A DRAMATIC AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER, ISOLDE,
DERIVED FROM BOTH THE LEGEND AND RICHARD WAGNER'S
OPERA, TRISTAN AND ISOLDE

APPROVED:

[Signature]
Major Professor

[Signature]
Minor Professor

[Signature]
Dean of the School of Music

[Signature]
Dean of the Graduate School
A DRAMATIC AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER, ISOLDE, Derived from Both the Legend and Richard Wagner's Opera, Tristan and Isolde

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State Teachers College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

By

Patxi Jane McConnell, B. M.
Tulia, Texas
May, 1949
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CHAPTER I

A SHORT ANALYSIS OF THE LEGEND AND OPERA,

TRISTAN AND ISOLDE

This paper attempts to give a complete musical and dramatic analysis of the character of Isolde, from both the legend and Richard Wagner's opera, Tristan and Isolde, by first comparing the events as related in the two principal sources of the legend and then by an examination of Wagner's version of the story. This is followed by an analysis of the character of Isolde as revealed in the legend and as modified by Wagner. The final chapter discusses Wagner's musical treatment of the role of Isolde.

The Two Main Sources of the Legend

There are several versions of the legend, Tristan and Isolde. The most important are that of Thomas and that of Beroul, both to be discussed later. The earliest form and nationality is a matter of debate. The name Tristram (Thomas: Tristan, Tristram; Beroul: Tristram, Tristrant) probably of Pictish origin, seems to have been transmitted to the French by the Welsh or Cornish. The name Isolde (Beroul: Iscuit, Yseut; Thomas: Isolt, Ysolt, Isol, Isolde, Yselt, Yseut) has been connected with various Germanic names; Ethylda, Iswilda, and Ishild. Its origin has also been
sought in the Welch Essylt. 1 According to Professor Heinrich Robert Zimmer, the main incidents were of historic origin, dating from the period of the viking rule in Ireland. In the Zeitschrift für französische Sprache (No. XIII) he points out that the name Isolda has several spellings according to the different versions. 2 The fact that she is traditionally an Irish princess seems to point to a Celtic origin. However, this assumption is quite unnecessary since, in the sixth century, the king of the court at Dublin was not Irish but a Norseman, a Viking. As a consequence, the princess of Dublin would most probably have borne a Germanic name. The heroine, then, is no Celtic maiden but a child of the North, a Viking's daughter; hence the legends always represent her as fair and golden haired. 3

The two main versions of this legend are classified as the French or Minstrel; 4 and the English or Courtly versions. 5 The French version is more detailed and looser in construction and is represented by French fragments attributed to Beroul and the German poet, Milbert von Oberge. The other version - called by Gaston Paris 6-the English and by

1 Gertrude Loomis, Tristan and Isolde, p. 268.
2 Jessie L. Weston, Legends of the Wagner Drama, p. 301.
3 Ibid.
4 Joseph Sedier, The Romance of Tristan and Isolde.
5 Weston, op. cit.
Wolfgang Golther—also known as the Courtly version—is represented by the poems of Thomas of Brittany and his follower and adaptor, Gottfried von Strassburg. It is to this version of the legend of Tristan and Isolde that Wagner was most indebted for the text of his opera.

According to the French or Minstrel version, when Mark was King of Cornwall, Rivalen, King of Lyonsse, upon hearing of the many bitter battles being waged against King Mark, set sail for Cornwall to assist him. As a reward for his faithful service, Mark gave Rivalen his sister, Blanchflur to wife. Hardly were they wed at Tintagel, home of King Mark, when news came that Duke Morgan, a bitter enemy of Rivalen, was again waging war upon his country. Rivalen set sail immediately for Lyonsse bearing with him his wife, Blanchflur, who was with child. Rivalen fought bravely, but was killed on the battlefield. Shortly afterward, Blanchflur gave birth to a son and died in childbirth. The child, called Tristan, was put in safe keeping with Lothar, a marshal of Rivalen’s. At the age of seven, Tristan was sent to Squire Gorvenal to learn the arts that went with his rank. Unfortunately he became friendly with a crew of merchants from Norway who bore him off, only to set him afloat, alone, after the Gods made their anger plain in stormy gales. Finally, Tristan came to land and met some huntsmen in a forest who were well disposed and took him with them to the court that happened to be that

7Ibid., citing Wolfgang Golther, Die Saege von Tristan und Isolde, Munich 1887.
of King Mark. The King, seeing what a fine youth Tristan was, kept him in his service for three years, though neither knew the kinship between them. After searching four years for Tristan, Rohalt came to Tintagel and told the story of Tristan's birth. Being now ready for the honor, Tristan was knighted by Mark and returned to Lyonsse to conquer his father's slayer. Giving Lyonsse to Rohalt, he returned to Cornwall only to find Mark's kingdom in sorrow over the forthcoming payment of three hundred youths and three hundred maidens to the king of Ireland, an annual tribute that had been exacted by an earlier Irish king as a result of his conquest. The proclamation was sent with the giant, Morhold, whose sister was Queen Isult of Ireland and mother of Isult the Fair. Tristan went into fierce battle with Morhold, killing him but receiving a wound from Morhold's poisonous sword. Before his death, Morhold informed Tristan he, too, would soon die from his wounds, for only Isult the Fair\(^8\) could heal them. Tristan returned from battle near death's door. Tristan's wound was so malodorous that he could not bear that anyone should be near him and he begged to be set adrift in a boat to die. "For seven days and seven nights the sea so drew him . . . and when at last the sea brought him near a shore where fishermen had left their port that night to fish far out."\(^9\)

\(^8\)In the English or Courtly version, queen Isult of Ireland is a sorceress, while the French or Courtly version makes her daughter, Isult the Fair, the sorceress.

The shore was that of Ireland and he was taken to Iseult, who, being skilled in the art of healing, cured him, not knowing who he was. Upon his recovery, he made his escape back to Cornwall.

Now there was a group in King Mark's court who were jealous of Tristan, and feared that, unless Mark married, Tristan would become heir to the throne. This group urged Mark to take a wife. While he was making up his mind, a golden hair was delivered to his inner room by swallows. King Mark announced that he would marry the maiden to whom the golden hair belonged. No one could suggest who this might be except Tristan, who told of Iseult the Fair having such golden hair, and offered to go and bring her to King Mark as his bride. Thus Tristan came to set sail again for Ireland. Upon his arrival, he killed a dragon which was besieging the city, and cut out his tongue; but he fainted into unconsciousness from poison emitted by the dragon.

There was a certain seneschal, a false and cowardly man, who had long wished to wed the Princess Iseult, but though each day he had put on his armour to fight the dragon, he had always been afraid to face it when he saw it. Upon his discovery that Tristan had slain the dragon, he, taking full advantage of the wounded hero, cut off the dragon's head and went riding through the town shouting with glee, "I have slain the dragon! Now, O King, have I freed your realm and avenged your men and your despetes." Yield me forthwithal my

9"Despites" = Those being contemptuous or havin outrageous treatment. (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Fifth Edition.)
warison, 10 which is Ysolt your daughter.  11 Iseult, knowing his real cowardliness, suspected deception. Taking Brangaene, her friend and maid-in-waiting, with her, they went to the place where the dragon lay dead and found Tristan. It was soon revealed that Tristan was the killer, and also, during his convalescence under the ministrations of Iseult, that he had been the slayer of Morholt, who was Iseult's uncle. Iseult vowed vengeance, but remembering the reward offered by the King, her father, namely her hand in marriage in return for the destruction of the dragon, she resigned herself to her fate of becoming the bride of King Mark of Cornwall. Again Tristan set sail, this time with a most precious cargo for his king. One day when the wind had fallen and the sails hung slack, Tristan dropped anchor by an island and everyone went ashore. Iseult, alone, remained aboard with a little serving maid. The sun was hot and the maid looked about for a refreshing drink and found the love-philtre that Iseult's mother had secretly given to Brangaene for safekeeping. It was intended to be served to Iseult and King Mark on the eve of their wedding. When Tristan came back to the ship to try to calm Iseult's loneliness, she, unconscious of the nature of the potion, asked him to drink with her.

