

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON: ²⁸⁹ THE TORCH OF WOMAN

by

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While Edwin Arlington Robinson's Arthurian poems are a record of three love affairs famous in legend and literature since medieval times, Merlin (1917), Lancelot (1920) and Tristram (1927) are also a record of the dissolution of relationships and the destruction of a civilization. The poems depict the suffering, loneliness, separation, destruction and death which accompanies the breakdown of personal and political bonds, and Robinson suspected that this might earn him the title of "an evangelist of doom."¹ The final scenes of each poem give credence to his apprehension. At the end of Merlin, Vivian remains secluded and abandoned in Broceliande while Merlin returns to Camelot, unable to prevent either the death of the king or the disintegration of the kingdom. At the end of Lancelot, Arthur, Gawaine and Modred are dead, killed in a war they were driven to wage by madness, hate and ambition; Guinevere is cloistered in a nunnery while Lancelot rides alone into the darkness in search of the Light of the Grail; and the fellowship of the Round Table lies scattered on the battlefield. And at the end of Tristram, Isolt of Ireland is dead, sapped of her will to live by the intensity of happiness followed by forced separation; Tristram is dead through treachery; and Isolt of the white hands remains alone to contemplate a future without love.

"Ruin . . . / Destruction, dissolution, desolation,"² occur in all three poems. But while they depict the loss of love and the disintegration of the established culture, the poems do not depict despair. Merlin's observation to Dagonet

"And in the end
Are more beginnings, Dagonet, than men
Shall name or know today"³

captures the atmosphere at the end of all three poems. And to those who would agree with Dagonet that the world is "a disease without a doctor" (Merlin, p. 103), Robinson suggests: "You mustn't forget the redemption — even if you don't see it."⁴ Robinson does not deal explicitly with "the redemption," but he does indicate in which direction it should be sought: as the wise man and the fool look down on the doomed city, Merlin tells Dagonet that he foresaw both the darkness now descending on Camelot, and the means of dispelling it, saying "I saw two fires that are to light the world" (Merlin, p. 119). More explicitly, he states:

"the torch
Of woman, who, together with the light
That Galahad found, is yet to light the world"
(Merlin, p. 110).

Skeptical, Dagonet repeats Merlin's prophecy twice, underscoring the positive, redemptive connotation of "light:"

"You say the torch
Of woman and the light that Galahad found
Are some day to illuminate the world?"
(Merlin, p. 111).

And again,

"The torch of woman
. . . and the light that Galahad found,
Will some day save us all" (Merlin, p. 113).

Two elements, then, will unite to "light the world," or provide the means of redemption. What constitutes these elements, however, is open to interpretation. According to Robinson, "Galahad's 'light' is simply the light of the Grail interpreted universally as a spiritual realization of Things and their significance. I don't see how this can be made any more concrete, for it is not the same thing to any two individuals. The 'torch of women' is to be taken literally."⁵

Though Robinson's explanation of "Galahad's light" would benefit from more explanation, it gives a definite direction for interpretation and will receive no further discussion here. "The torch of woman," however, gains little from Robinson's commentary. Although he neither explains what he means by "the torch of woman," nor defines how this "torch of woman" will save the world, Robinson does present four remarkable women in Merlin, Lancelot and Tristram. Vivian, Guinevere, Isolt of Ireland and Isolt of Brittany possess personal characteristics which enable them to bring about changes in themselves and in the men who love them. According to Robinson, by being women, they also have the power not only to change, but to save, the world. An examination of their personalities and characteristics, individually and collectively, can perhaps suggest Robinson's conception of the redemptive power of woman in the world.

I.

her beauty and her grace
Made passing trash of empires,

.

She being Beauty, Beauty being She:

.

The beauty of all ages that are vanished,

Reborn to be the wonder of one woman⁶ —

This is the lady Vivian for whose sake Merlin, "who made kings and kingdoms" (p. 37) chose to be "buried alive" in Broceliande, "by love made little and by woman shorn / . . . of . . . glory" (p. 38). It is she whom King Arthur in Camelot fears

more than Fate;

For . . . he knew that Modred, Lancelot,

The Queen, the King, the Kingdom, and the World,

Were less to Merlin, who had made him King,

Than one small woman in Broceliande (pp. 35-36).

The woman who evokes these intense responses is herself a person of intense feelings and thoughts. Impatient and out of tune with the world "with all its clots / And wounds and bristles" (p. 85), she has secluded herself in Broceliande, her Eden-like estate in Brittany. She has three hundred faithful attendants with her and their solitude is guaranteed by high walls surrounding the estate and by a heavy iron gate that guards its only entrance. As a child, she had seen "Merlin once in Camelot, / And seeing him, saw no other" (p. 44). Her love for him grew so intense and exclusive

That kings and princes, thrones and diadems,

And honorable men who drowned themselves

For love, were less to her than melon-shells

(p. 94).

So she has waited patiently for Merlin in her refuge for more than twenty years. When he arrives, he makes her see "what a splendid emptiness / Her tedious world had been without him in it" (p. 43). Until Merlin enters the gate of Broceliande and shuts out the crumbling world of Camelot, Vivian feels that hers is "a life that is no life" (p. 49). And Vivian hates as intensely as she loves, telling Merlin, "when I hate a man I poison him" (p. 45).

Merlin's response to Vivian is as intense as hers is to him. For him, she is "a miracle of love / And loveliness, and of immortal beauty" (p. 89). At her request, he removes the two most obvious external signs of his status as a man of intellect and insight. He exchanges "the sable raiment of a royal scholar" (p. 51) for a robe "of purple silk / With frogs and foreign tassels" (p. 23). He shaves off the beard which characterizes "every prophet and important wizard" (p. 47), leaving his face "too smooth now for a wizard or a sage" (p. 23). Merlin is no longer the wise counselor; he is now an ardent lover. The physical luxuriousness Vivian offers in Broceliande, together with her love and attention, constitute the kind of sensual experience Merlin the seer and the prophet had never had, the kind that he "had deliberately eliminated in favor of great affairs of state."⁷ Vivian offers him love, an experience without which even a wise man's wisdom is incomplete,⁸ and for which Merlin is willing to abandon the kingdom he created through Arthur.

