Path to chaos: excess, absence and anarchy in Tennyson's Idylls of the King

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THE PATH TO CHAOS: EXCESS, ABSENCE AND ANARCHY IN TENNYSON'S IDYLLS OF THE KING

BY

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B.A. Washington College, 1979

THESIS

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Citations from the *Idylls of the King* are presented in parentheses immediately following the quotation and are abbreviated as follows:

"The Coming of Arthur" CA
"Gareth and Lynette" GL
"The Marriage of Geraint" MG
"Geraint and Enid" GE
"Balin and Balan" BB
"Merlin and Vivien" MV
"Lancelot and Elaine" LE
"The Holy Graill" HG
"Pelleas and Ettarre" PE
"The Last Tournament" LT
"Guinevere" G
"The Passing of Arthur" PA
I. "HE WHO SPEAKS THE TALE":

TENNYS ON, SEXUAL POLITICS AND THE CRITICAL COMMUNITY

Alfred, Lord Tennyson has been described as the quintessential Victorian Laureate, the "Poet of the People," whose program, in the eyes of many nineteenth-century English patriots, had as its focus a "national cultural unity" (Jordan 5). Supremely popular with the public of his own time, Tennyson was never immune to criticism and became a primary critical target during the first few decades of this century, his disfavor encapsulated in such comments as those of Harold Nicolson, who scornfully asserted that the poet "was intended to be a subjective poet, and was forced by circumstances into fifty years of unnatural objectivity ... [subordinating] the lyrical to the instructional ... his poetry thereby [losing] one half of its potential value" (595).

The poetry of the Victorian era has conventionally been misprized as transitional and secondary to the Romantic and Modern periods, and Tennyson, as the premier representative of the period, has become the target of a vast critical bombardment. One of the best among Tennyson's biographers, Elaine Jordan, decries this fact in her observation that [Tennyson's] "stature as a major poet has always been in question, and peculiarly vulnerable to mockery" (12), while seminal Tennyson scholar John D. Rosenberg has pointed to artistically biased assessments of Tennyson's poetry by such Modernists as Eliot and Auden, along with "deliberate distortions of literary history," as fueling general anti-Victorian and particularly anti-Tennysonian sentiment (1-7).
One manifestation of this critical offensive has been its concentration on the cultural/political programme advocated in Tennyson's poetry. In her recent essay, "Tennyson's Gender Politics," Linda Shires points out that Tennyson, on the one hand, has been demonized by feminist critics for his support of Victorian hegemony, while on the other, his poetry has been criticized by traditionalists as not being masculine enough (61-2).

Indeed, in her early feminist evaluation of Victorian literature, Kate Millet disparaged Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, which is the focus of this study, as an escapist "romance ... a feudal asylum where he could deal with the failure of marriage and the wearying perils of sexuality" (203). Millet's approach, which concentrated on the dichotomous female characterizations of the 1859 *Idylls*, labeled "The True and the False," distilled "Elaine" and "Guinevere" to a "Lily vs. Rose" binary opposition, and became the model for many future feminist readings of Tennyson. This dichotomous interpretation of the first *Idylls* may at first glance seem valid; yet the Tennyson of 1859 is not the poet of later years who eventually incorporated them into what became the final version of *Idylls of the King*. An awareness of Tennyson's poetic evolution is vital to this reading of the *Idylls* and is directly related to the question of intentionality, which is examined below; both will be explored in relation to various aspects of the poem at points throughout the entirety of this discussion.

The mature Tennyson ultimately forged a final product from this early, experimental ore, to create, finally, a uniquely complex poem dominated by an accretive and painterly symbolic system of impressive sophistication. These early, formative
idylls, with their initial, simplistic tag of the "the True and the False," happily became segments of a whole which is substantially more than the sum of its parts, the achievement of which is only now being fully acknowledged. Yet Millet dismissed the whole of what she defined as "the [Victorian] chivalrous school," with Tennyson at the forefront, damning it and him as "deeply anti-revolutionary and conservative [and therefore] utterly unproductive" (178).

Conversely, historian Mark Girouard's observation that Tennyson was reprimanded both in his own time and later for "turning Malory's king and knights into pattern Victorian gentlemen" (184) is borne out by such comments as those of Tennyson's contemporary, A. C. Swinburne, who railed against the work, calling it the "Morte d'Albert," and saying of Tennyson's Arthur: "such a man as this king is indeed hardly 'man at all'; either fool or coward he must surely be" (qtd in Jump 319). Taking this line of reasoning to its ultimate conclusion, Elliot L. Gilbert, in his landmark essay of 1983, "The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse" (a title which speaks volumes), described the Arthur of the Idylls as a "restrained, almost maidenly Victorian monarch ... a species of female king ... [who] rejects the stability of patrilineal descent and seeks instead to derive his authority from himself, [relying] on the idealization of nature and female energy" (863-875). Thus this vapid, effeminate Arthur denies the primacy of his-story, rejects virility, and thereby subverts order (Gilbert 875-876).

In her observation concerning Tennyson criticism, Shires shares much with Isobel Armstrong, who, in her penetrating essay "Re-reading Victorian Poetry," points first to Alin Sinfield's 1986 Marxist biography Alfred Tennyson and then to Eve
Sedgwick's feminist treatment of *The Princess* as examples of brilliantly devised and argued, yet narrowly programmatic criticism which ignore or "[exclude the ambiguity inherent in Tennyson] ... or [stay] with those elements of ambiguity which corroborate [their cases]" (126-127). Armstrong also asserts that, in order to pigeonhole the poet as a political reactionary, Sinfield "must give a poem a particular historical meaning even when it appears to be struggling against [that particular stance]" (127). Further, although Sedgwick convincingly explodes the purportedly feminist agenda of *The Princess*, in Armstrong's view, "she [deconstructs] the poem ... by the introduction of a very narrow form of intentionality" (127).

This restrictive approach denies the poem as an accretion of a variety of contending processes and ideas and assumes a position which Mary Poovey, much in agreement with Armstrong, warns against in the introductory chapter to *Uneven Developments*, "The Ideological Work of Gender":

causation is never unidirectional ... the kind of linear narrative that many literary critics and historians employ necessarily obscures the critical complexity of social relations ... [further]
one of the effects of any ideology is to obscure the conditions of its own production. (18)

Poovey is here simultaneously commenting upon the Victorian production of propagandist imagery and upon modern critical practice, and she echoes the issue with which Armstrong is so absorbed, that is, whether what the poet "meant" can, or should, be evaluated within a deliberately restricted ideological framework. In response
Armstrong declares that rather than reduce the text through concentration upon a solitary ideological kernel, which is then restrictively and somewhat artificially extrapolated, the text must be seen "as a complex entity defining and participating in an area of struggle and contention." This, she further states, makes "intentionality a much wider and more complex affair" ("Re-reading Victorian Poetry" 128).

To single-mindedly select and concentrate upon only those aspects of a text which support one's own ideological assertions, while having become standard critical practice, is unfair to that text and ignores the fact that the various critical ideologies and their respective methodologies are as much cultural / social constructs as are the texts which they evaluate.

An awareness of the many ambiguities, ideological and otherwise, that are inherent in literature in general and are peculiarly so to poetry, must be constantly maintained by the scholar; further, it is the particularly paradoxical nature of Tennyson's poetry which lends his work its power. This ambiguity, as it is embodied in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, provides the rationale for this study.

A vital aspect of the Tennysonian "ambiguity" which Armstrong, Shires and many other critics would draw our attention to was pointed up, early on and with great insight, by critic Terry Eagleton, who in a 1978 essay called "Tennyson: Politics & Sexuality in 'The Princess' and 'In Memoriam'" asserted that here was an intensely "private lyricist" whose "poetic text [became] the repository of those 'feminine' elements expelled by the crass 'masculinity' of the dominant utilitarian ideology," however "bound by the 'masculine' propositional discourses of that ideology" (99).
Of the fact that Tennyson, as Poet Laureate of England, was "bound by the 'masculine' propositional discourses" of the "dominant utilitarian ideology," there can be no doubt; that he harbored a great deal of ambivalence concerning Victorian hegemony has become, as a result of the recent rash of new historical and ideologically-driven studies of the poet (such as those by Sinfield, Sedgwick and Linley mentioned here), equally clear. Tennyson's mid-century masterwork, *The Princess*, the generator of Eagleton's observation, along with the earlier "The Lady of Shalott" and the later *Idylls*, form the hub of the ongoing critical dialogue concerning the poet's role in Victorian sexual politics. *The Princess* is particularly pertinent here because it is so revealing of the paradoxical nature of, and the ambiguities which are inherent to, his canon.

Tennyson's first Arthurian experiment, "The Lady of Shalott," which Armstrong, in her 1988 essay "Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott': Victorian Mythography and the Politics of Narcissism," describes as "present[ing] images of almost laminated brilliance and precision which are at the same time absolutely arcane and enigmatic," has, since its first publication in 1832, been the subject of a vast amount of critical attention (49). The poem's marked, deliberately concocted ambiguity, "the strategy of which," Armstrong states, is "itself a form of signification," makes it an important predecessor to *Idylls of the King* (50). The myth-making strategy of "The Lady of Shalott" represents a vital point on the line which traverses Tennyson's symbolist / philosophical development and will, in the discussion which is yet to come, serve as a key to the *Idylls*. 
The farcical *Princess* is an equally important predecessor, in its calculated ambiguity, in its pseudo-Gothic setting and in its concern with the Victorian "Woman Question," to the stately and solemn *Idylls*. Moreover, both poems have in the past been criticized as examples of mere Victorian feudalist escapism. Yet *The Princess* was taken quite seriously as an examination of feminist issues in its own time, and F. E. L. Priestley was correct in his assertion, made as long ago as 1947, that the *Idylls* "are so far from being an escape that they represent one of Tennyson's most earnest and important efforts to deal with the major problems of his time" (634).