Now as the philtre commenced to work, Tristan and Iseult began

10 "Warison" = Reward. (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Fifth Edition.)
11 Roger Loomis, The Romance of Tristram and Ysolt, p. 105.
to look strangely upon one another. Day after day the love and desire became more compelling until they gave to one another their undying love and devotion, despite Brangaene's words: "Cursed be the day I was born and cursed the day that first I trod this deck. Iseult, my friend, and Tristan, you, you have drunk death together." Upon Iseult's marriage to King Mark, Brangaene, who was of Iseult's height and stature, was sent, by Iseult, to the bridal-bed in order to keep secret the fact that she had already betrayed the king with Tristan. Now the four felons at court, who hated Tristan for his friendship with the king, watched Iseult. They guessed the love of Tristan and Iseult, and informed the king, who could not believe his trusted Tristan capable of such disloyalty; but in order to allay suspicion, he ordered Tristan to leave the country. Though Tristan left, he secretly returned to see Iseult with the help of Corvenal. On the night of one of their meetings the evil felons planned revenge again. They bade King Mark climb into a tree and see for himself the lovers meeting, but Brangaene warned Tristan and Iseult in time so that Iseult feigns surprise at seeing Tristan and Mark is persuaded to allow the return of Tristan to Tintagel. But another trap is set and King Mark finally sees with his own eyes the guilt of the the two lovers.

Here the French versions differ from each other. Kilhart von Ohrge, writes of King Mark's anger and his banishment.

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of Tristan, but states that Tristan carried Iseult with him into the woods to live in primitive surroundings. As they were sleeping in the forest one day, King Mark came upon them and found Tristan's sword between them. Taking this as evidence of their innocence, Mark persuades Iseult to return to Tintagel with him. Thomas of Brittany writes of a test in which Iseult is to prove her virtue by being carried and made to grasp hot irons. She sends a messenger to Tristan to disguise himself as the pilgrim who is to carry her so that at her ordeal she can truthfully claim that none but the king and the pilgrim have held her in their arms. Thus she comes through unscathed and Mark receives her back. Both sources agree that Tristan took a voyage and entered service with the Duke of Wales. There he waited two long years for word of Iseult.

Here again the versions depart. Some say Tristan returned to Tintagel and lived a secret life, while others tell of the great friendship Tristan gains with Kaherdin, the son of an aged duke ruling in Brittany, "a brave and courteous knight . . . who . . . had a sister, fair, courteous and well-advised beyond any maidens of the land."¹⁴ She was called Iseult of the White Hands.¹⁵ Her remarkable resemblance

¹³There are several derivations of Kaherdin's name. This seems to be the preferred one.
¹⁵Also known as Iseult of Brittany.
to his love, Iscult the Fair, astounded Tristan, and he
marries her.

Tristan from Iscult thought to part,
And tear the love out from his heart;
He takes the one Iscult to wife
To thrust that other from his life.
Had that first Iscult never been
He'd not love this Iscult, I ween;
But for that first love Iscult's sake
A new Iscult he longs to take:
Since that Iscult may not be his
He sets his will on having this:16

Tristan is confused. His soul yearns for his Irish love, or
Iscult the Fair, yet the desire of his body gives him no
peace. Presently he leaves Brittany to go to Iscult the Fair
and tells her of his distraction and his marriage to Iscult
of the White Hands. When he came back to Brittany to Cairlax,
it happened that Tristan, as he was riding to the aid of
Kaherdin, his close companion, fell into ambush and was
wounded by a poisoned spear. Many doctors came, but none
could cure him of his wound. He knew his life was to be
short and again desired to see Iscult the Fair. "He called
Kaherdin secretly to tell him his pain... and then Tristan
told Kaherdin of his love for that other Iscult, and of the
sorrow of his life."17 Tristan asked of his friend that he
go to Iscult of Ireland and tell her of him and beg her to
come.

16Sayers, op. cit., p. 119, quoting the first Sneyd
Fragment.
Take heed none knows it save we two.  
Let not thy sister learn thereof,  
Or have suspicion of our love;  
Give out it is a cunning wife  
Come from a far to save my life.  
And thou shalt take my vessel fair,  
And place a double sail in her;  
One shall be black, the other white;  
And if thou bring Isuelt aright,  
And if she come to heal my pain,  
Sail with the white sail home again.  
But if of Isuelt thou shouldst lack,  
Sail hither with the sail of black.  

Isuelt of the White Hands, jealous of the love she had never received, overhears the conversation and determines to revenge herself upon Tristan. For forty days Tristan lay in semi-consciousness during which time Isuelt, his wife, served him well. At last the day arrived when the boat came into sight bearing a white sail. Tristan asked of his wife the color of the sail and here she saw her opportunity for revenge. "Thus saith Ysolt: 'I know it sikerly. Wit ye well the sail is altogether black. They have hoisted it and drawn it high, for that the wind faileth them.'" With that the dying Tristan turned his head to the wall in weakness and in grief saying:

God save Isuelt and me, . . .  
For if thou wilt not come to me,  
Then I must die for love of thee;  
I can no more, my life must end,  
For thee I die, Isuelt, sweet friend;  

And then to Tristan’s body came Isuelt the Fair and lay

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18 Sayers, op. cit., p. 201, quoting the Douce Fragment.  
down beside him. "She kissed his mouth and his face, and
clasped him closely; and so gave up her soul, and died beside
him of grief for her lover." 21

Thus ends the romance of Tristan and Iseult.

There are many minute differences in the stories of the
French and English versions of the legend, but the main ones
are the varied spelling of names and the transposing of
scenes from one place to another. For example, instead of
Rohelt, the spelling has been changed to Roald and so on.
It is quite plain the main scenes appear in all the versions
but are differently arranged. Thus the entrance of Iseult
and Tristan into the woods takes place after his banishment
by King Mark and before his voyage to service with the Duke
of Wales in the French version. The English version refers
to it after his return from duty with the Duke of Wales.
Berol and Oberge dwell more on the destruction of Tristan
and Iseult, while Thomas of Brittany felt the love-story to
be more appealing.

A Comparison of the Legend and Wagner's Story

The question now arises: How did Wagner write his
closely-woven libretti with all the confusion of numerous
versions of the legend? Wagner's drama is a synthesis of
legends from various sources as are the other Wagnerian
dramas. Wagner condensed the story into three acts. The

21Bedier, op. cit., p. 194.
first act centers around the drinking of the love-potion, the
second around Tristan and Isolde’s deception and discovery,
culminating in Tristan’s banishment, and the third around the
reunion and death of the lovers. Wagner does not mention
certain characters and incidents. For example, Isolt of the
White Hands is never referred to and Tristan never marries.
None of Tristan’s early life is given. Neither Rivalen nor
blanchflur is mentioned, and, though it is stated that
Tristan is King Mark’s nephew, the exact relationship of his
being Mark’s sister’s son is never clear. Melot is responsi-
sible for the discovery of the lovers in Wagner’s opera while
in one of the legends, it is the four felons. In order not
to have an excess of characters, Wagner has further condensed
the number of characters. Instead of having the serving maid
prepare the potion, he omits this character and has Brangaene
prepare the draught. The same is true with Kaherdin. He is
omitted and it is Kurvenal (Corvenal) who ministers unto him
in his last illness.

“Tristan and Isolde\textsuperscript{22} would seem, more than any other
work of Wagner’s, to owe its existence to real experience
and real suffering. None shows so plainly the link between
actual events and the artist’s creative dreams.”\textsuperscript{23} Wilhelmine
Schroeder-Devrient, one of the leading sopranos of the time
and one of Wagner’s close friends, had once supplied Wagner

\textsuperscript{22} Wagner preferred this spelling.

\textsuperscript{23} Paul Bekker, \textit{Richard Wagner}, p. 286.
with the style of his heroines, however it soon became
Mathilde Wesendonk, wife of a New York silk firm agent, who
endowed his works with soul.

The antecedent events of the opera tell of Isolde,
daughter of the King of Ireland, who was engaged to Morold.
(In the legend Morold is Isolde's uncle.) Morold has gone to
Cornwall to collect the annual tribute that had been exacted
many years before by another king of Ireland, who had con-
quered Cornwall. Here Morold is slain by King Mark's nephew,
Tristan, so, in place of the tribute, Mark sends back to
Ireland Morold's head, embedded in which Isolde finds a piece
of the killer's sword and eventually identifies the murderer.
In one of the legends Morolt's body is taken back to Ireland
by his kinsmen who had come with him to Cornwall. Tristan,
himself, is wounded and goes to seek the assistance of Isolde,
who in Wagner's drama, had learned the magic art of healing,
while one of the legends states that it was Isolde's mother
who was the sorceress. Tristan, not wishing to be recognized,
goes to her under the name of Tantris, but Isolde discovers
his true identity by the piece of Tristan's sword taken from
Morolt's head which Isolde has preserved in order to identify
Morolt's slayer. As she raises her sword to avenge Morolt's
death, Tristan looks long and tenderly at her. Not knowing
why, Isolde drops the sword. After his healing, she allows
him to depart without revealing his true identity to the
rest of the Irish court. Upon his return to Cornwall, he joins those who are urging the king to marry for an heir and Tristan is dispatched by the king to go back to Ireland and ask for the hand of Isolde.

