Assessing Bartlett Through Isolde: How Bartlett’s Argument is Upheld by Tristan and Isolde

Robert Bartlett, in his book *Trial by Fire and Water*, synthesizes a number of sources in an attempt to discern the answer to a complex question: “why were the ordeals abandoned?” Through his attempt, he answers a number of questions that provide a background for the passage concerning the ordeal in *Tristan and Isolde*, mainly: what were the ordeals and what was their purpose, what were they used to determine, and what was the role of each individual involved? Through an in-depth analysis of *Tristan and Isolde*, Bartlett’s theories and conclusions derived from his initial question provide a better insight to the work than Brown’s theories - fundamentally, Bartlett’s assertion that the ordeal was an exercise of power; his conclusions about role of the clerics, townsmen, kings, and those undergoing the ordeal are solidified through the work’s own revelations.

In simplified form, Bartlett’s theory was that the decline of the ordeal in the 11th century was due to growing unease among the clergy as to whether is was right to use the ordeal as an attempt to show God’s judgement. There were also worries as to the biases of officiators of the ordeals - it was one man’s judgement of guilt or innocence. Furthermore, many debated whether or not God could influence the physical world in such a way that man could interpret His judgement. Finally, since the clergy were involved with the procedure of the ordeal, its demise in 1215 C.E. was caused by a decision from the papacy that no cleric may bestow any blessing “in judicial tests or ordeals by hot or cold water or hot iron” (Halsall). Bartlett argues: as it was no
longer sanctioned, the death of the ordeal was caused by a “unilateral decision by the Church to
abandon the practice” (Bartlett, Trial by Fire and Water, pp. 101).

Bartlett’s theory stands apart from Brown’s, in context of Tristan and Isolde, because
Brown’s argument was that the ordeal was a “device of small communities” (Bartlett, Trial by
Fire and Water, pp. 36). Bartlett argues that the ordeal was more of a device of the ruling bodies
who exercised the ordeal because of the ordeal’s place in Christianity as a means to reinforce
“their kingship by their Christianity” (Bartlett, Trial by Fire and Water, pp. 36). In Tristan and
Isolde, it is king Mark, in the presence of a council, who makes the suggestion of the ordeal,
stating that his queen should “Step forward at once and bind [her]self to the ordeal of the red-hot
iron” (Strassburg, Tristan and Isolde, pp. 245). In this instance, Bartlett’s argument is reinforced.
However, Bartlett states “the ordeal was not so much a device for maintaining consensus… as
for dealing with trouble outside it” (Bartlett, Trial by Fire and Water, pp. 37), and in the case of
Isolde, the ordeal would likely not have been used in favor of compurgation.

As described by Bartlett, the accused person, Isolde, was summoned to a special church
service and “arrived at the minster and had heard mass with deep devotion” (Strassburg, Tristan
and Isolde, pp. 247). In Tristan and Isolde, the ordeal is still a highly religious event, if the fourth
Lateran Council had already taken place, Bartlett’s argument that it was the outlawing of the
ordeal in Canon law that lead to its demise would be flawed. It is, however, unlikely this event
had already taken place, since a priest officiated Isolde’s ordeal. Isolde has little doubt as to what
course of action to take to avoid being found guilty: in order to remain unscathed by the hot iron,
she must confess her sins without alerting anyone to their true nature. The sentence “Isolde had
surrendered her life and honour utterly to God's mercy” (Strassburg, Tristan and Isolde, pp. 247)
is quite telling about her belief in the absoluteness of the ordeal. This could indicate a lack of dissenting opinions of the ordeal’s effectiveness, or the author’s belief in it as well.

Bartlett may be correct his assertion that the ordeal was under new scrutiny and was finally outlawed, but at this point in *Tristan and Isolde*, the ordeal was still flourishing. Bartlett states that there were those who were for the abolishing of the ordeal, but there are none who dissent in Isolde’s case. The author’s final commentary is an important piece of evidence when examining the belief in the ordeal:

> Thus it was made manifest and confirmed to all the world that Christ in His great virtue is pliant as a windblown sleeve. He falls into place and clings, whichever way you try Him, closely and smoothly, as He is bound to do… (Strassburg, Tristan and Isolde, pp. 248)

It shows the attitude of the author when concerning the ordeal -he has a firm belief in the power of the ordeal at discerning the judgement of God. One must assume that *Tristan and Isolde* took place during a time period in which the ordeal was not under scrutiny and its religious connection removed.

Bartlett’s theories as to the roles of the kings, clergy, and countrymen in the time before the fourth Lateran Council works better in the context of explaining the ordeal of Isolde. However, this requires the assumption to be made that Canon law did not already ban the priests’ involvement in the ordeal. Bartlett’s own conclusions overshadow Brown’s for the fundamental reason that the ordeal was an exercise of power from king Mark, and less of a tool of consensus for the townspeople.


<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp>.