With its battle-of-the-sexes theme, its reversal of gender roles, its promotion of androgyny, and, as Carol Christ notes, its "concern with the restrictiveness of both masculine and feminine sexual roles" ("Victorian Masculinity" 155), *The Princess*, along with *Idylls*, has provided much grist for the critical mill in recent times. Elaine Jordan describes *The Princess* as "a hermaphrodite among poems, a thing that doesn't fit into any category" (83); while Marion Shaw categorizes the poem as the "most comprehensive" among a group of mid-nineteenth-century works, including Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Barrett's *Aurora Leigh*, that present strong, intellectually adept female heroes who abdicate, in favor of marriage, their positions as independent, unmarried women (*Alfred Lord Tennyson* 42).

In keeping with the view first espoused by Millet, Shaw further sees the poem as a study in fear, the fear that a self-sufficient womankind will no longer find it appealing or necessary to provide nurture or offspring to mankind. There is a great deal of validity to this view, which holds that *The Princess* is:
[marked by] an acute anxiety concerning male sexual needs and definitions. On ... its surface ... the poem not unsympathetically states women's educational demands and appears to effect a liberal compromise between these demands and the requirements of marriage and maternity. But ... the poem takes fright at its own daring and turns away from the logical pursuit of its argument ...

[The poem] is about saving man from death, from the death of his manhood in literal sexual terms, and also from the death of his function, powers and self-image as a man. It is a strategy for survival. (Alfred Lord Tennyson 42-43)

The many notable feminist critics of the poem, among them Shaw, Millet, Rogers and Sedgwick, are correct in their collective opinion, as summarized by Carol Christ, that on one level it represents "an attempt to preserve true womanhood [as defined by man] in reaction to the threat of feminine emancipation" ("Victorian Masculinity" 156). Yet, one must not dismiss the undercutting, culturally subverting component inherent in the poem's depiction of an impressively strong, capable princess, set in opposition to a passive, effeminate prince. Further, the reactionary stance which eventually emerges in the poem is countered by the fact that, as Christ makes clear, Tennyson seems equally concerned with the feminization of men and the feminization of women. His concern suggests that "... he idealizes certain feminine postures, not merely because he wants to keep women in their place, but because he finds such postures so attractive himself" ("Victorian Masculinity" 156).
While Shaw is correct in her assertion that one of the text's programs is the promotion of Victorian masculine hegemony through man's employment of weapons new to him, namely, "sentimentality, weakness and dependency" (Alfred Lord Tennyson 43), the poem also clearly reveals Tennyson's awareness, the result of firsthand experience gained through the witnessing of his mother's perseverance in the face of his father's violent alcoholism, of both the plight of Victorian women and the need for a fundamental change within the cultural paradigm. He simply was not quite sure what this "change" would or should eventually encompass. Further, while Tennyson endorsed gradual, rather than immediate change, *The Princess*, however ultimately unsuccessful in its quest, does represent a distinct effort to present some kind of possible resolution to one of the foremost issues of the era. Jordan notes that

[when] Tennyson began work on *The Princess* in 1839 this would seem like a very early entry into [feminist] debates for someone of his class, with family connections to the established church, law and politics. Undoubtedly his sensitivity to his mother's experience influenced him. (89)

That Tennyson did not recognize or support absolute suffrage for women was hardly unusual at the time *The Princess* was produced. Shaw mentions that "[w]hen Harriet Taylor asked in 1851 'why the existence of one-half the species should be merely ancillary to that of the other--why each woman should be a mere appendage to a man,' she was questioning assumptions that few individuals, even those who ardently supported the women's cause had doubted" (41).
One layer of Tennysonian ambiguity which Armstrong, Eagleton and others have noted has been defined by Christ as "a pattern of feminine identification ... [which demonstrates] 'an ambivalence toward masculine action and an idealization of woman's purity with an ambivalence toward masculine sexuality" (152). Shaw has further identified this as what she calls Tennyson's "poetic transvestitism," and the degree to which this "ambivalence" colors his work renders Tennyson's own agenda, political or personal, elusive, if compelling.

To call for the "feminization of men," as Tennyson did, in an age increasingly dominated by a manly ideal, the predominant characteristic of which was a stoic, if refined, virility (Banner 261), and the possessor of which, ironically, would ideally live in perfect harmony with his "'angel in the house' ... 'who could create a sanctuary ... 'from the anxieties of modern life" (Christ, "Victorian Masculinity" 146), was to directly countermand that masculine ideal.

Indeed, The Princess treats the "man's man" satirically in the character of the Prince's father: he, in his misguided destructiveness, declares "Man is the hunter; woman is his game ... We hunt them for the beauty of their skins / they love us for it, and we ride them down" (V: 147-50). Tennyson deliberately paints a ridiculous picture of the old, now defunct garde, countering it with the positive, if effeminate, sensitivity of the Prince, who is ever at odds with his father.

That masculine aggression, lust and greed -- this last a direct comment on middle class materialism -- should be perceived as generally undesirable traits, inappropriate within the new paradigm of male / female relationships, was quite a radical assertion
considering the highly entrenched mores of mid-century England. This rejection of the traditional masculine role, coupled with the poem's portrait of the extremes of feminist intellectualism, embodied by the Princess's companion Blanche, prefigures Tennyson's call to vigilance in the *Idylls* concerning extremes of human behavior.

Equally as radical as Tennyson's rejection of the male as naturally aggressive is his turning in *The Princess*, as Jordan notes, "from myths to explore ... the relation of sexual desire to the aspirations of the nineteenth-century woman" (82). She further states that as a result of

> the [Victorian] idealization of women, the equation of sensuality with filthiness, and the unease about the aggressiveness of taking the initiative, [acknowledgment of the normalcy of feminine desire was] terribly problematic for poets like Tennyson. (102)

This question was to be more fully explored in the mature *Idylls*, wherein the expression of Guinevere's healthy sexuality is transformed as a result of the inattentive asexuality of Arthur -- himself an evocation of the "Victorian gentleman" -- into tragically adulterous activities. What had begun, perhaps, just as Millet has said, as the simplistic, reductive condemnation of adultery in the early "True and False" idylls had, by the time the final version went to print, become a complex commentary on the nature of marital responsibility, and Guinevere is not ultimately the one found lacking--not by the reader, nor, one must assume, by the poet, who labored over this "area of struggle and contention" in this, his masterwork, for fully the last half of the nineteenth century.
The Princess, then, portions of which display a degree of satiric savvy only rarely seen in Tennyson, reveals the still youthful poet's versatility, his intellectualism, and his willingness to experiment not only with form, structure, style and genre, but with tone, characterization and ideological stance, through what modern critics have dubbed "subtext." And while a number of modern critics would have Tennyson in possession of an intellectually stilted, ideologically simplistic, purely lyrical genius, there is an opposing contingent that credits Tennyson with a progressive social awareness and a marked ideological openness.

So, on the one hand, Sedgwick suggests that Tennyson had no conception of the "potentially subversive" nature of his text; she describes his genius as the ability "to light on the tired, moderate, unconscious ideologies of his time and class," stating that The Princess constitutes "one of the age's definitive articulations of the cult of the angel in the house" (120).

On the other hand, Jordan, who is much kinder to Tennyson in her evaluation of his position on sexual politics, points out with great insight that "because The Princess is not a restrictive poem it raises problems about open-mindedness and evasion, about ambivalence as indecision or as negotiating real difficulties"; finally, she rightly praises the poem for its courageous "attentive[ness] to different voices" (105).

As has been stressed, Armstrong's assertion that the text must be "seen as a complex entity defining and participating in an area of struggle and contention" ("Re-reading Victorian Poetry" 128) is of central importance here, since each of these often contending stances possesses a certain validity within the context of their
respective critical positions. Armstrong's statement suggests that there is no single Tennysonian ideological stance; indeed, the ambiguity inherent in his work does, as she suggests, make intentionality a supremely difficult issue.

Rather than applying a polar, single-faceted ideological model to the poet, one must be willing to see him as multifaceted, indeed, as many "Tennysons." Viewed in this way, one must concede the concurrent progressive and conservative components of his canon, and see them, rather than as mutually exclusive, competing elements, as mosaic tesserae which, when conjoined, lend the text its paradoxical brilliance as a "complex entity."

There is, as has been suggested, a progression in complexity from The Princess to the final Idylls of the King in theme, characterization, imagery and sociopolitical stance. This progression prevents Tennyson, who, by the time of the latter poem was at the height of his great lyric and symbolic power and also of his ambivalence toward Victorian conceptions of masculinity and sexuality, from being easily pigeonholed as a patriarchal "crusader" for Victorian hegemony. Further, as we shall see, Idylls of the King does not, ultimately, present as unassailable the idea that perfection flows from Victorian morality: the moral Arthur fails in his fight to instill domestic values, as he does in his quest to maintain a unified kingdom, and not primarily because of the inherently flawed human beings over whom he rules.

