

MEANINGS OF THE WOMEN IN TENNYSON'S POEMS

THESIS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The many women in Tennyson's poetry from the conventional and lifeless portraits of Victorian ladies in the earlier poetry to the dramatic figures in the Idylls suggest that the opposite sex had a special appeal and meaning to the poet. One of the important questions that demand an answer is: To what extent are his female figures allegorical and symbolic? The primary purpose of this thesis is to explore Tennyson's poetry and attempt to answer this question. My objective is to mark out and discuss within prescribed limits the primary types of ladies in Tennyson's poetry. The women in the plays--Queen Mary, Harold, Becket, The Falcon, The Cup, The Promise of May--will not be dealt with since no new female type appears in these plays. Likewise the influence of women in In Memoriam will not be discussed in depth. There is one problem in the poem which deserves a brief comment. Mrs. Betty Miller<sup>1</sup> has claimed that Tennyson's relation to Arthur Hallam was a friendship to some extent homosexually based. Indeed the intensity of the attachment and some of the language in the

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<sup>1</sup>See note 18, p. 144 of R. W. Rader's Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genesis (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963).

poem suggest latent tendencies in this direction. But the Victorian age was not obsessed with sublimations of sex in male relationships, and no one has shown or seriously suggested any overt perversity in the relationship between Tennyson and Hallam.

A secondary purpose of this thesis is to enhance the reader's appreciation of Tennyson's poetry. He was notoriously representative of Victorian life, and his verse reflects the prejudices and the limitations of his surroundings. He was serious and highly moral in his life and in his work. The poet catered to the tastes of his public, The Princess and the Idylls of the King being the most notable examples, and his readers showered their utmost measure of adulation upon him, for Tennyson in his lifetime commanded a larger audience and more veneration from that audience than any other English poet has ever enjoyed. After his death and on into the early twentieth century, the distaste for middle-class morality among intellectuals caused his reputation to decline drastically. James Joyce referred to him as "Alfred Lawn Tennyson," and critics strove to rank the poet as a minor figure in English literature. Tennyson's reputation at mid-twentieth century, however, was rising, and is now again rated highly, though significantly not for the qualities that brought him fame in his own time. Critics such as T. S. Eliot admire the abundance and variety of his poetry, but above all his perfect control of sound, the synthesis of sound and meaning.

## CHAPTER II

### THE WOMEN IN THE SHORTER POEMS

The women in the "Mariana" poems, "The Lady of Shalott," the "Oenone" poems, "Demeter and Persephone," and "Maud" can be understood within the frameworks provided by Professors Lionel Stevenson and Clyde de L. Ryals. The "high-born maiden theme" of the former, and the femme fatale concept of the latter, are psychological interpretations of Tennyson's indecisiveness and the tension between withdrawal and participation, rejection and acceptance. These views stress both the feminine persona of the poet and his masculine role of judgment and identification or refusal to identify.

In 1948 Lionel Stevenson found what he called "the high-born maiden symbol" in "The Lady of Shalott," "The Palace of Art," "Mariana," "Mariana in the South," "Lady Clare Vere de Vere," Maud, The Princess, and Lancelot and Elaine.<sup>1</sup> He argued that the symbol represented the poet's own soul by way of a woman figure. Referring to Professor W. D. Paden's work, Tennyson in Egypt, he reasoned that, since no such theme can be found in the early poems studied there in terms

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<sup>1</sup>"'The High-born Maiden' Symbol in Tennyson," PMLA, LXIII (1948), 234-243. The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. by W. J. Rolfe, will be the primary source in this chapter. The short poems will have no other reference than the title.

of the psychological meanings of imagery, Tennyson must owe it to his later reading of Shelley, in particular to his "To a Skylark," "Epipsychidion," "The Witch of Atlas," and Queen Mab. Echoes of these poems are to be recognized in the many passages in which Tennyson refers to an isolated and unhappy maiden.

In the 1830 volume, the "high-born maiden" makes her first appearance in "Mariana" and, in 1833, in "Mariana in the South." Both portray suffering, lonely, and forsaken ladies, waiting for what they know will not come, and ultimately for death. For if "he" did come, it would spoil everything. As Elton Smith says, "One may sense that these forsaken women . . . are, in a perverse way, comforted by the beauty of decaying nature and the melody of their own monotonous sorrow."<sup>2</sup>

No actual story is told in "Mariana" to account for her loneliness or to explain who "he" is and why "he" does not come. Tennyson is successful in creating a particular and personal emotional state. The poem expresses superbly the feeling of stagnation in nature. Image and symbol, not abstract statement, are used to evoke the mood of isolation and despair. The refrain, "'I am weary,'" is explicit, but otherwise the expression is indirect. Mariana is not described at all, but is identified with the decaying house she lives in and its dreary setting in "the level waste, the rounding gray." The "moated grange" is the prison house and stands for the imprisoning power of Mariana's mood. Jerome

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<sup>2</sup>The Two Voices: A Tennyson Study (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 37.

Buckley says, "The one token of life in Mariana's desolate world is a single poplar . . . as tall and masculine as the lover who has deserted her."<sup>3</sup> The "gnarled bark" of the tree "suggests a maleness the woman will never embrace."<sup>4</sup> The tree becomes an obsession, and its shadow sways constantly outside her curtain and falls "Upon her bed, across her brow." Steane goes on to say, "the sterility of wind moving the branches of a tree is all the reality that love can ever have as it moves in the frustrated desires of her mind."<sup>5</sup>

The Southern Mariana is more interesting than her previous creation in that she has more force of personality. Like the earlier "Mariana," the poem deals with unfulfilled love in terms of a setting which evokes frustration, but the house of the forlorn lady is now of less importance than the sterile landscape. Surrounded by a glaring southern landscape, she sees images of fertility only in a dream, which is used as a means of escape. When she awakens, she ceases for the first time to complain about her situation and prays, "Sweet Mother [the Virgin Mary], let me not here alone / Live forgotten and die forlorn." As Ryals says, "She is no longer the patient sufferer . . . for she rebels against her plight."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Tennyson; The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup>J. B. Steane, Tennyson (New York: Arco Publishing Company, Inc., 1966), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Theme and Symbol in Tennyson's Poems to 1850 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 79.



She even has moments of hope when she sees an image which tells her that she will not long be alone. Near the end of the poem, she escapes her condition "of woe without a tear" by gaining some relief by tears. For the first time there is the image of water in this dry wasteland. Whether she is to die or whether she will change her stagnant condition, she now is determined that there will be an end to her suffering:

The night comes on that knows not morn,  
When I shall cease to be all alone,  
To live forgotten, and love forlorn.

The suffering female is no longer patiently resigned to her condition.

In "The Lady of Shalott" there is another "high-born maiden." The outside world is fertile, consisting of barley and rye fields, but on Shalott there are only lilies, symbols of purity and innocence. The people know her only by her song. They do not see her as a person, but know her only as an artist. The reapers emphasize the unreality of the artist as a person by calling her the "fairy" Lady of Shalott. Oblivious of the changing life outside her casement, she weaves magic shapes, under a spell, in the mirror that hangs before her the year round. She sees only dim reflections of the outside world. Her art, therefore, is not the mirror held up to nature; rather, it is a shadow of a shadow. Ryals remarks correctly that "She knows of love, religion, nature, the court, and knightly adventures, as symbolized in the third stanza of Part II; but she herself is uncommitted" ("she hath no loyal

knight and true").<sup>7</sup> She feels her art is an adequate substitute for life. But suddenly she realizes when she sees reflected a funeral and a wedding in her mirror that she is separated from life. Attracted by the real world, she begins to desire an escape from her isolation: 'I am half sick of shadows.' She then sees Sir Lancelot, who represents the most attractive aspects of life. In spite of his attractiveness, she has refused to give up her isolation. But when he sings, and she realizes that song is possible in the outside world; she can no longer resist. She leaves her web and looks down on Camelot. As a result the curse takes effect, for the web disappears and the mirror cracks; in other words, her art is lost. Ryals comments, "Prior to her action the outside world had been described in terms of gay passionate colors. Now when she tries to partake of that life, the gay colors disappear, and nature takes on a different aspect".<sup>8</sup>

In the stormy east-wind straining,  
The pale yellow woods were waning,  
The broad stream in his banks complaining,  
Heavily the low sky raining  
Over tower'd Camelot.

Ryals goes on to say,

When seen through reflection and when heightened by art,  
the world had been beautiful, because it had been an  
ideal world. When seen in reality, the world is nothing  
like what she thought it would be. Art had improved on  
nature.<sup>9</sup>

So she floats down the river to Camelot, singing the song

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.

symbolic of her death as an artist. We are left with the conclusion that the loss of artistic isolation results in death.

Tennyson himself hinted at the allegorical nature of the poem. Years after its composition he told Canon Ainger that "The new-born love for something, for some one in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities."<sup>10</sup> This remark, as well as the commentary on the poem by Hallam Tennyson in the Memoir, indicates that the poem deals with the inadequacy of an isolated existence. Ryals claims,

The real moral of the poem seems to be that the self-absorbed spirit, no matter how much it desires to enter into the life of other men, may be unable to face reality and thus be destroyed by the attempt.<sup>11</sup>

By looking at "The Palace of Art" Stevenson claims that the Lady of Shalott as an artist is the complement or antitype of the poet, to be understood in Jungian terms as the anima, the unconscious itself, and which is of the opposite sex. A man projects his anima emotionally upon a woman, but with the complete maturity of the individual, the projection is replaced by a more rational relationship. In Tennyson's poetry the symbol went through three phases:

- (i) a vague, melancholy, and sympathetic picture of a girl imprisoned and isolated for no explicit reason,
- (ii) a bitter condemnation of the girl for being proud, and self-sufficient,
- (iii) a bland, objective use of

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<sup>10</sup>Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memoir by His Son (2 vols.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), I, 117.

<sup>11</sup>Poems to 1850, p. 76.

the theme for its narrative value.<sup>12</sup>

"The Palace of Art" originated in a remark by Tennyson's friend Richard Trench, when they were both still at Cambridge: "'Tennyson, we cannot live in art.'"<sup>13</sup> The poet transformed this opinion unto the familiar figure of the imprisoned maiden. Personifying his soul as a beautiful and arrogant woman, Tennyson tells how she built a palace on top of a mountain, where she dwells in complete solitude. The feminine soul thinks of itself as king, but a king remote from its subjects. The palace and the artist are a portrayal of art for art's sake, a refuge of the artist in beauty free of the taint of reality. As the soul sings, she rejoices in the joys of the senses and her power over nature, remote from the suffering and triumphs of mankind. The "swine" below have an inferior religion and morality. As night comes, the soul lights its palace, so brilliantly as to "mimic heaven," for she still believes in her complete self-sufficiency. However like King Belshazzar, the soul is spoken to by handwriting on the wall, which tells her that her kingdom is at an end. After enjoying her power and throne for three years, the soul feels sinful and is disturbed at her separation from humanity. In humility the feminine artist descends to the world of men, "a cottage in the vale," and promises to share the beauty of art with others. Only the artist who is in sympathy with

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<sup>12</sup>"'The High-born maiden' Symbol," pp. 242-243.

<sup>13</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, I, 118.

other men can safely dwell in the aesthetic palace, and he must share its joys with others.

Although the poet convincingly presents the faults of artistic isolation, the antidote could be more appealing. Most of the poem deals with the glory, splendor, and terrors of living alone in art, while only four lines present the movement of the soul from the mountain to the cottage in the valley. In spite of this weakness in the poem, the moral clearly is that beauty, goodness, and love should have an equal influence in the life of the artist. To Stevenson, the high-born maiden symbol assumed a new implication in "The Palace of Art":

She is no longer a pathetic, deserted creature who is the victim of external oppression, but a hard, arrogant egotist who has chosen isolation because she feels superior to her fellow beings, and whose eventual misery is due not to the absence of one particular lover, but to her divorce from all human sympathy.<sup>14</sup>

The last step in Tennyson's developing treatment of women is the transferal from allegory to objective presentation. The poem which achieves this step is "Lady Clara Vere de Vere," a dramatic monologue written in 1833. The speaker is a man who suspects that the great lady of the manor is planning to break his heart for her amusement, as she has already broken the heart and caused the suicide of his friend. Lady Clara in her pride and selfishness regards herself as separated from her neighbors by the "hundred earls" in her ancestry. And yet, like the Lady of Shalott and the soul in "The Palace of Art," she finds her self-

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<sup>14</sup>"The High-born maiden' Symbol," p. 240.

sufficiency is inadequate. So the man advises her to take up social-service work. Stevenson comments,

It is something of an anti-climax, just as in the ending of "The Palace of Art," but in both poems Tennyson is insisting that for the self-induced misery of isolation the only remedy is unselfish participation in human affairs.<sup>15</sup>

E. E. Smith claims that the theme can be carried further than Stevenson has taken it. Let us assume that Mariana, the Lady of Shalott, the soul, and Lady Clare are animae or female counterparts of the soul of the poet. Then the soul is represented as isolated in a selfish aestheticism and disdainful of love. However, Smith points out that "all of these poems have a more basic similarity than the theme of the high-born maiden—they are all poems of rejection."<sup>16</sup> If there is a feminine figure, there is also a male who either rejects or is rejected.

According to this broader concept, the poet not only portrays female figures who are projections of his inner states, but he also makes a moral judgment upon them as worthy or unworthy of acceptance.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the ego becomes the censor of the anima as the poet rejects the soul of the Palace of Art; weeps with Mariana and Oenone; and accepts the Princess after a period of adjustment. Therefore, the women in Tennyson's poetry are not only psychological projections, but they are objects of either moral acceptance or rejection.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>16</sup>The Two Voices, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

Clyde de L. Ryals also expanded Stevenson's concept of the "high-born maiden." He believed that Stevenson overlooked the many women--Lilian, Madeline, Margaret, Adeline, Rosalind, Eleanore, Kate--who, unlike Mariana, are not suffering, forlorn maidens, but strong, proud, often cruel, ladies.<sup>18</sup> The best example of these maidens, or femmes fatales, is "Eleanore" (1833). To Ryals the poem is a "picture of a damsel so withdrawn from reality that she becomes an abstraction, almost an allegorical figure, seemingly representing some state of soul."<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the poet adores her in whom "all passion becomes passionless." She cannot participate in either love or life. Eleanore is a powerful woman who traps the minds of all men who gaze on her, but she gives nothing in return.

Ryals suggests that the suffering maid, the regressive symbol, and the strong woman, the aggressive symbol, are representative of the conflict within the poet between sensual indulgence and the development of moral purpose. Both symbols are in a Jungian term, "soul-images" of the poet. Ryals believes that the femme fatale represents that part of Tennyson's romantic nature which was influenced by Keats. The fatal woman represents the attraction of sensuous poetry. However, Tennyson was forced to recognize the limitation of this type of poetry, and as a result he redirected his art along the

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<sup>18</sup>"The 'Fatal Woman' Symbolism in Tennyson," PMLA, LXXIV (1959), 438-443.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 439.

lines of the moral, or the moral aesthetic. The "Victorian" Tennyson emerged from the "romantic" Tennyson.

Ryal's concept of the femme fatale and Stevenson's of the "high-born maiden" are helpful in understanding some of the poems based on Greek mythology. An example is "Oenone" (1832), which describes one of Tennyson's many forsaken ladies. Oenone throughout the poem ponders her betrayal, her forlorn condition, and her anticipated revenge. Oenone is like the other high-born maidens, Mariana and the Lady of Shalott. She differs from them in that she gets her revenge (in "The Death of Oenone," 1892), but afterward, she plunges into her husband's pyre, closing a life in which she was always "led by dream and by vague desire."

When Oenone first speaks, she appears to be another Mariana: "My heart is breaking, and my eyes are dim, / And I am all aweary of my life." Oenone speaks of hills and caves; and according to Ryals these contrasts are obviously sexual symbols.<sup>20</sup> There is sexual significance in lines like, "O caves / That house the cold crown'd snake!" Of course, Oenone mourns the loss of Paris because of her love for him, but here she complains of her loss primarily because, like Mariana, she is suffering from frustration of her desire.

Tennyson's silence about erotic passion has often been condemned by his critics, who feel that by his lack of candor he has left out of his poetry an important part of man's nature. R. W. Rader remarks that

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<sup>20</sup>Poems to 1850, p. 80.



his early religious training, together with the unfortunate family situation and the guilts usual to adolescence, had made it difficult for him to accept the fact of human carnality and sexuality and the whole darker side of human nature which these involved.<sup>21</sup>

Ryals suggests that Tennyson's restraint was

in part forced on him by his age. And far from limiting him, it served the salutary effect . . . of forcing him to resort to ambiguities and paradoxes, indeed to symbols, the very qualities that modern critics most admire, to convey his meaning. On the other hand, many of the sexual images in his verse the poet himself was surely unaware of, and their meaning as symbols is thus doubly potent.<sup>22</sup>

Ryals points out that when Paris appears to Oenone, he is wearing a leopard skin and leading a goat, traditional symbols of concupiscence. The imagery suggests the sexual nature of Oenone's response to him: "Far up the solitary morning smote / The streaks of virgin snow."<sup>23</sup>

Paris has brought her from out of herself, out of the cave . . . and ironically, the one who has brought her out is also the one who sends her back into the cave, where she may witness the actions of life, but may not participate in them . . . .<sup>24</sup>

The three goddesses offer Paris of Troy a choice of gifts: Pallas Athene offers wisdom; Hera, power; Aphrodite, sensuality. He should have chosen the gift of wisdom offered by Pallas, but instead chose Aphrodite's gift of the most beautiful wife in Greece, Helen. The description of Aphrodite in imagery of passion and fertility makes her the most attractive of the three goddesses. She is a femme fatale whose

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<sup>21</sup>Tennyson's Maud: the Biographical Genesis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 94.

<sup>22</sup>Poems to 1850, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 81

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

gift, Helen, is ironically already a loving wife and whose beauty will result in the ugliness of war and death. Aphrodite's gift is sensual indulgence, which was rejected by the poet in "The Palace of Art."

Stopford Brooke remarks that Oenone's

sorrow is lifted almost into the proportion of Greek tragedy by its cause and by its results. It is caused by a quarrel in Olympus, and the mountain nymph is sacrificed without a thought to the vanity of the careless gods.<sup>25</sup>

Behind her sorrow are the ten year battle of Troy, the anger of Achilles, the wanderings of Ulysses, the tragedy of Agamemnon, and the founding of Rome. Paris's acceptance of the beautiful Helen sets in motion all these great events. In "A Dream of Fair Women," she is the femme fatale who says, "Where'er I came / I brought calamity." However, the indulgence in sensuality has already brought tragedy. Steane comments,

Oenone loved Paris for his good looks: she makes it clear that the first sight of him inflamed her passions and so their union was based on sexual attraction. With Oenone this grew into love, but Paris left her, and so, as it seems to the Victorian moralist, she pays for her indulgence.<sup>26</sup>

In the face of this, we are left with the wisdom of Pallas, which is a summary of Tennyson's ethical viewpoint: 'Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control.' 'Right is right' and so 'to follow right' without any fear of the consequence is true wisdom. Again in "Oenone" we have the conflicting

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<sup>25</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), p. 119.

<sup>26</sup>Tennyson, p. 58.

voices of morality and sensual indulgence.

The landscape in "The Death of Oenone," that is published posthumously in 1892, is much the same as the companion poem, except that it is winter, in contrast to the spring of the earlier poem. Paris comes to see her as he formerly did, but now "Lame, crooked, reeling, livid, thro' the mist." Now he comes to beg her to heal him of his mortal wound. Having not forgiven him after ten years of anger and grief, she refuses to save his life: "Adulterer, / Go back to thine adulteress and die!" Consequently, Paris dies and is burnt by the shepherds on a pyre. However, "The morning light of happy marriage broke / Thro' all the clouded years of widowhood," and Oenone flings herself on the pyre. Brooke remarks quite plausibly that he doesn't

understand the husband and wife and widow business, unless it be that Tennyson desired to express over again his devotion to the eternity and sanctity of the marriage relation . . . The union between Paris and the nymph Oenone was not a marriage nor anything that resembled it.<sup>27</sup>

In this poem, we see a distortion of a Greek myth in order to meet modern needs. The Christian morality of nineteenth century England takes the place of the casual unions between Greek mortals and the nymphs. A Greek mountain nymph would never dream of marriage and would have smiled at any union of the kind. However, Oenone "mixt herself with him and past in fire."