The events, preceding the drama, are explained in Act I, scene two. From this we learn of Morold's voyage to Cornwall.

To lay a tax on Cornish backs, Sir Morold was ferried; 'Mid tussocks damp, in dismal swamp, his body now lies buried!
His head, tho'; went to Irish lands,
As taxes sent by English hands . . 24

We learn, from the conversation between Isolde and Brangaena, the facts of Tristan's arrival in Ireland, under the name of Tantris, and his curing by Isolde, who recognises him from the nick in his sword which matched the piece of steel taken from Morold's head and preserved by Isolde.

The opera begins when the curtain rises upon the ship on which Tristan is bringing Isolde to Cornwall. Isolde is a very unwilling bride-to-be. She is secretly in love with Tristan, and, in addition, is lonesome for her own country.

She bids Brangaena to go and command Tristan to come and speak to her. Upon his refusal, she bids Brangaena to pour into the golden cup the poisoned potion she had secretly brought with her. Brangaena, aware of Isolde's intentions, quickly substitutes the love-potion, which Isolde's mother had intrusted to her for the wedding night. A message is sent to Tristan

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saying Isolde will refuse to go ashore unless he, Tristan, comes first to obtain her pardon for the killing of her lover, Morold. He obeys her command and she offers him, what they both believe to be the cup of poison. She takes the cup from him and drinks the remains of the half-emptied cup. "Instead of the ice-cold chill of death which they both expected, Tristan and Ysolde suddenly feel the electric tingle of love rushing madly through all their veins, and, forgetting all else, fall into each other's arms, exchanging passionate vows of undying love."25 At this moment the ship arrives in the harbor, and the king approaches to meet his bride.

In act two, Isolde is soon to be married to the king. "It is not clear from Wagner's text whether Isolde really marries King Marke at all, but the indications are that she does not; and so far are Tristan and Isolde from being the conventional lovers of operatic romance, gratifying a guilty passion and singing melodiously about it for our benefit, that their whole pathos and their whole tragedy are that a union between them is forever impossible: Tristan's honour stands in the way of that."26 In the French version27 of

25H. A. Guerber, Stories of the Wagner Operas, p. 80.
27As given in Joseph Bedier, Tristan and Isolde and in Roger Loomis, The Romance of Tristram and Yseult. The only version of the English legend available for this study is that found in Jessie L. Weston and is explicit neither on the marriage of Isolde and Mark nor the actual sin of Tristan and Isolde.
the legend, Mark actually takes Isolde to wife, however no mention of actual sin is made on the part of Tristan and Isolde. But Isolde and Brangaena plot her rendezvous with Tristan. One courtier, Melot, jealous of Tristan, is resolved to betray him to the king, in whose company he intends to surprise the lovers. Needless of Brangaena's warning, Isolde is determined to meet Tristan. In the poetic paraphrase of Catulle Mendes: "They lose themselves in the Nirvana of love, and already, having ceased to be, retaining of their individual love but a vague, delicious feeling, they dissolve into their common soul, which, large and unfathomable, seems to them the soul of the whole universe."²⁸ Brangaena's fears are well founded, however, because King Mark, Melot and other attendants, suddenly appear. The king reproaches both of them bitterly, but Tristan, who is still in a trance, dreamily turns to Isolde and asks her to follow him away from Cornwall. Melot rushes forward, shouting treason and stabs Tristan. At this point, Wagner has condensed several scenes pertaining to the departure of Tristan.

As the curtain of the third act rises, Tristan is in his own castle in Bretagne being cared for by Kurvenal, who brought him home after the affray with Melot. The legend states that Tristan asked Kaherdin to go and get Isolde, while in the opera it is Kurvenal who, secretly, had sent for

²⁸ Henry T. Finck, Wagner and His Works, p. 142.
Isolde hoping that she might again heal his wound. A shepherd has been stationed on the rocks to watch for the ship bearing Isolde. Suddenly the ship is sighted. Isolde has come. "Painfully he staggers half across the stage to meet Ysolde, who appears only in time to hear his last passionate utterance of her beloved name, and to catch his dying form in her arms."29

CHAPTER II

A DRAMATIC COMPARISON OF THE CHARACTER, ISOLDE

DERIVED FROM THE LEGEND AND THE OPERA

The Legendary Iseult

Since the legends do not contradict each other in regard to Iseult's character, we may draw on them indiscriminately to construct as near as we can, the composite character of the legendary Iseult.

Iseult is, of course, reputed to have been a woman of great beauty, the principal feature being her long golden hair. Seamus McCall\(^1\) states that the Celts of the North were described as tall and robust, generally blue-eyed, with red or fair hair, and long-faced, with a narrow aquiline nose. Since none of the legends gives a full description of Iseult, except for her long golden hair and the general fact that she was beautiful, one can only imagine the rest. We do not even know how old either she or Tristan was, save that it is obvious that they were both of marriageable age. Whatever that age may have been, according to the customs of the time and place, her ingenuity and her ability to deceive argue that, at least, she must have been a mature young woman rather than a simple child-bride.

\(^1\)Seamus McCall, And So Began the Irish Nation, p. 318.
Iseult enters the legend upon Tristan's arrival in Ireland to be cured, by her, of the wound Morholt had given him before his own death, yet her character does not reveal itself until the seneschal claims to have killed the dragon and asks for the promised reward of her hand in marriage. On this subject Iseult says to her mother:

Never will I consent to be this man's wife! I will kill myself rather. But I cannot believe that such a coward as he ever slew the terrible dragon. Let us go and look where the monster's body lies. It may be we shall find there the true hero, whether living or dead I know not.  

Iseult laughs at the seneschal in scorn saying:

Thou? thou the dragon-slayer? Thou that wast ever known to be cowardly, false, a traitor in grain? Not so; for they say that another slew the dragon, and thou wouldst steal the reward.

She insists on going with Brangaene to see for herself the slain dragon. Here she finds her suspicions confirmed when she discovers the real slayer, the wounded Tristan.

Now when Iseult was examining the sword of Tantris, in his absence, she discovers it to be the one which slew her uncle, Morholt. In fury she runs upon Tristan crying: "Villain and traitor, thou canst not now deceive me! Die upon the sword with which thou didst slay my uncle!"

In addition to the intelligence shown by this bit of detective work, the incident illustrates her family loyalty. Yet she does not kill him because, since only she and Brangaene know that it was Tristan, and not the seneschal, who killed the

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2Dorothy Leigh Sayers, Tristan in Brittany, pp. 67-68.
3Ibid., pp 69-70.  4Ibid., p. 71.
dragon, the king and the rest of the Irish court would assume that the seneschal was the slayer and would force Iseult to marry him. For this reason, she decides not to kill Tristan. In this matter Iseult is showing normal concern for her own marital happiness.

On board the ship carrying her to King Mark, Iseult and Tristan drink the love-philtre which alters her character somewhat for the remainder of her life. She becomes tormented, but frustrated, in her love for Tristan. As she says to Tristan: "L'amor torments me; l'amor lies heavy on my heart; l'amor is pain and grief to me." Where she had formerly been haughty and reserved, she now lays open her heart to Tristan, and in doing so has blossomed emotionally. Yet Iseult is clever, and devises the plan of having the virgin, Brangaene, take her place with King Mark upon the briscal-bed. In her subsequent plot to seal Brangaene's lips, by having her murdered, she shows herself capable of cruelty in her intense concern for her own security at all costs.6

Yet, after Brangaene succeeds in talking the murderers out of killing her, by claiming that Iseult's malevolence was only temporary, Iseult is genuinely remorseful at the idea that she

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5Ibid., p. 77.

6A less extreme example of Iseult's cruelty is the incident of the dog which Tristan sent to her. Through the dog, her loneliness and grief expanded till she had the dog killed.
had feared disloyalty on Brangaene’s part. 7 Here, as on
other occasions, Isult’s head and heart are in conflict.