Rather, in the final, most highly evolved version of Idylls of the King, the Victorian domestic model itself, with its feminine-angelic / masculine-heroic complements, is ultimately rejected as an attractive, yet sterile and unattainable myth,
even while the impossibility of its realization is mourned. In this sense, *Idylls of the King* is "about" the apocalyptic clash of two incompatible ethical systems. Tennyson deliberately manipulates the preexisting, romantic conceptual model of Arthurian legend to expose the flaws inherent in the rigid, idealistic Victorian moral system, while suggesting the substitution of an attainable, much more humane, and human, order.
II. "A BROKEN CHANCEL WITH A BROKEN CROSS":

TENNYSON, DISILLUSIONMENT AND THE ABSENCE OF THE KING

When reading *Idylls of the King*, one would do well to keep in mind Karen Hodder's observation that

art actively defies formulation .. [and in this lies] the essential uniqueness of each individual work ... art is served less well by disambiguating imagery than it is by creating [what Elaine Showalter has called] 'multiple perspectives.' (83)

The complexity of Tennyson's *Idylls*, with its appropriation and remaking of the Arthurian paradigm, is prodigiously labyrinthine: not only must a path be cleared through a forest of intratextual, intertextual, and historical associations, but the character of Arthur itself consists of "multiple perspectives" that shift, shudder, and at a number of crucial points, render unstable the purported ideological construct of which he is the primary component.

To reiterate, Tennyson seems to have been about the business of exploding a number of elements of the Victorian paradigm, among them, those of the virile, stoic hero, and that of the hearth, with its attendant national homage to "Woman's Sphere."

The simultaneous myth-making / myth-exploding strategy of the *Idylls* is akin to that of the poet's earliest medieval experiment, "The Lady of Shalott," concerning which Isobel Armstrong has stated:
This is an un-innocent, sophisticated poem, which ... studies to create a form which, as Ruskin was later to say, appears not to know its own meaning... Its strategy is to be opaque, proffering and evading interpretation simultaneously, so that the strategy itself becomes a form of signification.

("Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott'" 50)

As is true of the earlier poem, the myth-manipulating strategy of the Idylls was also originally hoped by Tennyson "to make myth the bearer of a healing, conserving social integration (which is itself a myth) through the organic continuity and wholeness of communal national legend" ("Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott'" 52). As with "The Lady of Shalott," one must attempt in treating the Idylls to "evolve a reading which, while it does not 'crack' the poem, nevertheless elicits a complex of (often contradictory) projects" (51).

*Idylls of the King* is, to an even higher degree than "The Lady of Shalott," a poem of studied opacity, of calculated ambiguity, of paradox deliberately forged. Tennyson's masterwork suggests, through its simultaneous glorification and questioning of heroic myth, the possibility that the path to "highest and most human too" lies in a different, as yet unconsidered, direction, and one necessarily more compatible with modern sensibilities. Tennyson's Arthur is presented, while in many ways as an admirable, heroic figure, as also a conflicted, distant one.

In short, the poet's Arthur is at one and the same time the Romantic hero taken to his apocalyptic extreme: angst-ridden, obsessed with delusions about the "great world,"
about love and about Woman, ultimately becoming disillusioned and suicidal. He is also the Victorian feminized gentleman at his most ineffectual: sexually and spiritually conflicted, displaced as master of his lady and his castle and, significantly, often absent emotionally or physically at crucial points in the narrative.

This last component of the Arthur given us in the *Idylls* seems particularly valid in light of Tennyson's personal history, considering the nature of his childhood experience, which, as so eloquently described by Robert Bernard Martin in *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart*, was marked by contention with the previously mentioned "pattern of [his father's] vehement anger and subsequent forgetfulness," which caused a great mental "confusion ... [and] deterioration ... epileptic in origin, possibly complicated by heart troubles, and certainly aggravated by alcoholism" (40-41). At turns charming, domineering and often "drinking heavily ... and ... threatening physical violence to his family," Dr. Tennyson's behavior was marked by a *terribilita* which provided the tenor of the family's interrelations.

The kind of Freudian inquiry made concerning what U. C. Knoepflmacher, in his recent "Idling in Gardens of the Queen: Tennyson's Boys, Princes, and Kings," has described as "the importance [the *Idylls*] places on a relationship that prefigures all adult intercourse between the sexes, namely between ... a male child ... and its mother" (343), while not of primary concern here, is of interest. It seems likely that the poet's depiction of a well-meaning, but misguided, ineffectual protagonist was equally determined by the harsh reality of his father's erratic, often violent behavior and by his mother's perseverance in the face that behavior. This behavior was so severe, that,
according to Charles Ricks, Tennyson's father came "near to depriving his wife and children too of almost every enjoyment of life" (25). This fact, combined with his mother's strong attempts at familial leadership (fearing for her family's safety, Mrs. Tennyson left the poet's father in 1829, an action not often undertaken by Victorian wives) sounded the tenor of the poet's formative years (Ricks 29).

Not to belabor the point, what might currently be called the "dysfunctional" quality of Tennyson's family life certainly provides a clue to the complex rationale behind his ambivalent characterization of Arthur. Further, his mother's strength and compassion in response to his father's long illness goes far to explain Tennyson's conception in the *Idylls* of a Christianity necessarily grounded in feminine spirituality and nurturing. This spirituality is personified by the ubiquitous Lady of the Lake, along with the "three fair queens," who in "The Coming of Arthur" are illuminated by "three rays" of "flame colour, vert and azure," and who, "gazing on him, tall, with bright / Sweet faces ... will help him at his need" (274-278).

Indeed, Tennyson's depictions of what is, finally, an ineffectual, feminized Arthur, a powerful, Christlike Lady of the Lake, a feminized, weak-willed, easily seduced (rather than being the seducer) Merlin, a Balin doomed by his own "violences" rather than by a magically cursed sword, along with many other characters and situations of the *Idylls* radically altered from the Malorian version, reveals clearly the extent to which the poet was wrestling with and, in many ways deliberately subverting the traditional masculine / feminine, active / passive dichotomies. As Armstrong has said of "The Lady of Shalott," Tennyson is here also playing a "game with paradigms [which]
suggests that the poem is about binary opposition rather than being an expression of it” ("Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" 71).

This "game" has become, by the time of the final version of the *Idylls of the King*, a desperate effort at "breaking patterns and ... overcoming oppositional structures ... through the refiguring of myth ... which is intended to move beyond the tyranny of the closed world" (Armstrong, "Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott'" 71). Tennyson's presentation of Arthur as both maidenly and as "the great Son of Glory" (GL 22), as the "King of Fools" and as the supercilious, wronged husband, confirms the degree to which Tennyson's concern was the "refiguring of myth." In these and a vast number of other choices, it becomes apparent that the "complex entity" of the *Idylls* represents the poet's efforts at "participating in an area of struggle and contention," as Armstrong has asserted in regard to Tennyson's overall canon (Armstrong, "Re-reading Victorian Poetry" 128).

Armstrong's insight into the poet's struggle to transcend "the tyranny of the closed world" ("Tennyson's 'Lady of Shallot'" 71), along with Hodder's praising of the "disambiguating [of] imagery" (83), seem particularly valid in relation to the central female characters of the *Idylls*, since each proves, finally, to be much more than that which she initially appears to be when locked within the narrow dichotomy of the "True and the False." Indeed, the various aspects of "image"--internal fidelity or infidelity to external appearance, the nature of illusion and the reflexive nature of delusion, of "name and fame"--are different facets of this, one of the poem's central themes.

Further, the various aspects of myth and the "multiple perspectives" that these female characters represent and present are inextricably entwined with the
ambiguity-laden Arthur / Camelot construct, and are defined by the position which each character occupies, so to speak, at any given time in relation to, or within, this construct. Thus it is important to first examine the characteristics of Arthur / Camelot, and the implications of Tennyson's treatment of this model, before moving on to any discussion of specific female characters and that of the general treatment of the "feminine" in the Idylls. Arthur's kingdom, centered in the illusions of political and domestic order, is laid low by the monarch's singularly unachievable aspirations for humankind. For, as James Rosenberg has observed, the poem

is not only explicitly and constantly about the hazards of mistaking illusion for reality; it *dramatically enacts* those dangers, ensnaring the reader in the same delusions that maim and destroy its characters. Nothing in the poem is as it seems, and nothing seems to be what it is, with the possible exception of Arthur, who may himself be the most dangerous of the illusions, the *homme fatal* of the Idylls. (10)

Arthur's role as the poem's "homme fatal," which represents for Tennyson a reversal of the predominant *femme fatal* construct, and the King's centrality to the collapse of his kingdom is inescapable, since it is his attendant construct or vision on which the supreme illusion of Camelot depends.

Arthur's culpability rests not, as Gilbert has asserted, on the fact that his "kingly mission is ultimately self-authorized ... by that part of himself which [is] ahistorical [and] ... distinctly female" (869), since it is not Arthur himself, but the cosmic Power
represented by the Lady of the Lake, ageless guardian of the sword of power, Excalibur, and by the sage Merlin, which, sanctioned by the people, "authorizes" his reign.