When Hallam Tennyson requested a poem based on the

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<sup>27</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, pp. 142-143.

Demeter-Persephone myth, his father replied, "I will write it, but when I write an antique like this I must put it into a frame--something modern about it. It is no use giving a mere rechauffe of old legends."<sup>28</sup> It is fruitless just to rehash old myths; if retold they must relate to modern life and current needs. Tennyson was fascinated by the past, especially the ancient myths of the Greeks and Romans and the legends of the age of chivalry; but he was determined in recreating the past to contribute something of significance to the present. As we have seen, Tennyson's treatment of the Oenone myth in the 1832 poem did just this, while the later poem failed to effectively unite the past with the present.

Hallam Tennyson said that "Demeter and Persephone," 1889, was written at his request, because he knew that his father considered Demeter "one of the most beautiful types of womanhood."<sup>29</sup> The myth offers a complex and disturbing vision of reality in which light alternates with darkness and life with death, and in which two kinds of love are mingled by the curious unity of the extremes of heaven and hell. Robert Stange suggests that Tennyson's interest was less in "one of the most beautiful types of womanhood" than in "the scheme of related antinomies from which the imagery of the poem develops, and which are inherent in the myth."<sup>30</sup> Smith

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<sup>28</sup>A Memoir, II, 364, 364.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>"Tennyson's Mythology--a Study of 'Demeter and Persephone,'" English Literary History, XXI (March, 1954), 71.

claims, "Demeter is a meaningful type of womanhood to Tennyson because her love triumphs over the power of death, although only in partial victory."<sup>31</sup> The life of Persephone includes both light and darkness, both life and death, for she dwells, "nine whole moons" on the earth, absorbed in the love of her mother, and "Three dark ones in the shadow" with her husband, Pluto. The reader wonders which was her real home--earth or Hades; which was her real identity--daughter or wife; which was the source of richer experience--the vision of Pluto and the poets or her stay on earth? Persephone is not just the child of Demeter; she is also the wife of Pluto and the Queen of Death, in which innocence and experience are curiously united. Persephone is far more than the stolen, forlorn, possibly "high-born," maiden of Greek myth. As Smith comments, "she has become one with Tiresias, Lucretius, Merlin and the Ancient Sage, to whom have been given visions of deep and secret wisdom at the price of danger and terror to themselves and to their world . . . ." <sup>32</sup>

The abduction of Persephone is not simply an evil act of Pluto, the ruler of Hades, but it is permitted by his brother, Zeus, the king of heaven. Thus heaven and hell are not in opposition, but in brotherhood and unity. Smith suggests,

It is as if Tennyson were saying to the grieving mother,  
'Despite all your grief and all your love, the tension

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<sup>31</sup>The Two Voices, p. 138.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

between life and death remains, and the best you can know is alternating periods of each.'<sup>33</sup>

Brooke argues, "Motherhood, first of the earth, and then of Humanity, is the innermost being of the poem--the 'deathless heart of motherhood.'"<sup>34</sup> When Demeter loses her child, she implores heaven for help; and she wanders all over the earth to find her. In the search, she forgets her own earth. Because of her devoted motherhood, Demeter consoles all the troubled mothers of the world, and gives to sick children the same breast which fed Persephone.

Demeter's dream reveals that her daughter belongs to Pluto. This revelation causes her to curse the gods, who are in heaven remote from man, while she, along with humanity, suffers. Mortal man seems to her more noble than the callous gods. All nature is drowned in her tears, and is afflicted by the loss of crops. In the last stanza, Demeter voices the universal objection of man to belief in gods who ordain his lot and callously leave him to suffer it alone. Looking toward an evolutionary improvement in religion and in the nature of man, a theme of the latter part of In Memoriam, Demeter speaks with the voice of a human prophet, promising the reign of Christianity, in which God suffers with man. Stange says in the last stanza Tennyson has tried to "augment the implication of a vital myth" by reinterpreting the story of Demeter and Persephone "as an anticipation of the story

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 141.

of Christ."<sup>35</sup> Tennyson uses a myth of the past to meet the needs of the present. Since the essence of the new religion is to be love, there will be no place in it for hell. Persephone will dwell always with her mother in sunshine, and be worshipped by men with love instead of fear. Curt Dahl claims that "the grieving love of the mother, Demeter, can lead toward the great Love which is God and which brings life and Light even to death itself . . . ."<sup>36</sup> Here we see why Demeter represents Tennyson's ideal of womanhood. As Rader says,

The angelic woman was in a real sense for Tennyson a savior, a means of grace; in the fact of his love for her, untouched by the baser affections, man . . . could find existential evidence of the ultimate spirituality of himself and the universe.<sup>37</sup>

Maud, published in 1855, was Tennyson's favorite poem. Ralph W. Rader discusses the autobiographical elements in the poem, along with "Locksley Hall" (the same story, developed and expanded), in Tennyson's Maud: the Biographical Genesis. A close reading of Maud leads the reader to believe that it was a failure, because it was too closely an expression of Tennyson's own troubled experience. Maud provided what Rader calls a "functional correlative" for the poet's memory of his dark and tortured past. Rader says,

Having objectified and judged, as accurately as he was able, the experience of his early life, he felt ready,

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<sup>35</sup>"Tennyson's Mythology: A Study of 'Demeter and Persephone,'" pp. 78-79.

<sup>36</sup>"A Double Frame for Tennyson's Demeter?" Victorian Studies, 1:4 (June, 1958), 361.

<sup>37</sup>Tennyson's Maud, p. 98.

his own salvation secure, to minister to the moral and spiritual needs of mankind at large.<sup>38</sup>

The death in 1833 of Tennyson's dear friend, Arthur Hallam left an emotional vacuum, which was filled by three successive attachments, all relevant to Maud: Rosa Baring, Sophy Rawnsley, and Emily Sellwood. Maud and the hero's passion for her were based in part upon Tennyson's memories of Rosa and his association of her with the flower for which she was named. Sophy lacked the sensual beauty of her neighbor, Rosa, but possessed the ethical sympathy, which Rosa could not provide. While the first love was associated with the rose of passion, the second was represented by the lily of ethical love. Emily Sellwood provided a stabilizing psychological synthesis of the rose and the lily.

The story in Maud is similar to the Romeo-Juliet narrative. The speaker of this dramatic monologue is a bitter young man, living in rural isolation after his father's suicide. At first he desires to bury himself in self and the past. Roy P. Basler remarks,

From the time of his father's death his life has been isolated by wish as well as by circumstance, and he represents the return of Maud's family to the neighboring Hall because of an unconscious fear of Maud herself as a source of danger to all that is his.<sup>39</sup>

Maud, promised to the hero even before her birth, returns with her brother and father from abroad. She is forbidden to speak to the hero, whose father had been ruined by a specu-

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<sup>38</sup>Tennyson's Maud, p. 115.

<sup>39</sup>"Tennyson the Psychologist," South Atlantic Quarterly, XLIII (April, 1944), 147.



lation which enriched her father. The hero wishes to avoid "the cruel madness of love" and the sensuality associated with the "honey of poison-flowers."

At the beginning of the poem, the hero views Maud as a femme fatale. Her spirit haunts him, for he wonders if she is like Cleopatra, the femme fatale in "A Dream of Fair Women." Maud is also a "high-born maiden," but she proves not to be as aloof as previous maidens of this type. "At the beginning of the poem," Stevenson says, "her moody admirer assumes that she will be cold and selfish; but Maud proves sincere enough . . . to defy the family grandeur and keep tryst with her penniless lover."<sup>40</sup>

The hero first falls in love with Maud's voice, for she sings "A passionate ballad gallant and gay, / A martial song like a trumpet's call." Her singing of honor and death in battle presents the war theme for the first time. Even though his character forbids him to believe in her, love has mastered him. However, as Rader says, "Passionate sexuality in Maud as in Lucretius, is identified with the blood-lust of murder; the passion-roses of the garden, as the hero eventually comes to realize, 'are not roses but blood.'"<sup>41</sup> As was the case with his love for his father, his love for Maud ends in bloodshed and death.

The hero's love of Maud is represented in the poem not only as a possible source of sensual enslavement, but

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<sup>40</sup>"'The High-born maiden' Symbol," p. 1241.

<sup>41</sup>Tennyson's Maud, p. 107.

ultimately as a source of spiritual redemption. This aspect of the hero's feeling has its parallel in the love of Emily Sellwood. Like Maud, she was "Queen lily and rose in one," a union of the passionate beauty of Rosa and the ethical strength of Sophy. All three of the women helped to form the image of Maud. Marriage for Tennyson meant the ascent from his lonely hell of the tormented self into the radiance and splendor of love, which provided a redemption from the flesh and a reunion with the world. Rader remarks that

Tennyson's love for Emily, so different from his love for Rosa, seems . . . to have involved in some degree a renunciation and repression of physical sexuality. Tennyson consistently viewed marriage, at its highest, as more a spiritual than a physical communion . . . .<sup>42</sup>

The hero's love for Maud draws him out of the self through love, and makes his life "a perfumed altar flame." His love enhances his perception of nature, for now "A livelier emerald twinkles in the grass, / A purer sapphire melts into the sea." However, despite the healing influence of Maud's love, the hero buries himself in madness. But once again he emerges--this time in a determination to engage in war. Because of Maud's love, he claims, "I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind, / I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assign'd." As his love for his father and Maud resulted in bloodshed and death, so may his love of country result in the same tragic consequences.

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

After hearing Tennyson read Maud shortly before his death, Henry Van Dyke said,

It was love as a vital force, love as part of life, love as an influence--nay, the influence which rescues the soul from the prison, or the madhouse, of self, and leads it into the larger, saner existence. This was the theme of 'Maud.' And the poet's voice brought it out, and rang the changes of it, so that it was unmistakable and unforgettable.<sup>43</sup>

Having objectified in Maud his own troubled memories of the past, Tennyson set forth to deal with the moral and spiritual needs of his readers. He treated various exemplars of devoted womanhood. An example is the wife in "Sea Dreams," printed in 1860. It is a narrative of a crisis in the life of a man and his wife, "who kept a tender Christian hope." The man is a city clerk, "gently born and bred," who has been cheated of all his savings by a hypocritical "rogue," and who afterwards visits the seaside with his wife and infant. They walk on the shore, and at evening the tide rises with a furious force. The thunderous sound flows into their sleep, and, with their circumstances, forms their dreams. The dreams kindle their hearts--his to more bitterness, hers to pious contemplation--and she asks her husband to forgive the wrongdoer. Led by her forgiving and virtuous spirit, he finally forgives the hypocrite. Like Maud, she exerts a healing influence on a tortured and bitter individual. Her loving motherhood is poignantly portrayed in her exquisite cradle

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<sup>43</sup>"The Voice of Tennyson," Century Magazine, XLV (Feb., 1893), 540-541.

song. Brooke claims, "Tennyson has scarcely drawn a more gracious woman--her grace the grace of Jesus Christ."<sup>44</sup>

"Happy--The Leper's Bride" is another presentation of exalted womanhood. The poem is a dramatic lyric in which the wife of Ulric, "a warrior of the Holy Cross" vows to remain one with her husband, even though his leprosy has isolated him completely from society. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Church mingled a consideration of the public welfare with compassion for the victims of leprosy in a ritual that differed little from the burial service. At first there was doubt whether wives should follow their leprous husbands, or remain in the world and marry again. The Church decided that the marriage bond was indissoluble, and thus gave an immense source of consolation to the husbands. With a love stronger than this living death, lepers were followed into complete banishment by their faithful wives.

At first the wife in the poem doubts the justice of a divine providence who inflicts such a loathsome disease as leprosy on a valiant fighter for Christ's cause. She asks the universal question: why do the wicked prosper and the good suffer? But later she realizes that the affliction is not a curse but a blessing, for it means that she will be forever with her husband in a union of love and grace. As we have seen in Maud, Tennyson held that marriage, at its highest, is more a spiritual than a physical communion. The wife's roses of sensual passion are rejected by Ulric before

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<sup>44</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 420.

he leaves for the Crusades. She expresses the view which Tennyson had from the beginning always believed:

The fairest flesh at last is filth on which the  
worm will feast;  
This poor rib-grated dungeon of the holy human ghost,  
This house with all its hateful needs no cleaner  
than the beast,

This coarse diseaseful creature which in Eden was  
divine.  
This Satan-haunted ruin, this little city of  
sewers,  
This wall of solid flesh that comes between your  
soul and mine,  
Will vanish and give place to the beauty that  
endures,

The beauty that endures on the Spiritual height,  
When we shall stand transfigured, like Christ on  
Hermon hill,  
And moving each to music, soul in soul and light in  
light,  
Shall flash thro' one another in a moment as we  
will.

In this poem Tennyson is successful in driving home the sacredness and sanctity of marriage.

"Romney's Remorse" is a dramatic monologue with the familiar Tennysonian duality of aestheticism and love.

Edward Fitzgerald, a friend of Tennyson, said,

. . . Romney wanted but education and reading to make him a very fine painter: but his ideal was not high nor fixed. How touching is the close of his life! He married at nineteen, and because Sir Joshua and others had said that 'marriage spoilt an artist' almost immediately left his wife in the North and scarce saw her till the end of his life; when old, nearly mad, and quite desolate, he went back to her and she received him and nursed him till he died. This quiet act of hers is worth all Romney's pictures! even as a matter of Art, I am sure.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. by W. J. Rolfe (Cambridge ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), pp. 551-552.

Romney's art "harlot-like seduced" him from "the truest, kindest, noblest-hearted wife" that ever took the Christian vow of marriage. He condemns himself for choosing art rather than the "wife of wives a widow-bride" for his salvation. Although he feels unworthy of her love, he pleads for her forgiveness. He also requests her to model for one of his paintings. Thus, as in "The Palace of Art," art and love are fused together into a more comprehensive and meaningful relationship. Goodness, beauty, and love should have equal attraction in an artist's life.

Buckley remarks, "The most vivid of all Tennyson's dramatic monologues, 'Rizpah' meets most of the requirements of the genre as Browning established it."<sup>46</sup> As the Biblical title suggests, the mother is less an individual than a type, and is the embodiment of the infinite love of motherhood. The Biblical Rizpah (II Samuel 21:8-11) guarded the bones of her sons hanged by the Gibeonites. As she lies dying, the half-insane old mother relates to a visiting evangelical charity-worker how her son had long ago been hung in chains, according to eighteenth-century law, for robbing a mail coach, and how he had done it not in sinfulness but in recklessness. Her plea to that effect had been in vain; and when she went to visit him in prison, she had been forced from him by the jailer, with his cry of "mother, mother!" ringing in her ears. Afterward the cry rang in her brain, while she

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<sup>46</sup>The Growth of a Poet, p. 218.

lay bound and beaten in a madhouse. When she was at last set free, she used to go out on stormy nights. In what she remembers as the climactic experience of her life, she had gathered all the bones of her son, Willy, and buried them in consecrated ground beside the churchyard wall. Her cry,

Flesh of my flesh was gone, but bone  
                                   of my bone was left--  
 I stole them all from the lawyers--and  
                                   you, will you call it a theft?--  
 My baby, the bones that had suck'd  
                                   me, the bones that had laughed  
                                   and had cried--  
 Theirs? O, no! they are mine--not  
                                   theirs--they had moved in my  
                                   side,

is a cry from the heart of a mother who has loved and lost. Her intolerable misery of love drives her to madness.

It is clear that the women in the shorter poems have a psychological significance in relation to Tennyson himself. He projected his anima, the symbol of the unconscious, upon the women he portrayed in his poetry. The poet sympathizes with the forlorn, imprisoned "high-born maiden" (Mariana, Oenone, Princess Ida after a period of adjustment); while, on the other hand, he condemns the proud, self-sufficient femme fatale (the soul in The Palace of Art, Lilian, Madeline, Margaret, Adeline, Rosalind, Eleanore, Kate). With his progress toward maturity, the projection is replaced by a more rational relationship, and the women in his poetry are used for their objective narrative value (Lady Clara Vere de Vere, Demeter, and Persephone). His treatment of women was important in resolving his inner conflicts, whereby he could better deal

with the moral and spiritual needs of the Victorian public. In his creation of Maud he purged himself of his troubled past, thereby enabling him better to depict men and women in a detached, objective manner. Tennyson's use of woman as projections of his inner conflict between a sensual indulgence in cold aestheticism and the development of a moral purpose, for example in The Palace of Art, provided a catharsis, an alleviation of fears by bringing them to consciousness and giving them expression. At first the feminine soul rejects love, and thus the capability of performing a moral act. She finally realizes the horror and misery of devoting herself exclusively to beauty and neglecting love, for

he that shuts Love out, in turn shall be  
Shut out from Love, and on her threshold lie  
Howling in outer darkness.

To Tennyson the conflict between art and morality involved more than a choice between detachment and involvement. It primarily consisted of choosing either an isolated self-absorbed existence or a life of moral decision in society, and the latter is only possible through the power of love.

The women in Tennyson's poetry purged him of the painful memories of his past and of the inner conflict between art and morality and thus enabled him to better deal with the moral purposes of the individual in Victorian society. A good poet must have a detachment and objectivity in relation to his work. When he is too personally involved, the poetry suffers. Tennyson's women were vital in giving him this state of disinterestedness, whereby he was able to



deal more objectively with the moral virtues admired by Victorians, and sometimes to express these virtues in such viable poems as "Demeter and Persephone," "Sea Dreams," "Happy—The Leper's Bride," and "Rizpah." His treatment of women shows the extent to which he was mastered by circumstances, but his resolution of his inner conflicts by means of this treatment also shows his success in fulfilling his high calling as the Poet Laureate.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PRINCESS

The Princess, published in November, 1847, is, as its subtitle suggests, a "medley" both of styles and themes. The blank-verse lyrics appeared in the first edition; the intercalary songs, all in rhyme, were included in 1850; and the passages describing the "weird seizures" of the Prince were added in 1851. No poem of Tennyson was so much corrected, or so often re-edited as this one. Allan Danzig is correct in saying that The Princess

is not a verse essay on female education, nor even on the position of woman . . . It is a verse narrative of a prince winning his princess, a mock-heroic romance. Its serious subject, therefore, is the nature of love, a definition of the proper relation between the sexes.<sup>1</sup>

The scene of the Prologue is suggested by Park House, the residence of Mr. Edmund Lushington, the husband of the poet's sister, Cecilia. The Prologue opens with a strange mixture of "two nations": the working men, attending a Mechanic's Institute, who are looking to the future, and Sir Walter Vivian's other guests, his son's undergraduate friends, who are students of the past. From the serious treatment of a modern scene, the narrative moves to comic mock-heroic verse in which the poet supports as well as burlesques the

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<sup>1</sup>"Tennyson's The Princess: A Definition of Love," Victorian Poetry, IV, 83.

cause of feminism. Partly a burlesque (its story provided the basis of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera, Princess Ida), the main body of the poem tells a quite deliberately fantastic and mock-serious tale of knights and ladies. To entertain the ladies, the young men make up a story. Each of them is to contribute a chapter of his own, following on where the last narrator left off. In fact, they play a game which Tennyson himself had played at Cambridge.<sup>2</sup> There are seven sections; thus the subtitle A Medley. By using his favorite age of chivalry, the poet was not escaping from the actual world, but was presenting to that world what was of immediate concern to it. The medieval age of the past gave him a mode of poetical expression. The reader returns to the present for the conclusion, so the piece is set within a modern framework. Tennyson brings the poem to serious close, which as the poet says in the Conclusion, "I moved as in a strange diagonal / And maybe neither pleased myself nor them,"<sup>3</sup> pleasing neither the mockers nor the realists. The men had wanted a "sort of mock-heroic gigantesque," while the women "Had ever seem'd to wrestle with burlesque, / And drove us (men), last, to quite a solemn close."<sup>4</sup>

The outline of the narrative is simple. The Prince

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<sup>2</sup>Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son (2 vols.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), I, 253:53.