Clever enough to deceive others, she, herself, can be
deceived, at least momentarily. When King Mark hears rumors
of the love-affair between Isult and Tristan, he puts Isult
to a test of loyalty by asking her who she thought would be
the most capable person to take care of her in his absence on
a proposed pilgrimage. Isult replies: “Nay, my dear lord,
who but Tristan, your own sister’s son and the best man in
your realm?” 8 Isult has stepped into the trap set for her,
and selfishly rejoices at the thought of many happy hours to
be spent with Tristan. However, upon reflecting, her shrewd-
ness again manifests itself, and she tells Mark, the following
day, that she does not wish Tristan to stay with her and even
hints that Tristan is disloyal to him and dislikes her. It is
here that Isult begins her own destruction. Later, when she
and Tristan are about to be caught by King Mark and the felons,
in one of their rendezvous, she immediately addresses Tristan
with feigned innocence:

I am greatly astonished Sir Tristan, that you should have
asked me to meet you in such a place and at such an un-
timely hour. Think if this were known, what colour it
would give to the unjust suspicions men have of us! How
unjust they are, you know well, for I swear to God that
never have I shown love or desired to show love to any
man, save only to him who first held me, maiden, within
his arms. 9

7 It may be remarked in passing that Brangaene’s ability
to talk herself out of danger here shows a certain quick-
wittedness on her part too.

8 Sayers, op. cit., p. 86. 9 Ibid., p. 91
In referring to the fact, unknown to Mark, that it was Tristan with whom she had first lain, before her arrival in Cornwall, and not Mark himself, she evades the truth but is careful not to swear to a lie. Iseult was less a congenital liar, however, than a woman forced into evasion by her need to preserve her own security in the face of her strong, but illicit, passion for a man other than her husband. Thus, in order to allay all suspicions of her affair with Tristan, she consents to submit to the ordeal by hot irons, but cleverly arranges for Tristan to be dressed as a poor pilgrim to carry her from the boat to the appointed meeting of the test, so that when the ordeal takes place, she can say:

Kings of Logres and of Cornwall; my lord Gawayn, and Kay, and Girflet, and all of you that are my warrantors, by these holy things and all the holy things of earth, I swear that no man has held me in his arms saving King Mark, my lord, and that poor pilgrim... 10

and taking the hot irons in hand, Iseult remains unharmed. It was not long, however, before she becomes entangled with Tristan again and, upon discovery, both are banished from the land.

Iseult is very passionate at heart and it is through this characteristic that she herself brings about her own destruction. She is a woman of extremes of temperament; at times she experiences utter joy and other times deep remorse at her illicit passion. Except when real necessity for duplicity arises, she is quite frank and open. She says what

10Joseph Bealor, The Romance of Tristan and Iseult, p. 131.
she means, simply and directly, as her speeches show. However reckless she is in her scenes with Tristan alone, she is poised and self-possessed in the presence of others. For example, in Joseph Bedier’s French version of the legend, Tristan leaves Tintagel and goes into service for the Duke of Wales, marries Isolde of the White Hands, but returns to Mark’s courts once again to see Isolde the Fair. In order to keep his identity secret from everyone, even Isolde, he arrives disguised as a fool. On first seeing him, Isolde’s poise is shaken and she cries to Brangaene:

Why was I born? Brangaene, dear sister, life is so hard to me that death were better! There is a fool without, shaven criss-cross, and come in an evil hour, and he is warlock, for he knows in every part myself and my whole life; he knows what you and I and Tristan only know.

Isolde is frustrated. Perhaps her entire affair with Tristan will be revealed and yet her desire for Tristan is gnawing at her mind and heart. She is not bitter, only irritable and anxious when Tristan is not there. For the major portion of the legend, her love for Tristan is entirely selfish, and it is only at the end that she shows any remorse for the effect that their love has had on his position. Tristan is already dead when Isolde looks to the heavens praying:

Since I behold thee dead, sweet friend, I too of life must make an end;

11Ibid., pp. 161-169.

12Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Fifth Edition, Warlock, a sorcerer or wizard.

13Bedier, op. cit., p. 175.
All for my love thou comest to die
And I die, love, for misery,
Because in time I could not come
To heal thee of thy evil doom.
Love, love, for this the death of thee
Nothing can ever comfort me,
Delight, nor mirth, nor any joy.
God's hate that evil storm destroy.
That on the sea so long me stay'd,
I could not come, friend, to thy aid.
Wherefore must I too late attain?
I would have brought you life again,
And spoken tenderly with you
Of that love which was 'twixt us two,
And made complaint of all our fate:
The joyousness and pleasure great,
The bitter pain and dolorous,
Which love hath always brought to us.
All this had I brought back to mind,
And clipped and kissed you and been kind.
Since I might heal thee not, God send
We now together make an end!
Since I in time came not aright,
Nor knew not of thy evil plight,
But found death waiting overseas,
Of that same draught will I have ease.
 Thy life is lost because of me,
And I will thy true leman be,
And I will to die for thee likewise. 14

Isbelt's character offers some points of interest in the
light of modern psychology. For her intelligence 15, one needs
seek no deep psychological reason; nor for her pride, which
would be natural for a princess, as would also her family

14 Sayers, op. cit., p. 158. Quoted from the Last Part
of the Poem from the Douce Fragment (the 1268th to the 3087th
line), the Second Turin Fragment (the 1268th to the 1518th
line), the Second Strasbourg Fragment (the 1499th to the 1493rd
and the 1616th to the 1688th line), the Third Strasbourg Frag-
ment (the 1755th to the 1854th line), and the Second Seyd
Fragment (the 2519th to the 3145th line).

15 As exemplified in her suspicion that the seneschal was
not the slayer of the dragon, again in her comparison of the
sword fragment from Morhold's wound with the nick in Tristan's
sword, as well as in her schemes to assure Tristan's presence
both during Mark's pilgrimage and the ordeal of irons.
loyalty to her dead uncle, Morhold, which impels her to try to kill Tristan.

Her passionate nature, not only accounts for her continued vengefulness toward Tristan during most of the voyage from Ireland to Cornwall, but also causes the recklessness with which she persists in carrying on her affair with Tristan, and the frankness of her speech. Perhaps too, it accounts in some measure for her cruelty, although this is also partly attributable to her selfishness as exemplified in her plan to kill Brangaene in order to conceal the fact that she was not a virgin when she married King Mark. In fact, it almost seems that selfishness is the keynote of her character. Not only does it drive her to cruelty toward Brangaene and to a disregard for the effects of her actions on the lives of Tristan and King Mark, but it also produces her calculated concern for her own position as well as the deceit and evasiveness necessary to preserve that position.

In his book, A Theory of Personality Based Mainly on Psychiatric Experience, A. J. Rosanoff stated that there are four types of character: the Antisocial (hysterical), Cyclothymic (moody), Autistic (dreamy), and Epileptic (head-strong). A mixture of these types is the rule and pure types

\[16\text{The incident of cruelty toward the dog is similarly inspired by selfish desire to rid herself of this reminder of her lover's absence, without any humane consideration of the dog.}\]

\[17\text{Cited in June E. Downey, The Will Temperament and Its Testing, pp. 8-10.}\]
are the exception. Iseult may be regarded as a mixture of Rossenoff's "Epileptic" and "Cyclothymic" types. The headstrong side of her character is manifested primarily in the persistence with which she carries on her affair with Tristan, while her moodiness is exemplified throughout the story, not only by her alternation between ecstasy and remorse in the moments of passion itself, but also in her alternation of recklessness with caution.

Iseult's betrothal to King Mark is the point of some interest. It seems to have been a fairly frequent procedure, in such distant ages, for royal marriages to be arranged without regard for affection (as has also been the case in much more recent times), even to the point of a daughter's hand being given to a conqueror; and one wonders somewhat, in view of this custom, at Iseult's lack of resignation to her arranged marriage to a man, who, though probably considerably older than she (since his nephew was her contemporary) and unknown to her, was nevertheless a king, and a fine and noble one at that. Iseult's attitude, in this matter, seems to mark her as headstrong and perhaps as a person who, having no concern to adapt herself to the situation, selfishly tries to adapt the situation to herself. Knowing as little as we do

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18 Ibid., p. 10.

19 "Specific characteristics depend upon the types of adaptive responses which the individual makes use of." Mandel Sherman and Irene C. Sherman, The Process of Human Behavior, p. 185.
about life in so remote a period, we cannot be altogether sure to what extent Isseult’s reaction, here, is to be reckoned as "normal" or "abnormal," and, therefore, to what extent a knowledge of modern psychology is necessary to explain it. Modern psychology does, however, offer an interesting interpretation of Isseult’s killing of the dog in the concept of cathexis.  