Vivian holds Merlin first of all with her physical beauty and youth. "Her complexion" is a "wild harmony" of "blood

and olive," "with eyes and wayward hair that were too dark / For peace" (p. 44). When Merlin first sees her, and at the end when he tells her he must return to Camelot, she is dressed "all in green, all wonderful" (p. 79). Although Merlin at the end remembers her in green, the lasting impression of Vivian is a vision of red and black. At their first dinner, she is "a fragile sheath / Of crimson" (p. 53), "a swimming crimson between two glimmering arms" (p. 55). To Merlin she is

a flower of wonder with a crimson stem

 — a flower of change and peril
 That had a clinging blossom of warm olive
 Half stifled with a tyranny of black,
 And held the wayward fragrance of a rose
 Made woman by a delirious alchemy (p. 56).

She is a combination of "darkness and wild light," and her eyes "that made fuel of the night" impart "a laughing flame" (p. 63) to Merlin which makes him jealous of everyone who had ever touched her, even as a child in the cradle. She is desirable and young, and rumors in Camelot maintain that Merlin does not age while he is with her.

But physical beauty alone could not induce Merlin, the seer and wizard, to become "a man of dalliance, and a sybarite" (p. 22). Vivian not only satisfies his need for love, beauty and youth, but she also stimulates his intellect.⁹ She is an intelligent woman who wants Merlin "to teach and feed me

an ounce of wisdom" (p. 49), and Merlin finds "a threatening wisdom" (p. 62) in their discussions that he had not anticipated. Vivian also uses her intelligence to keep Merlin the man happy and content in Broceliande. She flatters him and pays him the deference his age and status demand, telling him "you are so great and I so little" (p. 63), and calling him "the wisest man that ever was" (p. 69). Realizing that constant intimate contact can cause problems for lovers, she advocates and insists on "judicious distance and wise absences / To keep the two of us inquisitive" (p. 69).

Perhaps the contradictions which are Vivian also keep Merlin inquisitive for more than ten years. "I'm savage"; "I'm cruel and I'm cold, and I like snakes" (p. 46), she tells Merlin, who insists to Dagonet that "she meant / That she was warm and kind" (p. 115). She had urged Merlin to shave his beard and wear robes of a color other than black, but when she inspects him in his altered appearance, "pitying herself, / She pitied the fond Merlin she had changed" (p. 73). She tells Merlin, "like you, I saw too much" (p. 70), yet she looks to him to learn "what I am, / And why I am" (p. 44). Merlin tells Dagonet that Vivian is "over-wise / For woman in a world where men see not / Beyond themselves" (p. 115), but "she knows not yet the name / Of what she is" (p. 166). Vivian is a mystery even to herself. "You are wiser than all wisdom / If you know what you are," Merlin tells her. She answers, "I don't" (p. 66). Pointing to the redemptive potential in Vivian,

and by extension, in woman generally, Merlin predicts,

"In time to be

The like of her shall have another name
 Than Vivian, and her laugh shall be a fire,
 Not shining only to consume itself
 With what it burns" (p. 116).

During their ten years together before Dagonet comes to take Merlin to see Arthur, Vivian knows that she has competition for Merlin's loyalty. The world which she abandoned and shut out is the world Merlin loved enough to make Arthur its king. And the king in Camelot whom Vivian dislikes is the Arthur whom Merlin calls "a child of mine" (p. 23). Intruding on her happiness is the fear that Arthur and the world will some day lure Merlin away from her. She exhorts Merlin to be like the fern, to "never march away" (p. 67). Her fears are realized when Merlin finds "that a mightier will than his / Or Vivian's had ordained that he be there" (p. 86) in Camelot at the end. She reacts to his departure with pain and grief and fear. Arthur need not fear her any longer, for her beauty and charm cannot counteract the forces of Change which draw Merlin away from her, back to the king and the kingdom he had fathered. Vivian closes the heavy iron gate to Broceliande quietly behind Merlin, locking out the world and the man

whom her fate had sent

One spring day to come ringing at her gate,
 Bewildering her love with happy terror
 That later was to be all happiness (p. 94).

II.

In contrast with Vivian's self-exile from society and her disdain for its concerns and activities, Guinevere is an active participant in the social and political world of Camelot. As the Queen, married to Arthur and in love with Lancelot, she is the object of Arthur's suspicions, Modred's scheming and Camelot's slander. She is caught in a national upheaval she is accused of precipitating, tormented by the obvious cooling of Lancelot's passion, and plagued by self-doubt and frustration. Through it all, however, she remains "as strong as a steel spring."¹⁰ She fights for her love, accepts its defeat with dignity and learns the need of a kind of love that is not passion. Her love for Lancelot is intricately interwoven with the state of Arthur's kingdom, and the collapse of the kingdom is in part precipitated by and in part precipitates the death of their love. "It is impossible to say which spectacle is sadder: the overthrow of Camelot and the ordered empire of Arthur's contriving, or the cooling of the flame-like passion of Guinevere, a passion that should have served to gauge the world's great loves, but which dims and expires as the true Light beckons Lancelot away from the rain-swept terraces of Joyous Gard."¹¹

Guinevere married Arthur against her will when "he bought me with a name / Too large for my king-father to relinquish."¹² Having been made a pawn of politics, she shows no compunction for disregarding her marriage vows. Arthur had sent Lancelot

for her despite Merlin's warning, and when she saw him, "there were no crowns or kings or fathers" (p. 90) who mattered any longer. Guinevere feels their love is justified as a gift from God who might say of them, "they need fear no more . . . / For it was I who gave them to each other" (p. 84).