<sup>3</sup>Line 27. All subsequent references to The Princess will indicate only the section number (in Roman numerals) and the opening line number (in Arabic numerals).

<sup>4</sup>Conclusion, 16.

has been betrothed to a Princess in the South, and made her his ideal by loving her from her portrait. His father sends some of his subjects to claim her for his son. His claim is rejected, and the Princess refuses to marry. Due to her interest in the idea of rescuing women from the slavery of men, she has founded a woman's college into which no man shall enter on pain of death. The Prince with two college friends tries to find the Princess. They disguise themselves as girls and enter the college, betray themselves, are discovered, and are in danger of being slain, until the fact is brought out that the Prince saved the life of Princess Ida. The three men are thrown out of the college. Ida refuses the idea of marriage, and summons her three brothers to support her cause. Both sides agree to settle the question by a tournament of fifty against fifty knights, and the Prince and his party are wounded and overthrown. The defenders of the Princess are victorious. However, Ida feels that her cause has been defeated, partly because the sanctity of her palace has been invaded, partly because of the jealous rivalry of Lady Blanche, one of the professors, partly because Ida's dearest friend, Lady Psyche, the chief lecturer of the college, has fallen in love with Cyril, one of the Prince's friends. Ida, moved by the fate of the child Aglaia, admits all the wounded to the college, dissolves the college, and, in nursing the wounded Prince, finally accepts his love.

The types of women in The Princess bear resemblance

to the females in Tennyson's earlier poetry. Princess Ida herself can be classified as a femme fatale.<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that she resembles Tennyson's previous strong women. Her father says that "all she is and does is awful."<sup>6</sup> The host at the inn near the college frankly admits that he is scared of her and says that she "look'd as grand as doomsday and as grave."<sup>7</sup> Psyche calls her "That axelike edge unturnable,"<sup>8</sup> while the Princess herself tells the disguised Prince that "no doubt we seem a kind of monster to you."<sup>9</sup> Cyril calls her a lioness "That with your long locks play the lion's mane,"<sup>10</sup> while her father refers to her "steel temper."<sup>11</sup> The Prince himself claims that Ida is "Too hard, too cruel,"<sup>12</sup> and while recovering from his wounds he claims to "call her sweet, as if in irony, / And call her hard and cold, which seem'd a truth."<sup>13</sup> In all of the above qualities she is the reincarnation of the earlier femmes fatales.

Ida is not the only femme fatale in The Princess.

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<sup>5</sup>Clyde de L. Ryals, Theme and Symbol in Tennyson's Poems to 1850 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 171.

<sup>6</sup>I, 139.

<sup>7</sup>I, 184.

<sup>8</sup>II, 186.

<sup>9</sup>III, 259.

<sup>10</sup>VI, 147.

<sup>11</sup>VI, 214.

<sup>12</sup>V, 504.

<sup>13</sup>VII, 82.

The first mention of such a woman comes in the Prologue in reference to the lady who refused to submit to the wild king and who "drove her foes from her walls."<sup>14</sup> Lilia is a budding fatal woman,<sup>15</sup> "A rose-bud set with little wilful thorns,"<sup>16</sup> who would build a college for women and make it death for any man even to observe it. Her brother suggests that she should be taken for the heroine of the tale: "And make her some great princess, six feet high, / Grand, epic, homicidal."<sup>17</sup> Within the college there are many statues, not of "Sleek Odalisques, or oracles of mode" but of strong women such as the Sabines.<sup>18</sup> Most fierce of all the ladies in The Princess is Lady Blanche, who, "a tiger-cat / In act to spring,"<sup>19</sup> when dismissed by the Princess, "stretch'd a vulture throat, / And shot from crooked lips a haggard smile."<sup>20</sup>

The secondary theme in The Princess, the theme of woman's rights, was not new to Tennyson's poetry. The subject of woman's education and of her place in society was very congenial to Tennyson. He had been concerned with feminine characters in his previous poetry and seems to have

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<sup>14</sup>Prologue, 123.

<sup>15</sup>Ryals, Poems to 1850, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup>Prologue, 153.

<sup>17</sup>Prologue, 218.

<sup>18</sup>II, 62.

<sup>19</sup>II, 427.

<sup>20</sup>IV, 344.

adopted an immoderate idea of the sanctity of woman. For example, he wrote to Aubrey de Vere, "I don't know, but I feel quite sorry that Caroline (Standish) is married. She did so well unmarried, and looked so pure and maidenly that I feel it quite a pity she should have changed her state."<sup>21</sup> In the 1842 Poems "Godiva" had treated of a woman who had "built herself an everlasting name" by standing up for the overtaxed people against a tyrannical lord. In "Locksley Hall" the speaker had in anger cried out that woman is inferior to man ("Woman is the lesser man"). The speaker decided to withdraw from a society composed of weak women and to join a more healthy savage race, and win a savage for his bride. Morton Luce claims in many respects this is the counterpart of the plan of Princes Ida.<sup>22</sup> In "Edwin Morris," the curate, Edward Bull, answers his friend, a poet, to whom his beloved's "least remark was worthy / The experience of the wise," that this idealising of the woman was all nonsense: "'I take it, God made the woman for the man, / And for the good and increase of the world.'" Tennyson does not agree with that view: "'Parson,' said I, 'you pitch the pipe too low!'"

It is possible that the idea of the woman's position in society was borrowed by Tennyson from Johnson's Rasselas, and that the poet was influenced by the plot of Love's Labour's

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<sup>21</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, I, 283-283.

<sup>22</sup>A Handbook to the Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson (New York: Burt Franklin, 1908), p. 232.

Lest.<sup>23</sup> Tennyson's conception that "knowledge . . . was all in all"<sup>24</sup> to Ida might have been partly derived from the following passage in Rasselas:

The Princess thought that of all sublunary things knowledge was the best; she desired, first, to learn all sciences, and then proposed to found a college of learned women, in which she would preside, that, by conversing with the old, and educating the young, she might divide her time between the acquisition and communication of wisdom, and raise up for the next age models of prudence and patterns of pity.

Ida desires for "many weary moons" to study the sciences. In the college are learned women, and Lady Blanche is one of the "old." This passage, together with Love's Labour's Lost quite possibly formed the foundation of Tennyson's college. The Princess is a counterpart in opposites of Shakespeare's play in which the plot involves the withdrawal from the world of a king and three lords for the purpose of study. They withdraw for three years. and resolve not to see any woman for the same period of time.

The whole question from the woman's side is laid down by Lilia in the Prologue when she declares in response to Walter's inquiry if noble women still exist:

There are thousands now  
Such women, but convention beats them down;  
It is but bringing up; no more than that.  
You men have done it--how I hate you all!  
Ah, were I something great! I wish I were  
Some mighty poetess, I would shame you then,  
That love to keep us children! O, I wish  
That I were some great princess, I would build  
Far off from men a college like a man's,

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 234-235.

<sup>24</sup>I, 134.



And I would teach them all that men are taught;  
We are twice as quick!<sup>25</sup>

She goes on to say, "I would make it death / For any male thing but to peep at us."<sup>26</sup> Lilia is saying that women are not inferior, but that stupid customs still hamper the development of their potentialities. The chief lack of women is education, an injustice suffered at the hands of man. But women may perhaps take on themselves what men have refused to give them. Ida agrees with Lilia according to King Gama, the Princess's father, who says,

they had but been, she thought,  
As children; they must lose the child, assume  
The woman.<sup>27</sup>

This classification of women with children in regard to political rights was accepted by the great majority of people long after the passing of the Reform Act in 1832, despite a growing volume of protest at the absurdity of it.<sup>28</sup>

Lady Psyche does lose her child, Aglaia, mythologically one of the three Graces in the Iliad. Also, as we will see, the child can be considered the heroine of the poem, for she gives rise to the compassionate, maternal instinct, which to Tennyson elevates woman to her true nobility.

Lilia, "wild with sport / Half child, half woman" is

<sup>25</sup>Prologue, 127.

<sup>26</sup>I, 150.

<sup>27</sup>I, 135.

<sup>28</sup>John Killham, Tennyson and the Princess: Reflections of an Age (London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1958), p. 68.

as "sweet as English air could make her."<sup>29</sup> Danzig claims that Lilia is meant to personify childlike sympathy, but unfortunately is merely childish.<sup>30</sup> She is described as "petulant" and "trifling," possessing "sudden-shrilling mirth." Ryals believes that Lilia has some of the traits of the femme fatale: "A rosebud set with little wilful thorns." Yet he also says, "Lilia would make an excellent wife, and we are a little disappointed in the end of the poem when no one of the young gentlemen declares his love for her."<sup>31</sup> She has feminine appeal, for one of Sir Walter Vivian's guests in response to her idea of the college remarks,

I fear,  
If there were many Lillias in the brood,  
However deep you might embower the nest,  
Some boy would spy it.<sup>32</sup>

Lady Psyche, like Lilia and Ida, deplores the injustice suffered by women throughout history from the Persians, Greeks, and Romans to the age of chivalry, "When some respect, however slight, was paid / To woman, superstition all awry."<sup>33</sup> But now there is a new dawn, for the Princess has dared "To leap the rotten pales of prejudice, / Disyoke their necks from custom,"<sup>34</sup> and establish a college whereby through

<sup>29</sup>I, 100; 154.

<sup>30</sup>"The Princess: A Definition of Love," 89.

<sup>31</sup>Ryals, Poems to 1850, p. 186.

<sup>32</sup>Prologue, 145.

<sup>33</sup>II, 120.

<sup>34</sup>II, 126.

education women might be able to obtain equality with men. Women have already proven themselves in history, for in government there was Queen Elizabeth and others; in war, Joan D'Arc and others; in poetry, Sappho and others. At the end of her lecture, attended by the Prince, Cyril, and Florian, disguised as ladies, she proclaims a prophecy of the condition of women in the future:

everywhere  
Two heads in council, two beside the hearth,  
Two in the tangled business of the world,  
Two in the liberal offices of life,  
Two plummetts dropt for one to sound the abyss  
Of science and the secrets of the mind.<sup>35</sup>

According to King Gama, Ida had been influenced by Lady Psyche and Lady Blanche who

fed her theories, in and out of place  
Maintaining that with equal husbandry  
The woman were an equal to the man.<sup>36</sup>

Ida believes that throughout history the woman's will has been lost in that of man, and her ignorance encouraged so the woman may be kept in subjection and slavery to the will and purpose of man. Women have been treated as either toys or slaves during the past "six thousand years of fear" in every age and nation. Such persistent wrong gives her cause to distrust all men; and the cure for these evils is "bringing up" in the words of Lilia, or "equal husbandry" in her words as quoted by Gama. The tyranny of man has reigned in marriage; in a letter to her brother Arac, she says,

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<sup>35</sup>II, 155.

<sup>36</sup>I, 127.

O brother, you have known the pangs we felt,  
 What heats of indignation when we heard  
 Of those that iron-cramp'd their women's feet;  
 Of lands in which at the altar the poor bride  
 Gives her harsh groom for bridal-gift a scourge.<sup>37</sup>

Motherhood has also kept woman in subjugation by relegating  
 her to the low position of

mothers, household stuff,  
 Live chattels, mincers of each other's fame,  
 Full of weak poison, turnspits for the clown,  
 The drunkard's football, laughing-stocks of Time,  
 Whose brains are in their hands and in their heels,  
 But fit to flaunt, to dress, to dance, to thrum,  
 To tramp, to scream, to burnish, and to scour,  
 For ever slaves at home and fools abroad.<sup>38</sup>

Ida designs her classes so that her students will be  
 taught about the great women of history in hope that they  
 will seek "To lift the woman's fallen divinity / Upon an even  
 pedestal with man,"<sup>39</sup> and thus the college is established.  
 The fact that most of the types of feminine superiority men-  
 tioned by the Princess in her discourses—from the legendary  
 Amazon down to Joan of Arc—are women renowned in war, shows  
 the inconsistency of women. Sir Alfred Lyall claims that the  
 whole aim and educational policy of the college, if it was  
 designed to promote equality between the sexes, should have  
 been to denounce and depreciate war and soldiers, because  
 this is the cornerstone of masculine superiority.<sup>40</sup> Ida se-  
 cured a staff of professors who would have had ideally "no

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<sup>37</sup>V, 364.

<sup>38</sup>IV, 493.

<sup>39</sup>III, 207.

<sup>40</sup>Tennyson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902),  
 p. 58.

links with men." In reality Lady Psyche had a brother, and Ida had brothers and a father. Ida's purpose was to build a college far off from men and to admit no man to enter it. For three years the ladies are not to speak to men, and for the same period they are not "to correspond with home." The Princess thought that she would obtain better results if the refining influences of the college were not hampered by less favorable impressions outside, for "their May was passing." The college is "full of rich memorial," and by dwelling on the statues of noble women of the past, Ida hopes that the lives of her students will be enriched. Miss Pitt says, "Ida's college has the appearance of the Palace of Art refurnished for practical use."<sup>41</sup>

The primary purpose of the college is knowledge, which is now "no more a fountain sealed." The Princess implores her students to drink deeply from this fountain

until the habits of the slave,  
The sins of emptiness, gossip and spite  
And slander, die. Better not be at all  
Than not be noble.<sup>42</sup>

Although Ida has chosen not to marry, she does not impose this restriction on others. The college is not proposed by the Princess as an alternative or antidote to marriage, but only in order that, if afterwards they choose to marry, the students might do so as intellectual equals of their husbands.

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<sup>41</sup>Valerie Pitt, Tennyson Laureate (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 142.

<sup>42</sup>II, 77.

After the women have received an education equal to that of a man's and cast aside "the tricks which make us toys of men,"<sup>43</sup> they may, if they choose, "with those self-styled our lords ally / Your fortunes, justlier balanced, scale with scale."<sup>44</sup>

In 1850 Tennyson inserted the songs in rhyme by the ladies, because he thought the public did not understand the meaning of his poem, and he put the songs in to make it clear.<sup>45</sup> Since no one took any notice of the child, Aglaia, the poet determined to drive home the moral to his readers and thus inserted the series of lyrics sung by ladies of the house party. This use of songs to control the reader's attention was a device which Tennyson often used in a long poem. To lose the child meant to Ida the refusal to submit to the domination of the male. Miss Pitt is correct in saying,

the songs declare . . . to lose the child; either, that is, to put off womanly submissiveness, or to refuse the sacred duty of child-bearing, became for him (Tennyson) a defiance of love and nature, and a loss of those powers of compassion and reconciliation which children give to the woman, and of courage which they give to the man . . ."<sup>46</sup>

The songs are meant to serve as reminders to his audience of woman's true function in life.

The child, dead or alive, appears in most of the songs. Tennyson presented the child as the unifying link

<sup>43</sup>II, 49.

<sup>44</sup>II, 51.

<sup>45</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, I, 254-55.

<sup>46</sup>Pitt, Tennyson Laureate, p. 146.

between the different sections of the medley. The song beginning with "As thro' the land at eve we went"<sup>47</sup> has no direct connection with the narrative except to emphasize the importance of a child in bringing a man and a woman together. When the husband and wife come to the grave of the child they "lost in other years," they "kiss'd again with tears."

The well known lullaby "sweet and low" is meant to be "a contrast to the lofty rhetoric and thought of Lady Psyche's class in the women's college."<sup>48</sup> Again the baby emphasizes the true calling of women to motherhood. The lyric "Thy voice is heard thro' rolling drums"<sup>49</sup> is sung by Lilia. It sings of the battle to take place because of the three disguised men who had entered the women's college. In the narrative the Princess had just rejected the offer of the Prince, while thanking him for saving her life after she had fallen in the river during the disturbance over finding men present at the picnic. The lyric unites the fury of battle with love for the family.

"Home they brought her warrior dead"<sup>50</sup> is sung just after the Prince has been wounded in the tournament and is about to be taken to be nursed by the Princess, who then begins to weaken in her vow not to marry. As usual, the child

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<sup>47</sup>I, 246.

<sup>48</sup>George O. Marshall, Jr., A Tennyson Handbook (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1963), p. 114.

<sup>49</sup>Interlude, 1.

<sup>50</sup>V, 532.

plays a prominent part in the lyric.

"Our enemies have fallen" is sung by the Princess herself near the beginning of the sixth section, just after the Prince had been wounded in the tournament. Although it is a victory song on behalf of the woman's cause, the Princess holds Lady Psyche's baby in her arms as she sings, whereby we see that shortly the Princess's resistance will be destroyed by her desire for motherhood. The song "Ask me no more" at the end of the sixth section is also a prediction of Ida's yielding to love. It is a lyrical expression of Tennyson's thesis that a woman who strives for fulfillment outside of the domestic circle is striving "against the stream and all in vain."

One of the most lovely lyrics in The Princess and in Tennyson's poetry is "Tears, idle tears." Tennyson himself said of the poem:

The passion of the past, the abiding in the transient,  
was expressed in 'Tears, idle tears,' which was written  
in the yellowing autumn-tide at Tintern Abbey, full for  
me of its bygone memories.<sup>51</sup>

One of the maids sings this lyric at the command of the Princess, who hates the "days that are no more," the past when man dominated woman. Ida can not understand why one of her students should long for the past, and strongly criticizes the song when she says to the singer,

But thine are fancies hatch'd  
In silken-folded idleness, nor is it  
Wiser to weep a true occasion lost

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<sup>51</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, I, p. 253.



But trim our sails and let old bygones be.<sup>52</sup>

Edward P. Vandiver's explication of the lyric is revealing:

Thus even more significant become 'idle' tears; for to the Princess tears for the past are disgusting because the present is far superior to the past, and such an unwholesome thought could come only during idleness . . . If it is assumed that the maiden singer composed the song herself extemporaneously or after becoming one of the six hundred young women ruled by the Princess, the opening line, 'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,' may not really indicate that the singer does not know the real significance of the tears but that, fearful of the Princess, she does not dare admit.<sup>53</sup>

A deeper understanding of the pathos of the maiden singer is attained when the reader remembers that some time before this lyric is sung some of the students in college had

murmur'd that their May  
Was passing--what was learning unto them?  
'They wish'd to marry.'<sup>54</sup>

For such young women the earlier decision, which had made them agree "not for three years to speak with any men," makes even more poignant the last stanza of the lyric:<sup>55</sup>

"Dear as remember'd kisses after death, / And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd."<sup>56</sup> The maiden singer may fear that the sweetness and beauty of love belongs to the past and is gone forever and that the past days are "dead" days and in

<sup>52</sup>IV, 48.

<sup>53</sup>"Tennyson's 'Tears, Idle Tears,'" Explicator, XXI:7 (March, 1963).

<sup>54</sup>II, 439.

<sup>55</sup>Vandiver, "Tennyson's 'Tears, Idle Tears.'"

<sup>56</sup>IV, 36.

memory exist as "death in life." However, to the Princess the happiness of emerging from the bondage of the past far outweighs the sadness of lost love. Ida "paradoxically sees the significant part of the past existing in the present not as 'dead' but as still alive:"<sup>57</sup> "For was, and is, and will be, are but is, / And all creation is one act at once."<sup>58</sup> "Let the past be past," she says, for she is a new woman, one who would forget tradition, "a death's head at the wine," and deal only "with the other distance and the hues / Of promise."<sup>59</sup>

"Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height"<sup>60</sup> is another beautiful lyric, which is separated from "Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white" by only two lines, and like it, was read by the Princess to herself as she watched by the bedside of the wounded Prince just as she realized that she loved him. These songs are significant both in the development of the narrative and the character of Ida. The lyric "Come down, O maid" is a reproach to Ida for her remote ideals, and it invites her down from the mountain top of isolation to active participation in society and love for humanity. This is another variation of "The Palace of Art" theme.<sup>61</sup> The humble life of a cottage in the vale is

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<sup>57</sup>Vandiver, "Tennyson's 'Tears, Idle Tears.'"