Richard Wagner’s Isolde

As to the appearance and costume of Isolde in the opera, Wagner’s score is no more explicit than the legend.

Isolde begins the first scene of Act I asking of the sailors, who have been singing a song of an “Irish maid,” whether they are trying to mock her. She is disturbed and lonely, and breaks into lamentation over the strange land and husband to whom she is destined. She wishes for death, rather than the life she is to lead. In scene two, wishing for a visit from Tristan to demand of him a request for forgiveness for having killed her lover, Morold, she commands Brangaena:

He is a man, go ask him, then if some to me he dares?
This caitiff lord oth e’en neglect
to greet his lady due respect; . . .
As my vassal bound straight-way let
him come nigh . . .

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20Cathexis, term in psychoanalytic theory referring to the concentration of psychic energy in a particular outlet. Philip Lawrence Harriman, The New Dictionary of Psychology, p. 64.
Nay, let my lord forth-with be told, 
he mind his mistress, me, Isolde!21

Isolde is showing her impetuousness along with her unconscious desire to speak with Tristan, despite the fact, that (as she well knows) Tristan, having wooed and won her to be his uncle's bride, is traditionally forbidden to visit the bride-to-be. When, in scene three, Brangaena brings his answer, Isolde becomes furious. She explains to Brangaena how she once had Tristan at her mercy, but had not killed him; and now she admits she is ruled by Tristan, as his possession— all to her shame. She is proud and now regrets that she did not take advantage of her former position. Passionately Isolde cries out against Tristan: "Curse thee, thou dastard! Cursed by thy head! Vengeance! Death! . . . "22 When Brangaena tries to calm her by explaining Tristan's position, Isolde staring vacantly, refers to herself as: "Unbeloved, yet ever thus near to him so noble (i.e. Mark)! How can I endure my trouble?"23 In mind Isolde is frightened. She knows nothing of King Mark or Cornwall. She cannot possibly feel love for the king, and for this reason has a sense of loneliness and dread. But in the fourth scene, Isolde quickly regains her self-control sufficiently to plot Tristan's death. Shrewdly she refuses to leave the boat until Tristan comes to ask

22Ibid., p. 44. 23Ibid., p. 49.
forgiveness for the wrong he has done her, at which time she plans that they shall both drink a toast of death—bringing an end to her fears and unhappiness and, at the same time, a violent revenge upon Tristan. In her mind, Isolde is too distraught to know what to do, so that death seems to be her only refuge. Tristan appears before her, in scene five, and reminds Isolde of his honour, which has kept him from appearing before. Isolde, in her selfishness and self-pity, makes light of his honour. In turn, Tristan hands her his sword in order that she may kill him if she sees fit. Wishing to be more subtle in her murder, Isolde refuses the sword, and instead offers Tristan what she believes to be the drink of death. But Brangaena has purposely substituted the love-potion, and Isolde’s personality, along with Tristan’s, immediately changes. When Isolde realizes, from her emotional reaction that it is the love-potion she has consumed, she develops a certain restlessness of conduct. She realizes that she is not going to die, and that she has not only failed to solve her problem, but has made it worse. In desperation she cries: "Tristan! Must I live then?" 24

In Act II, scene one, Isolde is awaiting a secret rendezvous with Tristan. Her cautiousness has sharpened. She feels it imperative to see her lover and in order to do so, she must arrange conveniently, but slyly, their meetings. She is so determined to see Tristan that she stubbornly

24 Ibid., p. 103.
refuses to believe Brangaena's warning—that Melot is spying on them. She says to Brangaena:

Mearest thou Sir Melot?
How art thou deceived?
Is he not Tristan's faithfulest friend?
When my lover must leave me,
he lingers with Melot alone. 25

When Isolde sees Tristan's signal, she is carried away:

The signal Brangaena!
O give the signal!
Out with the lights last lingering flame!
That now she come nigh us,
bid we the night!
E'en now steals her silence o'er house and how,
E'en now feels my heart her rapturous awe.
Oh! quench me the light at last!
Quench me its fear bringing flame!
Time 'tis, my lov'd one came! 26

Her former contempt (if it really was that rather than unconscious desire) for Tristan has, of course, changed after drinking the love-potion; and throughout the second scene, she confesses her great love, with frankness, and even with a certain self-effacement of which she would not have been capable without the potion. Their affair is discovered by Mark in the following scene, and when Tristan asks Isolde to go away with him to his own country and castle, Isolde's reply is:

When her to foreign lands as friend
thou once didst woo,
the unfaithful full of faith did Isolde follow.
To realms of thine now going,
thine heritage art showing:
Why should I fear that space,
that doth the world embrace?

26 Ibid., p. 115.  26 Ibid., p. 118.
To Tristan's house and home,
there will Isolde come;
The course she true and fair must hold,
that course now show Isolde. 27

The events of the third act take place in Tristan's
castle in Brittany. Isolde does not appear until the end of
the second scene. Rushing on to the stage breathlessly, she
catches Tristan in her arms as he dies. Isolde is grief
stricken and horrified at the sight of her dead lover. To her,
his death seems impossible. At once she is filled with
bitterness towards love. Her conscience now appears for the
first time. She feels she is being punished for her sins and
she gazes at the dead body of her lover, crying out:

Too late! Cruellest love!
Punishment this, all anguish above!
No pity thine
for this grief of mine . . . 28

In the last scene, King Mark and Brangäena appear. King
Mark, who has learned of the potion and has magnanimously
decided to lay the blame on it, rather than on the lovers,
arrives too late to unite Tristan and Isolde. Tristan is
dead and Isolde has slipped into a world of her own as re-
vealed in her great love-death scene:

Fair and gently he is smiling;
see, his eyes he softly opens!
See, my friends,
sh, see ye not?
how he, bright and brighter burning,
streaming starlight, heaves him high?
See ye not how his heart with courage swells,
strong and pryé within him it wells?
From his lips how soft and sweet

27Ibid., pp. 211-212. 28Ibid., pp. 281-282.
come the breath he breathes to me.
Friends, ah! see!
Feel ye, see ye not?

Hears none else the music yonder
that so soft and full of wonder,
sweetly tinging,
all things singing,
from him swelleth,
peace foretellith,
round me growing,
thro' me flowing,
trumpets blast around me blowing?
Blowing clearer,
growing nearer,
Are they waves in air of azure?
Are they waves of perfume and pleasure?
How they heave them,
how they near them!
Dare I breathe them?
Dare I hear them?
Shall I drink them,
dive among them,
Where in perfume they have flung them?
In their billowy well,
in their resonant spell,
with the world's life breath,
breathing o'er all,
Sink down in
and drown in
dreamless rest
highest best?

In comparing Isolde with the legendary Iscult, the first thing to be said is that no essential change has taken place.

From the foregoing, it is clear that Wagner's Isolde is just as intelligent, proud and passionate as she appears in the legend; and just as selfish. Wagner has, however, heightened

\[\text{Ibid.}, \quad -- \quad 293-301.\]
some of her qualities to counteract other qualities which he has eliminated with the condensations of scene.30

Thus we know nothing of Isolde's family loyalty because, in the opera, Morold is not her uncle, but her lover. Nor do we have any evidence of suspiciousness on her part, since the incident of the seneschal is eliminated. Nor, again, is there evidence of cruelty, since both the slaying of the dog and the plot to kill Brangaena are omitted. Isolde's state of confusion and loneliness during the voyage to Cornwall are amplified in the opera, yet there is no particular emphasis on this in the legend; and even the domineering attitude Isolde takes, in her commands of Tristan, are more intensified. The independence of Isolde is also more exaggerated in the opera, while remorse seems to dominate the legendary Isolde more than Wagner's Isolde. It is in Wagner's Isolde that her personality seems to have been centered around her love for Tristan, drawing upon every other characteristic for intensity, yet the legendary Isolde's character was dominated by her selfishness. It is agreed that these two main characteristics of the two were the deciding factors in their destruction.

