

Daniel Kim  
 English 397  
 Professor Grossman  
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### An Image of the Ideal: *Songs at the Start*

Louise Imogen Guiney's *Songs at the Start* memorializes the intimacy of family, created through the intersection between recollections of nature and medieval sentiments of chivalry. In addition, her poetry treats civil and social conflicts as opportunities for reconciliation, assessing peaceful intimacy to be the ideal value that a family - whether or not they are blood-related - should strive to achieve.

### Intimacy, Family, and Love

Guiney was born on January 7, 1861 - almost an exact month before the Confederacy was officially formed. As such, to say that the American Civil War was significant in her life would be an understatement, especially considering that her father, General Patrick Robert Guiney, was a well-decorated veteran. However, his sudden death in 1877 is what makes its mark in *Songs at the Start*, since his daughter Guiney dedicates the book like so:

THIS  
 FIRST SLIGHT OUTCOME OF TASTES TRANSMITTED BY  
 MY FATHER,  
 Is Inscribed to His Friend and Mine,  
 JOHN BOYLE O'REILLY.

(Figure 1).

This precursor to the poetry ties an intimate string amongst three central individuals: Guiney herself, her father General Guiney, and their friend John Boyle O'Reilly. In his article "Louise

Imogen Guiney and Her *Songs at the Start*,” William Lucey identifies that “[John Boyle O’Reilly] was editor and part owner of *The Pilot*, a Boston newspaper, and a dear friend of General Guiney. He is the one who gave his good friend’s daughter the opportunity to attract the attention of Boston’s literary critics” (Lucey 56). Thus, the relationship between Guiney and O’Reilly reflects that of a figurative niece and uncle, not merely a father’s friend or a professional contact.

For a reader, however, this dedication might seem puzzling. Why does Guiney emphasize John Boyle O’Reilly with larger text while “My Father” is nested more subtly? It is certainly odd, but the answer lies in how she doesn’t neglect relationships solely on the basis of blood ties. To Guiney, both her father and O’Reilly are equally important, but it is the latter who was more “present” in her life around the time of *Songs at the Start*’s publication. Her closeness to O’Reilly is reflected in how the dedication says “Is Inscribed to His Friend and Mine” (Guiney, *Songs at the Start*, 3). To say “My Friend” to a man who is considerably older than herself reveals the closeness of their bond. A familial tone exudes from this short phrase - both in loving memory of Guiney’s father and in sweet emotionality to O’Reilly. As a result, two critical situations are fulfilled here. First, Guiney reveals how much she cherished both her father and O’Reilly, and how their intimacy did not depend on genetic ties. Second, she uses this affection to foreshadow the intimate feelings that will be contained in her poems. One example comes from “A Jacobite Revival” where Guiney writes:

Here’s to our fathers, Cavaliers;  
 Their noble toil, their patient years  
 That bore  
 A burden precious now no more:  
 So may they rest in happier spheres. (103)

The title of this poem must first be considered, because “Jacobite” directly references the 17th to 18th century movement of Jacobitism which supported “the exiled Stuart King James II and his descendants after the Glorious Revolution” (Jacobite, *Britannica*). Jacobites valued the divine right of kings, and in Ireland, the movement was more emphatically religious with express support for Catholicism. Now although Guiney was of Irish descent, she was not Irish born. It was her father who immigrated to America from Ireland and also raised Guiney on Christian-Catholic ideals. Although express evidence of Guiney’s religious connections to the Jacobites could not be found, she honored her father’s heritage with this title.

Considering General Guiney’s particular career, it is reasonable to assume that the lines are referencing him. After all, one definition of “Cavaliers” used in the 1870s was “a horseman, esp. a horse-soldier; a knight” which matches his achievements in the war (OED). In addition, the tone of this excerpt, particularly the last three lines, is intimate since Guiney desires that “they rest in happier spheres.” The feeling is bittersweet, longing yet composed, because Guiney fully understands that her father has left this world for a more peaceful place. Familial intimacy sustains Guiney’s verse, which is notable because it works to convert her own emotional turmoil into a sense of her reader’s peace. This is complemented by the AABBA rhyme scheme, which utilizes simple words, especially “years” and “spheres”. Because of their definitions and images, these words feel whole or rounded, as if they are complete ideas that have no disruptions. Thus, the lines together read like a toast, smooth and simple for the sake of emphasizing her family over her pain.

Guiney’s control over intimate, familial diction, however, is not limited to a living daughter and a deceased father. In fact, *Songs at the Start* reverses the positions of the players for the reader in an earlier poem “Child and Flower.”