Now Guinevere finds that this love is fading. Lancelot had gone with the other knights of the Round Table in quest of the Grail, and since he had had a glimpse of its Light, he is drawn to follow it again, away from Camelot, away from Guinevere. Drawn by the Light, yet held by

the glimmering face and hair
of Guinevere — the glory of white and gold
That had been his, and were, for taking of it,
Still his,

Lancelot is a tormented man, "a moth between a window and a star, / Not wholly lured by one or led by the other" (p. 77). Guinevere is painfully aware of his dilemma. "She sees things objectively in the clear, cold light of reality,"¹³ and so she senses that ultimately she cannot obscure Lancelot's vision of the Light. She wants only to delay his pursuit of it. Since the Light "must live for ever" (p. 82), she tells Lancelot, "I doubt not that your Light will burn on / For some time yet without your ministration" (p. 22), so there is no need for him to rush away. If she loses him, there will remain very little else to lose, so if their world is coming to an end, "why not before it goes and I go with it, / Have yet one morsel more of life together" (p. 82), she asks. Cynically,

she tells Lancelot,

"Knowing the world, you know
How surely and how indifferently that Light
Shall burn through many a war that is to be"

(p. 63-65).

She claims to be glad for Modred's scheming and slander since it forces Lancelot to think of her instead of the Light. Guinevere reminds him wistfully that once "another light, a longer time ago, / Was living in your eyes, and we were happy" (p. 21).

Neither Lancelot nor Guinevere is happy any more. Although she knows she is losing him to the Light, Guinevere cannot quite understand why.

"Is there no longer something left of me
That made you need me? Have I lost myself
So fast that what a mirror says I am
Is not what is, but only what was once?" (p. 89),

she asks Lancelot.

"Is there nothing left of me
Nothing of what you called your white and gold
And made so much of? Has it all gone by?" (p. 91).

She realizes that Lancelot is changing and is aware of Modred's campaign to usurp Arthur's throne, using her affair with Lancelot as one of his tools. But she does not fear for herself; only Lancelot can hurt her. And he does hurt her deeply when he arranges for her return to Camelot after he had rescued her from being burned at the stake for adultery. Guinevere finds herself a pawn of political necessity again. But she does not

acquiesce without protest. She lashes out at Lancelot's terming her return to Camelot setting her "free" and sending her "home" (p. 71).

Like a blue-eyed Medea
Of white and gold, broken with grief and fear
And fury that shook her,

Guinevere vents her pain and her frustration with stabbing sarcasm.

"Free? Do you call me free? Do you mean that
There was never woman live freer to live
Than I am free to die?" (p. 87).

Realizing the political impossibility of any other action, and wishing to put an end to the killing, Lancelot takes Guinevere back to Arthur.

The Guinevere Lancelot finds in Almesbury is "not the Queen of white and gold" (p. 114). She is a woman with "kind eyes, but they were not the eyes / Of his desire" (p. 116). There is no passion, frustration or fury in her now. "The long nights in the Tower have taught her a new sense of values."¹⁴ She will no longer prevent Lancelot's pursuit of the Light; she has seen a light of her own. She had belonged to the world of Arthur and Modred and Camelot, a world that is now dead. In an ironic reversal of the scene at Joyous Gard, where Guinevere begged Lancelot to take her to France or anywhere in the world rather than send her back to Camelot, Guinevere now rejects Lancelot's suggestion that they go to France. She echoes the truths he had forced her to listen to,

that

"We cannot make one world of two, nor may we
Count one life more than one. Could we go back
To the old garden, we should not stay long;
The fruit that we should find would all be fallen,
And have the taste of earth" (p. 93).

Guinevere knows and accepts that she cannot recapture the love that once was. She tells him, "there is not even the world left, Lancelot, / For you and me" (p. 118). Lancelot had made the decision at Joyous Gard that she must go, and now Guinevere makes the decision that he must go. She has learned that

"There is no place
For me but where I am; there is no place
For you save where it is that you are going"
(p. 121).

She refuses his last kiss and the gates of the nunnery shut her in to seek a spiritual peace after years of emotional upheaval.

III.

Isolt — Isolt of the dark eyes — Isolt
Of the patrician passionate helplessness —
Isolt of the soft waving blue-black hair —
Isolt of Ireland.¹⁵

She is a woman "of silence and of Irish pride, / Inhabiting too much beauty for one woman" (p. 13); a woman "made for love, / And of it, and . . . mostly pride and fire / Without it" (p. 54). She "is the passionate lover, who is also capable of spiritual growth and wisdom."¹⁶

Like Guinevere, Isolt had been given in marriage out of political necessity and convenience. She is "the bartered prey" (p. 28) whose life is to buy peace between her family in Ireland and King Mark in Cornwall. Again like Guinevere, Isolt falls in love with the man sent to take her safely to be married: Tristram, King Mark's nephew, "the loud-accredited strong warrior" (p. 23). Out of loyalty to his uncle, he delivers her to Cornwall before he realizes that he is in love with her. He blames their blindness for preventing the recognition of "a passion that was death" (p. 20) for both Isolt and himself. Isolt, who at first did not recognize the love beneath her hatred toward Tristram for having killed her uncle, realized she loved Tristram during the trip from Ireland, but her pride forbade her to speak. The love they discover too late on her wedding day is no ordinary passion. Isolt professes their love to be stronger than death or time, saying

"Tristram, believe

That if I die my love will not be dead,
As I believe that yours will not be dead.
If in some after time your will may be
To slay it for the sake of a new face,
It will not die. Whatever you do to it,
It will not die. We cannot make it die,
We are not mighty enough to sentence love
Stronger than death to die, though we may die"

(p. 48-49).

Their discovery of love and the hopelessness of its fulfillment

fill Tristram with despair and he contemplates committing suicide or murdering Mark. Isolt, however, sees their situation more clearly than Tristram does.¹⁷ She has more insight and faith, and she can hope for fulfillment in life while Tristram can think only of frustration and death. She believes that time is on their side and she is not so hasty to despair of their future. The passion she feels is a love that can "wear down the wall of time" (p. 54) and she is willing to accept suffering and separation until that can be accomplished. She tells him, "if I were sure this was to be the end, / I should make this the end" (p. 55). But Isolt sees the possibility of being closer to life in the discovery of love, than to death in being separated from her lover.

