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Arthurian Wantons: Language, Lust, and Time in Victorian Poetry and Drama

Abstract
Compares several Victorian treatments of the Matter of Britain. Includes Tennyson's moralistic version as well as "theologically and linguistically subversive" works of later Victorians.

Additional Keywords
Arthurian myth—Women; Arthurian myth in drama; Arthurian myth in poetry; Arthurian myth in Victorian literature; Religion; Sexual mores; Victorian literature—Style

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The verse fantasy of the Victorian period was profoundly, often fiercely theological — or anti-theological. On the battlefield of Arthurian legend, the writers of the Victorian period conducted an argument about the value of sexuality, the sanctity of marriage, the nature of language and the nature of deity. Is sexuality lovely and valuable in itself, or is it valuable only when directed toward the service of a higher good, within the sacrament of marriage? Should language strive to express a stable and eternal vision, or should it embody and celebrate the uncertainty and instability of the world around us? Is God a transcendent being, beyond and above this world, imparting to humans an absolute system of morality by means of his sacred Word? Or does the divine move through the cycles of the natural world and the vagaries of mortal love? These are the issues with which Victorian poets were wrestling, and Arthurian narrative provided one of the vehicles for their debate. Accordingly, when Victorian poets used the Matter of Britain, they focused either on the quest of the Grail, the quest for transcendence, or (more commonly) on the quest for secular love.

Even Tennyson, Victoria's Poet Laureate, placed the adultery of Guinevere at the center of his Idylls of the King, as the "one sin" through which the realm crumbles; since Tennyson's Arthur has founded his kingdom on a basis of "maiden passion" and domestic fidelity, his order is exceptionally vulnerable to this attack from within. Later Victorian poets — discouraged perhaps by the bland specter of Tennyson's "blameless King" — tended to avoid the figure of Arthur as far as possible, focusing exclusively on the lovers in Arthurian legend: Guinevere and Lancelot, Tristram and Iseult. Guinevere and Iseult had traditionally appeared in literature either as adulterous whores or as icons of courtly love, in either case embodying a potent and destructive sexuality. For Tennyson, such women as Guinevere and Isolt debase sexuality by disconnecting it from the Christian sacrament of marriage, just as they pervert language by disconnecting it from the stability of Arthur's "large, divine and comfortable words" (The Coming of Arthur, 267). These women are false to themselves (again, in Tennyson's view), since they fail to embody the moral idealism of King Arthur's vision. However, in the poetry of the generation following Tennyson's, a new concept of the Arthurian heroine develops, and she becomes the goddess of a radiant and liberating sexuality, able to connect her own nature and her lover's with the pagan harmonies of the natural world.

In tracing this development, I shall focus on the specific issue of language, which will be found to illuminate all the other issues that I mentioned earlier. Thus, while Tennyson's Guinevere needs to learn Arthur's Christian language, William Morris' radiant and audacious Guenevere — the New Woman of Camelot — develops a language which is as shifting, as unstable, and as beautiful as any other natural process; language becomes an extension of the transient and sacred joy of bodily life. A similar contrast appears between the Iseult in Idylls of the King and the heroine of Algernon Swinburne's epic, Tristram of Lyonesse, published in 1882. Unlike Guenevere, Iseult is an unrepentant adulteress. Both Tennyson and Swinburne, therefore, present Iseult's language as forever unstable, shifting and twisting as it accurately expresses her varying emotions. Yet to Tennyson this instability discredits Iseult even as a romantic heroine, whereas to Swinburne it marks the vitality of her love. This deep division between Tennyson's God-centered vision and the dynamic vision of his successors crucially marks the Arthurian literature of the period.

