VISUALITY AND MATERIALITY
IN THE STORY OF
TRISTAN AND ISOLDE

EDITED BY
Jutta Eming, Ann Marie Rasmussen,
AND Kathryn Starkey

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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The compelling incentive for this volume, which began at a conference held in 2007, is the fact that the tale of Tristan and Isolde was the most widely depicted secular story of the Middle Ages. Material evidence for this medieval fascination includes texts in all Western European vernacular languages. There are versions, reworkings, or adaptations of the Tristan story in poetry, prose, and drama, and visual depictions are found in manuscripts and printed books that contain the story but also appear independent of the text. In addition, pictures and pictorial narratives (sometimes with and sometimes without inscriptions or captions) that conjure the Tristan story occur on an array of objects: stained glass, wall paintings, tiles, tapestries, ivory boxes, combs, mirrors, shoes, misericords. In contrast to many medieval tales that lost their appeal after the Reformation, the story has continued to resonate strongly up to the present.

The pan-European and cross-medial nature of the surviving medieval evidence is not reflected in the scholarship on Tristan, however, which largely falls along disciplinary and linguistic lines. In literary studies, scholars of Old French publish on Thomas and Béroul, with some work on later French adaptations, while scholars of medieval
German focus on their versions of the story by Eilhart von Oberg and Gottfried von Strassburg. There has been little dialogue between these groups of literary scholars and the art historians who are still documenting the vast number of visual representations of the story of Tristan and Isolde. This volume seeks to open up a dialogue across disciplinary boundaries and to propose a new set of intellectual coordinates—the concepts of materiality and visuality—that will give scholars in several disciplines the tools to explore the productive connections between the verbal and the visual in medieval culture.

The concepts *materiality* and *visuality* enable one to think about the ways in which this vast and fascinating textual and visual evidence fits together without losing sight of the historical specificity or the aesthetic character of the individual pieces. *Materiality* refers to the objects, manuscripts, and spaces on and in which the story appears and also, in the broadest sense, to the construction of space, objects, bodies, and material signs that appear in various redactions. It encompasses the material (German *Stoff*) that stands behind the various versions of the story. Materiality is at once a philological concept (textual variability), a medial concept (ivory, parchment, paint, shoe leather), and a critical concept (how a narrator arranges space in the story, or uses a poetics of visibility, or signifies with the human body through gesture and clothing in uniquely adapting the story). *Visuality*, as we define it, refers to depictions that convey specific meanings, as well as to images, objects, performance, and the processes of visually perceiving. Visuality is at once an art historical concept (referring to the archive of depictions in varied media), a psychological concept (referring to the modes of perception expected of medieval audiences, including allegorical, typological, or experiential frames of mind), and a performative concept (e.g., how narrator, actor, artist, or fictional character might show or signify an emotion through ritualized gestures, speech, or actions).

Of course, visuality and materiality can never be entirely separated from each other. To be perceived, the visible needs material form, although that form could be achieved with a rhetorical device such as personification. Thus the concepts *visuality* and *materiality* function like moving indicators along a single scale of analysis. Their insep-
rability moves these concepts beyond the straightforwardly descriptive and gives them theoretical power. The visual/visibility becomes *visuality* when it refers to the whole complex of the production, perception, and cultural locations of the story. The material/medial becomes *materiality* when it refers to the means of production and materials used and their typical proliferations. Thanks to this theoretical innovation, something new is gained about the dynamics of the entire Tristan tradition, not just the textual part and not just the image part, and by extension about other medieval imbrications of texts and pictures.

Visuality and materiality are salient terms for the Tristan story *tout court*. They are especially useful for understanding Gottfried’s thirteenth-century masterpiece, which is the focus of four chapters in this volume (Baisch; Müller; Schultz; Wandhoff). Central scenes rely on staging (in which Mark sees the lovers loving but fails to perceive their guilt), allegory (the visible and material form of abstract concepts), and symbolic objects such as the chessboard that the lovers use to shield the light, signifying that love is a game of strategy, or that love and loss will be combined like the black and white squares. These terms also encompass the tradition’s unique ability to be collapsed into one, emblematic scene—the tryst in the orchard—whose visuality (perception as understanding) relies on the sacred iconography of Adam and Eve next to the forbidden tree. Thus the visuality of this single scene enfolds the materiality (*Stoff* and verbal media) of the entire romance tradition and challenges the viewer to perceive its theological subtext.