Isolt's insight is rewarded when after two years she is reunited with Tristram at Joyous Gard. At Cornwall, she had been able to look beyond the immediate darkness of their separation to the possibility of happiness. At Joyous Gard she can see beyond the joy of fulfillment to its inevitable end. They could not be lovers in the temporal world of kings and courts, but in their private paradise, they have escaped from both the world and time. Isolt, however, has attained the insight to know that "when we are done / With time, Tristram, nothing can be for long" (p. 138-139). Isolt can see a darkness coming that Tristram refuses to acknowledge, believing rather that "when we are done with time, / There is no time for fear" (p. 152). He cannot see what Isolt fully accepts,

that death is almost a "necessary consequence of the total commitment to love."¹⁸

Isolt can accept her death because she has grown and matured during the two years she suffered in Cornwall without Tristram. Her awakening to love had also awakened other intense emotions: "abhorrence / Of Mark" (p. 123), disgust for Andred, and above all, fear. For Isolt, "all there is in my life now / That I would live for longer" (p. 54) is Tristram. Because Tristram considered death an alternative to living with the pain of separation from her, and because of the uncertainty of his impulsive nature, she feared that he would do something rash and jeopardize her reason for living. The look of terror in her violet eyes on the night he was banished haunted Tristram during their years of separation, and constantly reminded him of his need to stay alive for her sake.

But for two years she had been "alone with time" (p. 123) and pain in Cornwall, and during that time

The fires of love and fear
Had slowly burned away so much of her
That all there was of her, she would have said,
Was only a long waiting for an end
Of waiting — (p. 125).

When she meets Tristram at Joyous Gard, "there was no fear in her eyes" (p. 127). The Isolt at Joyous Gard is a woman who possesses a "knowledge born of all endurance," whose fiery passion is now a "pale fire of love," reflecting both "passion and comprehension," and whose eyes contain "tears of vision

and of understanding" and "a mist of wisdom" (p. 130). Life without Tristram had taught her the truth of her words when she had said that without him, there was no reason for her to live. The summer with Tristram in perfect physical and spiritual union is the end of waiting and the fulfillment of Isolt's life. At Joyous Gard their love broke down the walls of time, as Isolt had said it could, and she and Tristram learn that

One may do worse than die.

If life that comes of love is more than death,
Love must be more than death and life together

(p. 148).

Like Guinevere, Isolt is returned to her husband against her will. Because life for Isolt consisted of loving Tristram, when Mark kidnaps her from Joyous Gard he finds that his captive wife is "pale no longer / With life" (p. 176). She had told Tristram that if she ever lost him, there would only be one thing worth waiting for. An end of love for her was the end of life, and having separated the lovers, Mark finds that Isolt is dying. Isolt accepts the summer with Tristram as the fulfillment of her life, and does not regret her portending death. She tells Tristram,

"I am not afraid to die,

.

My cup was running over; and having had all
That one life holds of joy, and in one summer,
Why should I be a miser crying to God
For more? (pp. 184-185).

Her summer of complete living through love has taught Isolt to accept life as it is given, and to understand the blindnesses of others. Her previous abhorrence of Mark mellows into gratitude for what she terms his kindness in permitting Tristram to come to her, and she forgives both Mark's persecution and Andred's hatred. Her love has taught Tristram, the man of impulsive action, the necessity of restraint, so that at the end she can rightfully call him "a child of thought" (p. 155).¹⁹ And in accepting and being grateful for the fulfillment of her life, she is willing to give Tristram back to the world, to take his rightful place as a leader of men and the husband of the other Isolt. She tells him that death is best for her, "to make him sure, leaving him and his wings / To fly wherever they would" (p. 190). When she dies, Isolt knows "that love is more than passion and possession"²⁰ and that for her, death is peace.

IV.

Isolt of Brittany, the other Isolt, also called Isolt of the white hands, is a stark contrast to Isolt of Ireland, both in physical appearance and in personality. While Isolt of Ireland is "dark and love-red" (p. 95) Isolt of Brittany is the "white Isolt" (p. 89) with "calm gray eyes" (p. 15) and hair of "a nameless cloth of gold whiter than gold" (p. 102). She is a "mild white thing / That had so quaint a wisdom in its mildness" (p. 92), "a changeling down from one of those white stars" (p. 18) with "flame-white loveliness"

(p. 88) and "rose-white warmth" (p. 92). "Half childlike and half womanly" (p. 17), she is "no heavier than a cat . . . / But otherwise" she is "somewhat like a tiger" (p. 11); "so frail, so light, / And yet, with all, mysteriously so strong" (p. 16). Isolt of the white hands does not inspire the passion Tristram associates with the "love-red" Isolt of Ireland, but she possesses a "white fire" (p. 89) and is a "white wise fiery thing" (p. 93).

Like Vivian, Isolt of the white hands fell in love as a child with a man who promised to come to her some time in the future. In her childlike innocence, she clung to the dream of Tristram's return to Brittany, believing his carelessly given promise and prizing the agate he had given her as a token of that pledge rather than as a mere keepsake. "But believing, she is not deceived."²¹ She possesses an intuitive wisdom about who she is and what she can expect from life. She has the insight to look beyond her own desires and consider possibilities that the future may hold. This practicality enables her to accept that, if Tristram does not return,

"I shall have been but one poor woman more
Whose punishment for being born a woman
Was to believe and wait" (p. 16).