Rather, the King, in attempting to serve two irreconcilable systems, that of, to employ Eagleton's phrase, the "masculine propositional discourse" along with that of the "matriarchal psyche," is never fully "present," for, or committed, to either. Arthur is a man / god divided; he is thus diminished in his effectiveness as either. The King, as the text's defining mythological component, ultimately represents the impossibility of any attempt to unify the patriarchal violence-embracing and the matriarchal nurture-embracing models within a transcendent paradigm.

The hope that Tennyson's own culture might transcend its compartmentalized, restrictive worldview--"the tyranny of the closed world"--is, as has been suggested in regard to both "The Lady of Shalott" and the markedly more lighthearted The Princess, one of his recurrent motifs and must be interpreted as a predominant concern in the Idylls. Yet the poet's view of history, as David Shaw has pointed out in The Lucid Veil, is also informed by Hegel's historical dialectic, with its cyclic vision and its view that heroes arise from the historical situation into which they are thrust. Hegel was in England during the late Victorian era and Tennyson was particularly familiar with his 1857 Lectures on the Philosophy of History (Shaw 50). This is a fact which is important to an understanding of the Idylls, for, as the poet asserted, the poem is concerned not merely with one generation, but with "a whole cycle of generations," (qtd in Rosenberg, 34).
Shaw's conclusion that the *Idylls* reflects Hegel's belief in "a Brahmanic absorption of the individual into the ... void [and] 'remains ... a poem in which time is still unfilled by meaning" is telling (268). The *Idylls of the King* clearly reveals the poet's conviction that transcendence of humanity's baser nature was not to occur during his own day. The vast, cyclic time-space continuum presented in the *Idylls* suggests a humanity repeatedly rising up and "reeling back into the beast," achieving, by degrees, a higher awareness.

As Rosenberg has pointed out, "from [Tennyson's] cyclic perspective, man's reeling back into the beast is both monstrous and natural. The Round Table is founded to arrest this process, and it succeeds only "'for a space'" (37).

Read from this perspective, the *Idylls* represents Tennyson's final disillusionment with the hypocrisies and contradictions of nineteenth-century culture, a discontent which, as stated by his grandson Sir Charles Tennyson in his *Memoirs*, manifested itself as an "obsess[ion with] the thought that the world was standing on the brink of a revolution such as had never been seen before--'a last dim battle in the West' which, if it came, would be world wide." (qtd. in Rosenberg, 36)

That Tennyson saw this "last dim battle in the West" centering around what James E. Adams has called "the underlying discursive categor[ies] that underwrite the coherence and stability of the existing cultural order" is singularly apparent in the *Idylls*, which suggests, through the catastrophic absence of such stability, no remedy other than a complete shifting of the cultural kaleidoscope. Nothing less than a complete reworking
of the questions of spiritual and temporal authority, of the masculine and the feminine, of sexuality and violence, would suffice.

As Armstrong has said of "The Lady of Shalott," the *Idylls* "is involved in the collapse of the conservative myth of myth ... [and further,] the meaning of myth [itself] becomes the site of conflict between conservation and change" (52). But whereas at the time of the production of the earlier poem, Tennyson had been idealistic, "longing for a culture in unity with itself," with the artist wisely, intuitively pointing out the way, by the time of the final version of the *Idylls*, he was no longer so sure.

Thus the *Idylls* raises the dual possibilities of cultural transcendence and of obliteration; the old path leads to chaos, while the new is yet to be forged. He suggests, through the failure of the Arthurian paradigm, that the new ethics must emerge from the individual, that is, from within the self. Arthur's ethical system must finally be seen as unstable and illusory, imposed as it is from without.

It is in fathoming this that Arthur has failed, as is clarified in his opening speech of "The Passing of Arthur":

'I found Him in the shining of the stars,  
I mark'd Him in the flowering of His fields,  
But in His ways with men I find Him not.  
I waged His wars, and now I pass and die.  
O me! for why is all around us here  
As if some lesser god had made the world,  
But had not force to shape it as he would,
Till the High God behold it from beyond,
And enter it, and make it beautiful? (9-17)

The King's unreliability as a temporal power, his inaccessibility, is pointed up
time and again. He is repeatedly described as being vaporous, ghostlike, dreamlike, of
mysterious origin. Excalibur, that mark of Arthur's authority granted early on by the
inscrutable Lady of the Lake, bears upon it the inscription, "Cast me away," a simple
phrase carrying within it, here at the beginning, the seeds of his absence. Guinevere's
father, Leodegran, seeking proof of Arthur's authority, dreams of

... a slope of land that ever grew,
Field after field, up to a height, the peak
Haze-hidden, and thereon a phantom king,
Now looming, and now lost ... (426-430).

As David Goslee has said, "[w]hat can this dream foreshadow except the fatal
incompatibility of Arthur with his realm?" (212). Compounding the phantasmal effect,
the tortured Guinevere last sees:

The Dragon of the great Pendragonship
Blaze, making all the night a steam of fire.
And even then he turn'd; and more and more
The moony vapour rolling round the King,
Who seemed the phantom of a Giant in it,
Enwound him fold by fold, and made him gray...
Before her, moving ghostlike to his doom. (G 594-601)
Finally, Arthur has become a phantom even to himself, wailing his confession to a disheartened Bedivere: "... on my heart hath fall'n / Confusion, till I know not what I am, / Nor whence I am, nor whether I be King. / Behold, I seem but King among the dead"

(Ph 143-146).

As Ian McGuire has suggested in "Epistemology and Empire in Idylls of the King," "the Idylls represents a search "for the essential, objective 'truth' of British imperial power ... it is the essential founding mythology ... which must be rediscovered if it is to survive" (391). So, one of the primary issues raised in the Idylls is the fundamental nature of authority, as regards the spirit, the state and the the individual.

In terms of the question of the King's authority, of the "authorization of [Arthur's] reign," it is the people themselves, with their attendant prophets, who transmit the opposing versions of his origin, and it is they who confirm his authority. The two versions of his coming represent contending ideologies, and the depiction of these two belief systems is central to the Idylls.

These are "opposing versions," since the first tale of his birth represents the traditional, earth-bound tale of male violence and acquisition, symbolically, told by Bedivere, "the first of all his knights / Knighted by Arthur at his crowning," wherein Arthur's father, Uther, forces himself sexually upon Ygerne, the object of his lust:

But she, a stainless wife to Gorlois,
So loathed the bright dishonor of his love,
That Gorlois and King Uther went to war:
And overthrown was Gorlois and slain.
Then Uther in his wrath and heat besieged
Ygerne within Tintagil...

So, compass'd by the power of the King,
Enforced she was to wed him in her tears,
And with a shameful swiftness... (CA 193-204)

The second represents the matriarchally-transmitted version of Arthur's appearance, since the teller at this point is Bellicent, Arthur's sister and daughter to Ygerne, a point that is itself heavily laden with symbolic import. Just as Bedivere represents the authority of the violence-defined, exoteric, and empirically-based power of the warrior Order, with its "male propositional discourse," Bellicent, along with the seers Bleys and Merlin, represents the peace-seeking, esoteric, intuitive, feminine complex, with its accompanying egalitarian discourse.

Bellicent reveals that on "a night / In which the bounds of heaven and earth were lost," Bleys and Merlin had seen the coming of the child Arthur "clothed in fire," and delivered by

... a ship, the shape thereof
A dragon wing'd and all from stem to stern
Bright with a shining people on the decks,
And gone as soon as seen." (CA 370-390)

Here, Bellicent's uplifting, mythologized and egalitarian phrase "shining people" (CA 389), is set up as an alternative to Bedivere's passionate, empirical and aristocratic "power of the King" (CA 202). Arthur, in his untenable position as the representative of
both, and thus of neither, of these paradigms, is bereft of the veracity to uphold either of them.

It is in this, the impossibility of Arthur's mission to create a bridge between the two, that his power is undercut and he is rendered unable to direct the members of the Round Table effectively. His quest is impossible because the first path is grounded in violence while the other is rooted in peace; they are mutually exclusive philosophies. Ultimately, as David Goslee has said, "he can no longer bind [his knights], as he boasts of having done in "Guinevere" (208). This failure, marked by his entrapment within his own illusion, is ultimately Arthur's defining characteristic; like Oedipus and Lear, his blindness seals his doom along with that of his kingdom. His nobility as a character arises from his constant striving for attainment of the ideal in spite of the temporal impossibility of his vision.

Since this mythological set that "the King" composes serves as the hub of the wheel around which the accompanying characters' "spokes" revolve, and since the mettle/metal of this hub is compromised, all action is dependent upon his presence or absence in relation to the other characters. This is true in terms of both "Arthur-as-illusion" or as ideal--as "the Once and Future King" and what that signifies--as well as in terms of his actual stated presence or absence as a character within a scene. It would be incorrect to say that each of the other characters is set up in opposition to Arthur; rather, each operates within a circle of activity or development which is circumscribed by this hub, who is, to re-employ Rosenberg's phrase, "the most dangerous of illusions, the homme
fatal of the Idylls," that is, underneath the surface ethical system lies a core of violence and an abdication of self-responsibility.

All "meaning" in the poem flows from out this truth since what Tennyson seems very much concerned with here is nothing less than exploding the "hero" construct and revealing its underlying root, which is violence. Arthur's methods are at odds with the spiritual vision which is his end; as Marion Shaw puts it, "although Tennyson ... solve[s] the narrative problem of a passive hero by devolving the action onto the knights, the ideas on which that action is based--to do the King's will and to be more like him--are incompatible" (93).