In part I of this volume, Müller, Wandhoff, and Schultz calibrate the concepts of visuality and materiality to reframe some of the classic debates on Gottfried’s *Tristan*: how is the prequel related to the main story (Müller), what is the scope of Gottfried’s famous preface or his famous allegory of the cave (Wandhoff), and what does the love potion do (Schultz)? Schultz’s chapter, for example, discusses the love potion as the material form of a refusal of the theology of concupiscence. It puts Gottfried’s *Tristan* in its rightful place as the signal moment when “a secular elite turns away from the teaching of priests . . . and begins to explore love on its own terms.”
Today Gottfried’s Tristan seems more skilled and complex than ever. Scholars constantly revisit and reevaluate not only the text itself, but its literary and cultural context and the tradition from which it arose and that it helped to shape. Parts II and III explore this larger tradition, as represented by the story’s precourtly precursors and its continuations, by its visual representations in a wide variety of media, and by late medieval dramatizations of and responses to the Tristan material. In other versions of the material we find that, for example, certain conflicts and tensions are not developed, or they are resolved or downplayed, or the redactors have focused on different aspects of the story entirely. In the face of this evidence for the popularity and longevity of the Tristan story in a wide variety of media, the chapters in this volume pose questions that are both significant and largely unanswered due to the isolation of art historical and literary discourses: What makes the material uniquely hospitable to visual depictions? Do visual and verbal narratives relate to each other, and if so, how? Do modes of perception or ways of seeing in turn have an impact on the material?

In answer to the question about the remarkable staying power of the Tristan story, Curschmann discusses four “dramatic shifts of venue and medium that create entirely new and different perceptions (i.e., the visuality aspect) of older literary material.” His example from the late nineteenth century is a sensible enhancement of the medieval emphasis of this volume. Koch’s conceptual discussion of a sixteenth-century Tristan drama shows how love is recast as a dangerous drive coming from within a material human body— and thus capable of being represented, contained, and disciplined by the gestures of stage performers. It works well with Schultz’s chapter to delineate the onset of the drive theory as another new step in the history of sexuality. Luyster analyzes the most extensive depiction of a romance in French medieval wall painting. She argues that the frescoes and their texts are cleverly disjunctive to create an illusion of time passing as the viewer strolls through the architectural spaces of the painted chamber. Thus the medieval viewer takes a journey with Tristan in a now time of direct experience, analogous to what a medieval Christian might feel walking through a cycle of sacred images but different from what we moderns would likely ever experience looking at an image.

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Krüger’s theoretically important contribution, the only one that does not focus on Tristan, demonstrates how the visual can collapse into the material, thereby blocking perceptions, when wall paintings of narrative subjects are voided of their standard literary and didactic meanings (courtly deportment, the virtue of love) in highly decorative contexts. Indeed, Krüger points out that an earlier generation of scholars “saw” the Tristan story where it probably did not exist, since many medieval depictions of lovers or aristocratic life are so conventional as to defy any positive identification. His chapter resonates with Van D’Elden’s conclusions about generic scenes whose materiality is so opaque that they cannot signify the presence of the Tristan story at all, while others such as the orchard scene visualize the entire myth in one emblem. Brüggen and Ziegeler offer yet another take on the “problem” of formalism in medieval media by showing that the position of illuminations in one important Tristan manuscript is determined not by the textual references but by the location of initials in an earlier, now-lost manuscript. Text and image refuse any neat coherence.

Although the primacy of the visual and the material in the Middle Ages has long been recognized and in recent years discussions of visual culture have become ever more frequent, this visual turn has largely bypassed Tristan scholarship, which has traditionally been focused on other concerns. This is particularly the case for Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan. The variety and number of approaches bear testimony to the complicated and nuanced threads of this text that every generation has sought to unravel anew. While nineteenth-century work seems primarily concerned with the theme of adultery and attempts to distance itself morally from the story, twentieth-century scholars focus on the concept of love and regard its intricate relationship to religious discourses of the time as the romance’s most distinguishing feature. The unification of the lovers was idealized and understood as a quasi-religious experience that drew on contemporary mystical concepts, in particular the notion of the mystic union with God. This positive assessment of the romance that arose from scholars’ idealization of the lovers’ union meant, however, that little attention was paid to the potential for conflict and discord at court and between the lovers themselves.