Tristram's arrival in Brittany after his banishment from Cornwall is for Isolt literally a dream come true. He chooses exile in Brittany so that Isolt's "innocence may teach me to be wise / Till I be strong again" (p. 82). "The still white fire of her necessity" (p. 88) and her "wisdom beyond thought, /

Or . . . innocence beyond all wisdom" (p. 93) hold Tristram captive, until he convinces himself that his pity is a form of love and marries her. Her marriage to Tristram fulfills all the expectations the eighteen year old Isolt held out for her life. Although she knows she cannot inspire the passion in Tristram the other Isolt does, she is not jealous of the emotion between them, because she knows she is incapable of a similar passion. She can, however, offer something as important to Tristram. She can "teach and heal" (p. 118) him, and can be happy while he is with her without asking for more. She knows that

"I am not one who must have everything.

I was not fated to have everything.

One may be wise enough, not having all

Still to be found among the fortunate" (p. 98).

And Isolt considers herself fortunate in having Tristram's kindness and physical presence with her in Brittany. Only the thought of his departure or death casts a shadow on her happiness. With her intuitive wisdom she anticipates both Tristram's departure and death, telling him

"I see almost a shadow on you sometimes,

As if there were some fearful thing behind you,

Not to be felt or seen — while you are here"

(p. 97).

When Gawaine comes to take Tristram to Camelot to be knighted by Arthur, Isolt suspects she will never see him again if he leaves Brittany. But she is too wise to prevent his

leaving. She sees that his departure is the only means of releasing him from his passion for Isolt of Ireland which haunts him constantly. Although she sees the possibility of losing him permanently, she possesses the wisdom to know that she does not have any weapons with which to fight Tristram's love for the dark Isolt. She can understand that the power of their love is such that she cannot hope to extinguish it. She is wise enough to stand aside with the hope that something will remain for her to hold on to when fate is done with Tristram.

When Tristram dies, Isolt's purpose in living is gone, and the child who dreamt of her great love by the sea must face reality as a woman. "Isolt of Ireland died for her love; Isolt of Brittany had to live without it,"²² and the young woman who seemed "too frail" (p. 16), finds within her the strength to be willing to learn to live without love. The experience of possessing and losing love has taught her that "wisdom was never learned at any knees;" rather, "wisdom is like a dawn that comes up slowly / Out of an unknown ocean" (p. 206). Explaining to her father her understanding of what happened to her and Tristram,

"The dawn has come," she said,

"And wisdom will come with it. If it sinks

Away from me, and into night again —

Then I shall be alone, and I shall die.

But I shall never be all alone — not now;

And I shall know there was a fate more swift

Than yours or mine that hurried him farther on

Than we are yet. I would have been the world
 And heaven to Tristram, and was nothing to him;
 And that was why the night came down so dark
 On me when Tristram died. But there was always
 Attending him an almost visible doom
 That I see now; and while he moved and looked
 As one too mighty and too secure to die,
 He was not mingled and equipped to live
 Very long. It was not earth in him that burned
 Itself to death; and she that died for him
 Must have been more than earth. If he had lived,
 He would have pitied me and smiled at me,
 And he would always have been kind to me —
 If he had lived; and I should not have known,
 Not even when in his arms, how far away
 He was from me. Now, when I cannot sleep,
 Thinking of him, I shall know where he is"

(p. 207-208).

Isolt's intuitive wisdom is augmented by the wisdom gained
 through experience. She accepts unpleasant realities and her
 dreams will enable her to face the future without Tristram.
 She will endure and may yet "be Queen / Of Here or There,
 may be — sometime" (p. 205).

V.

Considering the characteristics of Vivian, Guinevere,
 Isolt of Ireland and Isolt of Brittany as the elements which

comprise "woman" whose "torch" will "light the world," it is apparent that "woman" possesses a wide range of traits and qualities. Some, like Isolt of Ireland's capacity to forgive, are more readily identifiable than others as traits which can improve the flawed world Robinson depicts. If Gawaine had possessed a comparable capacity perhaps Arthur would have been able to protect his kingdom from Modred. But all the character traits of these four women are believable, and if their actions are not always exemplary, it is because of personal limitations and blindneses, not intentional maliciousness or mischief. Examining the characteristics the women have in common and balancing qualities which represent two extremes yield a profile of "the composite figure, Woman,"²³ and indicates that "woman" possesses qualities which can be beneficial if applied to the task of improving the world.

If beauty alone could save the world, Vivian, Guinevere, and the two Isolts could save it four times over. Two are dark and two are light but each is a woman whose beauty is legendary among those who have heard of her. Coupled with physical beauty is a captivating charm — mysteriously provocative in Vivian, transparently innocent in Isolt of the white hands — which beguiles men sometimes against their will. Tristram is never sure how his marriage to the white Isolt came about. "Magicians may have done it. / Stars may have done it" (*Tristram*, pp. 93, 94). "Woman" is also intelligent and intellectual, capable of complex metaphysical thought and comfortable with philosophical discussions. She

is perceptive in distinguishing the real from the illusion, and accurate in establishing the existence and strength of her competitor or opponent. Her fears are real fears of real threats to her happiness: Merlin still loves the world, Lancelot is intensely drawn toward the Light, Tristram remains impulsive and passionate till the end.

"Woman" is articulate in expressing both her fears and insights, both of which appear to be intuitive and accurate. Her insight into people and events ranges from Vivian's perception that "judicious distance" will ensure love's longevity, to Isolt of Ireland's realization that perfect happiness cannot last. And insight makes her practical and accepting of situations she cannot change or control. Guinevere cannot regain Lancelot's passion and Isolt of Brittany cannot extinguish Tristram's passion for the dark Isolt, and so each stands aside and lets her lover go.

Whether he stays or goes, "woman" influences her man's appearance, his actions and even his thoughts. Under Vivian's influence, Merlin not only discards the outward symbols of his solemn position, but comes

To be the youngest, oldest, weirdest, gayest,
And wisest, and sometimes the foolishhest

Of all men of her consideration (Merlin, p. 94).