Tennyson's idyll, "Guinevere," and Morris' poem, "The Defence of Guenevere," were composed almost simultaneously, in 1857-58, quite independently. Yet these two poems read as if they had been designed to defy and denounce each other. Morris' Guenevere is seen on trial, defying those who accuse her; though facing execution if convicted of adultery, she "stood right up, and never shrunk. / But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!" (55-6). She speaks and is silent at her own will: "By God! I will not tell you more today" (277). On the other hand, Tennyson's Guinevere grovels before her offended husband, in the classic pose of the guilty wife made popular by the paintings of Augustus Egg. And throughout their last interview, she is silent with shame and love; while Arthur is present, she says nothing at all. Indeed — until his reproaches have brought her to a sense of repentance — she has almost nothing to say throughout the Idyll that bears her name. Earlier in the Idylls, she was fluent enough; then the language that expressed her love for Lancelot failed her, and in her last encounter with her lover the two of them could only sit "Stammering and staring" (101). At the beginning of the Idyll called "Guinevere," she has been publicly revealed as an adulteress, and has fled to the convent at Almesbury, hoping vainly to hide herself in silence and invisibility. Yet, as one of the novices innocently reminds her, she cannot retreat into silence and "weep behind a cloud: / As even here they talk at Almesbury / About the good King and his wicked Queen."
Tennyson's Guinevere must learn to alter her own language, to let her words acquire the stability of Arthur's "simple words of great authority" (The Coming of Arthur, 260). Before Arthur's arrival at Almesbury, she thinks she has repented, for she has sworn, as she puts it, "never to see [Lancelot] more, / To see him more" ("Guinevere," 374-5). But the loving repetition of her last words betrays her, and shows the instability of her resolution; immediately, "from old habit of the mind" (376), she recalls her first ride among the flowers with Lancelot and her disappointment on meeting Arthur. Arthur then seemed to her "cold, / High, self-contained, and passionless," colorless and remote from the imperfection of "earth," and, therefore, less lovable than Lancelot (402-4, 640-3; "Lancelot and Elaine," 131-4). At this point, however, Arthur arrives; and in a speech which (as George Meredith remarked) suggests the "crowned curate" as much as the wounded husband, Arthur imposes his own judgment, his own hopes, and his own vision of himself upon Guinevere's mind. Guinevere's reaction, when he is gone, is to echo his words, his ideas, and the very structure of his speech, from judgment to mercy. Alone once more, Guinevere murmurs, "He, the King, / Called me polluted" — and considers herself polluted; she turns to hope; and adds — "His hope he called it": the hope that she and Arthur may yet be reunited "Before high God," if she repents and purifies her soul ("Guinevere," 614-15, 627-33). Finally, she accepts Arthur's own perception of himself as her true mate and lover, superior to Lancelot. Arthur says, "Let no man dream but that I love thee still": "I am thy husband — not a smaller soul, / Nor Lancelot, nor another" (557, 563-4). So Guinevere cries to her departed lord,

I see thee what thou art,
Thou art the highest and most human too,
Not Lancelot, nor another. (643-5)

And she repeats, "he loves me still. / Let no one dream but that he loves me still" (667-8). In the end she passes beyond the "voices" of this world to the peace of a heaven for which Arthur alone has been the fully competent spokesman (692).

This scene has been much attacked, both in Tennyson's Arthur and in our own. The Victorian objection comes, not (as one might have expected) from feminists, but from male writers who perceived and resisted the traditionalist religious, psychological, and moral implications of the scene. Arthur is to Guinevere and his knights "as is the conscience of a saint / Among his warIng senses" (634-5); he is reason, looking upward to heaven, and attempting to bridle the rebellious beasts of passion. More specifically, to Guinevere he is Milton's Adam, who should control the corrupted imagination and passion of a weaker Eve; like Adam, he is God's mediator, and Guinevere must learn to see and worship God in him, to hear God's word through his husband's voice and to bow to it.