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30 In passing, it is worth noting as a matter of some curiosity that in the legends there is no evidence that Tristan's marriage to the other Isolde causes Isolde the Fair any jealousy. In the opera, of course, no jealousy on Isolde's part appears because there is no grounds for it, since Tristan's marriage is not mentioned, nor is any other woman involved.
CHAPTER III

A MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER ISOLDE

The "... intimate fusion of poem and music, or to express it better, this simultaneity of conception involving a single creative idea and the double musical and poetic faculty in the same brain, is one of the points to which Wagner clings the closest."\(^1\) The important character of the opera is Isolde. The strength of her personality reduces the others, even Tristan, almost to insignificance. She dominates all the scenes of the opera whether she is present or not. When she does not appear on stage, the dialogue is constantly centered around her. Thus, in the first scene of Act III, Tristan lies deathly ill and Kurvenal is talking to the shepherd who is on look-out for the ship which is to bear Isolde to Tristan's castle. "And if he woke, it would be but to part from us forever; unless that doctoress come, for she alone can help us now."\(^2\)

There are numerous incidents throughout the opera where Isolde, by the mere mention of her name, becomes the center of attention. Though her situation is unchangeable and she

\(^1\) Adolphe Jullien, Richard Wagner, His Life and Works, p. 193.

is powerless to marry Tristan, her helpless position
strengthens her importance as in Act II, scene one, where
Isolde says to Branguela, when the latter warns Isolde to
beware of Sir Melot:

Thy work! O foolish maid!
Know'st not the goddess of love?
Know'st not her wondrous pow'r?
Of keenest quests is she the queen!
She works for what the world will be!
Life and death are subject to her,
These she weaves of joy and woe:
And love from envy to flow.
The work of death I rashly took to my hand;
Love's goddess unto me did countermand.
Death's victims then she took as her own;
Now by her hand the work be done!

Where'er she guides it,
How she decides it,
What road she reads me,
Whereas she leads me:
She only doth own me:
So have I obedient shown me!3

Isolde feels no guilt for her passion. The fact that she is
Queen of Cornwall, King Mark's wife, raises no barriers for
her as far as her love affair with Tristan4 is concerned.

Even in the duets with Tristan, Isolde is the stronger
figure. In the scene (Act II, scene three) between Tristan,
Melot and King Mark all the dialogue pertains to her, although
she takes small part in it herself. Through the first scene
of the third act, Isolde is again the topic of most of the

3Ibid., p. 122-125.

4For all his arduous words, Tristan appears less as the
actual lover than as the passive beloved, yet in the legend,
the impression is given that Tristan was the more ardent of
the two.
dialogue, and of course from her actual entrance to the love death, she monopolizes the attention.

Possibly the reason that Isolde is the more forceful of the two lovers was Mathilde Wesendonck's influence on Wagner. No one knows whether Wagner wrote this opera because he was in love with Mathilde or whether he was in love with her because he was writing this opera. Ernest Newman states⁵ that there was a connection in Wagner's mind associating Mathilde Wesendonck and the opera. She wrote five poems of which he set to music⁶ and used as leitmotifs in Tristan and Isolde.

The domination of Isolde in the opera can be measured by the proportion of action and singing given to Isolde. She appears in every act and scene except one: the first scene of the third act where Tristan is lying critically ill and talking, incoherently, to Kurwenal of days past.

In Act I, scene one, which amounts to only nine pages, Isolde and Brangaena do all the singing and acting, with the exception of the five scores of unaccompanied song by the young sailor. Both Isolde and Brangaena do about equal amounts of singing, most of Isolde's lines preceding those of Brangaena. The second scene is another short one, with twelve pages of acting and singing but with the entrance of

⁵Ernest New, Stories of the Great Operas, p. 86.

⁶Der Engel, Stehe Still, Im Treibhaus, Schmerzen, and Traume.
Tristan and Kurvenal included. Isolde only has fourteen lines, which she devotes to speaking ill of Tristan and demanding that Brangaena go and tell Tristan to appear before her. The rest of the scene is mainly given over to Tristan and Brangaena with a few lines by Kurvenal. The third scene comprises twenty-nine pages and, again, all the action and singing is done by Brangaena and Isolde. It is in this scene that Brangaena tells Isolde of Tristan's refusal to come to her quarters and Isolde's castigation of Tristan. The first four pages of the scene consist of small fragments of singing for both characters; in the next five pages, except for a small interruption by Brangaena, Isolde laments the fact she helped Tristan when he came to Ireland to be bealed and proceeds nine more pages to curse Tristan, while Brangaena finishes the scene trying to calm Isolde. More than two-thirds of the action and singing of the third scene is Isolde's.

The fourth scene is short: Isolde tells Kurvenal she will not leave the ship till Tristan comes to ask his pardon and then she prepares to drink the potion, bidding farewell to Brangaena. Isolde does most of the singing of the eleven pages. The last scene of the first act is considerably longer than the preceding scenes. Tristan finally appears before Isolde and she angrily tells him of his discourtesy towards her and how she could have killed him had she not taken pity on him while he was recovering from the wound dealt by Morold. She invites him to drink the potion of death, and having been
ceived by Brangaena, they drink the love potion. Neither Isolde nor Tristan sings much of the scene alone, which is largely made up of short phrases in dialogue. Of the one hundred and fifty-eight lines of singing here, Isolde sings approximately eighty-six, twenty lines of which comprise a duet with Tristan.

The first scene of the second act sets forth Brangaena’s warning and Isolde’s impatience for her lover’s signal. It consists of dialogue between Isolde and Brangaena. In these twenty-three pages there is no continuous singing for either, but the amount of singing is divided almost equally, with Isolde singing some three or four more pages than Brangaena. It is in the violent love duet of the second scene of this act, that Tristan and Isolde, though again warned by Brangaena, yet continue their ardent love making. Of the sixty-four pages in the scene, twenty-eight are duet between Tristan and Isolde. Approximately nine pages of the remaining thirty-six belong to Isolde, the rest being allotted to Tristan alone, who here seems, for once in the opera, to be the central figure of this scene. Mark, Melot and Mark’s attendants appear, discovering the lovers. Isolde barely sings two pages of this scene.

In the first scene of the third and last act, Isolde does not appear at all, but there is talk of her by Kurvenal and Tristan, who occupy the entire scene. The first ten pages of the next scene are sung by Isolde, Tristan and Kurvenal. Tristan is awaiting Isolde’s arrival impatiently, but when at
last she does arrive, it is only to catch her dying lover in her arms and to sing of her inability to believe that Tristan is dead. Although she does not appear until the last six pages of the scene, her entrance is led up to with so much expectation that she dominates it, before as well as after, and she alone sings the six remaining pages. In the last scene of the opera, it is Isolde, who, singing her famous love-death climax (her only singing in the scene), draws the opera to a close.

Of the three hundred pages in the Schirmer Edition of the vocal score, a little less than half of the pages belong to Isolde, during which time the dramatic dominance is hers as well.

The technical requirements of the role of Isolde include several items. It has already been shown that the length of the time Isolde is on stage singing is enormous. There are few roles that require the one singer to sing almost half of the opera alone. Not only does the mere length of the role require unusual breath control and physical stamina, but the kind of music makes the role even more taxing. The range of the role is two octaves, from b to b", a good deal of which is sung from c' to a". It is in this range of c' to a" of the dramatic soprano's voice that there is a normal change of registers, and for this reason, sustained singing, here, is
exhausting, and Wagner's long phrases\textsuperscript{7} only add to the difficulty. Unlauted vowels such as \( \ddot{u}, \dddot{u}, \dddot{u} \), as well as short \( i \), of the German text, appear frequently. These vowel sounds are always sung with difficulty in a register change and on the highest notes of the voice.\textsuperscript{8} Usually the note values in Wagner's music are not difficult because they are relatively long. The difficulty lies in the rhythm: much of the music is syncopated and the use of triplets is frequent. Not only does the role call for wide vocal leaps,\textsuperscript{9} but also the singing of several successive leaps of thirds and fourths from low notes to high ones.\textsuperscript{10} One must be capable of singing sustained high notes\textsuperscript{11} and of jumping immediately to the lowest register. There are cases where Wagner has written an equal, but opposite, difficulty in the use of runs in chromatic semitones.\textsuperscript{12} It is not particularly difficult for the voice from the high registers, downward; it is singing such runs, from the low register upward with continuous singing in the higher registers, which Wagner has employed so frequently, that is so

\textsuperscript{7}G. Schirmer, Fifth Edition, Vocal Score, Tristan and Isolde, p. 119, measures 4-11.

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., p. 38, measure 10; p. 38, measure 13; p. 7, measure 21; respectively.

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., p. 9, measure 7.

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., p. 10, measure 4.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 193, measures 10-12.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 195, measures 1-12.
difficult and requires stamina.\textsuperscript{13} It may also be noted at this time that the accidentals are numerous, as are also the tempo changes. These features complicate problems of memorization. Another problem found, in the singing of this role, is the diminuendos on the high notes.\textsuperscript{14}

Yet, despite all these technical difficulties, the role of Isolde is a deeply satisfying one to study.