Lancelot, drawn by the Light but held by his love for Guinevere, is a torn man "who sees the new and cannot leave the old" (Lancelot, p. 31). "Woman" is also capable of personal growth and maturation. The pressure of suffering and solitude transforms

the frantic and frustrated Queen of Joyous Gard into the calm and decisive Guinevere of the convent. "Woman" can learn to understand necessities other than her own, and when she does, she can "forgive / The faggots" (Lancelot, p. 122) and accept whatever fate life has allotted her.

The quality which all four women possess in an extraordinary degree is the capacity to love. For each woman, the man she loves becomes a motive for living, and loving him becomes the purpose of her life. For Vivian, Merlin's "love and service were to be her school, / Her triumph and her history" (Merlin, p. 43). Merlin knows that "no other love than mine / Shall be an index of her memories" (Merlin, p. 116). Guinevere tells Lancelot,

"what is all for you
Is all for love, which were the same to me
As life" (Lancelot, p. 20).

For Isolt of Ireland, Tristram is "all there is in my life now / That I would live for longer," and for Isolt of Brittany, he "had been all, / And would be always all there was for her" (Tristram, pp. 54, 209). Hers is a passionate, all-inclusive love for which she is willing to defy the world, or to hope and wait and suffer alone. For the sake of her love, man is willing to abandon the world, betray the trust of his king, wage bloody war, and look on death as a blessing rather than be separated from her.

It is this characteristic of woman, her capacity to give and inspire love, which is generally interpreted by critics

as "the torch / Of woman [which] . . . / . . . is yet to light the world" (Merlin, p. 110). According to The Oxford English Dictionary, figuratively or allusively, a torch is "something figured as a source of illumination, enlightenment or guidance, or heat or 'conflagration.'"²⁴ It is logical then that "the expression 'the torch of woman' — that is, woman as torch — must, in its connotative force, turn in two directions: woman as an inspirer, as a producer of enlightenment, knowledge; and as a producer of that flame of love or passion that moves even the mightiest of men."²⁵ Critics have generally limited their discussion of the "torch of woman" to the latter connotation of the phrase. Perhaps because "the torch of woman" appears in Merlin, which Robinson suggested be read together with Lancelot, and perhaps because they are so obviously producers of passion, Vivian and Guinevere provide the basis for most of the discussion of this concept. Franchere considers Vivian "the sensuous creature, the torch of passion," the "torch to set fire to Merlin's too-long restrained passions." Guinevere had once performed a similar service for Lancelot but now finds "that the torch she had at one time been for her knight burns less intensely" until finally "Guinevere's torch flickers and goes out."²⁶ The passion she had inspired in both Arthur and Lancelot had served to set not only the men, but the entire kingdom on fire.

Franchere's contention that "both Vivian and Guinevere are torches lit to inspire a man's passion,"²⁷ summarizes the

belief of other critics, who go on to speculate how the passion of women will benefit the world in general. Barnard and Cestre equate "woman" not only with intense passion, but with the emotion of love generally. Barnard states: "'Woman' . . . — or perhaps more properly, 'man's love for woman' — teaches that earthly existence also has a meaning; as the closest relation with another person that most human beings ever know, it puts the body to use in the service of the soul, it exalts and purifies, it reveals (to those who are ready for the revelation) the need and the capacity for union with another soul and hence with other souls, and it opens the way to the conquest, if not the cure, of 'self.'"²⁸ Similarly, Cestre speculates that the phrase affirms Robinson's faith in love, "in pure love, that, handing on from woman to man the enthusiasm for what transcends Self, prepares the way for great sacrifices and noble achievements."²⁹ Neff, on the other hand, attributes a future redemption to "the instinct of women to abhor war."³⁰ Carpenter's reading of "the torch of woman" retains its equation with love and passion, but extends its application to the two Isolts. According to him, Merlin's "prophecy finds realization in Tristram, where the dark Isolt points to salvation through passionate love (the torch of woman), while Isolt of the white hands realizes the ideal of purity, which Galahad found."³¹ Apparently, Robinson did not realize in how many ways "the torch of woman" can be taken "literally."

These critical interpretations and speculations do share one premise: that woman as a torch is initially and finally a source of heat, or emotion, be it love, passion or abhorrence. And there is ample evidence in the poems to support this reading. However, there appears to be no discussion of the other connotative meaning of "torch" as a source of illumination, enlightenment or guidance, pushing back the darkness, showing the way. The examination of the characters of Vivian, Guinevere, and the two Isolts not only indicates the existence of character traits which can be instrumental in changing the world for the better. Examining them in the order in which Robinson presented them — first Vivian, followed by Guinevere, then Isolt of Ireland, with Isolt of Brittany closing the trilogy — also indicates a progression, an increase in the degree of self-knowledge each woman possesses initially, in her ability to gain additional wisdom through experience, and in the possibility of transmitting both the intuitive and acquired knowledge to others, and thereby being a "torch" to "light" the world. The evidence does not indicate that any one of the four women exactly embodies both the connotative meanings possible for woman as a torch. However, when the emphasis is shifted from producing heat to providing illumination as the function of a torch, then there is evidence to indicate that Isolt of the white hands is the "torch" that comes the closest to being in a position to "light the world."