Implicit in all this are several assumptions to which Tennyson's younger colleagues strenuously objected. First, Tennyson seems to assume here that the divine in humanity is a restraining and controlling power — or, as Blake would have put it (ironically), that "Good is the passive that obeys Reason." Second, he implies that to align themselves with divinity, humans must hear and obey a voice from above, must see by a light beyond them. And, third, Tennyson suggests that the "warmth and colour" (642) of human language and human sexuality must derive from a superhuman authority, or be proven ultimately false, by their own evanescence. In short, Tennyson turns the feudal structures of Arthurian legend to the ends of a traditionally hierarchical Christian vision of the soul's relationship to God. And this is what Morris and Swinburne refuse to accept. The great war between Christian orthodoxy and humanism which dominated the nineteenth century is fought out, not only on the fields of theological debate, but also in Guinevere's bower.

Morris' Guenevere attacks all the doctrines embodied in Tennyson's Arthur. To Morris' Guenevere, divinity is inherent not in the force that controls and restrains, but in the energy of physical delight that breaks all bounds. Thus, before her judges, she frankly recalls how, on the day when she first kissed Lancelot, she dared not contemplate her own beauty as well as the beauty of the natural world:

what should I have done,
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,
And startling green drawn upward by the sun?
But shouting, loosed out, see now! all my hair,
And trancedly stood watching the west wind run
With faintest half-heard breathing sound — why there
I lose my head e'en now in doing this ... (125-31)

Before her accusers, Guenevere acts out this gesture of liberation: loosening her hair, deliberately abandoning control, and presenting her own free living delight and beauty as the best reason why she should not be executed.

Far from obeying and worshipping a voice from above, Morris' Guenevere defies and denies all external, judgmental voices. Her contempt for the judgments traditionally ascribed to God is plain when she tells her opening parable of the two cloths, in which an angel asks a dying person to choose a short red cloth or a long blue one, one of which represents heaven and one hell. But the dying man cannot tell which is which; his fate depends on the outcome of a blind guess. Even so, she implies, we are asked on earth to choose between one course of action and another; we cannot tell "the better of the two"; yet we are
told that God will send us to eternal pain or joy — on the basis of that choice (16-45). To accept such ideas, as Guenevere’s accuser Gauwaine does, is to create “that awful drouth / Of pity” which led to Agravaine’s unnatural matricide (156-8). And to impose such ideas on others, as Gauwaine is trying to do, is to falsify the experience of those who know human passion. Hence she cries fiercely, over and over, that Gauwaine lies: “God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie” (48, 144, 285). Gauwaine, presumably, would call Guenevere’s love for Launcelot adultery, harlotry; she knows that her marriage is the real harlotry, a royal prostitution. “I was bought,” she says, “By Arthur’s great name and his little love” (82-3). Her love for Launcelot, on the other hand, is the only “cord” that still links her to the divine (91-3).

Fighting Gauwaine on his own ground, Guenevere is driven to a series of legal quibbles with which she herself is impatient; whether she had intercourse with Launcelot on a particular night is not, to her mind, the real point at issue, though to save her life she takes the trouble to prove that she did not (164-82, 242-62). But she does not try to conceal her love for Launcelot; and, far from agreeing that the transience of earthly joys proves their vanity, she celebrates herself as a dynamic physical being, beautiful because mobile:

see my breast rise,
Like waves of purple sea, as here I stand;
And how my arms are moved in wonderful wise,
Yea also at my full heart’s strong command,
See through my long throat how the words go up
In ripples to my mouth; how in my hand
The shadow lies like wine within a cup
Of marvellously colour’d gold; yea now
This little wind is rising, look you up,
And wonder how the light is falling so
Within my moving tresses ....

(226-236; italics mine)

Morris’ Guenevere presents the very process of speaking as beautiful, in and of itself, independently of its meaning — beautiful because it partakes of the breathing vitality and mobility of the natural world. When she cries, “See through my long throat how the words go up / In ripples to my mouth,” she deliberately distracts her hearers from the intellectual and ethical content of her defense to the loveliness of language as a physical act. This is her argument: that because she has a body, because as a physical being she shares in the unstable and transient beauty of natural life, she ought to be spared. The warmth and color of her language derive from the physical existence which Gauwaine threatens; and her own speech of defence, with its emotional fluctuations and illogical transitions, renounces both the discipline of legal defence and the idea of absolute truth.