Of the twenty-nine themes\textsuperscript{15} identified by Albert Lavinia\textsuperscript{16} as occurring in the opera, twelve of them are sung by Isolde and eight of these are introduced by her. The names of these motifs are as follows\textsuperscript{17} and those that she, herself, sings are marked with an asterisk:

*The Confession of Love  
*Desire  
The Glance  
The Love Philtre  
*The Death Potion  
The Magic Casket  
The Deliverance by Death  
*The Sea  
*Anger  
*Death  
Glory to Tristan  
*Tristan Wounded  
Tristan the Hero  
*Day (duet)  
Impatience  
Ardour  
Passionate Transport

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 277, measures 21-22; p. 279, measures 1-4.  
\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 296, measures 2-3.  
\textsuperscript{15}For illustrations, see Appendix II.  
\textsuperscript{16}\textit{The Music Dramas of Richard Wagner}, p. 284.  
\textsuperscript{17}For a table of a distribution of themes see Appendix III.
*Song of Love
*Invocation to Night (duet)
*Death the Liberator (duet)
Felicity
*Song of Death
Mark's Grief
Consternation
Solitude
Sadness
Kurwenal's Joy
Kareol
Joy
Annihilation
*Companionship in Death

From the above list, it will be seen that, although she sings less than half of the themes, almost all of them are connected with her in some way. Of the twelve themes sung by Isolde, the first to appear, in chronological order, is the "Confession of Love." It is first heard in the Introduction to Act I, after which it appears in scene 5, twenty-six times, leading up to the "Confession of Love" after Tristan and Isolde drink the potion. Isolde then sings the motif when she talks of Morold and herself as lovers and Morold's death and when she asks Tristan if he is going to refuse the death potion as a truce draught. It is again heard in Act II, in the prelude to scene 3, and when Mark is telling of his love for Isolde and of Tristan's betrayal of him. This same motif is heard last in Act III, scene 2 and 3. In scene 2, Tristan

18C. Schirmer, op. cit., pp. 1-5.
19 Ibid., example, pp. 34-35.
20 Ibid., pp. 74-75.
21 Ibid., p. 82.
22 Ibid., p. 197.
23 Ibid., pp. 205, 199.
tells Kurvenal that Isolde will see his wound and speaks of his love for Isolde, while she in turn tells of her love for him. In scene 3, both Isolde and the orchestra present the motif.

The "Glance" motif is heard frequently through the Prelude to Act I and scenes 1, 2, 3, and 5 of that act. It first appears in the orchestra in scene 1 when Brangaena asks Isolde why she seems so unhappy on the voyage, and also when Isolde asks the sailors which one is daring to mock her. In scene 3, it is heard in the orchestra when Isolde tells of how the masterful knight has avoided her, and again when Brangaena asks Isolde if it is Tristan she is speaking of, when Isolde makes light of Tristan’s masterfulness, and when Brangaena asks Tristan to go and see Isolde. In scene 3 the motif is heard, in the orchestra, when Isolde tells of Tristan’s wound that she healed, when Brangaena tries to explain to Isolde the problem of Tristan’s honour, and that every man who sees Isolde will fall in love with her, after which, she shows Isolde the love draught that Isolde’s mother gave

24Ibid., p. 275.  
25Ibid., p. 276.  
26Ibid., p. 281.  
27Ibid., pp. 293-297.  
28Ibid., p. 12.  
29Ibid., p. 6.  
31Ibid., p. 17.  
32Ibid., p. 17.  
33Ibid., p. 21.  
34Ibid., p. 25.  
35Ibid., p. 46.  
36Ibid., p. 51.
her to serve to the bride and bridegroom\textsuperscript{37}, which Brangaens describes as "The greatest draught."\textsuperscript{38} The "Glance" motif shows up again in scene 5 in the orchestra when Tristan is trying to explain to Isolde that it was his honor that kept him from her\textsuperscript{39} and Isolde misinterprets his meaning and asks if he was merely trying to scorn her.\textsuperscript{40} It is after both of them drink the love potion, that the motif is heard in the orchestra, as both Tristan and Isolde renounce their honor.\textsuperscript{41} The "Glance" motif is heard in the voices when Isolde tells Tristan that he has no honor since he refused to appear before her,\textsuperscript{42} when Tristan tells Isolde there was a feud truce as a result of Morold's death,\textsuperscript{43} when Isolde asks Tristan if he will take truce of death with her,\textsuperscript{44} and after both take the supposed death potion.\textsuperscript{45} In Act III, it is again heard in the orchestra when Tristan cries out Isolde's name as she catches him, dying, in her arms,\textsuperscript{46} and in Isolde's part as she vainly attempts to talk to her dead lover.\textsuperscript{47}

"The Death Potion" appears first in the prelude to Act I,\textsuperscript{48} in scene 3 of the same act, when Isolde asks Brangaens

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{37}ibid., p. 52.
  \item \textsuperscript{39}ibid., p. 69.
  \item \textsuperscript{41}ibid., pp. 94-95.
  \item \textsuperscript{43}ibid., p. 71.
  \item \textsuperscript{45}ibid., p. 97.
  \item \textsuperscript{47}ibid., p. 278.
  \item \textsuperscript{38}ibid., p. 54.
  \item \textsuperscript{40}ibid., p. 74.
  \item \textsuperscript{42}ibid., p. 69.
  \item \textsuperscript{44}ibid., p. 81.
  \item \textsuperscript{46}ibid., p. 277.
  \item \textsuperscript{48}ibid., p. 1.
\end{itemize}
what Tristan's reply is to her demand of an audience with him\textsuperscript{49} and again during the reference to her mother's skill in mixing potions,\textsuperscript{50} and when Isolde tells Brangaena of the better (i. e. death) potion for herself.\textsuperscript{51} It also appears in scene 4 when Isolde tells Brangaena that the death potion is in the golden goblet,\textsuperscript{52} when Kurvenal calls to prepare for Tristan to escort Isolde off the boat,\textsuperscript{53} and again when Isolde bids Brangaena to get draught of truce.\textsuperscript{54} In scene 5 it occurs when Tristan prepares to drink death potion,\textsuperscript{55} when Isolde urges Tristan to drink the death potion and let the truce be sealed,\textsuperscript{56} and when Isolde advances toward Tristan to give him the potion,\textsuperscript{57} and when Tristan cries "Isolde" after drinking the potion.\textsuperscript{58} In Act II, scene 1, it is heard when Brangaena tells Isolde of her confusion in the presence of King Mark when the boat docked,\textsuperscript{59} and of how she looked at Tristan\textsuperscript{60} and again when Isolde tells Brangaena that it was the Goddess of Love who claimed her and Tristan,\textsuperscript{61} and also when Brangaena tells Isolde to beware of Melot.\textsuperscript{62} In scene 2, "The Death Potion" motive is heard as Tristan tells Isolde

\textsuperscript{49}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 28, orchestra.  \textsuperscript{50}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 51.  
\textsuperscript{51}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 54.  \textsuperscript{52}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 63, orchestra.  
\textsuperscript{53}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 58.  \textsuperscript{54}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 62.  
\textsuperscript{55}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 73, orchestra.  \textsuperscript{56}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 73.  
\textsuperscript{57}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 83.  \textsuperscript{58}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 103.  
\textsuperscript{59}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 114.  \textsuperscript{60}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 115.  
\textsuperscript{61}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 123.  \textsuperscript{62}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 125.
of his love for her, when Isolde pledges herself and Tristan to death, and when she talks of the deceiving draught, and Tristan says that through the doors of death came love.

In Act I, scene 1, "The Sea" leitmotif appears as Isolde tells of her hatred of the voyage, and Brangäena wonders at Isolde's aloof attitude. It is also heard in the chant of the young sailor, again in scene 4 as Kurvenal tells Tristan of the awaiting gaiety on shore, and in scene 5, as the crowds cheer.

The "Death" motif is the next to appear. In Act I, scene 2, Isolde cries of her hate of the masterful knight, and Brangäena asks Isolde if it is of Tristan that she is speaking. It occurs again when Isolde bids Brangäena command Tristan to come to her, where Brangäena takes the message to Tristan, when, in scene 3, Isolde exclaims that her heart will be rested in death, and when Isolde curses Tristan. In scene 4 it is heard when Isolde refuses to walk ashore with Tristan.
unless he comes to her first, when Isolde tells Brangaena her mother gave her the death potion for pains and wounds, and finally in scene 5 as Brangaena curses death potion.