In describing what he calls this "moral paradox," Ryals has pointed to the fact that:

Arthur must ... impose his authority by force ... [and] bind his knights to his will by 'so straight vows to himself [that] ... he creates the condition which causes guilt and madness throughout his Order. As Tennyson said, 'Take away the sense of individual responsibility and men sink into madness.' By volitional violation Arthur creates the necessity for emotional dependency: being not themselves but pale facsimiles of the King, his knights must depend ... on someone or something for emotional satisfaction ... Lancelot's and Guinevere's sin is thus ... not the cause but the symptom of what is wrong in Camelot ... the paradox of Arthur ... [is that] his will simultaneously desired social freedom and
social slavery ... Arthur stands, finally, in moral terms, as both
the hero and the villain of the Idylls of the King. (75-91)

Thus, the doomed Balin can function positively only when his shield, which Ryals calls
his "prop," is lent meaning through the purity of Guinevere; therefore, the wide-eyed and
innocent young knight Pelleas is transformed into a crazed lunatic, crying "we be all
alike: only the King / Hath made us fools and liars" (PE 469-470).

Moreover, Arthur's own spiritual aspirations for his Order are misinterpreted,
and in what is one of two crucial instances of his absence from court, the Round Table is
decimated by the Grail Vision, as his key knights set off on what will prove to be, for all
but Galahad, an unfulfilled quest for the Ideal. The Grail originally appears to a nun,
sister of the knight, Percival, who expresses her experience of its coming in sexually
charged language:

And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail,
Rose-red with beatings in it, as if alive,
Till all the white walls of my cell were dyed
With rosy colours leaping on the wall;
And then the music faded, and the Grail
Past, and the beam decayed, and from the walls
The rosy quiverings died into the night. (HG 115-123)

Both Timothy Pelatson (465) and Linda Shires have pointed to this passage, and to the
resultant Grail Quest, as expressions of sublimated sexuality, with Shires, in her essay
"Patriarchy, Dead Men and Tennyson's Idylls of the King," stating that:
If the goal of the quest is to unite men, the fact of the quest fractures homogeneity. Arthur, realizing that the quest would end the brotherhood, fails in sufficiently warning his knights of ... their potential feminization ... The grail vision ... is tantalizingly sexual, ... with a specific scenario of the light beam as a penetrating male, the cup as a confirmation of the death of the male (its job is to hold sacramental wine, symbol of the blood which Christ shed), and the viewer as female ...

Male bonding will occur by the worshippers' common assumption of a female, asexual position. However, as Arthur intuits, the quest for the grail will undermine the kingdom, since it will serve not to bind men but to divide them. (410-411)

Finally, in the climactic idyll, "The Last Tournament," Camelot suffers its ultimate ignominy as Arthur's "noble" knights,

... who watch'd him, roar'd
And shouted and leapt down upon the fall'n
There trampled out his face from being known,
and sank his head in mire, and slimed themselves:
Nor heard the King for their own cries, but sprang
Thro' open doors, and swording right and left
Men, women, on their sodden faces, hurl'd
The tables over and the wines, and slew
Till all the rafters rang with woman-yells,
And all the pavement stream'd with massacre ...

(467-476)

Tennyson is the Prophet of sublimated Violence. His knights, gracious and beautiful, but painfully repressed in the moral purity which his Order imposed, here in this macrocosmic idyll, as is the case of Balin in the microcosmic "Balin and Balan" idyll which is its harbinger, degenerate en masse into vicious and fearsome "dogs of war." Arthur has unleashed this fury, for his knights can no longer hear his voice "for their own cries." Violence and anarchy reign supreme within Arthur's own camp, in spite of his best intentions.

The Idylls is concerned with violence laid bare and with the oxymoronic nature of the term "honorable warfare." Chivalry and butchery can share no common ground. Arthur's kingdom cannot endure because no matter what its spiritual aspirations, it is grounded in masculine cruelty, in inhumanity. The ultimate illusion that Arthur creates is that the end, order, can be achieved by his chosen means, violence, with all its attendant "chivalric" trappings. This is the true message of the inscription on Excalibur, the sword of power: the phrase "Cast Me Away," embodies Tennyson's prayer for the modern world. Tennyson is, in sentiment, one of the first of the moderns. Arthur J. Carr was one of the first to proclaim this view in his essay "Tennyson as a Modern Poet":

The question of 'objective foundations' permeates Tennyson's career and binds his poetry to the crisis of the arts in our century.

Tennyson took in the sickening fact that the continental areas of
common values were breaking up. Myths, rituals, slogans, accustomed loyalties and animosities, the classic procedures of warfare, the classic mysteries of philosophies ... rational history and rational science, the themes and modes of art--all cemented by hallowed ethical and economic traditions--were coming loose fast. (43-44)

The mature Tennyson came to the realization that the logical end of the "path of the hero," that is, of an ethics based on the sword of masculine virility, no matter how alluring, is cultural obliteration: in the end, *Ilium* can do nothing other than fall. Obliteration, nobly realized, is still obliteration. Here his sensitivity to the dovetailing of science, (with its terrible capacity for such misapplication as weapon development), with the omnipresent horrors of nineteenth-century warfare and with *fin de siècle* spiritual malaise becomes apparent. The awful clarity of his vision, so soon to be realized, is nothing less than breathtaking.
III. "THE QUEEN WE WORSHIP":
"BEST AND PUREST"--GUINEVERE AND THE SHATTERING OF ILLUSION

Tennyson saw within the Feminine the component which could provide the solution to this cycle, this "dialectic of violence"; yet he also saw that the feminine, civilizing component could be (and indeed, had been) distorted and misdirected along unproductive and sometimes destructive pathways. Thus the *Idylls* offers The Lady of the Lake, who supports Arthur in his effort to "drive the heathen out," yet who "Hath power to walk the waters like our Lord" (CA 286-293), along with Vivien, who is "born from death / and sown upon the wind" (MV 44-45). Moreover, we are presented with a vision of Guinevere, who is often interpreted as the Eve of Arthurian legend, as a woman authenticated by and ennobled through her tribulations.

Guinevere's narrow, dimly lit path of self-delusion, its locale the "wide world," is transformed by tale's end into a blazing boulevard of awareness surpassing that of any other character, with its locale the "narrowing nunnery walls" in which she lived out her days. She is transformed by degrees from a male-defined icon of feminine beauty, into a damned, adulterous queen, and at last into a sage abbess of great nobility. Notably, she is the only character in the entire *Idylls* whom the poet allows to evolve toward spiritual perfection while remaining to labor on the experiential plane, an end which is made possible only through her removal from the realm of male definition.
Neither Galahad, who is completely removed from the physical plane, nor Percival, who lacks the profundity of thought and being required to evolve, is granted this degree of growth. Indeed, the fact that the Idyll's most profound expression of spiritual evolution is granted to the only prominent character who, because of her sex, cannot carry that achievement to its full fruition in the world of active experience as defined by men is one of the text's central ironies, and again, must be seen as a "strategy of signification."

That it is the character "Guinevere" and not "Arthur" who develops most convincingly, that is, psychologically, was not lost on Tennyson; indeed, if one follows the logic of Carol Christ's previously cited argument asserting Tennyson's "pattern of feminine identification," it could be said that it is Guinevere whom the poet held in the greatest sympathy. Certainly she and Lancelot are the characters whose psyches are most fully explored; however, Lancelot's elimination from the text early on in the "Guinevere" idyll, wherein, "he past, / Love-loyal to the least wish of the Queen, / Back to his land" (124-126), seems, yet again to be a "strategy," the significance of which is to single-mindedly focus the reader's attention on the fallen Queen. It is she who releases him from his obligation to her; it is she who chooses the path to true Self, through the shattering of the false self.

In this reading, Tennyson's original labels "The True and the False" take on a new and more profound meaning; allegory gives way to the "parabolic drift" which the poet felt more accurately described the Idylls, while Guinevere becomes a character of
"multiple perspectives" and a prime vehicle for Tennyson's ambivalence concerning Victorian morality.

In the passage of parting of the two lovers, Lancelot's entreaty to her to "fly to my strong castle overseas: / There will I hide thee" is refused, nobly, by the Queen, who is well along on her journey of self-redemption:

'Lancelot, wilt thou hold me so?
Nay, friend, for we have taken our farewells.
Would God that thou couldst hide me from myself!
Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou
Unwedded: yet rise now, and let us fly,
For I will draw me into sanctuary,
And bide my doom.' (G 115-121)

One does not find anywhere in Tennyson's presentation of Guinevere's character the reductive quality which is to be found in his treatment of the villainess of "Merlin and Vivien," for example; rather, Guinevere's external, superficial glamor—"her beauty, grace and power," which "[w]rought as a charm upon" the nuns at Almesbury (G 142-143)—is transformed into an elegant, numinous beauty.

Tennyson depicts with crystal clarity the powerlessness of Guinevere within the world of men. It is telling that Idylls of the King opens singing of her beauty, which is "fairest of all flesh on earth" (CA 3-4); ironically, she whose surface beauty exercises power over its beholders is, like an exotic, caged animal, bereft of self-autonomy. Her very position as the "Stately Queen" becomes her prison. In the beginning, she is
disallowed any but a purely mundane existence. She stands as one among the myriad female characters devised by male writers, who are described by Sedgwick as commodities, whose "use ... by men is as exchangeable objects, as counters of value, for the primary purpose of cementing relationships with other men" (123).