Before she can enlighten others or show the way to the rest of the world, woman must know herself and be sensitive

to the needs of and changes in others. There is a perceptible increase in both self-knowledge and insight in the women from Vivian to Isolt of the white hands, the two women in Brittany who are such stark contrasts. Unlike Vivian who admits to not knowing what she is and needing Merlin to "tell me what I am, / And why I am" (Merlin, p. 44), Isolt of the white hands has a realistic concept of what she is and what she can look forward to in life. Vivian looks to Merlin "to teach and feed me with an ounce of wisdom" (Merlin, p. 49). In contrast, Tristram goes to Isolt so she "may teach me to be wise" (Tristram, p. 82). She knows she "was not fated to have everything" (Tristram, p. 98), and is willing to consider the possibility that her dreams may not come true. Vivian projects an image of a confident and self-assured woman, admitting to herself but not to Merlin, that he frightens her, because "if I show it, / I'll be no more the Vivian for whose love / He tossed away his glory" (Merlin, p. 43-44). Isolt has no need of such poses. "Her candor," "her artlessness," and "her flame-white loveliness" (Tristram, p. 88) appeal to Tristram and her intuitive wisdom enables her to love Tristram with "her eyes open."³²

Between Vivian's lack of self-knowledge and Isolt of Brittany's insight, Guinevere and the dark Isolt each possesses more self-knowledge than the former but less than the latter. Guinevere, who had felt certain of her appeal to Lancelot, who had known what she was and why she was, finds it progressively more difficult to understand what is happening to her. As a

result, she becomes less sure of who she is until she seeks a redefinition of her life through prayer in the convent. Isolt of Ireland, on the other hand, once she discovers the purpose of her life in love for Tristram, knows that she is all love and that the sum of her life will be her love for Tristram.

Before woman can enlighten others, she must have the capacity to learn from experience, to accept new realities, and to change to accommodate them in her life. Again, there is a progressive intensification from Vivian to the white Isolt in the degree of personal growth which occurs in the women. When Merlin leaves for the second and final time, Vivian is afraid and sad and somewhat bewildered. Merlin tells Dagonet he will never return to Broceliande and can see no man who will replace him there. He imagines she will remember him wistfully, saying perhaps

"I knew him when his heart was young,
Though I have lost him now. Time called him home,
And that was as it was" (Merlin, p. 117).

There is no indication from either Vivian's actions or Merlin's speculations about her future that Vivian has gained a new insight or changed her attitude as a result of her experience with Merlin. She is essentially unchanged when she closes the gate behind Merlin.

Guinevere changes rather suddenly and dramatically at the end of Lancelot. In one scene she pleads unsuccessfully and almost frantically with Lancelot to take her away to France.

The next time she appears she is in Almesbury convent, her passions controlled by a new insight she attained while suffering fear and loneliness in the Tower of London.

"I saw in the Tower
When all was darkest and I may have dreamed,
A light that gave to men the eyes of Time
To read themselves in silence" (Lancelot, p. 123).

By this light she has read that the world in which she was Lancelot's "glory of white and gold" (Lancelot, p. 77) is gone forever. As a consequence, she knows and accepts that she and Lancelot cannot regain the love they once had. But Guinevere acknowledges that she really "had no choice" (Lancelot, p. 123); circumstances dictated and demanded the change in her outlook. Her new insight is one that has been thrust on her.

Isolt of Ireland also changes and matures as a direct result of loneliness and suffering. Though she is not in a real prison or a captive in a declared war, she is a prisoner of the social order which gives the daughters of kings in marriage to other kings without regard for the feelings and preferences of the daughters. As Mark's wife who lives only for the remote hope of being reunited with Tristram who is her life, Isolt is in effect a prisoner in Cornwall. But being "alone with time" (Tristram, p. 123) for two years subdues her passionate nature, and when she meets Tristram again, "she smiled at him as only joy made wise / By sorrow smiles at fear" (Tristram, p. 129). Separation and uncertainty have taught her that "years are not life" (Tristram, p. 145); love is. After her

summer of physical and spiritual fulfillment with Tristram, she knows "I shall not be unhappy after this" (Tristram, p. 139). When she is forcibly taken from Joyous Gard, she is content to die for she has learned to be wise enough to appreciate those three months as the sum of her life.

Not the most dramatic but certainly the most enduring change and growth in wisdom occurs in Isolt of the white hands. Isolt's intense and determined faith that Tristram would return to Brittany because he had said he would makes her father speculate that

"If there were not inwoven so much power
And poise of sense with all her seeming folly,
I might assume a concord with her faith

As that of one elected soon to die" (Tristram, p.18).

She seems "so frail, so light" and so very much like "a foreign flower, not certain . . . / To thrive, nor like to die" (Tristram, pp. 16, 17) if not handled with care. But Isolt does not die when "the night came down so dark" on her after Tristram's death because she is also "mysteriously so strong" (Tristram, pp. 207, 16). "Wisdom is like a dawn," she tells her father, and "the dawn has come" (Tristram, pp. 206, 207) for Isolt. She can admit to herself the harsh reality that while she "would have been the world / And heaven to Tristram," she had been "nothing to him" (Tristram, p. 207). In contrast to Vivian, who hates any symbol of mortality or death and who wants to keep Merlin young behind the walls of Broceliande, Isolt knows

There are no mortal houses
That are so providentially barred and fastened
As to keep change and death from coming in

(Tristram, p. 207).

Isolt acknowledges the changes in her and knows she is wiser as a result.

Finally, if her wisdom is to benefit others, woman must be part of the world in order to share what she knows. Isolated in Broceliande, willfully locking out the world she disdains, Vivian as she is at the end of Merlin cannot enlighten anyone. While she was the Queen of Christendom, Guinevere was the torch of passion which burned, not illuminated, and was a cause of Camelot's collapse. Secluded in the nunnery, she can share her new wisdom and her light only with Lancelot and perhaps some nuns who are also withdrawn from the world. And Isolt of Ireland happily takes her wisdom and love to her grave once she has attained perfect happiness with Tristram. It is Isolt of the white hands,

a child that was a woman

Before she was a child, and is . . .

Woman and child, and something not of either

(Tristram, p. 94),

who alone of the four remains in the world to make an imprint on it with the wisdom she has acquired. She has learned from the experience of loving and losing Tristram what she had known before intuitively, that she cannot have everything and that change and death are inevitable. Though she may feel for a

time that Tristram will "always be all there was for her" (Tristram, p. 209), she is young and she has just learned the necessity of adapting to unpleasant circumstances. "'I shall be Queen / Of Here or There, may be — sometime,' she said" (Tristram, p. 205) and it is plausible that she will. While she will always remember Tristram, she will also retain and perhaps transmit her wisdom, thereby becoming a "torch" that can illuminate the world.