<sup>58</sup>III, 307.

<sup>59</sup>IV, 68.

<sup>60</sup>VII, 177.

<sup>61</sup>pitt, Tennyson Laureate, p. 142.

better than the lonely life on the mountain, for "Love is of the valley." Tennyson cannot accept the high idealistic and intellectual concept held by Princess Ida as the proper position for women. But, according to Elton E. Smith,

throughout the poem he [Tennyson] has reiterated that man's world of deed, passion, and materialism is not his proper place either. If woman must come down unto the valley of love, fertility, and the common life, man must forsake the lowlands of the commonplace and move up toward the mountains of idealism, thought, and a gentler way of life.<sup>62</sup>

If the lyric is read along side Ida's other song, "Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white," "Come down, O maid" reveals another significance. Miss Pitt says, "it is not so much an address to an idealist as to a virgin."<sup>63</sup> She goes on to point out the images of virginity in the lyric, such as stars, snow and mountain tops, the "height, the cold, the splendour of the hills." Furthermore, she remarks that the song emphasizes the quality of barrenness in these images. Love does not walk

With Death and Morning on the Silver Horns . . .  
Nor find him dropt upon the firths of ice.<sup>64</sup>

The beautiful virgin heights remain "The monstrous ledges there to slope, and spill . . . That like a broken purpose waste in air."<sup>65</sup>

The waterfall wastes as the maiden wastes without love.

<sup>62</sup>The Two Voices: A Tennyson Study (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), pp. 42-43.

<sup>63</sup>Tennyson Laureate, p. 143.

<sup>64</sup>VII, 189.

<sup>65</sup>VII, 197.

Beautiful as the mountain is, it is the image of stagnation and waste and death. The characteristics of the valley on the other hand are fruitfulness and movement.<sup>66</sup>

Love goes "hand in hand with Plenty in the maze, / Or red with spirted purple of the vats."<sup>67</sup> In the valley, where the children call, there is a domestic English scene where there is the "moan of doves in immemorial elms / And murmuring of innumerable bees."<sup>68</sup>

"Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white" links the marriage theme with the theme of the lady in the tower:<sup>69</sup>

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,  
And slips into the bosom of the lake.  
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip  
Into my bosom and be lost in me.<sup>70</sup>

Here is a rare passage in Tennyson's poetry dealing with erotic passion. The lyric anticipates the end of The Princess where the Prince urges Ida to yield herself up, and "means her not only to yield her virginity but her barren obstinancy."<sup>71</sup> An image in the lyric reveals the same idea: "Now lies the Earth all Danae to the stars, / And all thy heart lies open unto me." Miss Pitt gives a perceptive interpretation of these lines in relation to the context of the poem:

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<sup>66</sup>Pitt, Tennyson Laureate, p. 143.

<sup>67</sup>VII, 186.

<sup>68</sup>VII, 207.

<sup>69</sup>This theme appears also in "The Palace of Art," "The Lady of Shalott," and Lancelot and Elaine.

<sup>70</sup>VII, 171.

<sup>71</sup>Pitt, Tennyson Laureate, p. 144.

The Princess herself has been a kind of Danae, a virgin locked away from men in a tower, and here the virgin Danae and the virgin Earth waiting for the fruitful embrace of Heaven are linked together. It is because this image is double that its significance quickens--the virgin Danae is associated with Ida's remoteness, but the virgin Earth is linked with the fruitfulness which is to follow on the marriage of the Prince and the Princess . . . .<sup>72</sup>

Luce claims that

motherhood, and next to that wifehood, is Tennyson's ideal of womanhood . . . and as one ideal requires a child for its expression, and children are implied in the expression of the other, he has introduced Aglaia as the embodiment of both.<sup>73</sup>

The child, like the songs, presents motherhood, wifehood, and love, which is the poet's solution of isolation and despair.

Rolfe quotes from Dawson's "Study of The Princess" (Montreal, 1884) and agrees with the statement that

Psyche's baby is the conquering heroine of the epic . . . . Ridiculous in the lecture-room, the babe, in the poem, as in the songs, is made the central point upon which the plot turns; for the unconscious child is the concrete embodiment of Nature herself, clearing away all merely intellectual theories by her silent influence.<sup>74</sup>

The view that the child is the heroine was adopted by the poet himself in an interesting letter to Mr. Dawson printed in the preface to the second edition of the "Study."<sup>75</sup>

The little child, who appears and reappears throughout the narrative, is the link connecting the various sections. The child's function is to give rise to the maternal

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>A Handbook to Tennyson, p. 241.

<sup>74</sup>The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. by W. J. Rolfe (Cambridge ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), p. 811.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

and feminine qualities in the women who have supposed they could put them aside. Aglaia, "the maiden babe," first appears incongruously in her mother's lecture room. Cyril tells her that she is the "mother of the sweetest little maid / That ever crow'd for kisses."<sup>76</sup> The heavenly splendor and beauty of the babe is revealed when we are told that she "Lay like a new-fallen meteor on the grass."<sup>77</sup> She is a healing influence among the wounded knights in the college, which is converted into a hospital.

In the last sections of the poem, Ida gradually breaks down and "at every point this is done by the recurrence of the natural emotions from which she has tried to free her heart lest they should weaken her will."<sup>78</sup> Ida, like the previous fatal women in Tennyson's poetry, is conquered by love: love of Psyche's child, fondness for Psyche, and later affection for the man who loves her. Her first revelation of a feminine affection comes in the third section, wherein she tells of her love for children: "would they grew / Like field flowers everywhere! we like them well."<sup>79</sup> She utters the universal cry of motherhood: "O--children--there is nothing upon earth / More miserable than she that has a son / And

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<sup>76</sup>II, 260.

<sup>77</sup>VI, 118.

<sup>78</sup>Stopford A. Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), p. 178.

<sup>79</sup>III, 234.

sees him err."<sup>80</sup> However, it is only in the fifth section that the maternal instinct begins to subdue her pride in isolation. Her hardness is softened by the child's appeal to her womanhood, for Ida says that

the tender orphan hands  
Felt at my heart, and seem'd to charm from thence  
The wrath I nursed against the world.<sup>81</sup>

Thus she finds, "like the 'I' in 'The Two Voices,' release from isolation in self through the familial instinct."<sup>82</sup> We see that in "losing the child" women lose the qualities of the feminine nature. Miss Pitt comments,

Ida's yielding to the attraction of 'baby fingers, waxy touches' have a certain psychological reality . . . But whatever truth there is in his conceptions of the feminine role is overlaid by the falseness and the fulsomeness of its expression:<sup>83</sup>

and half  
The sacred mother's bosom, panting, burst  
The laces toward her babe.<sup>84</sup>

Thus one of Ida's faults--and probably the most serious--is the lack of natural affection. What are some of her other faults? One was her isolation of women from men. She sees only one type of man in their relation to women: those who treat them either as "vassals to be beat" or "pretty babes to be dandled."<sup>85</sup> It is a lack of wisdom to

<sup>80</sup>III, 242.

<sup>81</sup>V, 425.

<sup>82</sup>Ryals, Poems to 1850, p. 172.

<sup>83</sup>Tennyson Laureate, p. 145.

<sup>84</sup>VI, 131.

<sup>85</sup>IV, 128.

be so narrow-minded. Ida makes a mistake in rejecting those men who either idealized women, or who said that they were the equals of men, but in different qualities. In her isolation she despises even the good views of men of her sex. She is guilty of rejecting the opinion and support of men who approved of her cause, and of regarding the isolation of women from men as the best method of delivering that knowledge to her own sex as the only means of establishing equality with men.

Another mistake by Ida was that she thought knowledge alone was enough. She "sought far less for truth than power / In knowledge."<sup>86</sup> Lionel Stevenson says that the image of the high-born maiden "may be found, multiplied into a whole institution--full of high-born maidens, in The Princess, with intellectual arrogance this time the barrier that must be broken down by love and all the demands of practical life . . . "<sup>87</sup> Ida thought knowledge alone would raise woman to equality with man, and rescue her from the low position of toy or slave. Of course, knowledge is an absolute necessity, but, as Brooke remarks it hinders more than helps their cause, because knowledge

cannot create the imaginative or spiritual powers which illuminate or kindle work: nor can it enable womanhood to guard her own nature from its excesses or defects . . . . When women think that knowledge is all they need, (this) is to lead them to deny or minimize the radical differ-

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<sup>86</sup>VII, 221.

<sup>87</sup>"'The High-born Maiden' Symbol in Tennyson," PMLA, LXIII (1948), 241.



ence of sex on which Tennyson dwells so much.<sup>88</sup>

The many women of Tennyson's earlier poetry--Lilian, Isabel, Eleanore, Adeline, Madeline, Margaret, Leonora, Rosalind, Kate, to mention a few--are conventional female Victorian portraits, but of none are we told that she was eminently intellectual. They might possibly tell us of themselves that "Men hated learned women,"<sup>89</sup> as claim some of the women in the college and as maybe even Tennyson himself claims. Throughout his poetry, love and marriage are the true function of women; the home is their place; and maternity is their first duty: "What every woman counts her due, / Love, children, happiness."<sup>90</sup> The intellectual qualities and pursuits are never allowed to take rank with these. Ryals remarks, "Ida's cold intellectualism could have little appeal to the poet, and up to the time when she is defeated by love her utterances are among the least poetic in the poem."<sup>91</sup>

Buckley asserts that Princess Ida in the final analysis is more than the Prince's alter ego and complement. Like the Lady of Shalott or the soul in "The Palace of Art," she is the poet's anima, the projection of Tennyson's own aesthetic vision and conflict.<sup>92</sup> She cultivates all knowledge,

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<sup>88</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, pp. 175-176.

<sup>89</sup>II, 442.

<sup>90</sup>III, 228.

<sup>91</sup>Ryals, Poems to 1850, p. 183.

<sup>92</sup>Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 101.

including art, in the inhuman isolation of the soul in the Palace, who likewise occupies an "intellectual throne." Both are guilty of pride and both must suffer the burden of the self. The soul comes to know "scorn of herself" mingled with "laughter at her self-scorn," and the Princess, before her descent to the level of common humanity, experiences a similar despair: "But sadness on the soul of Ida fell . . . And waste it seem'd and vain; till down she came."<sup>93</sup>

As the soul in "The Palace of Art," which had lived only in harmful pride, cries out for something beyond the absorption in the self, so too Ida admits her need for something outside herself. She speaks of love;

some touch of that  
Which kills me with myself, and drags me down  
From my fixt height.<sup>94</sup>

"I cannot keep, " she says, "My heart an eddy from the brawling stream."<sup>95</sup> She finally yields to the wounded Prince. Touched by his devotion, "Her falser self slipt from her like a robe, / And left her woman."<sup>96</sup> Because she had rejected the claims of the human heart, she had failed in her effort to help woman, for she confesses "she had fail'd / In sweet humility, had fail'd in all."<sup>97</sup> She realizes that "A greater

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<sup>93</sup>VII, 14.

<sup>94</sup>VI, 287.

<sup>95</sup>VI, 301.

<sup>96</sup>VII, 146.

<sup>97</sup>VII, 212.

than all knowledge beat her down;"<sup>98</sup> that is, the maternal instinct. With the realization of why she had failed, Ida can, with the aid of the Prince, have hope of success.

It is hard to blame Ida for giving herself to love rather than to the Prince, because he is weak, unheroic, effeminate, highly sensitive, and cataleptic. He can become truly masculine only when the Princess discovers and accepts her womanhood. Miss Pitt asserts that the "weird seizures" are the "enchantment of the Lady of Shalott . . . The Prince is restored to the world of real life by Ida's kiss. He is not, however, destroyed like the Lady of Shalott."<sup>99</sup> On the contrary, Ida's love cures him of the weird seizures:

Lift thine eyes; my doubts are dead,  
My haunting sense of hollow shows; the change,  
This truthful change in thee has kill'd it.<sup>100</sup>

Love furnishes a healthy and fulfilling relationship with the world. The Princess is an optimistic poem, for "we may suppose that Tennyson's marriage (1850) did precisely this-- it stabilised the relationship he had been seeking between the inner and outer world."<sup>101</sup>

With all his views of the equality of women, the Prince is too condescending in his lecture. Brooke believes, "There is a certain lordliness in his lecture on the woman

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<sup>98</sup>VII, 223.

<sup>99</sup>Tennyson Laureate, p. 147.

<sup>100</sup>VII, 327.

<sup>101</sup>Tennyson Laureate, p. 147.

and the man which belongs to Tennyson's attitude on the subject."<sup>102</sup> But what the Prince says, independent of his attitude, is a true lofty conception of the place of woman. He holds that woman "is not undeveloped man," nor less than man, but "equal" and "diverse." In the attraction of diversity lies their individual fulfillment: "either sex alone / Is half itself."<sup>103</sup> Danzig claims that the basic thesis of The Princess "is that the man brings strength, the woman sweetness to a marriage; love is the mutual attraction of these opposite but complementary qualities . . . ."<sup>104</sup> Tennyson recognized it in Christ, Whom he called "that union of man and woman, sweetness and strength."<sup>105</sup> Their cause is really one; the problem is not the "woman question" but the "man and woman question:" "The woman's cause is man's: they rise or sink / Together,"<sup>106</sup> and "my hopes and thine are one: / Accomplish thou my manhood and thyself."<sup>107</sup> Smith says that "in the evolutionary process, the successful mating of each individual couple contributes to the upward progress of the race:"<sup>108</sup> "let us type them now / In our own lives."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 184.

<sup>103</sup>VII, 285.

<sup>104</sup>"Tennyson's The Princess," pp. 83-85.

<sup>105</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, II, 69.

<sup>106</sup>VII, 243.

<sup>107</sup>VII, 343.

<sup>108</sup>Smith, A Tennyson Study, p. 43.

<sup>109</sup>VII, 283.

Though women must grow intellectually, they must not "lose the childlike in the larger mind."<sup>110</sup> The term "childlike" can be taken as the equivalent of sweetness. The Prince's last command to Ida is "Lay thy sweet hands in mine and trust of me."<sup>111</sup>

Tennyson himself was not pleased with The Princess, for he wrote to FitzGerald soon after publication, "My book is out and I hate it, and so no doubt will you."<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, Hallam says,

as for the heroine herself, the Princess Ida, the poet who created her considered her as one of the noblest among his women. The stronger the man or woman, the more of the lion or lioness untamed, the greater the man or woman tamed. In the end we see this lioness . . . subduing the elements of her humanity to that which is highest within her.<sup>113</sup>

Some critics claim that Tennyson's treatment of the woman's true place in society was a failure. For example, A. C. Benson asserts

Tennyson's conception of woman is a very definite one: she is emphatically the weaker vessel; he creates no exalted type of womanhood; he is deeply sensitive of her beauty and purity, and the reverence due to her; but it is to him an essential thing in the perfect woman that, once wed, she should be absolutely loyal and devoted, entirely forgiving and unquestioning.<sup>114</sup>

Fausset also adversely criticizes The Princess.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>110</sup>VII, 268.

<sup>111</sup>VII, 345.

<sup>112</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, I, 260.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>114</sup>Alfred Tennyson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1907), pp. 185-186.

<sup>115</sup>Tennyson, pp. 128-139.

He claims that the poet refused to face the conclusions to which the sentiments expressed in the poem should logically have led. Instead he denied the spiritual and intellectual equality of woman even as he pretended to grant it. After raising woman above bondage to man, Tennyson reduced her to her former state. The supposed moral of the poem was that woman was not created merely to satisfy the appetite of man or as a means of family investment, but that she had a spiritual and intellectual significance of her own. Love and marriage can only have true meaning when this significance is recognized. However, Fausset remarks, "the moral was completely submerged by its setting." Tennyson "created a flowery Academy amid Elysian lawns," and filled it with ladies who "were not living women, ardent, open-eyed, pure, but a field of daffodils."<sup>116</sup> The women in the poem seem to waver in the magic air "as the golden Autumn woodland reels / Athwart the smoke of burning weeds."<sup>117</sup> Fausset concludes his discussion of the poem by saying that as a whole, it lacks emotional or intellectual sincerity.

Killham disagrees with Fausset, for Tennyson

tried to show that the posture of defiance into which an ambitious but frustrated woman might put herself could prove not only a matter for mockery but lead to tragic results as well. But this does not prove him hostile to allowing women a proper education, or hypocritical, or glib . . . . [I]t tries to illustrate the importance of conceding women what they want before they are driven

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<sup>116</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>117</sup>VII, 336.

to an aversion for the marriage relationship altogether.<sup>118</sup>

The Princess does not deal mainly with the higher education of women, but with the more fundamental issue of the marriage relationship after women have been allowed to develop their intellectual capacities.

In The Princess Tennyson is asserting that the essential nature of the individual can only be known in relationship, not in isolation. He never falters in The Princess or in his other poetry from recognizing marriage, home, and child as the central relationships of life. Thus the debate of "The Two Voices," 1834, is resolved in the symbolism of a Christian family, and the questioning cries of In Memoriam are finally blended into the wedding hymn at its close. Marriage, as an escape from isolation, is the essential unity of the inner and outer self. The final revision of The Princess shows the poet's certainty of this idea. This revision was made after his marriage with Emily Sellwood in 1850, after which he said, "The peace of God came into my life before the altar when I wedded her."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>The Princess: Reflections of an Age, p. 172.

<sup>119</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, I, 239-239.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE IDYLLS OF THE KING

Tennyson had considered writing an epic on the subject of King Arthur early in his poetic career. "The Lady of Shalott" (1833), his first treatment of the Elaine story, was written the year of his friend Hallam's death. Having idealized Arthur Hallam in a personal way in In Memoriam, Tennyson was later to carry this identification into a larger, less restricted allegorical figure, that of the mythical King Arthur.<sup>1</sup> The fragment "Morte d'Arthur" was written in 1835, and in a volume published in 1842, "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere" and "Sir Galahad" appeared. The series of idylls that were ultimately to be gathered into one organized whole was not seriously begun until 1856. The first four idylls to be published were Enid, Vivien, Elaine, and Guinevere (1859), which were a group of contrasting female characters. There was a contrast between the true maiden (Elaine) and the true wife (Enid) on the one hand and the harlot (Vivien) and the faithless wife (Guinevere) on the other. Ten years later the

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<sup>1</sup>The chronicle of Nennius (in which the Arthurian story first appears) is usually dated c. 800 A.D. In it Arthur is the hero who defended the civilized population against the invading Saxons. The legend was expanded in the History of the Kings of Britain by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1150). Sir Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur (c. 1470) was the primary source for Tennyson. Spenser's The Faerie Queene (1559-96) was also an influence.



the volume appeared which contained The Coming of Arthur, The Holy Grail, Pelleas and Ettarre and The Passing of Arthur. The Last Tournament and Gareth and Lynette were published in 1871 and 1872, respectively, and the Enid story was divided into two parts in 1872. This was done to bring the number of idylls up to twelve, presumably so that the symbolic year would be represented. Balin and Balan, though written fifteen years earlier, was not published until 1885, so that Tennyson spread his work on the Idylls over nearly half a century.

The treatment of women in The Idylls of the King is sometimes purely allegorical and symbolic and occasionally realistic. On the one hand there is the view, as expressed by M. W. Maccallum, that

The Arthurian stories have often been blamed for their want of reality, but realism is not the note of Tennyson's poetry. He had never pierced to the heart of humanity with its mysteries of good and evil, and its crowning commonplace mystery of their inextricable entanglement. But the knights and ladies of the Round Table had never really belonged to the world of living men.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Dean Alford, the old college friend of Hallam and of Tennyson, commenting on the characterization in the Idylls, claims,

As the pages are turned over . . . and as name after name again catches the eye, one is newly struck by the abundant and dramatic variety of the men and women moving to and fro! All, as before said, are alive and recognisable at a glance, at the sound as it were of

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<sup>2</sup> Tennyson's Idylls of the King and Arthurian Story from the XVth Century (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1894), p. 301.

their voice.<sup>3</sup>

Hallam Tennyson agreed with Alford's evaluation. Actually the truth lies somewhere between these two poles.

