

# DHARMA AND CHIVALRY:

## THE ROLE OF DUTY IN THE *RAMAYANA* AND *TRISTRAN AND ISEULT*

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The precedence of duty over other concerns is a major theme of both the *Ramayana* and *Tristan and Iseult*. Duty is an important factor in the societies of both ancient India and medieval France, yet how it interacts with other matters differs between the two myths.

The dedication of Rama to concepts of duty is first seen early in the *Ramayana* when he insists upon going into exile in the forest. Rama's father has made a promise and Rama understands that the promise must be honored. As Jeaneane Fowler notes: *Dharma* – or spiritual law – is not affected by what is fair. There is little room for maneuver, no higher power to whom one may attempt to justify one's actions. Instead, *Dharma* is absolute, and going against the rules of *Dharma* condemn a person to bad *Karma* (11). Although *Dharma* is spiritual law, it also profoundly affects the secular society. The rules of *Karma*, the concepts of *Dharma* and reincarnation (*Samsara*) were relatively recent additions to Hinduism at the time of the writing of the *Ramayana* in the fourth century BCE (Flood 56). They were introduced as a reaction to the birth of Buddhism and reflect an increased emphasis upon personal responsibility in both spiritual and secular matters. The focus upon the importance of adhering to *Dharma* was probably a result of religious and political upheavals at the time: *Dharma*, with its emphasis upon law and tradition could provide a stability that was otherwise lacking (Flood 51).

In the early stages of *Tristan and Iseult*, Sir Tristan is also prepared to risk his life in order to follow the dictates of duty. When Mark orders him to go to Ireland, Tristan agrees. He knows that such a journey is dangerous as he has been identified as the killer of the Irish champion, The Morholt. However, a knight owes his liege lord his loyalty even to death. This was an important aspect of feudalism, the dominant political system in

medieval Europe when the romance was first written (Gies 11). Feudalism relied upon the acknowledgement by the vassal of the duty he owed his liege lord (Painter 31). Tristan mirrors this societal need. Even after drinking the love potion, Tristan hands Iseult to his liege lord Mark, as befits a loyal knight. However, already his love for Iseult is coming into conflict with his duty. Unlike in ancient India, feudal duty was a secular matter and was not absolute. A knight might shirk codes of chivalry and duty, and only risk honor and political disgrace; in India, such a denial of duty would result in inevitable spiritual damage.

Rama's adherence to duty and *Dharma* is also tested by his love for Sita. When Sita is abducted by Ravana, her virtue is put into question: to live in the house of a man other than one's husband was considered immoral (Flood 66). Although Rama believes in Sita's chastity, he knows that it is his duty to renounce Sita and remove the stain upon his honor. Rama realises that the karma of a King extends not only to the individual but to the Kingdom and if he wishes to rule in his father's kingdom he must follow *Dharma*. Even when Sita is accused again, he must put personal feelings aside to do his duty, or risk not only disaster for himself but for his kingdom (Flood 71). As Gavin Flood writes:

“The king is the pivotal point in the body politic: the ‘body of the kingdom’ is recapitulated in his own body. If he acts in accordance with *dharmā* the kingdom prospers, but if he acts against *dharmā*, the body of the kingdom – which means the people – suffers. (70)”

This may seem unfair to modern readers, but to the ancient Hindus of India it was upheld as a perfect example of how a man should act: that a virtuous man should put duty and adherence to *Dharma* above all else. In this way, the *Ramayana* is myth as morality play.

In *Tristan and Iseult*, Tristan suffers internal conflict between love and duty over his feelings for Iseult. He knows he cannot have her, that his duty is to serve his liege lord, Mark, and yet he cannot help himself. Yet, betraying Mark, he cannot help but feel some guilt. Even after fleeing into the forest with Iseult, they sleep separated by a naked blade, and ultimately, Tristan returns Iseult to Mark. This conflict reflects the changes occurring in twelfth century France. The popularization of the romances of the troubadours, especially the concept of courtly love, and the weakening of the traditional feudal bonds shifted the emphasis away from traditional feudal duties, and

clearly *Tristan and Iseult* reflects this conflict (Gies 59). Yet we see the result of this conflict: that by overstepping the bounds of propriety and putting love before duty, Tristan and Iseult doom themselves.

Both the *Ramayana* and *Tristan and Iseult* reflect attitudes to duty within their societies. In India, duty is an integral part of *Dharma*, which as spiritual as well as secular law is immutable and an imperative that Rama cannot afford to ignore. Tristan, however, fails to fulfil his obligations and duty. Despite the changing of societal mores to acknowledge new ideas of courtly love and romance, the lovers cross a line and are thus doomed.

### Works Cited

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