Along her coffin-lid the spotless roses rest  
 A father's sad, sad hand culled from a happy bower;  
 Earth, they were born of thee: take back upon thy breast  
 Young child and tender flower. (54)

While the death motif remains as in “A Jacobite Revival,” now the child - a daughter - is buried while the father lives. Guiney captures the sheer emotion of the father with the repeated “sad, sad hand” yet still manages to maintain an air of peace and optimism with the direct address to Earth “they were born of thee: take back upon thy breast.” To take something back “upon thy breast” means keeping it near the heart, which invokes feelings of closeness and safety. In other words, this poem achieves warmth and restoration; there is a calming effect to the way Guiney describes death as natural instead of merely unfortunate. This view of death is consistent between “A Jacobite Revival” and “Child and Flower” and is achieved by the intimate family characters. Visibly, the presence of the “father” in these two poems substantially mirrors Guiney’s introductory dedication, and now the reader will be constantly aware that Guiney’s devotion to family will be a part of the entire text.

The ABAB rhyme scheme in “Child and Flower” is also one to take into consideration because of its simplicity. Guiney doesn’t surprise a reader with complex diction or entice them to overthink. Her intention is made clear by the first and last words, “rest” and “flower,” which create imagery of the funeral scene. A reader inevitably imagines themselves standing in front of the coffin as well, but the feelings of sadness are offset slightly by the calming mood of “spotless roses rest” and pleasing scent of a “tender flower.” By associating the family themes with easily understandable rhymes, Guiney makes both “A Jacobite Revival” and “Child and Flower” a compassionate appeal to both intimacy and sentimentality.

### **Nature, Familiarity, and Peace**

The emphasis upon intimacy continues as *Songs at the Start* moves through literal text and paratext. The pages are enclosed by a dark green, felt-like material decorated with gold lining. Instead of any titular words or even an author's name, a golden harp laying upon branches of leaves is embossed into the very center of the front cover, and a golden emblem of a cluster of leaves and flowers is on the back.



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)

The front's harp and leaves combination is both easier to recognize and understand. The harp has etchings on its spine and its neck is shaped into a bird while it rests on a bed of leaves, and in searching for why this is the cover image, Guiney's collection of letters written to both friends and family provides a hint. In a letter to Miss Ada L. Langley on November 8, 1888, Guiney wrote, "I hang my harp on a chestnut tree" (Guiney, *Letters of Louise Imogen Guiney*, 13). Considering that only four years have passed since *Songs at the Start* was published and this letter was written, it seems reasonable to predict that this front cover is exactly what Guiney corresponded. The chestnut tree "was a dominant forest tree throughout much of the Eastern

United States. The tree was ecologically important as a source of mast for wildlife, and economically valuable for its rot-resistant lumber, high-tannin content, and edible nuts.” (*United States Department of Agriculture*). The practicality of the tree suggests that Guiney wanted to highlight the symbolization of abundance or provision. As a girl who likely grew up near chestnut trees for her whole life, it was a constant indication of what nature could provide.

With that in mind, the cover is a primary interaction between reader and nature, or through further reflection, how readers utilize nature for themselves. There is a simple allure to the harp-and-leaves design, and the placement of a man made instrument against a tree’s leaves suggests the larger, Romantic ideology of the ways humans place themselves into nature. Plus, there are two ways in which Guiney pays attention to peaceful intimacy. First, she draws upon her childhood experiences of always being around nature - of always being around a chestnut tree, and links herself with its constant presence. Second, it is important to note that the harp is an instrument characteristically associated with serenity, calmness, and healing. Its sound has never been described as loud or overpowering, elements which also make their appearance in the poems that revolve around nature. The very first poem in *Songs at the Start*, “Gloucester Harbor,” opens with:

North from the beautiful islands,  
North from the headlands and highlands,  
    The long sea-wall,  
The white ships flee with the swallow;  
The day-beams follow and follow,  
    Glitter and fall. (9)

These lines show similar sentiments to the harp on the chestnut tree in that the speaker is familiar with the nature around her. This is not some new sight that she has never seen before; “Gloucester Harbor” seems to be a painting of home from the meticulous detail of how it’s

described. This is because the lines are not spoken as if they were a current scene but rather as if this is a recollection of some sort. By saying “North from the beautiful islands,” the speaker describes a place that the audience, presumably the reader, is likely a stranger to. Furthermore, “beautiful islands” creates another intimate connection between speaker and setting that the reader will not understand but will want to share. In other words, the speaker is invitational, welcoming the reader into sharing her intimacy with nature.