All that is best in Tennyson indicates that his specific genius lay in lyrical description. He is a superb landscape-painter and a brilliant musician. But his ability as a creator of living dramatic individuals has received criticism. For example, F. L. Lucas comments,

he wrote (typical title) 'A Dream of Fair Women'; but the fair women remain dream-figures; it is their setting that lives. So with his many heroines mourning for lost loves—he had a passion for them—the two Marianas, the two Oenones, the Lady of Shalott, the Maid of Astolat, Guinevere. Even if Oenone may be only painted grief upon a painted mountain—yet what painting!<sup>4</sup>

Grant it there are many abstract and shadowy ladies in Tennyson's poetry, but some of the poet's women are convincing distinctive individuals. Some of the most notable examples appear in The Idylls of the King.

The Idylls are primarily allegorical. Tennyson himself claimed that "there is an allegorical or perhaps rather a parabolic drift in the poem."<sup>5</sup> An allegory is a work in which the characters are admittedly unreal. They are not men and women, but virtues and vices masquerading as real people. The main characteristic of allegory is personification. An

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<sup>3</sup>Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson A Memoir by His Son (2 vols.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), II, 1281-3.

<sup>4</sup>Tennyson (London: Longman's Green and Company, 1957), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, II, 127-27.

allegory deals not with actual living persons, but with abstract qualities which are treated as if they were persons.

There are several purely allegorical feminine figures in the poem. For example, the Lady of the Lake is a personification of Religion. She dwells in a deep calm, below the surface of the water, and when it is troubled by storms, she "hath power to walk the waters like our Lord."<sup>6</sup> "She," according to Henry Van Dyke, "gives to the King his sword Excalibur, to represent either the spiritual weapon with which the soul wars against its enemies, or as seems to me more probable, the temporal power of the Church."<sup>7</sup> The sword Excalibur is to be used to drive the heathen out of the land, because it is Religion that gives to the soul the spiritual weapons necessary to fight the evil of the heathen. Excalibur is to be used, and then returned to the Lady of the Lake when the soul leaves its earthly tabernacle, for then the soul will not need a weapon.

The image carved above the gates of the mystic city of Camelot is the Lady of the Lake. Through religion one enters the spiritual city of Camelot. The Lady of the Lake is described as standing on the keystone of the gate of Camelot:

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<sup>6</sup>The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. by W. J. Rolfe (Cambridge ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), "The Coming of Arthur," l. 293. All subsequent references to The Idylls of the King will indicate the idyll and the line number or beginning line number of the passage.

<sup>7</sup>The Poetry of Tennyson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), p. 193.

all her dress

Wept from her sides as water flowing away;  
 But like the cross her great and goodly arms  
 Stretch'd under all the cornice and upheld.  
 And drops of water fell from either hand;  
 And down from one a sword was hung, from one  
 A censer, either worn with wind and storm;  
 And o'er her breast floated the sacred fish;  
 And in the space to left of her, and right,  
 Were Arthur's wars in weird devices done,  
 New things and old co-twisted, as if Time  
 Were nothing, so inveterately that men  
 Were giddy gazing there; and over all  
 High on the top were those three queens, the friends  
 Or Arthur, who should help him at his need.<sup>8</sup>

This is an allegory of the power of religion in sustaining the moral and spiritual fabric of society. Van Dyke remarks,

The forms of the church are forever changing and flowing like water, but her great arms are stretching out immovable, like the cross. The sword is the symbol of her justice, the censer is the symbol of her adoration, and both bear the marks of time and strife. The drops that fall from her hands are the water of baptism, and the fish is the ancient sign of the name of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps as an allegorical figure, the Lady of the Lake is unsatisfactory. Harold Littledale claims, "The elaboration of emblematic detail makes her ornate rather than sublime or awe-inspiring . . . ."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, she does not have any real influence upon the characters in the poem, as a personification of Religion might be expected to do. She is not even once mentioned in the central religious idyll of The Holy Grail. She is forgotten until the last idyll, The Passing of Arthur, in which she receives the spiritual weapon

<sup>8</sup>Gareth and Lynette, l. 213.

<sup>9</sup>Van Dyke, The Poetry of Tennyson, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup>Essays on Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King (London: Macmillan and Company, 1893), p. 87.

of Arthur, Excalibur. Bedivere throws the sword into the middle of the lake and

So flash'd and fell the brand Excalibur;  
But ere he dipt the surface, rose an arm  
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful  
And caught him by the hilt, and brandish'd him  
Three times, and drew him under in the mere.<sup>11</sup>

Like Arthur, the sword eventually returns to the great deep, or eternity, from which it came.

The three Queens are the theological virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity. When the Bishop of Ripon, Boyd Carpenter, asked Tennyson, whether those who had interpreted the three Queens as Faith, Hope, and Charity were correct, he tried both to accept and reject an allegorical interpretation:

They are right, and they are not right. They mean that and they do not. They are three of the noblest of women. They are also those three Graces, but they are much more. I hate to be tied down to say, 'This means that,' because the thought within the image is much more than one interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

The three Queens may also denote, as Littledale suggests, "the three virtues noted by Malory as deficient in the knights--Charity, Abstinence, and Truth . . . ."<sup>13</sup>

After taking their vows, the knights of Arthur tremble at the sight of the three Queens illumined by a mystical light which strikes down upon them from the casement above through the cross and the Crucified on it, with those around Him, the scene on the stained glass window above Arthur's throne, "to

<sup>11</sup>The Passing of Arthur, l. 310.

<sup>12</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, II, 127.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Essays on Idylls of the King, p. 70.

signify that it is through the atonement of Jesus Christ that these heavenly virtues . . . come to the aid of spiritualized man."<sup>14</sup> Bellicent relates:

Beyond my tongue to tell thee--I beheld  
From eye to eye thro' all their Order flash  
A momentary likeness of the King;  
And ere it left their faces, thro' the cross  
And those around it and the Crucified,  
Down from the casement over Arthur, smote  
Flame-color, vert, and azure, in three rays,  
One falling upon each of three fair queens  
Who stood in silence near his throne, the friends  
Of Arthur, gazing on him, tall, with bright  
Sweet faces, who will help him at his need.<sup>15</sup>

The three Queens who unexpectedly receive Arthur into the ship of death when he passes away may be "symbolical of the angels who bear away to heaven the soul of a brave warrior."<sup>16</sup> It is their mission to "help him at his need," and they "shriek'd and wail'd" as the barge moved to the island of Avilion, where joy and spring reign and where Arthur will be "heal'd of his wounds."

Why do the three Queens supposedly follow Arthur through life and accompany him to Avilion? To such a question Joseph Gerhard responds that one can

supply the numerologist's answer that three is the primary odd number, the emblem of multiplicity in unity, or the mythologist's answer that, like the three Sisters of "The Hesperides," the three Queens are a type of triplicated Great Mother, a cosmic female presence that broods over the life of Camelot in several forms, both natural and

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<sup>14</sup>Conde Benoist Pallen, The Meaning of the Idylls of the King (New York: American Book Company, 1904), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup>The Coming of Arthur, 158268.

<sup>16</sup>Sir Alfred Lyall, Tennyson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), p. 112.

supernatural . . . .<sup>17</sup>

However, the three Queens, like the Lady of the Lake, fail to exert the influence that they should, and therefore fail in their allegorical function.

Bellicent, Arthur's sister and Queen of Orkney, is only briefly mentioned, and therefore is not a fully developed dramatic character. However, she serves as an allegorical type. She is tenderhearted and full of intuitive faith in Arthur and his mission. Queen Bellicent possesses the feminine trait of curiosity that would penetrate to the mystery of the origin of Arthur. Merlin answers her in what she calls a riddle, because divine meaning is beyond the scope of her limited comprehension. Bellicent is deficient in her perception of certain truths.

Though Merlin's riddling answer angers Bellicent, the divine mystical wisdom will not show its light to eyes too weak to see. "For Bellicent, who stands for the type of those to whom Wisdom knows better than disclose her profound secrets, faith is sufficient."<sup>18</sup> She is the type who may never see the Holy Grail, yet she accepts Arthur on faith. She believes in him out of family loyalty, personal experience, and the witness of the seer Bleys to Arthur's supernatural origin. She assures Leodogran that Arthur was the true king, and that divine power dwelled with him, sanctioned by the

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<sup>17</sup>"The Idea of Mortality in Tennyson's Classical and Arthurian Poems: 'Honor Comes with Mystery,'" Modern Philology, LXVI (1968), 143-45.

<sup>18</sup>Pallen, The Meaning of the Idylls, p. 33.

presence at the court of the Lady of the Lake, Merlin, and the three Queens. Questioned further, she tells first her happy memories of Arthur's kindness to her during their childhood, and finally the story she had heard about his origins from Bleys before his death. Yet her loyalty is that of the emotions, not the will, and this emotion leads her to doubt Arthur's claim.

In Gareth and Lynette Gareth, the youngest son of Queen Bellicent, is eager to follow his two older brothers to Arthur's court, but Bellicent wants to keep him safely with her. She even denies the divine claims of Arthur in order to keep him from leaving. Once convinced of Arthur's divine origin, she gives in to her emotions and denies these claims in order to keep Gareth with her. Since her husband, Lot, and older sons, Gawain and Modred, no longer serve as company for her, she is selfishly determined to prevent Gareth from fulfilling his destiny as a loyal and noble knight of the Round Table, and wants to keep him forever near her. She needs his affection and abhors contemplating the prospect of being alone without his companionship. Again her emotions dominate, in contrast to Gareth, who never allows his emotions to interfere with his fulfilling his duty.

Before we look at the other women in the Idylls, the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere needs a brief comment. Their romance has an adverse effect on the characters in the Idylls. Because of their affair, Geraint's relationship with his wife, Enid, is threatened. Vivien is given the opportunity to spread



her poisonous rumors slowly through the body of the court and corrupts the wisdom of Merlin. Elaine is destroyed, and Balin and Pelleas are driven to madness. However, according to S. C. Burchell, the sin of Guinevere is merely the symbol and not the source of the decline of the Round Table. It is but one of many sins--pride, greed, selfishness.<sup>19</sup> The traditional interpretation of the Idylls is that the decline of Arthur's Round Table is the result of the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. However, it can be argued that decay has already poisoned the court before there is any mention of their guilt.<sup>20</sup> For example, the surly Sir Kay is rude in his treatment of Gareth. Sir Kay's unchivalrous attitude toward those of lower status reveals another side to the court of Arthur, at which justice might be expected.

A brief look at Tennyson's view of women in his earlier poetry provides an important clue in understanding the female figures in the Idylls. Ryals remarks that the ladies of his earlier poetry have either been unfairly treated by their lovers, or have dominated the male lover and in some way proved untrue. The early poems have numerous examples of these two types of women. Eleanore, Rosalind, and Lady Clara Vere de Vere are variations of the femme fatale.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>"Tennyson's 'Allegory in the Distance,'" PMLA, LXVIII (1953), 422.

<sup>20</sup>Clyde de L. Ryals, From the Great Deep (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1967), p. 77.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

The two "Mariana" poems and "The Lady of Shalott" are examples of the suffering and abandoned maiden. As we will see, Vivien is the femme fatale in the Idylls, and Enid and Elaine serve as examples of the suffering maiden.

Lynette is interesting to the reader, though not as much as Vivien, Guinevere, or Elaine. She is a proud young woman of a great family, and is described as having fierce eyes and a slender tilted nose. She is candid, smart, thoughtless, too rude and too bold, lovable, and pure of heart, petulant and impatient. She probably represents a society girl who places high value on social rank.

Although Lynette rebukes Gareth for a while, she does it out of indignation at the apparent insult of Arthur's sending a kitchen knave to be her champion.<sup>22</sup> Lynette, like Guinevere,<sup>23</sup> judges by the senses, by human appearances. She cannot imagine that a man from the lower class can possibly be a knight; she despises Gareth's offer to rescue her sister. She refuses to give up her false evaluation until Gareth proves to her that appearance does not make the man.

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<sup>22</sup>Lynette comes to the court to complain that her sister, Lyonors, is under seige by four evil knights. Her tower, the Castle Perilous, is surrounded by a river with three loops and three crossings, each guarded by a knight, and the castle itself is being attacked by the most powerful of the four knights. Lynette calls for Lancelot to come and aid her sister, but instead Arthur sends Gareth. Gareth serves as scullion at Arthur's Round Table as a result of a dissuasive condition laid down by Bellicent for his leaving her and coming to Arthur's court.

<sup>23</sup>Guinevere regards only the outward traits of people. When Arthur rides past her dressed as simply as his men, she does not recognize him because he is not dressed like the royalty.

Lynette, who perceives only appearances and not reality, sees only a fool's allegory in the conduct of the four knights.<sup>24</sup> Just as Lynette fails to recognize the true nobility of Gareth under his humble clothing of a kitchen-knave, and only admits it after Gareth proves his true merit, so she now only sees appearances, not the reality of truth. She signifies that "the world is blind to the warfare waged by the powers of Sense against the soul."<sup>25</sup>

Once Lynette sees the true nature of Gareth, she proves to be a tender, feminine lady, as is illustrated by her blessing of Gareth, asleep in the cave after his victory:

Sound sleep be thine! sound cause to sleep hast thou.  
Wake lusty! Seem I not as tender to him  
As any mother? Ay, but such a one  
As all day long hath rated at her child,  
And vext his day, but blesses him asleep.<sup>26</sup>

After Gareth defeats the knight Death, who turns out to be, not the humble monster he is feared to be, but a rosy-cheeked boy, we find that one tale had it that Gareth then married the rescued Lady Lyonors, but another claimed that he wed Lynette. Tennyson is declaring that in his story Gareth marries Lynette. In fact the story seems in one way

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<sup>24</sup>The knights overcome by Gareth are "Morning-Star," "Noonday Sun," "Evening Star," and "Death." These knights, interpreted allegorically, represent the perils and struggles of youth, manhood, old age, and death, respectively.

<sup>25</sup>Pallen, The Meaning of the Idylls of the King, p. 58. In the epilogue to the Idylls addressed to Queen Victoria, Tennyson urges "accept this old imperfect tale, / New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul" (To the Queen, l. 36).

<sup>26</sup>Gareth and Lynette, l. 1250.

a working-out of (and earning of) respect of the male by the female that should take place before marriage. Littledale comments, "No doubt she becomes a good wife to the hero of this Tennysonian Taming of the Shrew."<sup>27</sup>

Lynette "is more a study of the saucy type of woman than a real woman."<sup>28</sup> She represents an allegorical type, not a realistic personality. Brooke claims that Lynette's sauciness lacks charm, because too much of the masculine roughness of Tennyson speaks in her. He is referring to the way in which Tennyson has expressed the story of Lynette's scorning of Gareth, especially in his attempt to give it humor.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Tennyson, in trying to change her rude, impatient nature to a tender, sentimental personality, separates her from herself. The charming songs at the end of the narrative are too delicate for her previous character.<sup>30</sup>

As Lynette is the type of petulance, so Enid is the type of patience. Lynette is bold and outspoken. Enid remains silent in endurance of wrong. Like Dora (in 1842 volume), she is loyal, obedient, and compassionate. She is a type of the perfect servant like Gareth. She is absolutely loyal to her superiors. Lynette serves her father, even as

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<sup>27</sup>Littledale, Essays on Idylls of the King, p. 83.

<sup>28</sup>Stopford Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), p. 281.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 280-281.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 281-282.

a cook and cleaning woman, and serves guests as keeper of the horses. When she marries, she serves Geraint in the same way, when he demands it. She is always more concerned for his honor than for her own happiness, and is eager for him to redeem his good name. Like the perfect wife, however, she holds his safety above all else, even obedience, and she proves that such loving disobedience is the essence of fidelity.

The story of Geraint and Enid is similar to Shakespeare's Othello. It is the tragic story of a true and obedient woman married to a man who is suspicious.<sup>31</sup> The Marriage of Geraint and Geraint and Enid form one continuous narrative. Geraint weds Enid whom he saved from the vicious knight Sparrow Hawk. Suspicious because of the scandal about Lancelot and Guinevere, Geraint removes his wife from the influence of the court. Waking one morning Enid sheds tears over her sleeping husband. He awakes to hear her murmuring that she is a bad wife, unworthy of him. Jumping to the false conclusion that she has confessed adultery, he forces her to ride silently ahead of him. Geraint refuses to listen to Enid even when she tries to save his life by repeatedly breaking the pledge of silence he has exacted from her and warning him of waylaying villains that she, traveling before him, spies. Arthur had come to Geraint's country to rid it of robbers and evil earls, for he had taken Geraint's absence from the court as a personal reproach. While Geraint recovers from his wound, Arthur puts

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<sup>31</sup>Van Dyke, The Poetry of Tennyson, p. 201.

the earldom in order. They all return together to Caerleon. After a brief visit, Enid and Geraint go back to their castle to raise their family.

Enid never gives her husband any cause for doubting her faithfulness. The adulterous affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is the cause of Geraint's suspicion. When he considers Guinevere virtuous, he lavishly compliments her, joins her in friendship to Enid, and rushes off to avenge her honor without even obtaining weapons first.<sup>32</sup> When he has one suspicion of Guinevere's evil, he takes Enid off to the country, leaving Arthur and ruining his own martial reputation. To calm his jealousy, Geraint wants his wife to be constantly before his eyes. He wishes to escape from responsibility, and thus breaks the vows of service made to Arthur. However, after Enid proves herself, he returns to his duty.

Geraint's absorption in attending Enid shows that a marriage based on reality must not threaten the duty and destiny of man, but must help to fulfill it. Enid, unlike Bellicent, does not wish to keep a man enslaved. Unlike Arthur, Geraint succeeds because his wife gives him perfect devotion. Feminine faithfulness is necessary for the fulfillment of man's destiny. The masculine must be joined with the devoted feminine in order to be creative in society.

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<sup>32</sup>After Arthur leaves on a hunt for a mysterious white hart, Guinevere tarries behind, dreaming of Lancelot. Geraint joins her. They encounter a strange knight, accompanied by his lady and a dwarf. When Guinevere sends first her maiden and then Geraint to ask after the knight's identity, both her messengers are struck by the whip of the dwarf.

Enid's constancy is the virtue that helps Geraint's redemption by enabling him to overcome his emotions, just as Enid's purity is the indirect cause of Edyrn's<sup>33</sup> conversion to the ideals of Arthur. Edyrn becomes a loyal and compassionate friend to Enid and Geraint.

After Geraint arrives at the castle of Enid, he hears Enid's song which sounds like the voice of a nightingale. The serene voice in the midst of disaster is the song on fortune:

'Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel, and lower the proud;  
Turn thy wild wheel thro' sunshine, storm, and cloud;  
Thy wheel and thee we neither love nor hate.

'Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel with smile or frown;  
With that wild wheel we go not up or down;  
Our hoard is little, but our hearts are great.

'Smile and we smile, the lords of many lands;  
Frown and we smile, the lords of our own hands;  
For man is man and master of his fate.

'Turn, turn thy wheel above the staring crowd;  
Thy wheel and thou are shadows in the cloud;  
Thy wheel and thee we neither love nor hate!<sup>34</sup>

Enid urges a disregard of Fortune; that is, a stoic courage in the face of adversity. Her "song on Fortune is," according to Lawrence Poston, "central to the theme of the story, for Geraint and Edyrn triumph over their worst selves only when they achieve mastery of their own fate independent of Fortune's wheel."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Edyrn, the Knight of the Sparrow Hawk, is the nephew of Yniol (the father of Enid). As a result of Enid's refusal to marry him, the Sparrow Hawk seized and sacked Yniol's castle and usurped the earldom. Geraint overcomes the Knight of the Sparrow Hawk, and makes him admit his name.

<sup>34</sup>The Marriage of Geraint, l. 347.

<sup>35</sup>"The Two Provinces of Tennyson's Idylls," Criticism Vol. 39, p. 373.