Indeed, in her role as the "one fair daughter" of "Leodogran, the King of Camelard" she is the embodiment of "the highborn maiden" whose hand in marriage will seal the kingdom for Arthur. This is the crux: Arthur's validity as king is tied inextricably to his image in his knights' eyes as the worthy possessor of this, the ultimate prize among them. He fights in Leodegran's land as much to claim her as his as to establish his kingdom; the two aims are, in Arthur's mind and in the minds of his knights, inextricably linked. Early on, we find him on his way to battle the foe,

Desiring to be join'd with Guinevere;
And thinking as he rode, "Her father said
That there between the man and beast they die.
Shall I not lift her from this land of beasts
Up to my throne, and side by side with me?
What happiness to reign a lonely king,
Vext - O ye stars that shudder over me,
O earth that soundest hollow under me,
Vext with waste dreams? 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. (CA 74-89)

Guinevere is as much a mark of God's favor as is Excalibur. Each is the apex in its respective sphere: the best sword, the best woman. All that is needed to complete the trinity is a good horse.

Leodegran's willingness to surrender that which is his most valuable possession affirms Arthur's success as an astute barterer, as a worthy possessor. Guinevere is merely, at this point, an icon— which she will remain for the shortsighted Round Table society right down to the brutal end. This is the true nature of her role in the fall of the kingdom, and it is one for which she is entirely blameless. She is made a shining symbol of perfect feminine desirability, and the fall of the kingdom depends entirely upon the knights' misprision of her, a misprision mistakenly forged by Arthur to serve his "great Pendragonship." It is the nature of clay idols to shatter at the first shockwave; brittle idealistic visions tend to shatter in the face of worldly truth.

This misprision, this illusion, this mass delusion, is dependent upon, to apply a phrase originated by Sedgwick in her discussion of The Princess, his knights' "erotic perceptions [which] are entirely shaped by the structure of the male traffic in women" (123). Tennyson is clearly, in the tragic action of Idylls of the King, poetically restating Flaubert's observation that "man created Woman." This message resonates throughout the first, vital lines of "Geraint and Enid," which encapsulate one of the primary themes to be found in the poem:
O purblind race of miserable men,
How many among us at this very hour
Do forge a life-long trouble for ourselves,
By taking true for false, or false for true;
Here, thro' the feeble twilight of this world
Groping, how many, until we pass and reach
That other, where we see as we are seen! (1-7)

But Guinevere is no Emma Bovary; hers is not a coward's death, nor will she retire into oblivion. She will, she tells the inhabitants of the "holy house at Almesbury,

Pray and be pray'd for; lie before your shrines;
Do each low office of your holy house;
Walk your dim cloister, and distribute dole
To poor sick people ...

And treat their loathsome hurts and heal mine own. (G 675-680)

In short, she will work out on this earthly plane the debt she feels she owes. Hers is not a faint spirit or heart; she will work selflessly to soften the impact of the sinking ship of state. The naive child she had been in the beginning of the tale, the "fair daughter" contracted, without her consent to wed Arthur, whom she originally "mark'd not" (CA 53), is ultimately replaced by a noble, self-aware woman.

The structure of this misprision, based on the exchange of "earthly flesh"--the description arousing as it does biblical images and scenes from the slave trade--is set up too pointedly for it not to have been of foremost importance in Tennyson's mind. The
dramatic fleshing out of Guinevere's character, her movement from icon toward personhood, from superficiality toward authenticity, is layered into the fabric of the Idylls.

The degree to which Guinevere, a veteran of life and all its joys and sorrows, is a victim of her own and others' illusions of her is made doubly apparent in her encounter with the novice at Almesbury. Guinevere, tiring of the harangue of the young woman, who is so secure within the narrow context of her own conception of the events which have taken place within Arthur's kingdom

... openly spake and said to her,

'O little maid, shut in by nunnery walls,
What canst thou know of Kings and Tables Round,
Or what of signs and wonders, but the signs
And simple miracles of thy nunnery?' (G 222-228)

The novice answers her with a reworking of the tale of Arthur's coming, describing merveilleux seen "ere the coming of the Queen"; the tale she tells is now presented in the context of the Queen as a fallen woman, when "all the land was full of life /... 'the wine ran: so glad were spirits and men / Before the coming of the sinful Queen" (G 257-268).

The iconography is turned in upon itself; Guinevere-as-icon is dashed down, and the blame is laid squarely upon her shoulders. And all this is ironically achieved by what had by Tennyson's time become a cliché for the Romantic mouthpiece of "Truth," the Innocent, the Child.
Guinevere's depth of character sparkles here, her anger sparked by the young "babbler," and as she wrestles with her guilt over her role in the devastation which besets the kingdom,

Her memory from old habit of the mind
Went slipping back upon the golden days
In which she saw him first...
And moving thro' the past unconsciously,
Came to that point where first she saw the King
... glanced at him, thought him cold,
High, self-contain'd, and passionless ... (G 376-403)

She "grovel[s] at his feet" as Arthur inflicts his loathing and his forgiveness upon her, while in her mind she rises to a recognition of her responsibility and then, after his spectral departure, which is dominated by the image of the "Dragon of the Great Pendragonship," she transcends her guilt in self-questioning which becomes a supplication to God:

What might I not have made of thy fair world,
Had I but loved the fairest creature here?
It was my duty to have loved the highest:
It surely was my profit had I known:
It would have been my pleasure had I seen. (G 648-654)

It never occurs to Guinevere that Arthur equally owes her an apology, for, as Ryals says, she "suffers the same delusions as everybody else" (78). She herself is too
locked into the context of the Arthurian paradigm to sense the degree of his emotional absence from her, an absence which was the source of her response, perhaps not morally justified, but thoroughly human, that sensation that she "could not breathe in that fine air / That pure severity of perfect light" (G 640-641).

The other factor which she fails to recognize, but which we as the surveyors of this scene cannot help but surmise, is that her passion for Lancelot, is a natural human response in the face of what is deliberately presented as a sterile, passionless marriage (LE 131-4). Rosenberg has said of this scene that

Tennyson wants us to believe that Arthur feels sexual passion for Guinevere, and hence that both his injury and his forgiveness are all the greater. But if we must take Arthur on these terms, then he must stand judged by his wife's own words: "cold ...

passionless..." (130)

Until this scene, Tennyson has deliberately avoided lending Arthur any aura of sexuality and only rarely does he display what could be defined as husbandly warmth. When he attempts to make us believe that Arthur feels "sexual passion" here, we find it oddly incongruous with his character.

Indeed, Arthur has consistently cut a public figure, and Guinevere has been forced into the Victorian conception of "queen-ness." Jordan has said of the "Guinevere" idyll that the scandal of the adultery makes a problem for the Idylls as a whole: ... If we reason from the Sense / Soul, ideal / real
oppositions it would be Lancelot who was real and ideal ...

while if Guinevere represented Sense, Arthur as Soul would be at war with his wife, a conflict hardly likely to fulfill his early hope ... The confusion in Tennyson's oppositions derives from his pessimism, which makes ideal aspirations seem like ill-tempered complaints, if they are not realizable. (169)

Guinevere's human responses, her seeking of true companionship and passion, for the "warmth and colour which I found / In Lancelot" (G 643-4), her initial rejection of the sterility of Arthur, her seeking of normal human relations--all are consistent with her passionate, yet noble character.

Ryals has stressed that ultimately Arthur is guilty of emotional exploitation, not only of Guinevere, but of all his subjects:

Arthur has attempted to take Guinevere completely unto himself, to refashion her according to his conceptions, to make her will his, to set her up as the feminine ideal; and he forces this view of her--that is, Guinevere as the feminine counterpart to ideal man--on his Order. Guinevere is not, however made of the same metal as the King. A real woman and not an abstract ideal presence, she has all the passion and longing for life of a normal woman. (77-78)

Tennyson's concern with Guinevere's development, his deliberate de-emphasis of a climax in the relationship between Arthur and Lancelot--relegated in the Idyls to a
secondary importance--his pointed evocation of gossip as a destructive force, as an entity in itself, echoing the evil "Allecto, maker of grief" of the Aeneid, along with Arthur's inherent inability to read this most human of Queens, all point to a rejection of the commodity-based paradigm Sedgwick so deftly describes.

The evocation of the evil Allecto serves Tennyson well both in lending Guinevere an epic stature and in vindicating her. The swelling up of gossip over her relationship with Lancelot is like a gigantic wave, obliterating all that is good in Camelot. This process begins as early as the third book, "The Marriage of Geraint," wherein Geraint's wife Enid, companion of Guinevere, and possessing the greatest facility of any character for the assessment of true nobility,

... loved the Queen, and with true heart

Adored her, as the stateliest and the best

And loveliest of all women upon earth. (19-21)

That Enid recognizes Guinevere's internal nature is indispensable to Tennyson's conception of the much maligned Queen. Further, Enid is whisked away from court by her shallow young husband, himself the dupe of, as Sedgewick has stated that "erotic perception ... shaped by the structure of the male traffic in women," and is made as much an object by her husband as is the Queen. Geraint basked in the favor of Arthur and Guinevere,

But when a rumour rose about the Queen

Touching her guilty love for Lancelot,

Tho' yet there lived no proof, nor yet was heard
The world's loud whisper breaking into storm,
Not less Geraint believed it; and there fell
A horror on him, lest his gentle wife,
Thro' that great tenderness for Guinevere,
Had suffer'd, or should suffer any taint
In nature ... (23-32)

Geraint, described as a "brave knight of Arthur's court / A tributary prince of Devon, one / Of that great Order of the Table Round" (MG 1-3) proves himself at first to be a man of little depth, and this is vital to an understanding of the *Idylls*. He, as Goslee has said, is originally "all too willing to let the court and Guinevere shape his values and his quest" (169). Geraint's early passing of judgment on Guinevere, based only on vicious hearsay and ill will, sets the tone of the rest of the *Idylls*; his willingness to immediately surrender the vision of the Queen-as-icon, and his rapid fall into "uxoriousness," does not bode well for the future of the kingdom.