Another parallel to the harp and chestnut tree is the smooth association with people and nature. First, the swallow makes its appearance next to a man-made ship just like how a bird is carved into the neck of a man-made harp. There is a shared image of an interaction between animals and human creations. Second, the man-made items are placed onto a backdrop of nature. In “Gloucester Harbor”, the “white ships” seem closer to the audience than the “beautiful islands,” “headlands,” “highlands,” and the “long sea-wall,” just like how the harp is closer to the reader than the tree leaves since its patterning is overlaid onto the leaves. Third, the mood of this poem is simple and peaceful just like the cover. There is no sense of abrupt action or chaos; rather, there is a gentleness tied to the “day-beams” which “glitter and fall.” The scene is undeniably a sunlit day in what seems to be a pale-blue sky, invoking a sense of sublime calmness. The colors that one might imagine are uncomplicated, as the green-and-gold covers are not designed to bother a reader’s eyes.

Guiney, therefore, inserts her own experiences with nature into *Songs at the Start*, but does not hoard her feelings to herself. Instead, the book invites its readers to engage in the same sort of nostalgia, to reminisce about seemingly trivial experiences with nature in their own lives, appreciate them, and then apply them to an understanding of peace. *Songs at the Start* begins to show that intimacy is not just about intrapersonal relationships with other people, but internal

relationships also through the ways in which people engage with the abundance, openness, and generosity of nature's scenes.

### **The Invocation of Chivalry**

Medievalism occupies an interesting space in literary history. It is a retrospective term that scholars use to describe the Middle Ages, which lasted roughly from the 5th to the 15th century. However, it can also be used colloquially to describe something that is old, primitive, or otherwise in the past. Although the word medieval doesn't possess a positive or negative connotation explicitly, it can be considered a misplacement in time, since the era of the American Civil War would not be described as medieval.

But medievalism has more weight than a mere description, since it conjures up images of royalty and knightliness - Arthurian stories of feudalism, heroes, and romance. Other ideas of medievalism include the prominence of the Christian Church. *Songs at the Start* contains subtle allusions to these concepts like in "Knight Falstaff" which begins:

I saw the dusty curtain, ages old,  
Its purple tatters twitched aside, and lo!  
The fourth King Harry's reign in lusty show (56)

The combination of "King Harry's reign" in the third line with "ages old" in the first line implies a medieval past, and because the setting for this passage is British, Europe's medievalism transcends the passage of time. However, medievalism offers a more focused narrative when one explores the social trends and lifestyles of that time period. In his book *Thinking Medieval: An Introduction to the Study of the Middle Ages*, Marcus Bull writes "It was taken for granted that men were more important than women, and there was also a leaning towards the history of people from the higher social levels, so it is not surprising that particular attention was paid to the ideas and values of medieval aristocratic males. That meant, of course, the code of chivalry



[...] They spread the image of the medieval knight as physically brave, noble, steadfast, generous, loyal to his superiors, responsible towards his subordinates, and considerate towards women” (Bull, 25). Bull’s analysis of chivalry, especially of how the “medieval knight” should act, draws a line between this code of conduct and *Songs at the Start*’s final appeal to intimacy: noble behavior.

Medieval chivalry is introduced as Guiney’s method of instruction, a way for her to teach others how to be intimate rather than solely call it important. After all, what good is an ideal to strive for if there are no tools provided to reach it? Guiney praises chivalric attitudes through the ways in which she wrote letters to her father. Guiney writes: “My dear Papa [...] You can’t imagine how delighted I am to hear you are coming early in June” (Guiney, *Letters of Louise Imogen Guiney*, 29). “My dear Papa” is repeated exactly in several other letters to her father, along with the occasional “My darling Papa.” The emotion captured in these quaint greetings is more than enough of a hint in knowing that the relationship between father and daughter was characteristically loving. In other words, Guiney was able to draw upon her father as a source of chivalric inspiration which is synthesized by Eva Mabel Tenison in her book *Louise Imogen Guiney : Her Life and Works, 1861-1920*. Tenison writes, “Her father, General Patrick Robert Guiney, died when she was a young girl; but the constructive influence of his career affected her profoundly; and in his chivalrous and unworldly outlook may be found the key to his daughter’s character, principles, and ideals” (Tenison, xiv). Guiney, therefore, identifies her father’s chivalry as a source of the intimate peace and love shared between them, and the poetry also endeavours to honor the memories of a chivalrous man. For instance, “Patriot Chorus on the Eve of War” integrates several of the aforementioned facets of medievalism: heroism, knightliness, and chivalry.

In thy holy need, our country,

[...]

Thirst and famine, din of battle,

[...]

As with our souls' strength we lay them,

[...]