The next leitmotif to appear is "Tristan Wounded," which first occurs in Act I, scene 3, as Isolde explains to Brangaena how she took care of Tristan when he came to Ireland to be healed by her, in scene 4 as Isolde refers to her mother's skill in mixing potions, and in scene 5 when Isolde tells Tristan it was "Tantra" that she healed and hid. The same motif is heard in Act III, scene 1, when Kurvenal refers to Isolde as Tristan's only cure, when Kurvenal tells Tristan not to worry about his land, again when Kurvenal laments because he cannot cure Tristan, when Tristan exclaims that he is in death's hands, and when Kurvenal curses the death potion which has originally brought about Tristan's eventual death, when Tristan bequeaths all his possessions to Kurvenal, and when Tristan admits his betrayal to King Mark, and finally in scene 2 it is heard as Tristan boasts, deliriously of his prominence as a knight.

78Ibid., p. 59.
80Ibid., p. 94.
82Ibid., p. 64.
84Ibid., p. 218, orchestra.
86Ibid., p. 237, orchestra.
88Ibid., p. 258, orchestra.
90Ibid., p. 242.

79Ibid., p. 65.
81Ibid., pp. 33-34, orchestra.
83Ibid., p. 72, orchestra.
85Ibid., p. 223, orchestra.
87Ibid., p. 249, orchestra.
89Ibid., p. 271, orchestra.
91Ibid., p. 274, orchestra.
The "Day" motif is the next leitmotif pertaining to Isolde. The motif is played by the orchestra throughout the second act of the opera. One example of this motif is in the second scene when Tristan tells Isolde that day is to be feared.92 Other examples are found when Isolde says that it is day that she fears,93 and when Tristan assures Isolde that day will never devour their love.94 It is heard, again in the orchestra, in scene 3, as Tristan tells Isolde that day has dawned and that he must leave,95 again when Tristan calls King Mark and Melot "ghosts of daylight."96 In Act III, scene 1, it appears when Tristan refers to Isolde as sunlight,97 when he says that death's doors are open like streaming sunlight,98 when he curses glare of day,99 and claims day recalls too much.100

The "Song of Love" motif appears in Act II, scene 1, as Isolde is waiting for Tristan and mistakes the rustling of the trees for his approach,101 again when Brangaena warns Isolde of Melot's evil intentions,102 and when Isolde speaks of the Goddess of Love.103 It is heard in scene 2 when

92Ibid., p. 142. 93Ibid., p. 141.
94Ibid., p. 144. 95Ibid., p. 198, orchestra.
96Ibid., p. 200, orchestra. 97Ibid., p. 230, orchestra.
98Ibid., p. 231, orchestra. 99Ibid., p. 233, orchestra.
100Ibid., p. 254. 101Ibid., p. 110, orchestra.
102Ibid., p. 116, orchestra. 103Ibid., p. 124.
Tristan and Isolde declare their love for each other, \(^{104}\) when Tristan tells Isolde he would rather die than awaken from his dream of love, \(^{105}\) and when Tristan exclaims that he and Isolde are united. \(^{106}\) In Act III, scene 1, it appears while Tristan tells Kurvenal of his love for him, \(^{107}\) as well as when Kurvenal tells Tristan he has sent for Isolde, \(^{108}\) and when Tristan calls out to Isolde. \(^{109}\) In scene 2, it makes its first appearance as Isolde cries out to Tristan. \(^{110}\)

"Invocation to Night" is heard in the second act, scene 2, as Tristan tells Isolde how his love for her grew during the night, \(^{111}\) and asks night to descend upon them, \(^{112}\) and when Isolde declares they will never be parted through night and day. \(^{113}\) In scene 3 it is heard when Mark tells Tristan that he spied upon him during the night, \(^{114}\) and Tristan asks Isolde to come with him to his own land. \(^{115}\) It is again heard in Act III, scene 1, when Tristan asks if Isolde is going to come and heal his wounds, \(^{116}\) and in scene 2, when Isolde arrives and tells Tristan that she has come. \(^{117}\)
"Death the Liberator" is heard in Act II, scene 2, as Tristan declares that death is liberator for lovers, and that day should be given to death. The motif appears again in Act III, scene 1, when Kurvenal tries to persuade Tristan that he will get well, when Tristan tells of the crash of death's doors behind him, and when Tristan relates to Kurvenal of the drinking of the love-potion, and Tristan says Isolde's arrival is only joy to him. In scene 2 it is finally heard as Isolde asks Tristan if she is to be cheated of his last moments of life.

The next motif that pertains to Isolde is that of the "Song of Death." It first appears in Act II, scene 2, as Tristan declares that he and Isolde are united and will never be separated even by death and when King Mark relates to Tristan how he, Tristan, betrayed him. Again it is heard in Act III, scene 2, as Tristan talks of Isolde coming to heal his wounds like a queen of the art, and later when Isolde tells of the dreary days of longing to come and heal his wounds. In scene 3, it occurs when Mark comes to declare Tristan's innocence and when Isolde tries, in vain, to

120Ibid., p. 226, orchestra. 121Ibid., p. 231.
122Ibid., p. 256. 123Ibid., p. 268.
124Ibid., p. 279, orchestra. 125Ibid., p. 178, orchestra.
126Ibid., p. 201. 127Ibid., p. 275, orchestra.
128Ibid., p. 278. 129Ibid., p. 290, orchestra.
convince herself that Tristan is not dead.\textsuperscript{130} The last of the leitmotifs, which are centered around Isolde, is "Companionship in Death." It is heard only in Act III, scene 2, as Isolde hysterically cries out to Tristan,\textsuperscript{131} and also as she tries to persuade Tristan to rise from the dead.\textsuperscript{132}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{130}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 293, orchestra.
\textsuperscript{131}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 278, orchestra.
\textsuperscript{132}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 279.
\end{flushright}
APPENDIX I

It will be of interest to note several other treatments of the legend of Tristan and Isolde. In 1470 Thomas Malory wrote his version of the French legend, Morte d'Arthur, in which Tristan was one of the lesser knights. However, in the legend, Malory gives an account of Tristram's life before he entered Arthur's court which is similar to that of Thomas's life of Tristan, except that Malory adds the motive of jealousy, on King Mark's part. Soon after Mark himself tries to kill Tristram, but eventually Tristram enters the court of King Arthur.

In Matthew Arnold's Tristram and Isolde, written in 1852, the story is confined to Tristram on his death-bed under the care of Isolde of Brittany. He recalls the days of happiness and joy he had with Isolde of Ireland and grieves for their return again.

The treatment of Tristram in Tennyson's mid-nineteenth century Idylls of the King, pertains to Tristram's membership in King Arthur's Round Table and his murder by King Mark

1Sir Paul Harvey, Oxford Companion to English Literature. (Tristram) p. 795.

2Ibid.

3Victorian and Later English Poets, from Idylls of the King, p. 1175.

4Between 1859 and 1872.
of Cornwall as a result of Tristram's love affair with Isolt, wife of Mark.

*Tristram of Lyonesse*, written in 1882, by Algernon Swinburne is, with few exceptions, similar to the version by Thomas.

Two contemporary poets, Edwin Robinson (1927) and John Masefield (1927), have written more recent versions of the Tristram legend. Though both of these poets follow the story of *Tristrant* by Eilhart von Oberge, Robinson's version lies more closely to the Arthurian world of medieval romance, with deviations in the details, while Masefield's story lays greater emphasis on the moral problem.
# APPENDIX II

## TRISTAN AND ISOLDE

### NAMES of the principal Leit-motive in TRISTAN AND ISOLDE in the order of their first appearance

<table>
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<th>Scene:</th>
<th>Prelude</th>
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<th>ACT III</th>
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<td>v</td>
<td>v</td>
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<td>12 6 4</td>
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1Table taken from Albert Lavignac, *The Music Dramas of Richard Wagner*, p. 284. Leitmotifs marked with asterisks pertain to Isolde and numbers denote the number of times the motifs appear in the scenes.
APPENDIX III

Confession of Love

Desire

The Glance

The Love Philtre
The Death Potion

The Magic Casket

The Deliverance by Death

The Sea
Impatience

Ardour

Passionate Transport
Song of Love

Invocation to Night
Death the Liberator

Felicity
Mark's Grief (continued)

Consternation

Solitude
Karenol (continued)

Non troppo cresce.

Joy

Tristan
Companionship in Death
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