Morris’ Guenevere, then, is honest in a new way: honest to the dynamic fluctuations of passion. And her frankness influences later portrayals, both of Guenevere herself and of other Arthurian adulteresses. Richard Hovey — an American poet who befriended Bliss Carman — in the 1890’s wrote a series of plays on Launcelot and Guenevere, in which Guenevere’s forthright, active nature dominates Launcelot’s; as in the Vulgate Lancelot, while her knight is still paralyzed by guilt and uncertainty, she takes him by the chin to give him her first kiss. And he admires her “grand and undisguised” nature, as heartily as he loves her beauty. Hovey does present the love of Launcelot and Guenevere as a sin, partly because it involves a “tension of duplicity” which torments the lovers and is unnatural to them; but he also makes it clear that only through the energy of human passion can we attain to that union with the divine which is figured in the Holy Grail. In Hovey’s plays, Galahad is the child of Guenevere by Launcelot; and it is Galahad, not the rigidly chaste Percival, who will attain the Grail. As the Grail’s guardian declares, “Better the rose of love out of the dung-hill of the world’s adulteries / Than the maid icicle that keeps itself from stain of earth.” So the sacred child is born, not of a Virgin, but of an adulteress, who thus becomes a tabernacle within which the body of the sacred Word is enclosed. It is Guenevere herself who (in her pregnancy) compares her child to the Host:

Shut, as the Host is in the tabernacle,
Within you — Oh, it makes a sanctuary
Of every inch of you, a temple where
The soul is priest and may not leave the altar...

As early as 1869, Dante Gabriel Rossetti had projected a poem which would present Guenevere as Launcelot’s true Grail, and (as he put it in a letter to Swinburne) “emphasize the marked superiority of Guenevere over God.” The poem was never completed, but a sanctification of the adulteress more radical even than Hovey’s was achieved by two women writers of the period: Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the aunt-and-niece writing team who published under the name of Michael Field. Their closet play, The Tragedy of Pardon, published posthumously in 1911, presents Iseult, the other great Arthurian adulteress, as supremely confident in her religion of Venus. This Iseult even performs a miracle, and converts King Mark, her husband, to a “new religion” of natural love, so that he commands the lovers to go forth together, into the joy of spring. Finally, the play ends with these remarkable stage directions:

[The dead Iseult’s] beauty spreads like incense through
the Minster. The people instinctively kneel and fall to
prayer, burying their faces: but Mark remains standing,
and as he looks at the two lovers, now resting side by side
in transfigured beauty, the words escape his lips.

Pray for us!

Iseult rests in the odor of sanctity, a saint of Venus.

To understand how the revaluation of the Arthurian wanton reached this extreme, we must retrace our steps, and look back at the presentation of Iseult, the unrepentant
adulteress, in mid- and late nineteenth-century literature. Iseult is in some ways a less complex figure than Guenevere; for Guenevere's adultery involves the destruction of a kingdom, and the painful division of loyalty between Lancelot and his glorious king. By contrast, Mark in mediaeval legend is usually such a villain that Tristram and Iseult cannot be too seriously blamed for betraying him. Iseult's, therefore, is a romance of pure passion. But as early as 1852, Matthew Arnold had called the cult of romance into question, in his own "Tristram and Iseult," which presents the legendary adultery, not as immoral, but as unpleasantly exhausting, "a diseased unrest, / And an unnatural overheat." Arnold suggests that passion itself, like ambition, is primarily destructive to those who feel it; it hastens the process by which the power to feel inevitably wears itself out. Arnold's Iseult is a worn, sad monument to this folly, rather than to sin: her obsessive love, like Tristram's, has been a consuming fever, whither even their power to speak their love. When the lovers are reunited at his deathbed, their language is little more than an empty wrangling, as Iseult points out:

Vain and strange debate, where both have suffer'd,  
Both have pass'd a youth consumed and sad,  
Both have brought their anxious day to evening ....  