For, if Geraint is the best and the brightest, and as a member of "the Table Round" one cannot doubt his supposed worth, his character, which is here deliberately presented as being single-faceted, presents us in this particular book with one of the predominant characteristics of a number of Arthur's knights, foremost among them Gawaine and also the younger Pelleas: a marked superficiality of character.

It is the petty superficiality of society to which Tennyson is pointing; this is the aspect of human behavior, coupled with violence, which renders all dreams of Utopia an
impossibility. James Eli Anderson has pointed out in his essay, tellingly titled, "Harlots and Base Interpreters: Scandal and Slander in Idylls of the King," that the poem is from the very outset structured not simply by contrasting models of female sexuality, but by networks of rumor, gossip, scandal, and slander, ... the actual witnessing of "foul ensample" is ... what the poem fails to offer ... the chain is established ... through rumor and innuendo- through the dynamics of slander and scandal. This crucial fact emerges in ... every account of the poem that attempts to specify precisely when the relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot turns adulterous ... Tennyson was attracted to Arthurian myth ... because the ... ubiquitous story that informs [it] had taken on a ... threatening immediacy with the ... expansion of publicity in Victorian England. (422-434)

The societally disruptive effect of this gossip, a kind of scandal-driven "entropy," is dependent upon the vapidity of character and spirituality which Tennyson observed in Victorian England.

Finally, but for her own spiritual evolution, it does not matter whether Guinevere is guilty or not; it is the society itself, the epitome of which is the eavesdropping, spying Modred, whom Lancelot discovered, "pluck'd him by the heel / And cast him as a worm upon the way" (G 34-35), which is indicted. There can be no mistaking Tennyson's
contempt for scandal, nor of this aspect of his "message" to the reader, which is implicit, but clear; for, as Adams says, "harlots cannot exist without base interpreters" (437).

It is finally in Arthur's condemnation of Guinevere as much as in her role as self-authenticator that she is redeemed; for he becomes the voice of the very myth of Victorian morality which Tennyson is exploding. For Guinevere to remain silent concerning her "sin" as Adams and others have suggested she should would disallow her transformation into the representative of genuine Self which Tennyson envisioned for her. Confession is the only path to Truth, to self-purification. It is Arthur who does not purify himself of his self-delusion. It is he who is locked into the illusion to the end; he is at once great and petty, his voice "Monotonous and hollow like a Ghost's / Denouncing judgment," verbally whipping the prostrate Guinevere:

I wedded thee,
Believing, "lo mine helpmate, one to feel
My purpose and rejoicing in my joy."
Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot;
Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt;
Then others, following these my mightiest knights,
And drawing foul ensample from fair names,
Sinn'd also, till the loathsome opposite
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,
And all thro' thee! ...
And all is past, the sin is sinn'd, and I,
Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God
Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the rest.

... O imperial-moulded form,

And beauty such as never woman wore,
Until it came a kingdom's curse with thee -
And in the flesh thou hast sinn'd; and mine own flesh.
Here looking down on thine polluted, cries
"I loathe thee" ... (481-553)

Arthur here indicts himself, for in the vicious, inhumane fury of his attack, he sanctimoniously equates himself with "Eternal God," and thus undermines his position as arbiter of Truth. His haughty pride in his avowed purity becomes his moral noose. Further, that he feels that his Truth is dependent upon the "name and fame" of another serves to undermine its ethical force.

Margaret Linley has pointed out that in the *Idylls*,
the entire system of order centered by Camelot is fraught with an uneasy sense of its own arbitrariness, an awareness made most obvious in the constant, yet unsustainable, desire to situate the cause of the fall in Guinevere ... in the final idyll, Tennyson hammers a significant blow against the bourgeois industrial hegemony, shattering its assurance of moral virtue, contesting the effectuality of an ideal ground in sexual specificity (380).
Linley's observation is valid that Tennyson's aim is, ultimately, through "challenging the bourgeois ideology of separate spheres" to preserve "the integrity of the masculine political system" (380-381). But it is equally true that his very "contesting of an ideal ground in sexual specificity" diminishes male superiority through the selfsame mechanism.

As Shires has said, Tennyson was about the business of "simultaneously collaps[ing] and retain[ing] a patriarchal order" ("Patriarchy, Dead Men and Tennyson's Idylls of the King," 401). Through his concentration on the societally-endorsed, societally-destructive mechanism of slander, his presentation of a flawed, but ennobled Guinevere, and the implicit presence of a higher, femininely-defined spiritual plane, overseen by the Christlike Lady of the Lake, masculine hegemony is, like the myth of the "angel in the house," likewise undermined.
IV. "THE MAIDEN, PETULANT ... WONDERFUL":

LADIES OF THE IDYLLS--THE ETERNAL AND FALSE FEMININES

As has been said, the process of self-reclamation which Guinevere chooses--and it is, clearly, a choice, since she refuses to go with Lancelot, knowing full well that the consequence of that decision is likely to be death and shame--while not reasserting her moral purity, confirms her ethical superiority. As much as Arthur-as-construct serves as the overall defining element of the text, Guinevere, by extension, as the Queen to his King, becomes his female counterpart.

All female characters in the text operate in relation to this Guinevere-as-icon construct; this aspect of Tennyson's treatment of the feminine, along with other pertinent points, themselves each the proper subject for a much longer discussion, will be treated briefly in this concluding section.

In the final version of the Idylls of the King, as we have seen in regard to Guinevere, each female character (with the single exception of The Lady of the Lake)--whether it be Enid, Elaine, or Vivien--originally presents a restrictive image which is then in some way transformed or exploded: thus, what originally appears to be the soft, passive reticence of Enid becomes a steel-hard, active stoicism, while the seemingly fresh, virginal self-sacrifice of Elaine becomes a deluded and sterile selfishness, rooted in death and decay.
Vivien, often pointed out by critics as a simplistic harlot, is actually a masterpiece of terrible transformation, the product of Arthur's warmaking. She, as David Goslee has said, in her encounter with Merlin changes "herself ... into one of the shape-shifting specters who haunt medieval romance" (52). She stands in stark contrast to The Lady of the Lake, who alone remains monumentally stable and static; indeed, this is crucial to the Lady's function as the overriding spiritual constant in the dazzling, shifting pageant which is the *Idylls of the King*.

While it is more likely that as is true in satire, the solution to the societal problems presented in the *Idylls* lies in avoiding the pitfalls presented there, one might argue that if there is a positive, a middleground, to be found in the overall plan of the *Idylls*, it is to be found within the resolution of "Geraint and Enid."

Geraint's saving grace is ultimately his wife, Enid, who, according to Goslee, originally "defiantly insists on finding her ... sanctuary ... in the deliberate anachronisms of her own palace ... [and] implicitly claims that she exists on a level of reality different than that of the outer world" (169). Her altruistic, a-temporal values clash drastically with those of her earthbound husband, who "must find his sanctuary with the real world ..." (169). It is a classic case of confrontation between the feminine / intuitive and the masculine / empirical modes; in the end, a healthy balance emerges, yet it is the stronger Enid who effects the compromise.

Geraint, believing his wife to be tainted through a miscommunication, ironically, his misprision of her humble, self-deprecating evaluation of her own performance as wife, antagonistically drags her through the wilderness. Ironically, her stoic compliance,
her honesty and her fearlessness in the face of terror are the traits which save them, rather than his manliness. Moreover, it is, as Goslee has noted

only after being wounded 'secretly' by one of Limours' followers [that Geraint] can realize that his human antagonists, instead of powers from without, are what John D. Rosenberg has called 'extensions of [his] own erotic obsession with Enid' ...[who] learns in time that to be faithful to her husband she must simultaneously thwart the bully leading her toward their mutual destruction ... she [finally] acknowledges that even her sanctuary cannot remain impervious to the ... Other. (171)

Enid's stance is transformed from a passive to an active one, while Geraint is restored to sanity; further, theirs becomes one of the few "happy endings" of the Idylls, brought about through mediation and mutual understanding. But it should be noted that this occurs outside of the context of the court of Camelot, and this in itself, as an absence or abstinence from the court, becomes a comment upon the court itself.

Like "Geraint and Enid," the action of "Lancelot and Elaine" takes place predominantly away from court, and the idyll plays a central part in the narrative of the overall poem. Its purpose is to point up the increasing disorder which results from the bond between Lancelot and Guinevere, while condemning the ongoing process of slander. Elaine, who acts as both a mirror and a foil to Guinevere, and who wills herself to death rather than live without Lancelot, has traditionally been seen as the unblemished
maid (Gray 21-24), whose death evokes a sympathetic response, both from the reader and from the court of Camelot.