The focus of scholarly debate has since changed. For the past two decades the discussion has centered on the negative and destructive
aspects of the romance. From one perspective, for example, the lovers’ sorrow is a result of their social context, which impedes the relationship’s consummation but does not change the ideal notion of love. Recent approaches have examined instead the paradox inherent to the concept of love portrayed in the romance; the opposition of eros and death; the development of identity and the issue of subjectivity, particularly of the male protagonist; the transgressive and socially destructive behavior of the lovers; and the abrupt and seemingly unmotivated violent scenes that cannot be easily reconciled with the story of the lovers. The aesthetic structure of the romance both complicates the text’s interpretation and sheds new light on the romance. Whether the fragmentary nature of Gottfried’s version indicates that the poet intended to leave the outcome of his story open is debatable; it is usually assumed, based on references in the text itself, that this version too would have ended with the lovers’ deaths. Some recent work has investigated the mythical aspects of the romance and the competing notions of time that arise from the overlap of the different narrative layers. In this context scholars have focused on individual scenes and the text’s segmentation into discrete episodes that are not completely autonomous but have their own dynamic and therefore often seem to cast the entire text in a new light.

Today scholars typically do not even attempt to reconcile all the opposing elements of the romance: the idealism and destructiveness of Gottfried’s concept of love; the fatality and contingency of the plot; the reflective and anarchic nature of the characters; the allusiveness and concreteness of the narrative; or the utopian and regressive aspects of the romance. These and other issues continue to present a highly complex and puzzling challenge for the story’s recipients.

This book is organized as follows. Part I, “Courtly Bodies, Seeing, and Emotions,” examines the importance of seeing and visualizing for the representation of love in the text itself. The importance of visually coded communication, like ritual and performance, for courtly society has long been established. In “The Light of Courtly Society: Blanscheflur and Riwalin,” Jan-Dirk Müller focuses on Gottfried’s Tristan and argues that crucial differences between the love of Tristan’s parents, Riwalin and Blanscheflur, and that of Tristan and Isolde arise out of the different ways in which these passionate erotic love
affairs could accommodate themselves to the all-embracing visuality of courtly culture and its semantics of seeing. The love of Tristan’s parents is described in the text as leal amur, legitimate love, and this designation arises, according to Müller, because, although it originates as illicit, their love ultimately conforms to an acknowledged and conventional visual paradigm.

James A. Schultz also compares the love of Tristan and Isolde with that of his parents but comes to a different conclusion. In “Why Do Tristan and Isolde Make Love? The Love Potion as a Milestone in the History of Sexuality,” Schultz makes the case that for the poets Gottfried and Eilhart, the love of both Tristan and Isolde and Riwalin and Blanscheflur was “legitimate.” Schultz argues that both authors refuse to engage Christian theological discourses that explain sexual habits with innate forces like lust as a consequence of original sin. The poets’ refusal to explore the question of what impelled their characters to seek sexual relations signals a determination on the part of an emerging secular courtly culture to set off a domain in which writers could explore love and the desire to make love free from the taint of sinfulness that Christian theology had established as the first cause of desire. These authors used the symbol of the love potion to block theological inquiry into sexuality, thereby relieving love of denigration and opening a narrative domain for secular love and sexuality.

Two chapters examine the creation of allegory and visual space in Gottfried’s Tristan and its reception. In “How to Find Love in Literature: Reading Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan and His Cave of Lovers,” Haiko Wandhoff revisits the cave of lovers in Gottfried’s Tristan, arguing that it is not only the romance’s conceptual nucleus but also a mise-en-abyme, an internal representation of Gottfried’s Tristan, that reflects and is reflected in the romance. Reading Gottfried’s text as a cave of lovers and the cave as a text sheds new light on his conception of love and literature. Wandhoff argues that love is ultimately transformed into an aesthetic principle in Gottfried’s work, that Gottfried constructs his poem as a material manifestation of love and imagines a reader who is able to decode this visualization.

Ludger Lieb’s chapter, “Seeing Love in the World of Lovers: Late Medieval Love Literature as a Fulfillment of Gottfried’s Tristan,” explores the literary afterlife of Tristan love in the late medieval rhymed
couplet texts known as Minnereden, which use personification, allegory, and the description of love symptoms to fully realize strategies for visualizing love suggested in Gottfried’s Tristan. Only true lovers, Lieb argues, are able to see love in this “other world.”

Part II, “Media, Representation, and Performance,” addresses the ways in which the story is reshaped as it is reconceived for different media. These reinterpretations of the material bring into high relief the emotional valence of the story for its different audiences.

In his comparative contribution, “From Myth to Emblem to Panorama,” Michael Curschmann considers the historical dynamics of the long Tristan tradition, asking the question, “What are some of the forces or agents that create and maintain consciousness of, and interest in, the subject beyond its initial appeal?” He offers quick sketches of four stages: the initial formulations of the myth in early verse romance, the ascendance of an emblematic representation of the emerging story in a single image; the treatment of the narrative in Thomas Malory’s panoramic vision of the Arthurian world; and finally, one late and grand Victorian response to this vision, Tristram of Lyonesse by Algernon Charles Swinburne, poet, critic, and medievalist.