(II, 53-5)

Tennyson, too, in his Idyll "The Last Tournament," undermines the glamour of the love-legend. His Tristram and Iseult are not even independent sinners, but halfhearted cheap imitations of Lancelot and Guenevere, self-critical victims of a destructive fashion. Here, as in Arnold, we see the lovers only in their last interview, which is shaded and soured by a sense of time and change. Tristram is disappointed by Iseult's complex reaction to his arrival: "how ye greet me," he complains, "fear / And fault and doubt — no word of that fond tale — / Thy deep heart-yearnings, thy sweet memories / Of Tristram" ("The Last Tournament", 573-6; italics mine). He expects to find himself enshrined within her language; instead he finds her suspicious of Tristram's own tales and flatteries. Iseult, in turn, wishes to find in Tristram's language at least the illusion of stability; knowing him a "rover," she begs him to pretend that he will always be faithful to her, so that she may "suck / Lies like sweet wines" (541, 639-40). Though her life is an affront to Arthur's system of Christian values, she yearns for the "power [that] / Was once in vows when men believed the King" (634-4); she longs, that is, for the stability of Arthur's language and Tristram's kind of love. Tristram cannot and will not give her this.

As Tennyson makes clear throughout this idyll, Tristram's language at once proclaims and embodies the instability of this world. His songs celebrate transience and alteration: "New leaf, new life — the days of frost are o'er: / New life, new love, to suit the newer day" (278-9). Stability in love would contradict the speech he hears in the world and in the woods: "The wide world laughs at it ... [V]ows — I am woodman of the woods, / And hear the garnet-headed yaffingale / Mock them" (690-6). At best, to him, the vows by which Arthur tried to bring stability into an unstable world were "the wholesome madness of an hour," serving the needs of a particular, passing "time" (670-1).

Catherine Barnes Stevenson has argued that Tennyson intended his Tristram as a portrait of Algernon Swinburne, the finest of the younger poets who were proclaiming the doctrine of Art for Art's sake, celebrating the power and beauty of a strictly erotic passion, and delighting in the slipperiness and instability of a purely secular language. A friend to Morris and Rossetti, Swinburne had burst on to the Victorian scene in the mid-1860's, becoming at once a potential rival to the Laureate; and in 1868, the Athenæum had reported that "Swinburne [is] composing a poem on Tristram and Yseult, and writing an Essay on the women of Arthurian Romances for the Early English Texts Society, in which Tennyson's views will not be adopted." Tennyson began to compose "The Last Tournament" in the following year, painting Tristram as a harper who "harp[s] downward" (332), and whose very songs embody corruption. The criticism which Arthur's loyal fool Dagonet directs at Tristram's song is that which Tennyson and other critics directed against Swinburne's early work, acknowledging the technical excellence of the form and attacking the contents: "the cup was gold, the draught was mud" (298). Even more strikingly, in a still later Idyll, Tennyson puts into the mouth of Guenevere an appeal to Lancelot that echoes a notorious passage from Swinburne's lyric, "Dolores."

In "Balin and Balan" (first published in 1885), Tennyson's Lancelot is momentarily distracted from his Queen by the sight of lilies, the emblems of "stainless maidenhood"; at this Guinevere remarks, "Sweeter to me this garden rose / Deep-hued and many-folded! sweeter still / The wild-wood hyacinth and the bloom of May. / Prince, we have ridden before among the flowers" (263-7). Swinburne had jokingly invited men to "change ... The lilies and languors of virtue / For the raptures and roses of vice," and so does Tennyson's Guinevere — before her repentance. Her language, then, is parallel to Tristram's minstrelsy, and both are well figured by her favorite flowers: complex, wild, and associated not with the perfect purity of heaven but with the transient lust and beauty of the spring.