The world which Robinson depicts in his Arthurian poems is a world in disorder, in decline. He had presented "Arthur and his empire as an object lesson to prove to coming generations that nothing can stand on a rotten foundation."³³ Yet "the torch / Of woman . . . / . . . is yet to light the world." Emphasizing the illuminating, enlightening and guiding connotations of "torch" and "light" equally with the "heating" and "burning" connotations makes the redemptive potential of "the torch of woman" clearer.

In a world that men are making,
Knowing not how, nor caring yet to know
How slowly and grievously they do it, — (Merlin,
p. 115),

Vivian, Guinevere, Isolt of Ireland and Isolt of the white hands "have a firmer grasp on the realities of day-to-day existence. They may not see so far, but they see more clearly, are not so easily deceived by remote mirages, do not so eagerly . . . embrace illusions."³⁴ Perhaps the practical wisdom of the white Isolts guiding the passions of the Vivians,

Guineveres and dark Isolts will produce the kind of love that will shine not "only to consume itself / With what it burns" (Merlin, p. 116) in seclusion like Vivian's, but will "teach and heal" (Tristram, p. 118) like the white Isolt's, and thereby save the world.

Footnotes

¹Hermann Hagedorn, ed., Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Macmillan Co., 1940), p. 97.

²Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Lancelot," Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), III, 6. All subsequent quotations from the text of this poem are taken from this edition and designated in the text by the title and page number only.

³Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Merlin," Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), III, 107. All subsequent quotations from the text of this poem are taken from this edition and designated in the text by the title and page number only.

⁴Hagedorn, Selected Letters, p. 97.

⁵Ibid., p. 113.

⁶Robinson, Merlin, pp. 43, 61. 75. All poetic citations in section I dealing with Vivian are from this poem and designated in the text with page references only.

⁷Nathan Comfort Starr, King Arthur Today (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1954), p. 26.

⁸Ellsworth Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study (New York: Macmillan Co., 1952), p. 119.

⁹Nathan Comfort Starr, "The Transformation of Merlin," in Ellsworth Barnard, ed., Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 113.

¹⁰Starr, King Arthur Today, p. 35.

¹¹Lucius Morris Beebe, Aspects of the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson (Cambridge: Dunster House Bookshop, 1928), p. 56.

¹²Robinson, Lancelot, p. 90. All poetic citations in section II dealing with Guinevere are from this poem and designated in the text with page references only.

¹³E. Edith Pipkin, "The Arthur of Edwin Arlington Robinson," English Journal, 19 (March, 1930), rpt. in Richard Cary, ed., Appreciation of Edwin Arlington Robinson (Waterville: Colby College Press, 1969), p. 12.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Tristram," Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), III, 22-23. All subsequent quotations from the text of this poem are taken from this edition and designated in the text by the title and page number only. All poetic citations in sections III and IV dealing with Isolt of Ireland and Isolt of Brittany are from this poem and designated in the text with page references only.

¹⁶Frederic Ives Carpenter, "Tristram the Transcendent," New England Quarterly, 11 (Sept., 1938), rpt. in Richard Cary

ed., Appreciation of Edwin Arlington Robinson (Waterville: Colby College Press, 1969), p. 84.

¹⁷Starr, King Arthur Today, p. 77.

¹⁸Charles T. Davis, "Robinson's Road to Camelot," in Ellsworth Barnard, ed., Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 99.

¹⁹Carpenter, p. 83.

²⁰Barnard, A Critical Study, p. 253.

²¹Louise Dauner, "The Pernicious Rib: E. A. Robinson's Concept of Feminine Character," American Literature, 15 (May, 1943), rpt. in Richard Cary, ed., Appreciation of Edwin Arlington Robinson (Waterville: Colby College Press, 1969), p. 131.

²²Starr, King Arthur Today, p. 81.

²³Dauner, p. 132.

²⁴The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) XIX, 158.

²⁵Hoyt C. Franchere, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 122.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 122, 123, 124.

²⁷Ibid., p. 128.

²⁸Barnard, A Critical Study, p. 255.

²⁹M. Charles Cestre, "Edwin Arlington Robinson's Treatment of the Arthurian Legend," in Anon. Edwin Arlington Robinson (San Francisco: Macmillan Co., date unknown), p. 17.

³⁰Emery Neff, Edwin Arlington Robinson, The American Men of Letters Series (New York: Wm. Sloane Associates, 1948), p. 194.

³¹Carpenter, p. 84.

³²Starr, King Arthur Today, p. 80.

³³Hagedorn, Selected Letters, p. 112.

³⁴Barnard, A Critical Study, p. 250.

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EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON: THE TORCH OF WOMAN

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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While Edwin Arlington Robinson's Merlin, Lancelot and Tristram depict the dissolution of social and personal relationships, they do not depict despair. In Merlin, Robinson indicates that there is the possibility of redemption through "the torch / Of woman which . . . / . . . is yet to light the world." Although he gives no explanation of what the "torch of woman" is, or how it can illuminate the world besides saying that the phrase should be taken literally, Robinson does present four remarkable women in his Arthurian poems. An examination of their personalities and characteristics, individually and collectively, suggests a possible interpretation of Robinson's conception of the redemptive power of woman. As a composite woman, Vivian, Guinevere, Isolt of Ireland and Isolt of Brittany possess a wide range of character traits and qualities which can, if applied to that purpose, be instrumental in bettering the world. Examining the women in the order in which Robinson presented them in the poems — first Vivian, followed by Guinevere, then Isolt of Ireland with Isolt of the white hands closing the trilogy — also indicates a progression in personal growth from Vivian to Isolt of Brittany. If in considering the function of a torch the emphasis is shifted from producing heat to providing illumination, then there is evidence to indicate that Isolt of the white hands is the "torch" that comes the closest to lighting the world, since she possesses the highest degree of intuitive wisdom and she alone of the four remains in the world to

be able to transmit the new wisdom she had gained through experience.