

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON: ²⁸⁹ THE TORCH OF WOMAN

by

BEPNADETTE KRASSOI
A.B., Ursuline College, 1970

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1978

Approved by:



W. R. Moses
Major Professor

Document
LD
2668
.R4
1978
K73
C.2

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,