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TENNYSON'S 1859 "IDYLLS OF THE KING": A REFLECTION OF MID-VICTORIAN SOCIAL ISSUES

Rice University

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TENNYSON'S 1859 *IDYLLS OF THE KING*:

A REFLECTION OF MID-VICTORIAN SOCIAL ISSUES

by

JANICE L. HEWITT

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

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May, 1986
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May 1986
ABSTRACT

Tennyson’s Idylls of the King:
A Reflection of Mid-Victorian Social Issues
Janice L. Hewitt

The 1859 edition of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King contains only four idylls, all titled for women: "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere." Tennyson wrote the Idylls in an era of social, political, and religious flux, when men who regarded the "angel in the house" as the moral guardian of the home—and therefore of the nation—, also feared women’s increasing demands for autonomy. With the anchors of moral authority loosened, it was crucial that individual moral choice be for the good of society rather than for self. Because adultery became a focus for fears of the destruction of both home and society, Tennyson changed his sources in order to make Guinevere’s adultery, not Arthur’s ideals, the unifying element.

Yet Tennyson moved beyond society’s fears to give his readers not just a medieval romance with nineteenth-century ramifications, but a more complex picture of adultery, love, and marriage than found in contemporaneous discussions in Parliament and in press. The Idylls holds up ideal marriage as a necessary goal, but presents unusually sympathetic portraits of couples who fail in the attempt.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks go first to Martin J. Wiener, director of this thesis, for his encouragement and his demand for high scholastic standards. His course in British History was one of the first I took at Rice University when I returned to school, and it sparked a fruitful interaction between history and my interest in nineteenth-century British literature. I learned that not only can historical context illuminate a text, but that a literary work by a great author such as Tennyson can, in turn, be treated as an historical artifact to enrich the study of history. It was with that insight that I brought both disciplines to bear on this study of the 1859 *Idylls of the King*.

My appreciation extends, too, to Robert L. Patten, whose knowledge of English literature and of editing gave valuable help, and to Thomas L. Haskell, who consistently encouraged my efforts.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the patience and support of my husband, Chuck, and daughters, Amy and Katherine. Although they saw my head bent over a book far more often than raised in conversation with them, they formed a dedicated and sustained cheering section for my academic efforts.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, based on Arthurian legend and published in 1859, was an immediate success. 10,000 copies sold the first week; within the next four weeks sales totaled nearly 40,000. As one reviewer pointed out, "Mr. Tennyson has a place among us which his art, almost perfect as it is, could not have gained if the pulsation of his verse had not beat in harmony with the nation's life" (*Brit. Quarterly Review* 481). Another reviewer, John Nichol, praised the poem, yet wished that it had been set in nineteenth-century London where "lie richly scattered the yet unwrought materials for modern tragedy" (*Westminster Review* 525). By turning to the past, Nichol said, Tennyson wrote about "exquisitely beautiful fossils" (525). The same division occurs among twentieth-century critics. Basil Willey, who in 1956 praised "In Memoriam" because "it dealt seriously and beautifully with the very problems that most concerned the Victorians (79), saw no such virtue in the *Idylls*. Donald S. Hair, on the other hand, in 1981 included the *Idylls* among the poems of which he wrote that "[Tennyson] was not simply mouthing Victorian platitudes, but was rather making brilliant use of popular ideals . . . (4). Examination of the text gives credence to the belief that the 1859 *Idylls* strongly engages mid-Victorian social issues. What, then, were the British middle and upper class pulse beats that Tennyson's poetry reflects?