Yet, Elaine lives purely in a world of fantasy, and represents, just as surely as do all of the other representatives of the extremes of human nature presented in the idylls, not a positive, but a negative path: that of the deluded lover, of the Romantic, of the artist. Elaine is, of course, a lesser rendering of "The Lady of Shalott"; lesser, since, unlike the profoundly accretive, self-contained and monumental symbolism of the Lady of that poem, her action and symbolic function is here subordinate to her function within the narrative of the larger text. As Arthur L. Simpson has said,

for all her ... seeming innocence, Elaine is ironically presented as a negative exemplum of the woman as well as of the artist ... the failure of the major characters ... primarily Arthur and Lancelot--to ... comprehend just what all Elaine was points to factors contributory to the fall of the realm. (341)

Simpson argues that Elaine embodies the "personally and socially destructive effects of the wrong kind of artistic life," that she is totally self-indulgent and, for all purposes, insane. Having no other context in which to express her repressed natural drives, Elaine's fantasies have eclipsed her reason, and she is incapable of interaction.

Simpson proceeds:

...Elaine is not ready for realism, irony, or feminine maturity;

her love for Lancelot continues as the primary expression of
her attempt to order reality according to her private, self-indulgent vision. In her total indulgence in her fantasy, in her all-or-nothing attitude, and in her selfish, unreasonable behavior, Elaine has clear affinities with other Tennysonian extremists whose actions are damaging or dangerous to themselves and society. (355)

Elaine's proper place within the scheme of *Idylls* is not with Enid or The Lady of the Lake, or even with Guinevere; she belongs to the selfsame group as Balin and Pelleas, the Grail Knights and finally, as Arthur himself, for as Dennis Grunes has noted, the purity he and Elaine typify is identified in the *Idylls* with violence and sublimated sexuality.

Unable to transcend her illusions, locked into the "ambiguous inversion ... [of] her 'true love' ... [which is] her own death" (283). She presents us with an ironic reversal of the *vagina dentata*. She is a woman of a "type" common in nineteenth-century thought and imagery, which James E. Adams has described as having "a Sphinx-like nature, formerly beautiful and benign, [which] discloses an unexpected and terrifying enigma of violent purpose" (16). Alluring in her pointed "innocence," Elaine represents the deceivingly attractive stagnation of irrevocable self-delusion.

In much the same vein as Simpson, Grunes has said of the "Lancelot and Elaine" idyll that,

... as innocent of mean intent as Elaine is, her lethal purity is a trap that might easily entice one so deeply embedded in
mortal flesh and guilt as Lancelot ... Lancelot's marrying Elaine would mean succumbing to the hope of purgation or redemption without the harrowing of hell necessary to straighten his fallen moral posture. Elaine offers escape, in effect, suicide, the culmination of an intransient purity that has been her "curse," her inverted Original Sin. (283)

Yet Grunes makes the mistake of equating Elaine with Guinevere; the irony here is that the integrity and constancy of Guinevere's mature and very real love for Lancelot, though passionate and possessive, makes her feeling for him purer than the selfish, violent illusion of Elaine's supposedly "faultless love."

Finally, as Grunes has said of Arthur's statement to Lancelot that Elaine "might have brought thee, now a lonely man / Wifeless and heirless, noble issue, sons" (LE 1359-1360):

Insofar as he is a cuckold whose human knights will inevitably fail to sustain his legacy and dream, Arthur is projecting onto Lancelot ... his own despair at being "wifeless" and "heirless." In truth, Lancelot has done well neither to wed nor love a maiden the obsessive purity of whose own love Tennyson identifies with human violence. (281)

Ultimately the Victorian moral foundation, upon which the labels "The True and the False" rest, becomes highly unstable; one must question whether Guinevere is, finally, "False" and Elaine "True." In the end, their positions become inverted.
This reading of the *Idylls* is supported by the whole complex of Guineverian
"threads" that are interwoven into the fabric of the poem. Through such mirroring
feminine images as those of Enid, The Lady of the Lake, Elaine, Isolt, and Ettarre, not to
mention Vivien, the character of Guinevere is, through a vast series of interrelationships
and echoes, expanded. Her human frailties and her graces shine forth equally; through
these symbolic mirroring devices, she truly becomes a character of "multiple
perspectives." Her spiritual development, particularly as a transformational process,
stands in juxtaposition with the constancy of both the evil, destructive nature of Vivien
and with theuminously spiritual nature of The Lady of the Lake.

Importantly, it is the enigmatic Lady of the Lake who serves as the root metaphor
of true spiritual possibility in the *Idylls* and it becomes clear that Arthur is a secondary
or corollary expression of the Cosmic Power which lies behind this potential, for she

knows a subtler magic than his own--

Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful.

[and] Hath power to walk the waters like our Lord. (CA 283-293)

It is, truly, as if "some lesser god" had made the King: to receive Excalibur, for example,
he must seek her out, rowing out upon the surface of the mere, her venue. She occupies
the position of greater power and understanding.

The Lady of the Lake, "mystic, wonderful," serves as the conduit through which
cosmic and temporal powers meet; while even the great King Arthur's triumphs compose
merely a moment within the vastness of her Experience / Being. Her inscrutability
becomes an indecipherable glyph in the cosmic text, to which Arthur and even the sage Merlin are denied access.

The Lady's understated presence as the most powerful of a number of *marveilleux* in the *Idylls* colors the text as a whole; further, she is, as in the description of Camelot's gate, for example, promoted from her position in the Malorian version (Gray 13) to a level of unsurpassed cosmic grandeur:

The Lady of the Lake stood: 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 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 ... (212-222)

In Tennyson's version this feminine image becomes the sword's cosmic guardian, existing in a symbiotic relationship with, rather than merely being forger of, Excalibur (usurping the role played by Merlin in the "sword-in-the-stone" episode). Here she represents, in a positive, powerful fashion, the feminine principle, Nature, Balance and
Cosmos. The Lady of the Lake embodies the one monumental constant in the world of the *Idylls*, wherein even the mind of Arthur is finally "clouded with a doubt" (PA 426).

Further, the Lady's implied omnipresence stands in distinct contrast to Arthur's crucial absences. Her transcendence of the limitations of time / space points up his inability to always be present in the time of need. Her placid presence lends the world of the *Idylls* a reassuring continuity, the bounds of which are echoed by the constancy of those 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.* (275-278)

The poet's depiction of her as immutable and seemingly all-powerful, even as the moral entropy overwhelming the Camelot is accelerated by Arthur's tragic impotence, demonstrates the degree to which Tennyson was "refiguring" Arthurian, Christian--and thus Victorian--myth.

The Lady, as is implied by her association with the lake, is the embodiment of spiritual serenity. The extremes of Camelot, of "the wide world," its petty gossip, its immorality, its inhumanity, all is as nothing to her. She is that fully realized being which Guinevere has begun the long journey toward becoming. The struggles of the divided self which plagued Balin, the trivial sexuality of Vivien, the extreme spiritual fervor of the Grail Knights--these dark and narrow shadows are allayed by the breadth of her light. She stands untouched by that which transpires around her: life, love, sex, war, death. All are as One to her.
The Lady's profound serenity is first conveyed in "The Coming of Arthur" through her "voice as of the waters / ... deep; calm, whatsoever storms / May shake the world" (290-292). The symbolically loaded appearance of her "arm / Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful" above the mere, which catches and brandishes Excalibur three times, is set against the absolute waste of the battlefield (PA 312-313). And this is important, since Tennyson here chose, as he had chosen not to in other instances, to leave intact the symbolism from Malory. In this tripartite symbolism, as in her capability to "walk the waters," it is again she, rather than Arthur, who bears association with Christ.

There is also a pointed incongruity between her boundless calm and Arthur's final anguish which emphasizes his flawed, limited awareness—the mark of his temporality. The hopelessness of Arthur's anguish is driven home by the poet's deft description of him as panting "hard / Like one that feels a nightmare on his bed / When all the house is mute" (PA 344-346). It is, finally, encapsulated in his "mutter[ed]" plea to Bedivere, "Quick, quick! / I fear it is too late, and I shall die" (PA 347-348).

Clearly, however great the being of"Arthur," is, he is as yet limited and still cosmically evolving. The King is not yet all he might become. The Lady, in contrast, is a fully evolved, fully aware, fully realized entity. The sword Excalibur, rather than being merely an object over which she is custodian, is an extension of her—of her cosmic essence. She and it are archetypal; they signify the unity of "the thing in itself," the inviolable form which exists simultaneously with, and beyond the kin of, the imperfect, temporal world.
Excalibur's place as an object, as the "great brand the king / Took, and by this ...

beat his foemen down" (307-308), is granted only for a time. Ultimately, the sword and
the Lady signify a much more profound process than the mere taming of "the beast"
without. They represent the spiritual transformation signaled by a necessary turning
inward to quell the internal enemy--the inauthentic self which urges abdication of
personal responsibility and prefers extreme reaction to reflective, balanced action. Seen
in this light, the Lady and the Sword of the *Idylls* signify at the deepest level the quest for
the unified, authentic Self, a quest which seems to have engrossed the poet throughout his
life. Through this integrating, self-validating process, the kind of profound and lasting
change that Tennyson saw as crucial to human survival is made possible.
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