The modern reader encounters difficulty in understanding The Marriage of Geraint and Geraint and Enid. The story is a variation of a medieval theme, sometimes called the Griselda motif.<sup>36</sup> This story involves a patient wife who is mistreated, and by her tested devotion gains her husband's love. This type woman was treated by Chaucer in The Clerk's Tale. A modern reader finds difficulty not only in understanding how a chivalrous husband could inflict insults and injuries on his beloved, but how a Griselda or an Enid could bare so meekly such an injustice. His punishment ought to have been the termination of Enid's love, yet out of absolute faithfulness, she continues to love him. It is hard to believe that there was not some contempt mingled with her love. But it is necessary to remember that the meek and obedient type of woman was admired by a medieval audience. When allegory lurks under the narrative, as it does throughout the Idylls, actions not wholly suitable on realistic grounds may serve very well in indicating allegorical values.

The Enid-Geraint marriage breaks down due to silence on both sides. Enid is noble in enduring injury without a word of complaint. Yet she is silent also when she ought to speak out. She is afraid to blame Geraint for the neglect of his duties. Likewise, Geraint is afraid to give voice to his suspicion of Enid's fidelity. Enid's patience has both

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<sup>36</sup>Raymond MacDonald Alden, Alfred Tennyson: How to Know Him (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1917), p. 133.



a good and an evil side. Disregarding the sinister side of patience, Tennyson had a fondness for this type of woman. Stopford Brooke suggests, "Of all his women, Enid is the most carefully drawn, the most affectionate."<sup>37</sup>

The character of Enid suffers under the burden of the allegorical representation of patience. At times it is too much for the individual to bear.<sup>38</sup> But when we look solely at her virtuous nature, Brooke believes "we do not wonder that Tennyson was so moved with his own creation as to write about her some of the loveliest lines he ever wrote of womanhood."<sup>39</sup> After the reconciliation of the lovers, Tennyson writes,

And never yet, since high in Paradise  
O'er the four rivers the first roses blew,  
Came purer pleasure unto mortal kind  
Than lived thro' her [Enid] who in that perilous hour  
Put hand to hand beneath her husband's heart,  
And felt him hers again. She did not weep,  
But o'er her meek eyes came a happy mist  
Like that which kept the heart of Eden green  
Before the useful trouble of the rain.<sup>40</sup>

In the next idyll, Balin and Balan, Vivien, a "damsel-errant" from the court of the evil King Mark, appears, singing of the victory she hoped the sun-worshipping heathen would win over Arthur and Christianity:

'The fire of heaven has kill'd the barren cold,  
And kindled all the plain and all the wold.

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<sup>37</sup>Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 286.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>40</sup>Geraint and Enid, l. 762.

The new leaf ever pushes off the old.  
The fire of heaven is not the flame of hell.

'Old priest, who mumble worship in your quire--  
Old monk and nun, ye scorn the world's desire,  
Yet in your frosty cells ye feel the fire!  
The fire of heaven is not the flame of hell.

'The fire of heaven is on the dusty ways.  
The wayside blossoms open to the blaze.  
The whole wood-world is one full peal of praise.  
The fire of heaven is not the flame of hell.

'The fire of heaven is lord of all things good,  
And starve not thou this fire within thy blood,  
But follow Vivien thro' the fiery flood!  
The fire of heaven is not the flame of hell!'<sup>41</sup>

This is Vivien's defense of the lust of the flesh being the god of the world. The song praises the fire of the appetites and senses. She sings that human beings must yield to their desires. Even the old monk and old nun in their cold cells feel the fire of love, a desire and warmth natural to man. It is the true fire of heaven, not, as asceticism claims, the flame of Hell. The sensual side of Nature is contrasted to the temperance and chastity of Christianity. The fire from heaven is the maximum enjoyment and gratification of the desires of the flesh. Vivien sees this fire of desire in Nature as well as in man. It is "the lord of all things good," the source of beauty in the world. F. L. Priestley believes the song "echoes Lucretian themes of materialist naturalism, and at once recalls the similar songs in "The Vision of Sin" and "The Ancient Sage."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Balin and Balan, l. 434.

<sup>42</sup>"Tennyson's Idylls," University of Toronto Quarterly, XIX (1949), 39.

Vivien asks Balin to lead her to Arthur's court, because she claims to be fleeing from an unwanted lover. Balin refuses, saying he is too violent to face the pure Guinevere again. He has suppressed his doubts of the Queen's faithfulness, yet he is afraid of what he might find out by returning to Arthur's court. Vivien dishonestly claims that her squire had seen Lancelot and Guinevere embrace and that Balin had no reason to feel himself inferior to such hypocrites. Balin is driven mad by her words, which he is finally sure are true, having seen the guilty couple in a questionable situation himself. He tramples the shield with its crown, the thing on which he is most dependent. Hearing them, Balan, who is hiding nearby waiting for the demon, rushes out and attacks Balin, who mortally wounds his brother; while Balin's own horse falls upon him, crushing him to death.

Vivien is unconcerned about the fate of Balin and Balan after their battle, which she caused by her lies. Of course, the Lancelot-Guinevere affair is the primary cause of the death of the two brothers. Vivien's wicked and callous nature is revealed when, looking at the dead bodies of Balin and Balan, she says:

'Goodly!--look!

They might have cropt the myriad flower of May,  
And butt each other here, like brainless bulls,  
Dead for one heifer!'<sup>43</sup>

Vivien frequently uses animal metaphors, and, as Jerome Buckley claims, is herself described in such images:

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<sup>43</sup>Balin and Balan, l. 566.

If she thinks of Arthur's knights as swine or goats or rats whose burrowings must be 'ferreted out,' she feigns the helplessness of 'a gilded summerfly / Caught in a great old tyrant spider's web,' but when rebuffed she actually behaves like a snake-woman, the lamia of classical legend.<sup>44</sup>

In Balin and Balan Vivien despises the ideals of the Round Table and Arthur's attempt to incarnate these ideals in his knights. Her lies bring the first bitter harvest of Lancelot's and Guinevere's betrayal of Arthur. In Balin and Balan, she is to Brooke

altogether allegorical, the incarnation of that impurity of sense, which is, in Tennyson's mind, the bitterest enemy the soul can have, which more than all else breaks up and ruins not only States but also the powers by which States are made and held together--justice, knowledge, harmony, order, truth, true love, man's energy and woman's insight.<sup>45</sup>

In Merlin and Vivien the portrait of the seductress is developed more fully. Vivien draws on a number of femmes fatales that Tennyson had described in earlier poetry. Like Eleanore, she is a woman in whom "all passions becomes passionless"; like Lady Clara Vere de Vere, the "great enchantress" who seeks "to break a country heart / For pastime"; like Fatima, who vows "I will possess him or will die"; like Helen and Cleopatra in "A Dream of Fair Women," who "brought calamity" wherever they came.<sup>46</sup>

Having heard from a visiting minstrel that Lancelot and other knights of the Round Table had bound themselves

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<sup>44</sup>Tennyson: the Growth of a Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 185.

<sup>45</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 295.

<sup>46</sup>Ryals, From the Great Deep, p. 41.

to celibacy (another indication of the cleavage of the essential unity of man and woman), Vivien accedes to King Mark's suggestion to sow the seeds of slander in Arthur's court. She is corrupted by Mark, king of Cornwall, whose court is set opposite to Arthur's. Injustice, falsehood, and cruelty are the characteristics of Mark's realm. Mark relates to Vivien,

'Here are snakes within the grass;  
And you methinks, O Vivien, save ye fear  
The monkish manhood, and the mask of pure  
Worn by this court, can stir them till they sting.'<sup>47</sup>

Vivien goes on to relate that her father died in battle against Arthur, and her mother died upon his corpse after giving birth to her. She views herself as being "born from death" and carrying death and sin wherever she goes. She is born of rebellion resulting in war, "war for which there is no greater cause in all history than the lust of the flesh."<sup>48</sup> She also springs from death, which is associated with sin.<sup>49</sup> Vivien causes not only physical death, but moral death in the souls of Arthur's court. Her slander is said to leave "death in the living waters of Camelot."

Vivien also says that she was "sown upon the wind." This can be interpreted "as by chance," or symbolically. Brooke suggests,

Perhaps Tennyson thought of the text, 'They that sow the

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<sup>47</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 33.

<sup>48</sup>Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 301.

<sup>49</sup>"For the wages of sin is death . . . ." Romans 6:23.

wind shall reap the whirlwind'; but the main thought is the inconstancy and fierceness of the lust of the flesh, its veering and fluttering fancy, its tempest-wrath and fury at other times; and it is in the yelling of the storm that Vivien has her way with Merlin.<sup>50</sup>

When she hears of the vows of chastity at Arthur's court, she refuses to believe that a single one of the knights is pure: "There is no being pure, / My cherub; saith not Holy Writ the same?"<sup>51</sup> "Absolute unbelief in good," says Brooke, "is part of the mere lust of the flesh. With it is hatred of those who differ from herself, and deep hatred makes her cruel, fearless, and deceitful."<sup>52</sup> Goodness and purity are inconceivable to her, because she glories in evil for its own sake. Quite frequently man commits evil as a means to a good end, be it happiness, security, a sense of well-being or what have you. Not so with the child of death. Evil furnishes the means as well as standing for the goal of all her actions.

After Vivien arrives at Arthur's court, she remarks sadly that Lancelot and the Queen "dream the mortal dream that never yet was mine."<sup>53</sup> She has never loved, and thus can never know what love means. Tennyson thought that Love is the ultimate reality of the universe, a bond that unites individuals together. A person divorced from this fundamental

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<sup>50</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 302.

<sup>51</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 51.

<sup>52</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 303.

<sup>53</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 114.

unity is indeed in a hopeless condition. Vivien represents an extreme example of a person separated from the transforming power of Love. The bitter fruits of such a severance are rebellious pride, envy, hatred, lust, all of which are personified in the figure of Vivien. She is a devil incarnate, the Belle Dame sans Merci of the Idylls.<sup>54</sup>

Vivien exerts her evil influence by sowing the seeds of slander in the court of Arthur. The soil is fertile, for the knights have only jousts and tournaments to occupy their time, so that the evil gossip planted everywhere by Vivien has every opportunity to flourish. The illicit relationship between Lancelot and the Queen enables Vivien to corrupt the court. She hates the ideals of purity and courtesy attributed to Arthur:

as Arthur in the highest  
Leaven'd the world, so Vivien in the lowest,  
Arriving at a time of golden rest,  
And sowing one ill hint from ear to ear,  
While all the heathen lay at Arthur's feet,  
And no quest came, but all was joust and play,  
Leaven'd his hall. They heard and let her be.<sup>55</sup>

Vivien's whole being is dedicated to the destruction of the Round Table. She has no selfish motive for her evil, except her hatred of the good. She even tries unsuccessfully to flirt with Arthur. So she resolves to corrupt the heart of the old mage Merlin, the second greatest man of the court.

Merlin, as Ryals points out, "seems to sum up within

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<sup>54</sup>Littledale, Essays on Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King, p. 168.

<sup>55</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 139.

himself Western civilization's whole cultural accomplishment:"<sup>56</sup>

Merlin, who knew the range of all their arts,  
Had built the King his havens, ships, and halls,  
Was also bard, and knew the starry heavens;  
The people call'd him wizard.<sup>57</sup>

Though Vivien fails to move Arthur, the man of moral force, she succeeds in capturing Merlin, the man of intellectual power. It is Merlin who observes the dragon-shaped ship and the fiery wave which brings the baby Arthur, and who seizes the child and names him king. It is Merlin who commences the building of the spiritual city of Camelot, which

is built

To music, therefore never built at all,  
And therefore built for ever.<sup>58</sup>

Vivien's hope is to destroy the qualities represented by Merlin, and she knows that her only means of achieving this objective is to obtain the charm which Merlin possesses.

At first Merlin is attracted by her childlike ways, for he is old and lonely. The seer

Would watch her at her petulance and play,  
Even when they seem'd unlovable, and laugh  
As those that watch a kitten. Thus he grew  
Tolerant of what he half disdain'd.<sup>59</sup>

Merlin is always cognizant of the true nature of the enchantress, yet he is eventually caught by her net. As we will see

<sup>56</sup>From the Great Deep, p. 140.

<sup>57</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 165.

<sup>58</sup>Gareth and Lynette, l. 272.

<sup>59</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 173.



later, this is due to Tennyson's failure to portray a convincing psychological relationship.

Foreseeing in a dream the decline and ruin of Arthur's ideals and realm, Merlin sinks into melancholy. So he sails for Brittany to escape the melancholy which has fallen on him in Camelot, but he is followed by Vivien, the person from whom he had hoped to escape. In the woods of Broceliande, by a huge old oak tree, Merlin is absorbed in thought, while Vivien tries to get from him the charm which makes a man invisible, and imprisoned in a hollow tower. He "lay as dead / And lost to life and use and name and fame."<sup>60</sup> Vivien's greatest wish is to use the charm on the old mage "as fancying that her glory would be great / According to his greatness whom she quench'd."<sup>61</sup>

Vivien is depicted in terms of animal imagery. She "curved an arm about his neck, / Clung like a snake."<sup>62</sup> As has been mentioned, she is the lamia of classical mythology. A robe clings about "her lissome limbs."

In The Brook we have the phrase "lissome as a hazel-wand," which indicates the meaning of the adjective as it is applied to Vivien, to denote serpentine flexibility and grace.<sup>63</sup>

She has a "snake of gold" in her hair, and reveals her true nature when she stands "stiff as a viper frozen." Vivien

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<sup>60</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 211.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., l. 215.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., l. 239.

<sup>63</sup>Littledale, Essays on Idylls of the King, p. 181.

compares herself to a gilded summerfly caught in a spider's web, but she is more like "a lovely baleful star," a star of evil influence.

Merlin thinks of himself as lying on a shore watching a huge wave about to break, a wave that will sweep him from his hold upon "life and use and name and fame." Yet he still wishes to grant Vivien a "boon," which she hopes will be the charm. She tries to convince him that he should prove his love and trust by confiding in her, but Merlin replies that he has trusted her too much in telling her even of the charm's existence.

To assuage his anger, Vivien reminds him of Lancelot's song:

"It is the little rift within the lute,  
That by and by will make the music mute,  
And ever widening slowly silence all.

"The little rift within the lover's lute,  
Or little pitted speck in garner'd fruit,  
That rotting inward slowly moulders all."<sup>64</sup>

With unconscious irony she reveals her true nature and influence. Camelot is continually being built to music, for musical harmony represents the bond of faith uniting the knights of the Round Table. Vivien and Guinevere are the discords in the harmony leading to the destruction of Arthur's order.

To illustrate to Vivien how she is distracting him from his true purpose, Merlin tells her a story. By the oak

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<sup>64</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 388.

tree near where they sit, Merlin and about a dozen friends had met to hunt a hart with golden horns. At the same time, talk first arose of establishing the Round Table. Suddenly, a warrior burst into a song so loud that the hart was frightened away, forever lost to the hunters. Merlin knows that Vivien is keeping him from the mission of his life. He associates her effect upon him with the song of the warrior, which frightened away the hart with golden horns. The hunt symbolizes the quest for the spiritual and earthly ideals of Arthur, as it did in The Marriage of Geraint. As the warriors lost sight of the real goal (the hart) for the sake of a transitory beauty (the song), so Merlin allows himself to be distracted from the pursuit of wisdom by the sensuous attractions of Vivien.

Vivien remarks that men "never mount / As high as woman in her selfless mood."<sup>65</sup> She can give this evaluation without fulfilling it herself. The fact that Vivien makes this comment does not mean that the reader should not take it seriously, even though it is strange that the incarnation of evil should know anything about a virtue such as selflessness. Tennyson is using a very inappropriate mask to enunciate one of his convictions. He said, "You know . . . that I think women much better (morally) than we are."<sup>66</sup> A woman is capable of greater acts of devotion and self-sacrifice than

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<sup>65</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 440.

<sup>66</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, II, 94.54.

a man is under the same conditions. Later, Merlin alludes to Vivien's comment when he claims, "For men at most differ as heaven and earth, / But women, worst and best, as heaven and hell."<sup>67</sup> On the one hand, there is the purity and devotion of Enid and Elaine; on the other, the malice, hatred, and falseness of Vivien, Ettarre, and to some extent, Guinevere.

Vivien makes another generalization about the difference between men and women when she claims, "'Man dreams of fame while woman wakes to love.'"<sup>68</sup> To her any action done for the sake of love is justifiable. Ryals claims, "Vivien's wiles are those characteristic of the romantic lover."<sup>69</sup> Love, she says, is "a transcendence of the temporal whereby time is redeemed."<sup>70</sup> Love "carves / A portion from the solid present, eats / And uses, careless of the rest."<sup>71</sup> The union of two individuals in love involves loss of individual identity:<sup>72</sup> "For fame, could fame be mine, that fame was thine, / And shame, could shame be thine, that shame were mine."<sup>73</sup> Erotic love as expressed by Vivien involves the complete surrender of the will, and therefore of the power of choice. Thus erotic love can only result in harm to him

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<sup>67</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 812.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., l. 458.

<sup>69</sup>From the Great Deep, p. 141.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 459.

<sup>72</sup>Ryals, From the Great Deep, p. 141.

<sup>73</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 444.

who, Tennyson says in another poem,

Corrupts the strength of heaven-descended Will,  
And ever weaker grows thro' acted crime,  
Or seeming-genial venial fault,  
Recurring and suggesting still!<sup>74</sup>

Vivien accuses Merlin of having kept women locked up in towers with his charm, but Merlin does not take her jealousy seriously. But he does tell her the story of the charm, which "is apparently erotic passion, the willingness to surrender the will to desire."<sup>75</sup> A far eastern king seized a beautiful woman from a pirate captain and made her his queen. Because everyone fell victim to her beauty, the king sought a charm which would make her belong to him alone. At last, the king forced a hermit to reveal the charm, and caused the queen to vanish for all men but her husband.

Merlin declares that he fears Vivien will use the charm in revenge on some knight of Arthur's court who mocked her, if not on himself. In anger Vivien makes false rumors and slanders against Arthur's knights, especially against Lancelot. When Merlin withdraws in disgust, Vivien weeps and again pleads her love for him. She swears that if she has schemed against him that a lightning bolt should strike her dead on the spot. But the moment after she makes the oath,

out of heaven a bolt--  
For now the storm was close above them--struck,  
Furrowing a giant oak, and javelining

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<sup>74</sup>"Will," l. 11.

<sup>75</sup>Ryals, From the Great Deep, p. 140.

With darted spikes and splinters of the wood  
The dark earth round.<sup>76</sup>

In fear Vivien embraces Merlin, uttering cries of devotion.  
As a storm begins around them, Merlin begins to yield to the  
charms of Vivien. As Ryals says,

Merlin refuses to act on what he sees; so obsessed is  
the intellect with the presumed failure of what once was  
a guiding principle that in its desire for refuge from  
its despair it turns to what is immediately at hand.  
Merlin turns to Vivien, hoping by indulging the senses  
to assuage the pangs of the heart and mind: "he let  
his wisdom go / For ease of heart, and half believed  
her true."<sup>77</sup>

Thus Merlin reveals the charm. As he sleeps afterward, Vivien,  
symbolizing the lust of the flesh, employs the charm to im-  
prison him in the great oak tree, where he lies insensible  
forever, "and lost to life and use and name and fame."  
Triumphantly, Vivien declares she now possesses Merlin's  
glory as her own, because she has overcome him.

The story of Vivien is the tale of knowledge and  
wisdom made foolish in old age by a woman. This kind of  
story is one of the folk-tales of the world.

The most famous of these is the bridling and saddling  
of Aristotle by the mistress of Alexander, and her rid-  
ing the philosopher<sup>78</sup> up and down the garden paths in the  
sight of the king.

The story of Vivien is also the one of Samson fal-  
ling prey to the wiles of his treacherous wife, Dalila.

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<sup>76</sup>Merlin and Vivien, l. 932.

<sup>77</sup>From the Great Deep, p. 143.

<sup>78</sup>Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern  
Modern Life, p. 305.