The 1859 edition contains only four idylls, each named for a woman, "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere." By naming each of
the idylls for a woman, Tennyson points to women's centrality in mid-Victorian concerns. Additionally, although each of the idylls is based with varying degrees of accuracy on extant versions of the King Arthur legend, Tennyson makes significant changes. "Enid," the story of a patient and submissive wife in an ultimately happy marriage, stays closest to its source, the Welsh Mabinogion, but Tennyson subtly changes the interactions between Enid and Geraint to make Enid a more powerful woman than her Welsh counterpart. Tennyson's version of "Elaine" is fairly close to Malory's treatment in Morte d'Arthur, although Tennyson removes the supernatural elements and focuses on Elaine's capacity for love that is both pure and intensely physical. The patient, submissive wife portrayed in "Enid" and the bittersweet unrequited love exemplified in "Elaine" were appealing subjects to a patriarchal society that hoped for submissive wives and virtuous passion. But it is in "Vivien" and "Guinevere," the two idylls in which Tennyson makes the greatest departures from his source, that mid-Victorian concerns are most evident.

Many in that patriarchal society, caught up in Divorce Bill debates and increasing pressure by women for autonomy, feared the threat to moral order that women's growing independence and demands posed. The home, seen as a place of refuge in a time when increasing numbers of people questioned the moral authority of the church and when many men left the home each morning to compete in the burgeoning business world, also seemed under threat. Newspaper and journal coverage of the Divorce Bill debates, divorce proceedings, and the apparent rise in prostitution intensified the fears.
"Vivien" and "Guinevere" reflect the mid-Victorian fears of the powers of the unscrupulous sensuous woman as well as of the adulterous wife's potential for destroying both home and society. Tennyson eliminates the supernatural from Vivien's powers and gives her instead the wiles of the most seductive of harlots, making her a seductress driven not by lust of the flesh but by a lust for power, and makes her a woman so successful that she can imprison the wisest of men. Guinevere, still the unfaithful wife of Arthurian tradition, still a central influence in the breakdown of moral order in Arthur's kingdom, is yet fleshed out psychologically so that the reader, while condemning the adultery, feels great sympathy for her attraction to Lancelot. Arthur's flaws are subtly indicated as well, so that blame is not placed solely on Guinevere, as a rigid mid-Victorian moral standard would demand. The community, too, deserves condemnation for its eager participation in gossip and slander. The subject of marriage itself becomes a central concern, with the parting of Arthur and Guinevere, pure invention on Tennyson's part, evoking as much sorrow for the failed marriage as it does for the failed ideals of the Round Table. Tennyson's version of the adultery, then, is a complex one in which both sympathy for and fear of women are combined. Individual moral choices become crucial. Although the adultery has disastrous and far-reaching effects on the community as well as on the individuals involved, Tennyson reaches no glib, conservative conclusions.

Twenty years before publication of the Idylls, Tennyson had written to Emily Sellwood, "The Light of this world is too full of
refractions for men ever to see one another in their true positions" (Letters 172). That inability to see one another, central to the \textit{Idylls}, appears both in the content and the form of the work. King Arthur, although central to the work's title and action, for example, remains shadowy until Guinevere finally "sees" him just before their final parting. In addition, each of the idylls, a story in itself though connected with the others, is told, not in the first person, but with emphasis on what would be important to each of the title characters had she been the one speaking. The structure of the 1859 \textit{Idylls} reflects that growing mid-Victorian awareness that a "truth" looks different to different observers, that despite the desirability of an absolute moral standard, the actuality begins more and more to look as full of light and shadow as "shot silk with many glancing colours" (Hallam Tennyson 2: 127). Tennyson’s \textit{Idylls}, then, while beating "in harmony with the nation’s life," reveals much of the lack of harmony in a nation pulsating simultaneously with hope and fear, optimism and despair. The tensions of mid-Victorian society are in large part the tensions of Arthur’s England.
Chapter 2: TENSIONS IN MID-VICTORIAN SOCIETY

Introduction

The era in which Tennyson wrote the 1859 Idylls of the King was one in which far-reaching change occurred in religious and scientific ways of looking at the world, a time when the industrial revolution wrought changes in everyone's lives, a time when challenging new political and social ideas clashed with traditional views. Looking back in 1891 on the mid-Victorian era, J. A. Froude wrote:

It was an era of new ideas, of swift if silent spiritual revolution. Reform in Parliament was the symbol of a general hope for the introduction of a new and better order of things. The Church had broken away from her old anchorage. The squire parsons with their sleepy services were to serve no longer. Among the middle class there was the Evangelical revival. The Catholic revival at Oxford had convulsed the University and had set half the educated men and women speculating on the authority of the priesthood and the essential meaning of Christianity. All were agreed to have done with compromise and conventionalities. Again, the critical and inquiring spirit which had been checked by the French Revolution had awakened from the sleep of half a century. Physical science, now that it was creating railroads, bridging the Atlantic, and giving proof of capacity which could no longer be sneered at, was forming a philosophy of the earth and its inhabitants, agitating and
inconvenient to orthodoxy but difficult to deal with.
Benthamism had taken possession of dominions which religion
had hitherto claimed as its own, was interpreting morality
in a way of its own, and directing political action. . . .
Thus, all around us, the intellectual lightships had broken
from their moorings and it was a new and trying experience.
The present generation which has grown up in an open
spiritual ocean, which has got used to it and has learned
to swim for itself, will never know what it is to find the
lights all drifting, the compasses all awry, and nothing
left to steer by except the stars. (Froude I: 310-312)

In such a condition of "drifting," there existed degrees of
religious belief and disbelief, degrees of concern about the impact
of geological discoveries, degrees of interest in political reform
and the status quo, degrees of nostalgia for the Golden Age of the
past and hope for the future. A clear definition of "truth" became
more and more difficult either to locate or defend with "the compass-
es all awry." The unsettling effects of the Industrial Revolution
brought at the same time the widespread prosperity represented by the
Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. If a Matthew Arnold mourned the
"melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the "Sea of Faith," an
Evangelical like Lord Shaftesbury worked optimistically toward the
moral and physical well-being of the individual. Countering
Malthusian pessimism were Carlyle's belief in the efficacy of work
and Adam Smith's sanction of the individualism that inevitably worked
to the good of the community. In contrast to Benthamite reduction of
morality to numbers and contemporaneous with a growing sense of scientific determinism, Mill's clear voice sounded on the side of free choice and liberty. In this ocean of shifting uncertainty the individual was thrown more and more on himself, less and less on sure guides. Froude concluded:

In this condition the best and bravest of my own contemporaries determined to have done with insincerity, to find ground under their feet, to let the uncertain remain uncertain, but to learn how much and what we could honestly regard as true and believe that and live by it. (312)

A man such as Tennyson could say, "On God and God-like men we build our trust" (H. Tennyson 1: 311), a statement that combines nicely the attempt to believe both in God and in the striving individual, a statement that could be used to describe King Arthur. But such belief was not easily achieved. In such a time of ideational turmoil, it was inevitable that individualism should be both prized and feared, that people would both welcome and fear change. At a time when rising material prosperity meant that more and more middle class workers could afford their own homes, the home became increasingly a place of refuge in the midst of change, a refuge from the rigors of the workplace, and increasingly the place where moral values were inculcated by the parents, and especially the mother. As home and family became more important, parallel fears arose about the possible demoralization of family members, especially of women who were the moral guardians of the family and therefore of the nation.
The Ideal of the Home

In his 1833 study of England's manufacturing population, Peter Gaskell wrote that the ideal family constituted "a little kingdom within itself ... a domain shut out from the operation of those [immoral] influences" at work in society as a whole (51-52). Tennyson referred to the family as the "life within life" soon after he was happily married in 1850 to Emily Sellwood (Wheatcroft 70). Such an ideal of home and family held popular and growing appeal for the mid-Victorians for a number of reasons. Most mid-Victorians called themselves Christians, considered Britain a Christian country and the British people a Christian people despite the reality of the 1851 census that showed that only between 47-54% of the population went to church on census Sunday, a figure far below contemporary expectation (Best 193, 197). But as parson Holmes notes in the frame poem for Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur", there were fears of a "general decay of faith," fear that "there was no anchor more." And for those to whom the church's authority was weakened, home became the anchor. Because of its increased importance, Eric Trudgill notes, "Home was no longer a mere retreat from the bustling world outside, but a sacred place, a quasi-religious centre to men's lives" (39).

