Sweet Black Waves and Medieval Literature:
Educator's Resource Guide
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YA Fantasy

The legend of Tristan and Isolt is one of the best-known myths in Western culture, and arguably the most popular throughout the Middle Ages. The star-crossed lovers have become synonymous with passion and romance itself. The *Sweet Black Waves* trilogy is a YA Fantasy series that retells the legend from the perspective of Branwen, Isolt's lady's maid. This annotated bibliography comprises both primary and secondary sources designed to facilitate the use of my trilogy as a gateway to the study of medieval and Arthurian literature.

Pérez, Kristina, *Sweet Black Waves*. New York: Imprint/Macmillan, 2018.
Pérez, Kristina, *Wild Savage Stars (Sweet Black Waves #2)*. New York: Imprint/Macmillan, 2019.
Pérez, Kristina, *Bright Raven Skies (Sweet Black Waves #3)*. New York: Imprint/Macmillan, 2020. [Forthcoming August 25th, 2020]

Celtic Analogues

The names of the main characters in the Tristan legends can be traced to post-Roman Britain (sixth or seventh century CE). There was no real Tristan or King Arthur, but there are tantalizing stone inscriptions in the British Isles that suggest local folk heroes whose names became attached to a much older body of tales, some mythological in genesis. And while there is evidence that some motifs may have been borrowed from Hellenic, Persian, or Arabic sources, the vast majority are Celtic. Rather than viewing these Celtic stories as direct sources for the Tristan and Isolt narratives, however, most scholars agree the medieval Irish and Welsh material should be viewed as analogues that presumably stem from the same, now lost, pan-Celtic source.

Irish

There are three Old Irish tale-types that feed into the Tristan legend: 1. *aitheda* (or, elopement tales), in which a young woman runs away from her older husband with a younger man; 2. *tochmarca* (or, courtship tales), in which a woman takes an active part in negotiating a relationship with a man of her choosing that results in marriage; and 3. *immrama* (or, voyage tales), in which the hero takes a sea voyage to the Otherworld.

The Old Irish tales that share the most in common with Tristan and Isolt's doomed affair are *Tochmarc Emire* ("The Wooing of Emer"), a tenth-century aithed; and *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* ("The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne"), an *aithed* whose earliest text dates to the Early Modern Irish period but whose plot and characters can be traced to the tenth century. In these stories, the female characters wield tremendous power and are closer to their mythological roots as goddesses. Other tales that are reminiscent of Branwen's complicated relationship with Isolt include the ninth-or tenth-century *Tochmarc Becfhola* ("The Wooing of Becfhola") and the twelfth-century *Fingal Rónáin* ("Rónán's act of kinslaying").

Further Reading
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Welsh

My heroine was also partially inspired by another Branwen from the Middle Welsh *Mabinogion*, the earliest prose stories in British literature. The Second Branch of the Mabinogi is called *Branwen uerch Lyr* ("Branwen, daughter of Llŷr"), the meaning of the patronym ap Llŷr being "Son of the Sea," and the connection that the Branwen of The Sweet Black Waves Trilogy feels for the sea was inspired by this forerunner.

The Branwen of the Mabinogion is a member of a Welsh royal family who is given in marriage to the King of Ireland to prevent a war after one of her brothers has offended him. When Branwen arrives at the Irish court, the vassals of the King of Ireland turn him against his new queen and she is forced to submit to many humiliations. Her brothers then declare war on Ireland, and Branwen is the cause of the war her marriage was meant to prevent.

Several prominent Celtic scholars have made the case that the Welsh Branwen can trace her roots to Irish Sovereignty Goddesses or that both the Welsh and Irish material derive from the same, earlier source. Particular evidence of this is that Branwen's dowry to the King of Ireland included the Cauldron of Regeneration, which could bring slain men back to life, and which served as the inspiration for Kerwindos's Cauldron in my own work.

While there is no evidence of a direct connection between the Branwen of the *Mabinogion* and the Branwen of the Tristan legends, I find the possibility enticing and so I have merged the two into my Branwen as a forceful female protagonist with magical abilities and a strong connection to the Land.