Both Merlin and Vivien and Samson Agonistes deal with the theme that

Wisest Men  
Have err'd, and by bad Women been deceiv'd;  
And shall again, pretend they ne'er so wise.<sup>79</sup>

Betty Miller points out that Samson Agonistes, discovered by the twelve-year-old Tennyson in his father's library at Somersby, formed the foundation of his fear of all women. Thus it is not surprising that he employs a very dramatic example of female destructiveness in the Idylls.<sup>80</sup> Seeing how Samson's secret was wrung from him at the height of sexual love, Tennyson derived the

indelible impression that at no time was a man in greater jeopardy than at the moment of sexual union with the woman of his choice. Is it surprising that the early poetry of Alfred Tennyson is notably preoccupied with the situation of woman, Fatima, Mariana, and the like, all pining, all craving in solitude, for the embraces of the lover who remains throughout so warily and inexplicably absent from the scene?<sup>81</sup>

As an allegorical figure, Vivien is satisfactory, but as a woman in Merlin and Vivien, she is a failure. Brooke argues,

Absolute falsehood, unredeemed meanness, "motiveless malignity" are not found in sane humanity, and Vivien is all the three. She is not a woman at all . . . This native inhumanity makes her ways and speeches unnatural, and because unnatural, vulgar. All the art of the piece, because of this error in form by which Vivien the woman is confused with Vivien as Luxuria, is not good in art.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Samson Agonistes, l. 210.

<sup>80</sup>"Tennyson and the Sinful Queen," Twentieth Century, CLVIII (1955), 360-363.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>82</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 306.

Thus Vivien is not a convincing concrete, individual entity. Tennyson "striving to keep his subject within limits, has outlined rather than expressed her."<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, the conquest of Merlin by Vivien is not realistic. The old mage is always aware of the true nature of Vivien, until he succumbs momentarily to erotic passion. "He is made by this, not an object of pity, but of contempt."<sup>84</sup> He is not a tool, as Vivien claims, because he was never in love with her. Brooke goes on, "The conditions and position are out of Nature; or if such a thing can be in Nature, it is too improbable for art to use as a subject, and too ugly."<sup>85</sup> Obviously, for somewhat different reasons, the Victorian reading audience was shocked by the seduction scene.

Vivien presents a full contrast with Elaine. As Vivien represents guilt and lust, Elaine depicts innocence and purity. Vivien lives in a world of cynicism and hatred, free of the fancy of love, whereas Elaine's world is one of the imagination, of idealization without any root in reality.

Like Enid, the idyll of Elaine presents a situation in which a knight rides into a strange castle, where he meets the girl who falls in love with him. Lancelot stops at the Castle of Astolat and is welcomed by the Lord of Astolat and

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<sup>83</sup>Andrew Lang, Alfred Tennyson (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1909), pp. 171-172.

<sup>84</sup>Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life, p. 307.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.



his two sons, Sir Torre and Sir Lavaine, as well as his daughter, the lily maid, Elaine. She falls in love with Lancelot before she even sees him, apparently falling in love with his voice:

the lily maid Elaine,  
 Won by the mellow voice before she look'd,  
 . . . . .  
 And loved him, with that love which was her doom.<sup>86</sup>

She is in love with love, and adores the image of Lancelot created from her own imagination, oblivious to what he actually is. She believes that every smile, every variation of facial expression is for her, because

She still took note that when the living smile  
 Died from his lips, across him came a cloud  
 Of melancholy severe, from which again,  
 Whenever in her hovering to and fro  
 The lily maid had striven to make him cheer,  
 There brake a sudden-beaming tenderness  
 Of manners and of nature; and she thought  
 That all was nature, all, perchance, for her.<sup>87</sup>

Bearing people will recognize him if he wears no lady's favor (for Lancelot was known by this eccentricity), Lancelot accepts Elaine's red sleeve to tie on his helmet. He also borrows Torre's blank shield, leaving his own to Elaine. In her tower, she idolizes Lancelot's shield, making a case with "a border fantasy of branch and flower," which externalizes the fantasy in which she lives. As with the Lady of Shalott, the symbol of Elaine's inner existence is

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<sup>86</sup>Lancelot and Elaine, l. 241.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., l. 321.

a work of art.<sup>88</sup> Elaine, like the Lady of Shalott, lives in her imagination, which is essential to her existence; and when her imaginative creations are destroyed, her ruin is inevitable.

Like the soul in "The Palace of Art," Elaine lives remote from humanity in a position between heaven and earth, involved totally in the esthetic imagination and fancy. The palace-of-art theme is presented several times in the idyll.<sup>89</sup> The night after Elaine meets Lancelot,

his face before her lived,  
As when a painter, poring on a face,  
Divinely thro' all hindrance finds the man  
Behind it, and so paints him that his face,  
The shape and color of a mind and life,  
Lives for his children.<sup>90</sup>

After Lancelot leaves for the last time, she returns to the tower, where she notices "his pictured form'd," which grows "between her and the pictured wall."<sup>91</sup>

At the tournament Lancelot overthrows all who come against him, but is seriously wounded. He rides off with Lavaine before Arthur can award him with the diamond.<sup>92</sup> An ex-knight, turned hermit, takes care of Lancelot for many

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<sup>88</sup>E. D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 51.

<sup>89</sup>Poston, "The Two Provinces of Tennyson's Idylls," p. 374.

<sup>90</sup>Lancelot and Elaine, l. 329.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., l. 985.

<sup>92</sup>Arthur held an annual "diamond tournament," at which he awarded to the winning knight one of the diamonds from a crown he had found in the wilderness. Lancelot is saving them to give to Guinevere.

weeks in a cave near Camelot. Gawain, who has unwillingly undertaken the quest for Lancelot, comes to Astolat. He informs Elaine of Lancelot's wound and "thro' her own side she felt the sharp lance go."<sup>93</sup> Gawain tries in vain to win Elaine's affection, but ceases when he realizes that she identifies completely with Lancelot. His hints of Lancelot's infidelity go for nought, since Elaine in her innocence can not even suspect falseness in another, much less with Lancelot, to her the embodiment of perfect knighthood. Leaving the diamond in her care to give Lancelot, Gawain returns to Camelot.

With Sir Torre as guide, Elaine rides to Lancelot to care for him. She cannot help revealing her love in spite of Lancelot's resistance:

But the meek maid  
Sweetly forbore him ever, being to him  
Meeker than any child to a rough nurse,  
Milder than any mother to a sick child  
And never woman yet, since man's first fall,  
Did kindlier unto man.<sup>94</sup>

In his sickness, Lancelot vowed with himself to reform his life, but when well, falls back into his old sin. Though he had promised to grant Elaine any boon, he refuses to become her husband, because "his honor rooted in dishonor stood, / And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true."<sup>95</sup> He returns to Guinevere, who is so angry at his betrayal that she throws his diamonds in the river, just as Elaine's body

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<sup>93</sup>Lancelot and Elaine, l. 620.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., l. 850.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., l. 871.

comes to rest at Camelot, as if they were meant for her. The diamonds symbolize Lancelot's true purpose in life as the fulfillment of Arthur's ideals. A diamond is given to Elaine to keep for him, for only Elaine does not threaten his true mission. As soon as Guinevere is given the diamond, she throws it away, indicating that Lancelot's integrity is not safe with her.

Rejected by Lancelot, Elaine mutters over and over again, "death or him." Having given up her identity to Lancelot, he must confirm her identity or she is nothing. Tennyson believed that love in which the individual loses his identity or free will can only result in madness and eventually death. Elaine perceives this when she asks Lancelot to allow her to follow him: "I have gone mad. I love you; let me die."<sup>96</sup> Before leaving he pays her a high compliment: "for true you are and sweet / Beyond mine old belief in womanhood."<sup>97</sup> After Lancelot leaves without bidding farewell, Elaine composes a song called "Love and Death":

'Sweet is true love tho' given in vain, in vain;  
And sweet is death who puts an end to pain.  
I know not which is sweeter, no, not I.

'Love, art thou sweet? then bitter death must be.  
Love, thou art bitter; sweet is death to me.  
O Love, if death be sweeter, let me die.

'Sweet love, that seems not made to fade away;  
Sweet death, that seems to make us loveless clay;  
I know not which is sweeter, no, not I.

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., l. 925.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., l. 949.

'I fain would follow love, if that could be;  
 I needs must follow death, who calls for me;  
 Call and I follow, I follow! let me die!<sup>98</sup>

To a medieval audience, pure devotion and faithfulness were admirable. To a modern reader, Elaine's song reveals her failure to confront reality. Love and death are not the only possibilities, yet her innocence is at home, not on earth, but in heaven.

Thus Elaine dies of a broken heart, and her body is sent on a boat down the river to Camelot. Ryals observes that

The Lily Maid dwells beside the river in childhood, never partaking of what is symbolically the stream of life . . . Ironically, her river voyage, representing . . . a journey into the reality of the city of Camelot from her life in the tower, becomes symbolic not only of the life she has missed but also of her journey into timelessness.<sup>99</sup>

By giving her body to the river, Elaine reveals the loss to Lancelot of the joy of love. The stream of life sweeps the lost opportunity past him, just as the river carries away the diamonds. Later Arthur will journey on a barge to the island-valley of Avilion. Elaine leaves the world, in which her ideal was unrealizable, in death, and Arthur is to follow her example at the end of the Idylls. Elaine in a letter to Lancelot makes it clear that her love for him was unrequited. In her right hand is the lily, the symbol of purity and

all her bright hair streaming down--  
 And all the coverlid was cloth of gold  
 Drawn to her waist, and she herself in white  
 All but her face, and that clear-featured face  
 Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead,

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid., l. 1000.

<sup>99</sup>Ryals, From the Great Deep, p. 61.

But fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled.<sup>100</sup>  
 Elaine comes to Camelot "like a star in blackest night," and  
 "bearing mute testimony to the death to come that has been  
 sown by that fatal sin of sense."<sup>101</sup>

The pity of Lancelot's lost opportunity is that Elaine  
 was destined to be his wife. Arthur is amazed that Lancelot  
 did not marry a maiden shaped, it seems,

By God for thee alone, and from her face,  
 If one may judge the living by the dead,  
 Delicately pure and marvelously fair,  
 Who might have brought thee, now a lonely man  
 Wifeless and hierless, noble issue, sons  
 Born to the glory of thy name and fame.<sup>102</sup>

The masculine must be fused with the faithful feminine in  
 order to fulfil the spiritual ideal. There is another sugges-  
 tion of the suitability of Elaine for Lancelot. The lily as-  
 sociated with the fair Maid of Astolat recalls the struggle  
 in Lancelot's mind between the rose, symbolic of carnal love,  
 associated with Guinevere, and the white lily of virgin purity.  
 In a dream Lancelot sees that

That maiden Saint who stands with lily in hand  
 In yonder shrine. All round her prest the dark,  
 And all the light upon her silver face  
 Flow'd from the spiritual lily that she held.  
 Lo! these her emblems drew mine eyes--away;  
 For see, how perfect-pure!<sup>103</sup>

"The Maid of Astolat," as observes Maccallum, "seems created

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<sup>100</sup>Lancelot and Elaine, l. 1149.

<sup>101</sup>Pallen, The Meaning of the Idylls of the King, p. 78.

<sup>102</sup>Lancelot and Elaine, l. 1355.

<sup>103</sup>Balin and Balan, l. 256.

to fulfill these higher longings that rise in dreams to the Madonna."<sup>104</sup>

So alarmingly did Tennyson apparently view the evil qualities of the total commitment to love, whereby the individual identity is lost that he wrote Pelleas and Ettarre to tell Elaine's story again, this time with a male as the beguiled lover.<sup>105</sup> On his way to Camelot, Pelleas lies down to rest in a forest. He dreams of the pure lady whom he will love when he finds her. It is clear that Pelleas plans to find a woman "pure as Guinevere" to whom he will be another Arthur, and he loves her even before he finds her. Like Elaine, he is in love with love, not with a real person. Both Arthur and Pelleas depend on a woman's fidelity for the fulfillment of their purpose in life, and both of them are disappointed and brought to their ruin by the woman's failure to love faithfully.

Ettarre and her attendants ride by Pelleas in the forest, and Pelleas, struck by her beauty, offers to be her guide. Thus he meets his lady in the forest, which is, throughout the Idylls, a place of evil. At first, he can not speak for love, and she laughs at him. But when she learns he is to compete at the tournament, she is more kind. Ettarre wants the golden circlet to be offered to her by the winner, and promises Pelleas her love if he wins for her.

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<sup>104</sup>Tennyson's Idylls of the King, p. 380.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

Ettarre is often referred to as "a great lady," a contrast to her true inner nature. Actually she is a less interesting version of Vivien. Like Guinevere, she seems to the naive Pelleas both great and good, while in fact she, like Vivien, is the opposite. Ettarre is vain, perverse, cynical, and shrewish. She despises the knights and ideals of the Round Table, and even claims she hates the very sound of Arthur's voice. Brooke suggests,

She is the great lady of a debased society in which everything ideal is only matter of mockery. Such a society lives on the very marge of the incoming tide of weariness. It only continues to live by the fierceness of its strife to gain, hour by hour, enough of light or cruel amusement to keep that tide at bay . . . This woman is Tennyson's ethical warning against a loose and luxury-bitten society . . . .<sup>106</sup>

Once Pelleas wins the circlet for Ettarre, she has no further use for him. She goes back to her castle, and refuses to admit Pelleas, who followed her faithfully. He thinks he is merely being tested, for he can not imagine that a lady would break her promise. Despite attacks by her knights, Pelleas remains faithfully outside the castle. Having found out that Ettarre wants him brought bound into the castle, he obediently lets himself be captured. Ettarre scorns him so vehemently that Pelleas fears to cause her further trouble. As he leaves her, Ettarre briefly regrets her inability to love so noble a man. She is too realistic to believe that Pelleas would love her if he knew her as she really is, and she

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<sup>106</sup>Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life, p. 339.



does not care to reform her life so that she will be worthy of a noble man's love.

By chance Gawain passes by and takes pity on the situation of Pelleas. He offers to borrow Pelleas's armor and horse and to pretend to Ettarre that he has killed Pelleas. He plans to stay three days with Ettarre and convince her of Pelleas's courage and faithfulness so that she will long for her loyal lover to return to life. At the end of three days, Pelleas steals into the castle courtyard and sees three tents, one of which shelters Ettarre and Gawain, sleeping together. His honor forbids his killing a sleeping knight, so instead he leaves his naked sword across the throats of the sleeping pair. Ettarre is attracted to false values, caring more for the flattery of a crude love, like Gawain's, than for the pure love of Pelleas. In anger Pelleas rides away from the castle, his love replaced by hatred. Ettarre awakes and, finding the sword, rebukes Gawain for his lie about killing Pelleas. Ettarre begins to love the very one she had scorned and pines in vain for him the rest of her life. Her perversity causes her to hate when she is loved and to love when she is hated. After Pelleas leaves Ettarre, he encounters Percivale, from whom he learns that even Guinevere and Lancelot are false. Like Balan, this new awareness drives him to madness. Again we see the adverse influence of the illicit romance, whose poison is gradually spreading death and ruin throughout the body of Arthur's court.

R. W. Rader argues that Pelleas and Ettarre probably

has some biographical significance, mainly in the appearance of the Rosa-figure.<sup>107</sup> He claims;

Tennyson must have realized . . . that his attraction to Rosa had been more a sensual infatuation than a rational love, and he must have come to recognize that, like Pelleas, he had been betrayed by 'double-nature love' into imputing to the physical form upon which his imagination had dwelt with such loving fascination a corresponding spiritual value which Rosa simply lacked.<sup>108</sup>

When Pelleas is first struck with the beauty of Ettarre,

The beauty of her flesh abash'd the boy,  
As tho' it were the beauty of her soul;  
For as the base man, judging of the good,  
Puts his own baseness in him by default  
Of will and nature, so did Pelleas lend  
All the young beauty of his own soul to hers.<sup>109</sup>

Rader goes on,

And something of the lingering guilt and shame which in darker moods he may retrospectively have felt may have found their way into the story of the icy-cold Ettarre and the young knight who came to realize that 'I never loved her, I but lusted for her.'<sup>110</sup>

Less than one-fifth of the next idyll, The Last Tournament, is actually about the tournament, but the theme is the same throughout the narrative: the decline of Arthur's knightly ideal. The Last Tournament is held in honor of "Dead Innocence?" and is a nightmare celebration both of

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<sup>107</sup> Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genesis (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), p. 58. According to Rader, Tennyson's love for Rosa Baring was one of the most important episodes of his life. She married Robert Duncombe Shafto on October 22, 1838.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Pelleas and Ettarre, l. 74.

<sup>110</sup> Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genesis, p. 58.

Guinevere's moral ruin and the Round Table's decline. The female child whom Arthur gives to Guinevere, represents her own innocent virtue, which died early in their marriage instead of coming to maturity. The ruby necklace, a symbol of the child's innocence, ironically goes first into the hands of the guilty Guinevere and then into those of the guilty Isolt.

There are two romantic triangles in the Idylls, which are parallel in their destinies. Arthur, the betrayed husband of the first triangle, represents virtue, and his rival, Lancelot, is courteous throughout the Idylls. The love of Lancelot and Guinevere, although false to Arthur and the Round Table, is itself noble, faithful, and courteous. On the other hand, King Mark, the betrayed husband of the second triangle, is evil and destructive. Tristram, Mark's betrayer, is selfish and cynical. The two queens, Isolt and Guinevere, are alike in their determination to have a romantic love affair serve as an escape from a harsh reality, yet they differ in their motivation. Guinevere rejects Arthur because he is too good; Isolt rejects Mark because he is too evil. Guinevere claims that to her Arthur is "all fault who hath no fault at all, / For who loves me must have a touch of earth."<sup>111</sup> Again she refers to Arthur as "a moral child without the craft to rule, / Else had he not lost me."<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, when Tristram suddenly appears Isolt says, "My soul, I felt my

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<sup>111</sup>Lancelot and Elaine, l. 132.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., l. 145.

hatred for my Mark / Quicken within me, and knew that thou wert nigh." <sup>113</sup> Both are in love with love, not the individual. Isolt's escape into passion is far less restrained than Guinevere's. <sup>114</sup> She makes this quite evident when she declares to Tristram, "My God, the measure of my hate for Mark / Is as the measure of my love for thee!" <sup>115</sup> Again, she claims, "O, were I not my Mark's, by whom all men / Are noble, I should hate thee more than love." <sup>116</sup>

Arthur bases his ideal of love for Guinevere on respect for her and the belief that their earthly passion is a symbol of a higher spiritual love which will be fulfilled completely only in the next life. Tristram feels that the ugly, irreverent world he sees around him is not his fault and that he may as well enjoy the pleasures, including love, available to him. He sings (an echo of Vivien's song),

"Free love--free field--we love but while we may.  
The woods are hush'd, their music is no more;  
The leaf is dead, the yearning past away.  
New leaf, new life--the days of frost are o'er;  
New life, new love, to suit the newer day;  
New loves are sweet as those that went before.  
Free love--free field--we love but while we may." <sup>117</sup>

The love of Tristram and Isolt represents the nature of earthly love stripped of all its spiritual significance and reduced to lust.

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<sup>113</sup>The Last Tournament, l. 517.

<sup>114</sup>Ryals, From the Great Deep, p. 129.

<sup>115</sup>The Last Tournament, l. 535.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., l. 594.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., l. 274.

When Tristram arrives at the castle of King Mark, the king is away on a hunt, but Isolt fears he will return and find them together. She objects to Tristram's marriage to Isolt of Brittanny, but hates her own husband so much that she takes Tristram back regardless of his faithlessness. She is dominated by a desire for love no matter what the cost. She begs Tristram to deceive her and tell her that he will love her forever, because she would rather hear a lie than believe in false love. "Because erotic love seeks to negate life, it is a kind of insanity. The lover will not accept reality; he demands illusion."<sup>118</sup> But Tristram is uncourteous in his talk of free love and their own love failing when beauty fails. In desperation, Isolt declares that Lancelot is far more courteous than he, but nevertheless accepts his faults. Isolt is aware of her great need for love, and assumes that she needs her lover more than the other Isolt needs her husband. Isolt demands a love that will give meaning to her life, but she is willing to settle for the evil Tristram, knowing that he is actually deceiving her. In her desire for romance and escape from a hated marriage, she embraces fantasy. After a meal together, Tristram sings a love song to his lady and then offers her the ruby necklace. Just as Tristram kisses her, Isolt's fear turns true. Mark springs upon them and cleaves Tristram's head in two.