The home as refuge posited separate spheres of influence for the husband and wife, with the husband doing his work "in the world" and the wife increasingly responsible for the running of the household and the care of the children. Because mid-Victorian marriages were often based on affection rather than simply on material considerations, wives possessed greater influence in the family than they
had had in the eighteenth century (Degler 26-28). Moreover, because the home was the moral center and the place where the woman had primary influence, she was increasingly "perceived by society and herself as the moral superior of her husband, though his legal and social inferior" (Degler 8). She became, in essence, the moral guardian of the home, and because the home was perceived as being the bulwark of the nation, she was often seen as the moral guardian of the nation as well. Coventry Patmore characterized such a wife as the "Angel in the House" in a book-length poem of the same title.

For Patmore, the home was an "abode endued/ With temple-like repose," and the angel who lived there exerted a religious influence:

Her disposition is devout,
    Her countenance angelical;
The best things that the best believe
    Are in her face so kindly writ
The faithless, seeing her, conceive
    Not only heaven, but hope of it.
("The Rose of the World" 1.4.24)

Such a wife could combat the nation's ebbing Sea of Faith. Patmore also explicitly compares such madonna-like superiority to weak man:

Where she succeeds with cloudless brow,
    In common and in holy course,
He fails, in spite of prayer and vow
    And agonies of faith and force.
("The Comparison" 1.5.30)
Patmore makes clear as well the parameters of such female worthiness. In an age when men were becoming more and more fearful as women pressed for suffrage and for legal rights, he expressed the widely held belief that women were meant to be controlled by their men (Reed 36). When a woman is in love, he wrote, she again becomes childlike and dependent:

A rapture of submission lifts
Her life into celestial rest,
There's nothing left of what she was,
Back to the babe the woman dies,
And all the wisdom that she has
Is to love him for being wise.

("In Love" 2.8.118)

It is just such a relationship that Tennyson explores in "Enid." Tensions inevitably arose, however, when a woman tried to flex her newly strengthened moral muscle outside the home or demanded legal rights. Men--and women--feared the demoralization of the angel of the hearth just as they feared the demoralization of the working class and of the nation as a whole.

Closely allied to the fears of demoralization that resulted from the questioning of religious authority were those rising from geological discoveries. Although Tennyson had not read Darwin's *Origin of the Species* when he published the 1859 *Idylls*, he had read Lyell's 1830 *Principles of Geology*, a book that changed people's concepts of time and of nature. As Gertrude Himmelfarb points out, Lyell argued
that nothing be assumed to have taken place in the past that was not taking place in the present. It was from this . . . proposition that he derived the theory that all changes were the product of a slow, gradual, and cumulative process such as was observable—if he was right in his observations—in the present. (Darwin 90)

The concept of geological time shook the beliefs of the creationists and the Biblical scholars as well as those of the common man who had been taught that the earth was only a few thousands of years old. Geologic evidence could reveal grimly, as Tennyson states in "In Memoriam," that "A thousand types are gone," that Nature is indeed "red in tooth and claw" ("In Memoriam" LVI: 15). Gone was the romantic Wordsworthian view of beneficent nature with its lessons of moral natural law. If fossil evidence proved that "a thousand-types" (LVI: 3) that had once existed were now extinct, it was impossible any longer to believe in either a beneficent Nature or in a Nature that gave transcendental proof of God's ideal world. The God who knew when the least sparrow fell became instead the God of a world in which the strongest survived by killing the weakest. Bentham's felicific calculus worked in such a world as did an industrialist's self-centered success. Morality attended on success, not on a God-given absolute standard, at least in the world that geologic principles described. The plenitude of God's Great Chain of Being now showed frightening gaps. And for those who carried the thinking to its logical conclusion, if those species had disappeared, there
was no guarantee that God would maintain existing species, including man.