In his later Idylls, then, Tennyson is resisting a movement of which Swinburne seemed to be the "libidinous laureate" (to quote one Victorian critic). Swinburne, in turn, vigorously attacked Tennyson's attempts to domesticate and evangelize the matter of Arthur. From the beginning, his Tristram of Lyonesse glorifies the love that Tennyson had condemned, and presents Guenevere and Iseult as the crowning stars of love's year, radiant embodiments of "the sun-god which is love." Iseult herself, a variable planet that shines "opal-wise with April-coloured light," is described explicitly as a "god" (Poems, 4, 9, 8, 101). And Swinburne's lyrical epic is so organized as to set Iseult...
and Tristram's human godhead against a Christian deity of fear, and the lovers' living and unstable language against the artificially rigid language of their Christian enemy.

Even in her lovemaking, Swinburne's Iseult is as dynamic, fluctuating, and variable as the natural world around her; thus when she and Tristram unite in the woodlands,

her bright light limbs palpitated and shrunk
And rose and fluctuated as flowers in rain
That bends them and they tremble and rise again
And heave and straighten and quiver all through with bliss...

(Poems, 4:51)

The rapid succession of verbs deliberately blurs the distinction between Iseult's body and the wildwood flowers about her; her eroticism is identified with the impulse of growth and motion within the natural world. By contrast, her rival Iseult of Brittany is "no rose full-hearted from the south / And passion-coloured", (Poems, 4:73) but a virginal lily whose disappointment in her sexless marriage with Tristram turns her first sweetness to vindictive and stagnant hatred.

The two Iseults reveal themselves in their own words, in night-time soliloquies. Alone at Tintagel, Iseult of Cornwall prays to a dimly conceived deity to give Tristram whatever her changing thoughts take to be good; alone in Brittany, Iseult of Brittany prays to a Biblical God of Vengeance to punish her errant husband, and to make her the instrument of Tristram's death. Iseult of Cornwall's soliloquy is punctuated by the ebb and flow of the wind and sea outside, and itself fluctuates emotionally, through many logically incompatible phases: first, distress at what she takes to be her sin; then, pride in her love; next, self-sacrificing appeals that God will save Tristram by turning his heart away from her; then, a defiant confidence that her love is greater than God's, and that she can make Tristram happier than heaven could. Next she fiercely arraigns the God who has separated them; and at last, having offered to die herself as the price of Tristram's salvation, she makes a final appeal for the union of their souls.

The very absence of a settled vision in this speech testifies to the precision with which her speech expresses the variations of her passion. And although this Iseult uses the Christian terminology with which she is familiar, her truth to her own emotions breaks down the definitions of Christian dogma, and impels blasphemous reversals of the Christian litany:

Shall I repent, Lord God? shall I repent?
Nay, though thou slay me! for herein I am blest,
That as I loved him yet I love him best —
More than mine own soul or thy love or thee,
Though thy love save and my love save not me.
Blest am I beyond women even herein,
That beyond all born women is my sin,
And perfect my transgression .... (Poems, 4:78)

As this triumphant inversion of the Virgin Mary sings her Magnificat, and proclaims her own Annunciation, she suggests that the love of the broken sinner Mary Magdalen must have been greater than God's: therefore, "as we sinners can / Let us love still in the old sad wise of man." And, although she contradicts herself almost immediately, she even approaches a vision of a God whose heart can alter "as man's heart" (Poems, 4:80, 84). The content of her speech is the fluctuating experience of her own sad love. And, perhaps, unknown to Iseult, her own experience contains deity — the deity which Swinburne in this poem calls sometimes love, and sometimes fate, and sometimes the sun-god: an ever-evasive yet ever-present godhead, a god in perpetual metamorphosis, whose activity words can only try to re-enact. The divine resides in, or moves through, the shimmering unstable world of our mortality.