Elke Koch’s chapter, “Framing Tristan—Taming Tristan? The Materiality of Text and Body in Hans Sachs’s Tragedia,” brings into focus Sachs’s moralized sixteenth-century dramatic version of the story. Koch discusses the materiality of the body and the materiality of the text as keys for analyzing the aesthetic strategies that Sachs uses to represent love by employing the genre of drama and the media of performance as well as print. Sachs’s emotional pedagogy prepares the ground for a repressive discipline of emotion by reinforcing an understanding of love as dangerous energy and therefore, eventually, as a drive. By constituting love as a drive, Sachs draws on earlier concepts of the affect, but by equating love and desire, by derationalizing the emotion and separating it from the body as a means of communication while at the same time planting it firmly within the body, he takes part in shaping a concept of emotion that still echoes in Norbert Elias’s understanding of civilization and its history.

Luyster argues that the overall design draws the viewer into its three-dimensional presence of reality, shaping his or her journey through the distinct segments of the room’s architecture so as to mimic the literary protagonists’ journey through the narrative. The unusual complexity and focus on re-creating movement through time and space at Saint-Floret are analogous to religious wall paintings of the fourteenth century, and the author proposes formal and historical parallels with Avignon. Saint-Floret is unusual, however, in that the re-creation of space and experience is transferred to the secular realm. Luyster concludes that the murals re-create time and space and a full-body experience, an experience like that of reality, and she suggests that the viewing experience might be understood as a secular pilgrimage, a journey that mirrors that of Tristan and other heroes through the chateaux and forests of legend.

Klaus Krüger’s chapter, “Tristan Love: Elite Self-Fashioning in Italian Frescoes of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,” examines fresco fragments from private houses in Florence. Placing these frescoes against the backdrop of sociopolitical transformation, Krüger argues that they allowed bourgeois householders and patrons in search of a new identity to appropriate the models of social self-fashioning favored by the very nobility they sought to displace. While the representational art in these frescoes originally belonged to the nobility, in its new context it no longer has the same points of reference. The heraldic crests and other insignia of noble elitism, for instance, no longer refer to actual genealogies but symbolize power among the new urban middle-class elite. One curious aspect of the situation in Florence is that the urban elite has moved this representational art out of public spaces and into their private rooms.

In the third and final part of this volume, “The Visual Culture of Tristan,” five scholars bring new, yet foundational material evidence to our attention, setting the stage for more nuanced analyses of the striking visual iconicity of this story, that is to say, its significant narrative moments that, translated into depictions, effectively reduce the story to a single scene.

Martin Baisch’s study, “Discourses of Curiosity: The Materiality of Meaning in Edition Studies and Cultural Studies,” focuses on the question of materiality, which is defined in two ways. First, materiality
means the factual transmission of the text, whose relevance and status have been discussed by scholars under the rubric of material philology. Second, materiality functions on a semiotic level to refer to the ways in which texts represent and suggest material presence or absence. A discussion of the poetic commentaries in Gottfried’s Tristan shows that both definitions of materiality can be used productively. As material texts, the poetic commentaries differ from one manuscript to the next. Further, these different versions produce differing auras of materiality, or effects of authorial presence. The chapter concludes with a discussion of editorial and philological problems within scholarship on Gottfried’s Tristan regarding materiality.

Although the Tristan material appears frequently in the visual arts, only three manuscripts contain illustrations of Gottfried’s Tristan. In “Textual Worlds—Pictorial Worlds: Interpreting the Tristan Story in Illuminated Manuscripts,” Elke Brüggen and Hans-Joachim Ziegelel compare these three image cycles that appear in the thirteenth-century Munich manuscript (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 51), the fourteenth-century Cologne manuscript (Historisches Archiv, Wkl.f°88), and the fifteenth-century Brussels manuscript (Bibliothèque Royale, MS 14697). Focusing on the story of Riwalin and Blancheflur and Tristan’s birth, the authors explore the often surprisingly disjunctive relationship between story and image, arguing that decisions about image making go hand in hand with considerations regarding the medium of the book and its format.