But geology evinces a different sort of change as well. If "There rolls the deeps where grew the tree" ("In Memoriam" CXXIII), showing destructive force, the gradual changes also include "There where the long street roars hath been/ The stillness of the central sea," so that active civilization flourishes where once was water. If in geologic time, "The hills are shadows, and they flow/ From form to form," continuing change--and therefore the possibility of progress--also occurs. Such evidence in "In Memoriam" would support those who, like Comte, believed in inevitable progress. Although he used the word "evolutionary" in the first edition of Principles, Lyell did not elaborate upon it. He did, however, speak of development and of nature as a "continuum" (Himmelfarb, Darwin 93). In such a world of geologic time, the defeat of a King Arthur would be less catastrophic than in a discontinuous world. In such a world Arthur Henry Hallam's short life could more easily be seen as part of a continuum, whether viewed from the Christian view of immortality, or from the long sweep of time in which an individual, rather than being unimportant, fits into a pattern of gradual and even cyclic change. And if nothing happens in the present without precedent in the past, as Lyell suggests, Arthur Hallam could in one sense be another version of the earlier noble leader, King Arthur of the legends. In the slow cycle of change, Arthur after Arthur could appear: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new." Changing concepts of geology,
then, could be either frightening or comforting, but most certainly contributed to the unsettled moral and intellectual climate.

In the midst of such tension, people felt the need to make moral distinctions, but they were increasingly difficult to draw. The burgeoning industrialization fostered the growth of individualism as sanctioned by Adam Smith's laissez-faire and "invisible hand" theories, but influential thinkers such as Carlyle vigorously railed against Mammonism. Working conditions in mines and factories as well as overcrowded and unsanitary slums spurred the efforts humanitarians, whose goals looked hopeless in the long term if viewed through a Malthusian lens and hopeful if seen with the Evangelical perspective of the redemptive capability of the individual.

Additional tension resulted when the Protestant work ethic as espoused by Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdrökh, "Work, for the night cometh when no man can work," found itself embodied in the monotony of factory labor or almost equally monotonous city white collar jobs. The combination of population boom and increasing urbanization caused inevitable pressures on the family as city growth necessarily outstripped the city's ability to provide amenities. The sheer number of people caused problems. When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, five cities other than London had populations greater than 100,000. In 1800 only London had been that large (Briggs 59). The 1851 census, which showed that for the first time urban population outnumbered rural, also showed that church attendance was higher in rural areas than in the cities. Horace Mann, chief statistician for the census, noted that "the labouring myriads, the masses of our
working population . . . are never or but seldom seen in our reli-
gious congregations" (Briggs 63). Such a report fostered fear of the
"masses" and anxiety about the loss of traditional rural and reli-
gious values. Surely Matthew Arnold reflected the concerns of many
people when he wrote not only about the receding sea of faith in
"Dover Beach" but also of his feeling in "Stanzas From the Grande
Chartreuse" that he was "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/
The other powerless to be born." In such a world home became more and
more a haven. Such a culture would respond sympathetically to the
parallel tensions in King Arthur's world.

