in for the grail quest. Why would this story be parallel to Arthur? Possible to show variations in situations between the two realms, and to show that regardless of the situation, it is the system of chivalry that is destructive, and not through any specific faults of Arthur and his knights. It also deepens the feud between Lamorak and Gawain, and of course, the allegiances to them are made firmer. The feud is what ultimately brings down the kingdom.

The thread that weaves itself throughout the story is of the rival lovers, T and Palomides the Saracen, who both love La Belle Isold. At the end, they finally make peace and P agrees to be baptized by T. This, then, is an appropriate point to begin the grail quest.

Tristram, the knight, is a parallel of Lancelot, but without the moral righteousness.

King Mark's court was a mirror image of Arthur's:

King Mark - Bad king

Queen Isold - adulterous, beautiful (both queens)

Never has an heir

Tristram, Adulterous to Q, true to their Lords

Adulterous Lovers are best knights of the realm

T killed for adultery

Andred - nephew & mortal foe to Tristram

King Arthur - Good king

Queen Guinevere

Never has an heir

Lancelot, adulterous to Q

Kingdom falls because of ad.

Mordred - same, both plot to expose the adultery between the knight and the queen

I'm choosing to look closely at the opening pages of the story, to glean out information that could give clues to the rest of the story.

The first thing that caught my eye is that the title is "Isode the Fair,"---not Tristram's Birth, or something like it. I thought then this title gives the reader a hint that there is a lady that will be a significant part of the story.

Tristram is the only other knight besides Arthur in which a fairly full description of the birth and childhood details are given. This would indicate the importance this character will play in conjunction of the tales of Arthur, not just in his own story.

**Some details about his birth:** Since it starts with his birth, begins as a bildungs roman.

Some similarities to Arthur: Both birth centers around the death or presumed death of a parent. There was an enchantment involved in both births. T. is nearly slain and Merlin comes to the infant's aid to protect him by finding and releasing the father from prison. The fact that Merlin was there is also a clue to the importance this character will have in the overall tales.

This is the only time that Merlin appears in the Tristram story. I'm not sure about the significance of this. Perhaps he simply wasn't in the original stories. Also, there wasn't anything magical about T, unlike A who had the magic sword and scabbard, and the Lady of the Lake saved him a couple of times. Tristram was on his own to survive.

Unlike Arthur's birth, T's birth is "clean." This variation in the two stories, I thought, could be to show that Arthur's kingdom wasn't doomed because of the deceitful way in which he was born. T was born from "clean" love but his end was equally tragic (which is not developed by Malory.)

When he was delivered in the woods, the gentlewoman calls his birth a "miracle." Before his mother dies of childbirth, she calls her son a "murderer," but then softens of epitaph by saying that since he was a murderer so young, he will grow to be a "manly man." I thought about the words "miracle" and "murdered" applied to the infant at the same point in time. I wasn't sure what it could mean, but the end of her statement seems to be our hint that he will grow to be a man of prowess. **p230 L9**

Since the Q was dead and the K was presumed dead, the barons nearly slew the infant to take over the lands. However, something quite incredible happens: Q's lady talks them out of it! **p230 L22** This is the real miracle of T's birth because that's quite a feat! This is a second hint that perhaps women will play a big part in T's life.

The first we see or hear from Tristram, the boy, he is kneeling at his father's knees begging for the life of his stepmother, who was about to be burned for attempting to poison T. So, this is another instance of a woman who plays a significant role in T's life. **p231 L20**

So, the first thing he says or does is to save another person, without regard to the fact that that person tried to kill him. We see T, then, is forbearing and forgiving, almost in the extreme. We will continue to see this aspect of T. throughout the story. For example, **p276 L15** when he reminds sir Lamorak of the despite he did for sending the horn of potion to expose the unfaithful ladies, instead of being angry, he forgives him: L23. This was a pretty generous act since what Lamorak did could have had disastrous outcome.

Also, he was always forbearing and forgiving sir Palomides. **p462 L20** Palomides had done a treasonous thing to T at the tournament. Again, instead of punishing him or being angry, he forgave him.

Then on **p439 L24** he tells the knights not to slay the slime traitorous knight, Brunys Saunze Pite, because "he's just a foolish knight." Had **U** not been so forbearing, they could have slain one of the slimiest, vile knights there was.

He also seems to be a peacemaker. **p231 L40** T got his father to forgive his stepmother. However, the father then wouldn't have much to do with T. This doesn't make much sense to me. Perhaps Malory left part of the story out here.

T was sent to France where he learned harping, hawking, hunting, etc. These are activities associated with the perfect English gentleman. So, T would be a world-class knight, as well as a consummate gentleman. I'm not sure of the significance of that.

T then proves his prowess at K. Mark's castle, Tyntagel. **p234-6** The castle at Tyntagel is an interesting connection to Arthur, since Arthur was conceived under a disguise and deceit. Perhaps, since Mark is such a despicable man, it is probably appropriate for him to be at this castle.

Tristram arrives on the scene to save his uncle's kingdom by fighting a strong, proven knight. He doesn't have the typical quest of following a damsel into the woods, or just embarking on an adventure into the woods. Instead, he has a very definite job to perform.

**P235 L7** King Mark asks Tristram AGAIN who he is! I wasn't sure if this was just an oversight of Malory, or a comment on the stupidity of Mark.

**p235 L26** Mentions that Marhalte waited under the shadow of the ships. I thought this meant two things: 1) It's a scary image and made the encounter more fearsome, 2) Shadows are associated with death, so it foreshadowed Marhalte's destiny in the battle.

**p235 L29-38** He gives a speech to Governail covering all formalities of how to dress the horse, etc.

Then, **p236 L11** he launches into a windy speech to Marhalte. He seems to be trying to put off the inevitable, stalling. I think it shows his nervousness and inexperience because he has never fought a battle before. This is a very important battle for the entire country and winning it would give him instant fame.

p237 L24 After Marhalte runs off, T calls to him and mentions about wearing his shield and sword, and in front of King Arthur, etc. I'm really not sure why. Was it because he respected Marhalte? Perhaps this was the custom?

He does win the battle with Marhalte and so establishes his courage and prowess. He's a hero. It also turns out to be the shaping force of his life.

Also, from the wounds he receives will unfold events that will color the rest of his life: His relationship with the King Angwish of Ireland and meeting Isode, the daughter, and meets his rival.

So, I'll wrap here, but first want to summarize the women in his life because I found their association with him to be quite interesting. We've seen six women so far who have figured dramatically in his life:

Mother	He "murders" her
Gentlewoman	She saves him
Stepmother	He saves her
King's daughter	Died for love of him
Later, La Belle Isode	<u>The</u> one he loves, and because of her is haunted by the rival lover Palomides, and he suffers the wrath of his uncle, and ultimately death
Isode's mother	Tries to kill him

One thing that stood out as I read the story is that Tristram's personality has more depth (along with sir Dinadan) and seems more real as characters than the other characters. His conversations are more rounded, less cookie-cutterish. This is probably a function that the stories were written later, and thus, characters were becoming more sophisticated.