When dealing with written texts, we can identify an illumination by its placement in the manuscript or by an accompanying rubric or inscription. When dealing with ivories, embroideries, wall paintings, and other artifacts, however, there is often no written identification on the object. Then it is necessary to have a specific image, a scene that can be identified from its context no matter what the medium. In “Specific and Generic Scenes in Verse Tristan Illustrations,” Stephanie Cain Van D’Elden provides a survey of Tristan images in all media and argues for a distinction between specific and generic scenes. The alternation between these specific and generic scenes in the structure of the romance of Tristan and Isolde helps us understand the composer/designer/artist’s approach to the story—his intentions in rendering
the story either in writing or visually — from a simple courtly tale of bride-winning to a complex account of adultery and intrigue.

Margaret Alison Stones’s chapter, “The Artistic Context of Some Northern French Illustrated Tristan Manuscripts,” similarly addresses source material that has never been published and presents a panorama of stylistic changes in visual representations of the Tristan story in illuminated French manuscripts. Stones outlines the chronology and geography of the reception of Tristan in France through a comparative examination of the illustrations in the manuscripts and their cultural context. Although most of the manuscripts are neither signed nor dated, nor are many of their patrons known, it is often possible to attribute the illustrations by stylistic analogy to workshops or sometimes to artists whose other works are better localized and dated. In this way a pattern of the reception of Tristan manuscripts can be reconstructed.

This volume allows readers to survey the richness of the surviving evidence from a variety of disciplinary approaches while also offering new perspectives on the nature of representation in medieval culture. It is our hope that it will stimulate a dialogue in which questions of interest to art historians and literary scholars intersect in productive and exciting ways. Our goal is to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue and to open up and explore new avenues of inquiry into the well-documented and well-researched story of Tristan and Isolde.

Notes

1. This conference, “Visuality and Materiality in the Story of Tristan and Isolde,” was held March 30 to April 1, 2007, at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a part of the collaborative project “Tristan and Isolde and the Emotional Cultures of the Middle Ages.”

2. The literature on individual pictorial representations of the Tristan story is too vast to provide a comprehensive survey of it here. The following works provide surveys of objects containing images: Michael Curschmann, “Images of Tristan,” in Gottfried von Strassburg and the Medieval Tristan Legend: Papers from an Anglo–North American Symposium, ed. A. Stevens
3. For example, Richard Wagner’s Tristan and Thomas Mann’s Tristan. More recent works that engage with the story of Tristan include Raoul Schrott, Tristan da Cunha, oder Die Hälfte der Erde (Munich: Hanser, 2003); and John Updike, Brazil (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1994); and the many film versions include Jean Delannoy, L’Éternel retour (Art House Classic, 1943); Veith von Fürstenberg, Feuer und Schwert—Die Legende von Tristan und Isolde (DNS, 1982); Fabrizio Costa, Il cuore e la spada (Sat 1 T.V. Production, 1998); and Kevin Reynolds, Tristan & Isolde (ApolloProMedia 1. Filmproduktion KG (I), 2006).

4. There are several exceptions to this rule, such as the comparative studies by Walter Haug, “Erzählen als Suche nach personaler Identität, oder: Gottfrieds von Straßburg Liebeskonzept im Spiegel des neuen Tristan-Fragments von Carlisle,” in Erzählungen in Erzählungen: Phänomene der Narration in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit, ed. Harald Haferland and Michael Mecklenburg (München: W. Fink, 1996), 177–87; and “Reinterpreting the Tristan Romances of Thomas and Gotfrid: Implications of a Recent Discovery,” Arthuriana 7.3 (1997): 44–59, that take into consideration the Carlisle fragment.


7. For a survey of secondary literature, see René Wetzel, “Der Tristanstoff in der Literatur des deutschen Mittelalters: Forschungsbericht, 1969–1994,” in *Forschungsberichte zur Germanistik* Medialistik, ed. Hans-Jochen Schiewer, vol. 5.1 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996), 190–254; Christoph Huber, *Gottfried von Straßburg: Tristan*, Klassiker-Lektüren 3 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2000; rev. ed., 2001); and Huber’s online bibliography, “Bibliographie zum Tristan von Gottfried von Straßburg (1984–2002),” *Das altgermanistische Internetportal: Mediaevum.de*, http://bibliographien.mediaevum.de/bibliographien/bibliographietristan.htm (Feb. 18, 2008), which goes up to 2002. An unpublished extension of this bibliography that incorporates scholarship on other versions of Tristan and continues to 2007 was compiled by the authors as part of the TransCoop Program project “Tristan and Isolde and the Emotional Cultures of the Middle Ages.” A comprehensive (or even representational) overview of the extensive secondary literature on the story of Tristan is beyond the scope of this introduction. We refer here to only a few of the seminal works.


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