Guinevere, unlike the other women except Lynette in

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<sup>118</sup>Ryals, From the Great Deep, p. 130.

the Idylls, possesses a mixture of good and evil qualities. Tennyson claims in the epilogue to the Idylls, "To the Queen," that his poem deals with "Sense at war with Soul." In Arthur's marriage to Guinevere, Priestley points out that "Soul must act through Body; Thought must wed Fact; the Spirit must mix himself with Life; the Idea must be actualized . . . ." <sup>119</sup> Early in the Idylls, Arthur says,

for saving I be join'd  
To her that is the fairest under heaven,  
I seem as nothing in the mighty world,  
And cannot will my will nor work my work  
Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm  
Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,  
Then might we live together as one life,  
And reigning with one will in everything  
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,  
And power on this dead world to make it live. <sup>120</sup>

For as Priestley argues,

It is only through alliance with the temporal that the eternal can work in the temporal, and since for Tennyson the prime function of an ideal is to work in the temporal, the alliance is necessary. It nevertheless brings the inevitable danger of separation and of conflict. <sup>121</sup>

In Guinevere both Arthur and the Queen are aware that it was only through their love and marriage that redemption could be accomplished in the realm. Arthur does not sorrow as an injured husband over his lost love, but instead he shows the regret of an idealist whose entire mission depended on his marriage. He says to Guinevere, "Thou has spoilt the purpose of my life." <sup>122</sup> When she realizes she has lost him, Guinevere

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<sup>119</sup>"Tennyson's Idylls," 38.

<sup>120</sup>The Coming of Arthur, l. 84.

<sup>121</sup>"Tennyson's Idylls," 38.

<sup>122</sup>Guinevere, l. 450.

is able to perceive the magnitude of her sin:

Ah my God,  
What might I not have made of thy fair world,  
Had I but loved thy highest creature here?<sup>123</sup>

If we assume Arthur represents the soul or conscience, and Guinevere represents the body, <sup>124</sup> it is clear that the Idylls has a significant allegorical dimension. When the flesh goes its own way, as it does in the case of Tristram, and denies its spiritual obligations, ruin follows for both individual and society. Guinevere and Arthur were intended to complete man and woman in a mystical union and to set an example of perfect harmony. The realm finds the union a failure and consequently rejects completely the ideals for which it should stand.

Guinevere is not only an allegorical and symbolic figure, but a concrete, individualized personality. Buckley suggests that

Guinevere is, of course, first and last a distinct individual, the most vivid and dramatic figure in the Idylls. But insofar as she may also be considered a symbol of beauty which must eventually come to terms with the moral truth, she may . . . represent the anima, the essential aesthetic self of the poet.<sup>125</sup>

Even in her guilt she remembers the sensuous pleasures enjoyed while with Lancelot. They were

Rapt in sweet talk or lively, all on love

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid., l. 649.

<sup>124</sup>Guinevere is the "symbol of the nobility and beauty of the human body." Pallen, The Meaning of the Idylls of the King, p. 21.

<sup>125</sup>Tennyson: the Growth of a Poet, p. 191.

And sport and tilts and pleasure,—for the time  
 Was may-time, and as yet no sin was dream'd,—  
 Rode under groves that look'd a paradise  
 Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth  
 That seem'd the heavens upbreking thro' the earth.<sup>126</sup>

She "has known also the familiar Tennysonian burden of personality, and in parting from Lancelot she has cried, 'Would God that thou couldst hide me from myself.'"<sup>127</sup> Like Princess Ida, she is troubled by her own image.<sup>128</sup> Guinevere dreams that she is standing before a setting sun, which is symbolic of Arthur in his decline, and suddenly becomes aware that her own shadow has spread and is destroying by fire the land. But she seeks atonement for her selfishness and pride by offering to the nuns at Almesbury, the unselfish devotion that Arthur had hoped she would bring to his kingdom.

As a counterpart of Tennyson's own poetic struggle, she suggests not only his attraction to a sensuous art for art's sake but also, by her last gesture, his mature demand for a moral aesthetic.<sup>129</sup>

Tennyson intended Guinevere to represent the Heart in human nature.<sup>130</sup> Yet, according to Brooke, she

certainly does not represent the infinite variety of the human affections. However, by falling short of the allegorical aim of the poet, she gains as a real person.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup>Guinevere, l. 382.

<sup>127</sup>Buckley, Tennyson: the Growth of a Poet, p. 190.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., p. 191. The moral aesthetic is important in Tennyson's poetic development. This concept places more emphasis on dealing with the moral and spiritual needs of the reader than with indulgence in purely sensuous poetry for poetry's sake.

<sup>130</sup>Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 357.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid.



It is true that Guinevere is a real person, not merely an allegorical abstraction, or merely a symbol. But she is not an interesting person, having little intelligence and small variety in character.<sup>132</sup> If she were not an ordinary woman she would have repented without loving Arthur, or not repented at all.<sup>133</sup> She comes to repentance, not out of love, virtue, or unselfishness, but out of fear for her reputation and her status as a queen. Charles Masterman observes,

But the sense of sin, as done in the sight of God, as something that must demand inevitable expiation, she never experiences; and the simple life she adopts at Almesbury . . . is a very different life from that in reality chosen by those to whom the consciousness has come home of the impossibility of the restoration of a lost innocence . . . .<sup>134</sup>

One of the most interesting questions raised by the Idylls is whether or not Lancelot and Guinevere were justified in their unfaithfulness to Arthur, who is "ideal manhood closed in real man."<sup>135</sup> Certainly he represents the ideal, but this conception of Arthur has received criticism by those who think that it is an unjustified distortion of Malory's Arthur. Richard Jones replies,

. . . the satisfactory answer to criticism such as Swinburne's, to the effect that Tennyson has given us an emasculated hero, no longer Malory's lusty, incestuous knight . . . but a creature far too good for human nature's daily food . . . may be the demonstration that

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<sup>132</sup>Ibid.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>134</sup>Tennyson as a Religious Teacher (London: Methuen and Company, 1900), p. 201.

<sup>135</sup>To the Queen, l. 38.

the obligations of Tennyson to Malory have been over-estimated, and that, inasmuch as the traits of the ideal knight are to be found in the Arthur legend, Tennyson has done no violence to the spirit of the legend . . . .<sup>136</sup>

While Arthur is the ideal, as a real person he is as unconvincing to the reader as to Guinevere. Arthur's allegorical and symbolic function is depicted at the expense of the real man. Fausset even suggests,

Far from revealing how shameful is the sin of adultery by Lancelot's and Guinevere's love, he has persuaded us that it can under certain conditions be more beautiful and true than matrimonial complacency.<sup>137</sup>

It is true that their love in itself is generally noble, unselfish, and faithful. Fausset goes on to say, "Arthur alienates sympathy because he is too passively dignified to play the man, too morally self-complacent to assert himself when morality demands he should."<sup>138</sup>

Arthur attempts to mold Guinevere according to his own concepts, to make her will his, to set her apart as the feminine ideal. Guinevere is treated as a means to Arthur's end of fulfilling the spiritual ideal on earth, not as a unique human woman with common weaknesses and frailties. She is in some ways a real woman, not an abstraction, and possesses the desires and passions of an ordinary woman. She suffers from delusions as everybody else in the Idylls. A prime example is her mistaking Lancelot for Arthur, the

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<sup>136</sup>The Growth of the Idylls of the King (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1895), pp. 41-42.

<sup>137</sup>Tennyson, p. 261

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

misinterpretation that serves as the source of the illicit romance. Guinevere was only a girl when she left Leodogran's court. She was married to the solemn Arthur before the most beautiful of Britain's altar shrines. It is no wonder that she made her vows with drooping eyes. And then, at once, Arthur began his negotiations with the Roman ambassadors. He was completely absorbed in the affairs of his kingdom, and left the young Queen to herself and to Lancelot. Arthur seems to have been dreaming "of fame while woman wakes to love." Obviously, she thinks of him as cold and neglectful, not caring for her. So she finds the warmth, color, and love, which Arthur does not have, in Lancelot. Thus as a husband Arthur is a failure. If he had been a better husband, Guinevere might have been a more faithful wife.

However, the other side of the argument concerning the justification of the adulterous affair is more impressive and plausible. Buckley observes,

As the great and greatly human exemplars of the Order, Guinevere and Lancelot seem all beauty and all courage; but the adulterous love between them, the more culpable because necessarily furtive, partakes of ugliness, suspicion, and cowardice . . . .<sup>139</sup>

Littledale agrees, for "The grace that veils their sin does not in the least detract from its heinousness; on the contrary, 'lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.'"<sup>140</sup>

Tennyson looked on marriage, as in The Princess, as

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<sup>139</sup>Tennyson: the Growth of a Poet, p. 178.

<sup>140</sup>Essays on Idylls of the King, p. 78.

a union necessary for the stability and fulfillment of society. Sensuality or free love was "one of the worst evils, and perhaps the worst, which can inflict individual, social, and national life."<sup>141</sup> The sin of Lancelot and Guinevere, which is represented as induced by an irresistible love and maintained by faithfulness, does not completely ruin the noble elements in their characters. But we rarely see the lovers happy together. Also, their love is stained by jealousy. When in Lancelot and Elaine, she thinks she has been replaced by the lily maid, Guinevere pours forth her anger, which Lancelot recognizes as "jealous pride." Her illicit passion and her fear of discovery have produced in her a capricious and violent temperament. Instead of trusting Lancelot's love, Guinevere loses faith and shows her contempt for him by throwing aside his precious diamonds. The selfishness and pride of her rebellious love are apparent even to her lover. As Priestley comments, "Guinevere values imperfection and evil (since they are natural) above perfection and good . . . ."<sup>142</sup>

As we have seen, the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere, while not the original cause of the decay of the Round Table, is a primal cause of the ruin of Arthur's realm. What is worse, the two lovers realize the harm it does, and yet never wholeheartedly break the relationship. It is their guilt

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<sup>141</sup>Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 298.

<sup>142</sup>"Tennyson's Idylls," p. 40.

which made possible the corruption of the court by Vivien; that is, it was through their love, with all its faithfulness, that the lust of the flesh entered and destroyed the entire society. As Brooke points out:

Again and again this point is made by Tennyson. No matter how seeming fair an unlicensed love may be, no matter how faithful and how deep, it ends in opening to others the door to sensuality, which itself has no faithfulness, no depth, no enduring beauty.<sup>143</sup>

The romance of Lancelot and Guinevere has been a denial of true love. As in most of the other love affairs in the Idylls, their love has involved the complete surrender of the will, the loss of the power to choose, which Tennyson regarded as madness. In the total commitment of love, they disregarded the effect of their relationship on the world around them. Their love has been destructive, not creative. As Arthur tells Guinevere, "The children born of thee are sword and fire, / Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws."<sup>144</sup>

In exile, the Queen realizes the nature and extent of her sinfulness. Arthur forgives and blesses her, praying that they will meet and love again in heaven:

Perchance, and so thou purify thy soul,  
And so thou lean on our fair father Christ,  
Hereafter in that world where all are pure  
We two may meet before high God, and thou  
Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and know  
I am thine husband.<sup>145</sup>

Only in heaven can there be a perfect union of ideal and sense.

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<sup>143</sup>Tennyson: His Art and Relation, p. 299.

<sup>144</sup>Guinevere, l. 422.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid., l. 558.

Guinevere finally realizes that had Arthur found a faithful wife, the two of them might have refashioned the world. She is filled with sorrow for her role in the kingdom's ruin, as well as for her failure to perfect her own life by loving the highest person in it. No longer does she excuse her love for Lancelot. She admits that Arthur had every right to claim her total fidelity. Thus Guinevere puts aside the veil of romance and sees reality clearly when she says,

Ah great and gentle lord,  
Who wast, as is the conscience of a saint  
Among his warring senses, to thy knights--  
To whom my false voluptuous pride, that took  
Full easily all impressions from below,  
Would not look up, or half-despised the height  
To which I would not or I could not climb--  
I thought I could not breathe in that fine air,  
That pure severity of perfect light--  
I yearn'd for warmth and color which I found  
In Lancelot--now I see thee what thou art,  
Thou art the highest and most human too.<sup>146</sup>

Priestley argues plausibly that

A morality which merely conforms to our nature is based upon less than the highest possibility of our nature; we are most human when we transcend our ordinary selves. The ideal must not, like the ascetic ideal, be so remote that it seems obviously unattainable; nor must it, like the naturalistic ideal, be so close that it seems obviously attained.<sup>147</sup>

Ryals points out that Arthur tells Guinevere that true love,

in that it demands a transcendence of self-regard, can be an agent for good: it can become a paradigm of the love which man ought to exercise toward God. Eros becomes evil only when it is, itself, idolized.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup>Ibid., l. 633.

<sup>147</sup>"Tennyson's Idylls," 44.

<sup>148</sup>From the Great Deep, p. 124.

The following passage by Arthur expresses a conviction, we are told by Hallam Tennyson, that the poet felt very strongly:<sup>149</sup>

To love one maiden only, cleave to her,  
And worship her by years of noble deeds,  
Until they won her; for indeed I knew  
Of no more subtle master under heaven  
Than is the maiden passion for maid,  
Not only to keep down the base in man,  
But teach high thought, and amiable words  
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,  
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup>Hallam Tennyson, A Memoir, I, 249-250.

<sup>150</sup>Guinevere, l. 472.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Tennyson admired woman inordinately. He thought she can be morally better or worse than man. She is capable of greater devotion and self-sacrifice under the same conditions. We see this, on the one hand, in the faithfulness and virtue of Enid and Elaine; and, on the other, in the malice and falseness of Ettarre and Vivien. Tennyson himself wrote in a letter to Emily Sellwood that

'A good woman is a wondrous creature, cleaving to the right and the good in all change; lovely in her youthful comeliness, lovely all her life long in comeliness of heart.'<sup>1</sup>

He believed, as the poems have repeatedly shown, that one of the main tests of manhood is "the chivalrous reverence" for womanhood: "'To love one maiden only, cleave to her, / And worship her by years of noble deeds.'" His private writings confirm this view: "I would pluck my hand from a man," he remarked, "even if he wronged a woman or told her a lie."<sup>2</sup> His veneration of woman was based on his conviction that a lady of high moral character is able to bring about the spiritual redemption of man, as is the case in Maud.

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<sup>1</sup>Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memoir by His Son (2 vols.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), I, 169.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 250. 117



Despite his reverence for womanhood, Tennyson, however, adopted the conventional Victorian view that women are the weaker sex with no independent will of their own. Their proper place is the home, and maternal duty is their highest responsibility. Motherhood and following it wifehood are the appropriate roles of the opposite sex. Although in The Princess, Tennyson showed clearly that he realized the illogical bases on which the relations of the sexes rested in Victorian society, he perpetuated these fallacies in his other poems. He provided the excuse that The Princess was merely "gamesome" and a "burlesque," and was not to be taken seriously. His view of woman was essentially ambiguous.

Tennyson chose a middle ground between irreconcilable opposites. For example, in dealing with the Arthurian legend, he established two symbols of decay and disintegration. First, there is the adulterous and passionate love of Lancelot and Guinevere, abhorrent on both scores to Tennyson and his age. Secondly, the Holy Grail represents an excessive religious fanaticism which causes man to escape the responsibilities of this world. Tennyson preferred the middle ground on which a man loves a woman just passionately enough to want to marry her and, having taken her, to remain absolutely faithful forever. The necessities of physical desire are solely a means to the continuation of the home, the fundamental institution of society. A dedicated marriage frees and inspires a man to perform his work in the world.

One of the primary fallacies in Tennyson's conception

of the woman's role in a love relationship is his intense hatred of erotic passion. Tennyson refused to see the fundamental Christian truth that what God has created must be good. Why then, should that which God has created, man's physical body and its desires, be despised? As Robert Browning argues in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!" One must not be merely subjugated to the other. Love is not ultimately merely a spiritual union as Tennyson believed; it is a mingling of one's whole being with another. One can sympathize with the poet's hatred of lust, of every uncontrolled physical act in which the animal appetite overrides intelligence and moral conscience. But Tennyson carried this view so far as to relegate all erotic passion to a low level. This hatred of physical desire led him to neglect the darker and sordid side of human nature, whereby he never fully identified with the suffering and triumphs of common humanity. Unlike Browning, he could not see good in a love relationship outside marriage. This limitation was partly imposed on him by his age, but is mainly due to his own morbid fear of carnal pleasures.

It was difficult for Tennyson to contemplate even the possibility of any relationship between the sexes outside of marriage. The reflection of the outside world seen by the Lady of Shalott included "two young lovers" walking together in the moonlight, but we are at once informed that these two lovers were "lately wed." Princess Ida is urged to find love in the valley by "the azure pillars of the hearth." Trying

to emphasize the sanctity of marriage, Tennyson erred in making the relationship between Paris and the nymph Oenone a union in marriage, a bond that never existed in the Greek myth. Harold Nicolson makes the interesting observation that Tennyson even envelops the preconjugal relations of his characters in a domestic atmosphere. He observes that

The young men and women of Tennyson's stories are rarely allowed even the legitimate adventure of selection: they are pledged to each other from their childhood. In almost every case they are either closely related or have played at man and wife together in the nursery.<sup>3</sup>

Tennyson catered to the desires of the Victorian public. His conception of women as primarily mothers by the hearth caring for the children and obeying the husband's every command is typically Victorian. Critics contemporary with Tennyson thought that the poet should deal more with the moral needs of the common man, or more precisely with the middle class domestic virtues, than with the escapism of sensuous, subjective, "romantic" poetry. The practice of the moral aesthetic, a synthesis of beautiful expression and moral instruction, was considered the true calling of the Poet Laureate. Tennyson complied with the command of his people only after a long and painful inner conflict between a selfish aestheticism and an active concern in the moral welfare of man. This conflict was resolved by the poet's projection of his inner state upon the women of his poems.

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<sup>3</sup>Tennyson: Aspects of His Life, Character and Poetry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), p. 248.

These ladies are either rejected, forlorn, and mourning women, or they are proud, self-sufficient and cruel. They are not only psychological projections, but they are also objects of moral acceptance and rejection. The poet sympathizes with the forsaken maidens Mariana and Oenone, because they are without love, the ultimate reality giving purpose and meaning to life. On the other hand, he rejects the femme fatale, such as the feminine soul in "The Palace of Art," because it represents his destructive Keatsian romantic nature as shown in much of his earlier poetry. A selfish indulgence in a poetry for poetry's sake can only result in the spiritual death of the artist, because such work lacks the love and sympathy for suffering, struggling humanity. A beautiful union of sound and meaning infused with moral purpose was desired by the Victorian public. Purged of his inner conflict between aestheticism and morality by means of psychological projections upon women, the poet succeeded in emerging from the "romantic" Tennyson to the "Victorian" Tennyson, thereby fulfilling the expectation of his contemporaries.

The question concerning Tennyson's success in portraying individualized, dramatic entities is important. Rarely does he satisfactorily delineate a flesh and blood feminine figure. As has been pointed out, many of the women are either lifeless painted portraits of Victorian ladies or they are allegorical representations. Tennyson comes closest to the full development of dramatic characters in the Idylls.

Enid, Vivien, Guinevere, and, above all, Elaine impress one as real persons, not merely allegorical figures. However, these ladies (with maybe the exception of Elaine) carry an allegorical significance that overshadows the living person. Even in the Idylls Tennyson seems more interested in praising virtues and condemning vices than in depicting developed human beings who provide the illusion of actually being alive.

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