Nor was the political world calm. The 1832 Reform Bill had
opened the door to further demands for enfranchisement, including
votes for women. Reformers worked for legislative action to aid the
poor, to reform the abuses of the Church of England, to repeal the
Corn Law, and, later, to reform the divorce law, all measures that
ericited vigorous debate and disagreement, along with fears that
traditional life was eroding. Abroad, the country's idealized
concept of the White Man's Burden received a grievous blow with the
uprising in Cawnpore. W. L. Burn says, "What happened at Cawnpore in
July 1857 was like a red-hot poker thrust into the face of the
Englishman. It outraged his racial pride, his rough-and-ready sense
of fairplay, his standards of sexual morality" (84). Society seemed
to be advancing in some ways, breaking down in others. Material
success was celebrated in the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, but
the shifting pattern of traditional values made moral decline also
seem a part of the national picture. "Any idea of the
'individualistic' Englishman of the mid-century deliberately rejoicing in the prospect of social chaos is fantastic," Burn notes (292). A hint of what Tennyson himself saw as a breakdown in society can be read in what his wife told their son, Hallam. "One day . . . while writing his 'Guinevere,' A. spoke of 'the want of reverence now-a-days for great men, whose brightness, like that of the luminous bodies in the Heaven, makes the dark spaces look the darker'" (H. Tennyson 1: 424). There were many dark spots for the mid-Victorians, dark spots that made them fear for the future of their country, despite notable economic progress.

The need for re-moralization certainly motivated Mrs. Ellis, who wrote for women a popular series of books entitled Daughters of England, Wives of England, and Women of England in the 1830s and 40s. In the opening chapter of Women of England (1843), she states, "It is the domestic character of England—the home comforts, and fireside virtues for which she is so justly celebrated. These I hope to be able to speak of without presumption, as intimately associated with, and dependent upon, the moral feelings and habits of the women of this favored country" (5). She then admonishes her female readers, "You have deep responsibilities; you have urgent claims; a nation's moral worth is in your keeping" (6). Mrs. Ellis sees a clear link between a woman's role and the "nation's moral worth." But she feels compelled to write, she says, not just because she thinks a woman might need some motherly advice on how to prepare herself for Christian marital duty, but because she is "first premising that the women of England are deteriorating in their moral character, and that false
notions of refinement are rendering them less influential, less useful, and less happy than they were" (Women 5). With increased industrialization and the web of supporting businesses had come increased affluence for many middle-class women, to whom wealth gave servants and the time to shop and make social calls. A woman who became so materialistically worldly was likely to lose the desire to keep home central, was likely to get caught up in a round of fashion and social calls, and was likely therefore to jeopardize her superior moral "influence" over her husband. Mrs. Ellis reflects exactly the masculine ideal of the home-centered angel.

Additionally, those women responsible for the nation's moral worth seemed to be abandoning religious principles in favor of more and more self-indulgence. For example, Elizabeth Gaskell worried about her personal values when she and her husband purchased a house on the outskirts of Manchester in 1850. In a letter to a friend, Mrs. Gaskell is torn between delight about the new house and worry about the needs of the poor:

And we've got a house. Yes! we really have. And if I had neither conscience nor prudence I should be delighted, for it certainly is a beauty . . . You must come and see us in it, dearest Tottie, and try and make me see 'the wrong the better cause,' and that it is right to spend so much ourselves on so purely selfish a thing as a house is, while so many are wanting--that's the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes,' for I have a great number, and that's the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true
Christian--(only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house. (Letters 107-108)

Mrs. Ellis worried, too, about rising self-indulgence among the young wives for whom duty was no longer clearly defined:

By far the greater portion of the young ladies (for they are no longer women) of the present day are distinguished by a morbid listlessness of mind and body, except when under the influence of stimulus, a constant pining for excitement, and an eagerness to escape from everything like practical and individual duty. Of course, I speak of those whose minds are not under the influence of religious principle. Would that the exception could extend to all who profess to be governed by this principle! (Women 6)

To counteract this irreligious, self-indulgent listlessness, Mrs. Ellis prescribes the careful monitoring of the household, and tells the young ladies to make the most profitable use of each day:

'What shall I do to gratify myself--to be admired--or to vary the tenor of my existence?' are not the questions which a woman of right feelings asks on first waking to the avocations of the day. Much more congenial to the highest attributes of woman's character are inquiries such as these. How shall I endeavor through this day to turn the time, the health, and the means permitted me to enjoy, to the best account?' (Women 9)
And never before, Mrs. Ellis points out, had a comforting home been more important for a man: "But never wearied knight, nor warrior covered with the dust of battlefield, was more in need of woman's soothing power, than are those care-worn sons of toil, who struggle for the bread of life, in our more peaceful and enlightened days" (Wives 38). Mrs. Ellis is chiding the modern-day Guinevere who selfishly neglects King Arthur.