By contrast, Iseult of Brittany calls upon a transcendent judge to make her his "word" of judgment; her speech is consistent in its hatred, and in its rigid moral vision. Her language is therefore barren and dead. Later in the poem Iseult of Brittany will say, "I am death"; Iseult of Cornwall has already said of herself and Tristram, "I am he ... and he is I" (Poems, 4:145, 81; italics mine). That cry of identity expresses life and love; Iseult of Brittany's statement of identity not only blots out her original self, but also anticipates the fact that she will kill Tristram with a lie. When she sees the ship bearing Iseult of Cornwall to the dying Tristram, she reports falsely that its sails are black, not white — that is, that it signals Queen Iseult's absence, not her presence — and Tristram collapses as he springs up to see for himself. Iseult of Brittany's rigid creed corrupts language into "words like swords"; but, according to the narrator of the poem, "truth" is a flowing fountain, a transfiguring force, and a dynamic flame (Poems, 4:136, 135).

In short, Swinburne uses the legend of Iseult not only to glorify erotic passion and the natural world, but also to undermine Christianity and the popular Christian view that words must derive their authority from a stable, transcendent source. Tennyson's wantons use an unstable, slippery language which alienates both speaker and hearer from what Arthur suggests is a stable, transcendent deity. Swinburne's goddesses expose the disingenuous pretenses of religious language, and explore a style which, by its very instability, illuminates the fluctuating and dynamic process of human experience. Tennyson had used the language of Iseult, Tristram, and Guinevere as foils for those "large, divine, and comfortable words" in which Tennyson's Arthur expressed his Christian vision. What the anti-Tennysonian Arthurians of the Victorian period did was to recreate the glamour of Arthurian adultery, which Tennyson and Arnold had so carefully destroyed; to establish the Arthurian adulteress as a significant focus of consciousness; to instill into Arthurian legend a newly explicit element of physical eroticism, connected firmly (continued on page 64)
and I'm looking at the two singers, and I'm going, "We're in Oregon, there's no eucalyptus."

Le Guin: I think I brought it with me to Ashland. [Laughter]

Barton: It was something that close. I had it just before you came to Ashland. I had it scheduled — we do these songs today, and the next ones — and the last day of the recording week, I woke up, and the recording downbeat was 9 o'clock, and I got up, and was on the way out the door at 8, and I looked, and went, "Oh, first thing is the 'Willow' song. Oops." I hadn't written it. [Laughter] I hadn't even thought about it. It was just sitting there on the piano. And so I sat down and said, "Well, if I can do it in the next fifteen, twenty minutes I'll do it, because I can still make the 9 o'clock." So I sat down and just did it, and it came out. So we went in there, and of course I had it all written out, and there was a xerox machine, and I sneaksily handed it to my assistant and said, "Go make a bunch of copies," so we come up and it's time for the "Willow" song, and it's right there, and we do it, and Ursula teaches everybody how to speak Kesh, and sing it. Afterwards, on the way back to town, I go, "I have a confession to make. I just did this today, but it felt really right." It was actually the first — it came out so fast, I had to totally cross-circuit any of my automatic responses. She mentioned too that's the way the poem came to her too.

Le Guin: By then we had gotten into thinking Kesh. It takes a while. I was awfully hard on these people. Having been through it myself, I knew what you had to go through to get there. But I did have to keep saying, "No, that's not right." A big power trip, which none of us was too happy with.

Barton: For the "Willow" song, we used a darbagatush, which is the hand-beater. It's pictured in the book, in the very back, I believe. [Harper ed. p. 449, Bantam ed. p. 479.] It's a bunch of eucalyptus curls, which you can —

Le Guin: You just tie them together and hit them against your hand.

Barton: We had made some up in the Napa Valley when we were going up there to do our research, and I had brought one back to Oregon. It started out this long, and we were doing the "Willow" song, we did about ten takes on that. We were down actually to take number nine, and as you hit the darbagatush it breaks, and things fly off, and the little booth I was in was just littered [laughter], two inches deep in eucalyptus bark, and it was down to here, and I'm looking at the two singers, and I'm going, "We have one take left! [Laughter] Get it right, because once this goes we can't — we're in Oregon, there's no eucalyptus." They did it.

Le Guin: I think that's a good last story. Thank you all.

[The Editor would like to thank the 1988 Conference Chairman, David Bratman, for transcribing this panel discussion.]