If we be thy burden-bearers,

Let us ease thee of thy sorrow; (38)

Although these select lines from this three-stanza poem fail to capture the entirety of its medieval quality, the obvious connections are there. Medievalism's religious undertones appear in the country's "holy need" which requires knights to fight amidst "thirst and famine." These knights are the "burden-bearers" of the "din of battle," sentiments that trace back to how *Songs at the Start* honors the legacy of soldiers, of her father, who fought in the Civil War for the sake of preserving the Union. Chivalry, though not name-dropped, becomes a manifestation of both good conduct and sacrifice, which Guiney isolates as human qualities that promote intimacy.

Though *Songs at the Start* is the sole focus of this essay, it is curious that the American translator and writer, Helen Tracy Porter, also found Guiney's chivalric undertones in her other books: "We learn from this volume too, [*The White Sail*], that Miss Guiney, like Chaucer's knight, 'loves chivalry'" (Porter 289). This is in reference to Guiney's poem in the book "The Wooing Pine" that has "the story of a maiden and her mystic wonderful tree-lover" (Porter 289). In other words, Guiney's passion for chivalry is not isolated to her father. Rather, she is able to incorporate the more romantic facets of chivalry for her own use. This shows up in the poem "Lover Loquitur" in *Songs at the Start*:

Liege lady! believe me,

All night, from my pillow  
 I heard, but to grieve me,  
 The splash of the willow;  
 The rain on the towers,  
 The winds without number,  
 In the gloom of the hours,  
 And denial of slumber:  
 And nigh to the dawning,—  
 My heart aching blindly,  
 Unresting and mourning  
 That you were unkindly—  
 What did I ostensibly,  
 Ah, what under heaven,  
 Liege lady! but sensibly  
 Doze till eleven? (76)

This poem is initially a confusing one because the title looks as though “Loquitur” is the name of the “Lover.” However, loquitur is actually a verb that just means “to speak” (OED). The unique part of loquitur is that it is specifically used as “a stage direction or to inform the reader.” By understanding this definition, “Lover Loquitur” takes on a meaning that Guiney is directly addressing the audience about love, not just labeling a man who does love. This is a play on the aforementioned desire to teach chivalry, one of the crucial lessons being about earnestness. When the speaker of “Lover Loquitur” says “Liege lady! Believe me,” a tone of seriousness and urgency flows off the line. Guiney believes this type of honest appeal to be chivalrous and exemplifies it so readers can follow. The other lesson is about diligence, shown by the series of

lines: “In the gloom of the hours and denial of slumber [...] my heart aching blindly, unresting and mourning.” Despite the mental, emotional, and physical turmoil that the speaker is going through, he doesn’t give up in trying to reach out to the lady. Guiney praises this conduct and uses the titular “Loquitur” to invoke her audience into manifesting the trait of diligence as well. Thus, the way romantic pursuits are displayed here combine chivalry with intimacy once more. “*Lover Loquitur*” provides another way to view intimacy within chivalry without the need of a father figure. Thus, intimacy is made accessible to *Songs at the Start*’s readers with chivalry as the tool to achieve it.

### **Final Developments**

The American Civil War persists as one of the bloodiest conflicts in national history. Moreover, it was an event that split the nation apart across vengefully racial lines. One can only imagine the myriad of emotions a daughter felt every time her father was off fighting a war against a former, fellow American. Plus, one could only imagine how she felt as a young adult when she saw how the bonds of family and identity were shattered.

With *Songs at the Start* being Guiney’s first published book of poetry, it is clear how cherished her relationships with family, blood-related or not, were, especially considering that its creation is centered around such feelings of intimacy. The paratextual elements of *Songs at the Start* invoke interpretations of nature and familiarity in a way that stabilizes the mood of the poetry. Even despite the poems that speak about death and war - vividly negative experiences - the peaceful qualities of the text bring a light of hope and positivity to the otherwise serious content. Each of her poems, upon close reading, leave the reader with a sense of responsibility, a life perspective, and a value system to strive for. Through the lens of medievalism, *Songs at the Start* manages to promote chivalric behavior along with patriotic sacrifice, complementing the

intimacy of the family by providing emotional methods of practice. As a whole, Guiney's book provides its readers with calm contentment, a type of rest that was much needed amidst Civil War chaos and framing of what people should fully prioritize - the intimate bonds of love and affection that can tie families together.

This message is not isolated to times of war, when in fact, even the most peaceful periods can still be riddled with conflict - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. In other words, *Songs at the Start* invites the modern reader to critically assess their own sense of self and what they place their value in. Intimacy is a powerful protector of the heart, a feeling of closeness and peace that reminds people of where they all came from, the family that they had and will create in the future too. *Songs at the Start* was able to reconnect Guiney with her upbringing - her loved ones and nature - and it is through such a reconciliation that intimacy can make its mark. After all, there is always a light at the end of the darkest tunnel.

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