Further Reading

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Marie de France and the Breton *lais*

When the Romans withdrew from Britain in the fifth century, many residents from the south of the island immigrated to northern France. For the next five centuries, trade and communication was maintained between Cornwall, Wales, and Brittany. The Bretons spoke a language similar to Welsh and Cornish, which facilitated the sharing of the Arthurian legends, to which they added their own folktales. By the twelfth century, the professional Breton *conteurs* (storytellers) had become the most popular court entertainers in Europe, and it was these wandering minstrels who brought the Tristan legends to the royal French and Anglo-Norman courts—including that of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine, famed for her patronage of the troubadours in the south of France.

One of the earliest extant written *lais* (or poems) about Tristan and Isolt's love was penned by Marie de France, a female poet, whose work was known at the court of Henry II. The poem is called *Chevrefoil* ("honeysuckle") and in it Tristan describes himself and Isolt as being bound together like the

honeysuckle vine that wraps itself around the hazel tree—if they are ever separated, then both will die. In writing *Sweet Black Waves*, I decided to transfer this metaphor to the relationship between Branwen and her cousin.

The ancient language of trees that Branwen calls the first Ivernic writing is a reference to the Irish Ogham alphabet. It was devised between the first and fourth centuries CE to transfer the Irish language to written form and is possibly based on the Latin alphabet. Ogham is found in approximately four hundred surviving stone inscriptions and is read from the bottom up.

There is evidence that the inscription that Tristan leaves for Isolt in Marie de France's poem is in fact based on Ogham writing, which I decided to incorporate into my retelling. In addition to representing a sound, the letters of the Ogham alphabet have the names of trees and shrubs. The Ogham letter *coll* translates as "hazel" and represents the /k/ sound as in kitten. The Ogham letter *uillenn* translates as "honeysuckle" and represents the /ll/ sound as in shell. Hence, when Branwen and Essy trace their private symbol, they are only writing two letters rather than a whole word.

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Medieval Romances

The Breton songs of Tristan's exploits were soon recorded as verse romances in Old French by Anglo-Norman poets Béroul and Thomas d'Angleterre/Thomas of Britain as well as in Middle German by Eilhart von Oberge. Béroul's and Eilhart's retellings belong to what is often called the *version commune* (primitive version), meaning they are closer to their folkloric heritage. Thomas's Tristan forms part of the *version courtoise* (courtly version), which is influenced by the courtly love ideal.

The twelfth century is often credited with the birth of romance, and Tristan is at least partially responsible. Which is not to say that people didn't fall in love before then, of course (!), but rather that for the first time, the sexual love between a man and a woman, usually forbidden, became a central concern of literature. The first consumers of this new genre in which a knight pledges fealty to a distant, unobtainable (often married) lady were royal and aristocratic women and, like romance readers today, their appetite was voracious. While the audience was female, the poets and authors were male, often clerics in the service of noblewomen. The poetry produced at the behest of female aristocratic patrons might therefore be considered the first fanfiction.

However, while the courtly lady may have appeared to have the power over her besotted knight, in reality noblewomen were rapidly losing property and inheritance rights as the aristocracy became a closed class ruled by strict patrilinear descent. Legends like that of Tristan and Isolt provided a means of escape for noblewomen who were undoubtedly in less than physically and emotionally satisfying marriages of their own, while also reinforcing women's increasingly objectified status.

In the thirteenth century, German poet Gottfried von Strassburg wrote his celebrated courtly verse romance of Tristan, drawing on Thomas d'Angleterre as his source material, which later served as the inspiration for Richard Wagner's operas. The Tristan legends started as distinct traditions that were grafted onto the Arthurian corpus (possibly in Wales, possibly on the Continent) and became forever intertwined with the thirteenth-century prose romances.

Concurrently with Gottfried, there was a complete Old Norse adaptation by Brother Róbert, a Norwegian cleric, and the Tristan legends gained popularity not only throughout Scandinavia but on the Iberian Peninsula and in Italy. There were also early Czech and Belarusian versions, and it was later translated into Polish and Russian. Dante also references the ill-fated lovers in his fourteenth-century *Inferno*, and Sir Thomas Malory devoted an entire book to Tristan in his fifteenth-century *Le Morte d'Arthur*, one of the most famous works in the English language.

The popularity of Tristan and Isolt fell off abruptly during the Renaissance but was revived by the Romantic poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who sought an antidote to the

changes enacted by the Industrial Revolution—although they viewed their medieval past through very rose-tinted glasses. The Arthurian Revival in Britain during the Victorian era is epitomised by Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, which significantly revisits the Tristan legends.

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Online Resources
The Camelot Project at the University of Rochester:
https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/theme/tristanisolt