To many English middle-class mid-Victorians, Queen Victoria symbolized the virtues of home and family as they should be practiced, especially after the example of George IV, whose financial, moral, and gustatory excesses had angered many of his subjects, and whose marriage had been publicly far from ideal. Of George, Leigh Hunt comments:

A libertine over head and ears in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, companion of demi-reps, a man who has just closed half a century without a single claim on the gratitude of his country or the respect of posterity. (qtd. in Plumb 148)

In contrast, Queen Victoria was viewed as an exemplar who "severely discountenanced 'immorality'" (Best 194). In addition, Queen Victoria was happily married to a man whom she publicly adored and for whom she had borne nine children between 1840 and 1857. Her intense grief and subsequent retirement from many public activities after Prince Albert's death in 1861 intensified the public myth of symbolic domesticity, although her withdrawal as "the Widow of Windsor" (Kipling) eventually led to criticism. Behind the myth, however, was
the Victoria who spoke of her daughter’s pregnancy in 1858 as "horrid news," remembering, perhaps, her feelings about her own pregnancies. On May 16, 1860 the Queen wrote to her pregnant daughter:

All marriage is such a lottery--the happiness is always an exchange--though it may be a very happy one--still the poor woman is bodily and morally the husband's slave. That always sticks in my throat. When I think of a merry, happy, free young girl--and look at the ailing, aching state a young wife generally is doomed to--which you can't deny is the penalty of marriage. (Dearest Child 254)

But because England needed a model of domestic bliss, it looked to the Queen and her handsome husband and family, and by the 1850s the royal family was the model family of the land (Arnstein 82). For example, Mrs. Ellis's Wives of England is dedicated "By especial permission" to "Her Majesty the Queen, In whose exalted station the social virtues of domestic life present the brightest example to her Countrywomen, and the surest presage of her Empire's glory." Even though she privately complained of child-bearing, Victoria's "personal life was of a kind which even Victorians--those of them who were not exaggeratedly strict--regarded as decent: in other words, she lived in erotically satisfied monogamy" (Tingsten 90). Erotically satisfied monogamy" is, of course, is the question examined at length in Tennyson's Idylls of the King.

This enthusiasm for a royal monogamous standard is especially illustrative of the mid-Victorian outlook because in 1820, only twenty years before Victoria's first child was born, England was in
the throes of a divorce scandal concerning George IV and his wife Caroline. For many years the pair had not lived together, but at the time of George's coronation Caroline returned from Switzerland with the intention of being crowned Queen. George, instead, tried to divorce her on grounds of "adulterous intercourse." Her cause was taken up by political radicals who wished to oppose the King, by women who were concerned with the adultery issue, and by those who simply enjoyed the scandal. William Hazlitt noted, "In obscure Welsh coastal villages, in rural southwest Hampshire, in hamlets hundreds of miles from London where the people knew as little of radicalism as they do of necromancy, Caroline found fervid support" (qtd. in Laqueur 417). William Cobbett said that her cause "let loose for a time every tongue and pen in England" (qtd. in Laqueur 417). Thomas Laqueur notes:

Caroline was being sued by a husband so debauched that he had no standing in an ecclesiastical court; she had been denied his bed and board; denied access to her daughter, denied even the use of her household goods. Her home in exile had been violated by spies and her honor as a woman had been publicly impugned. Consequently, whereas for male radicals Caroline's prosecution had become a metaphor for the evils and illegitimacy of the 'old corruption,' for women, radical or not, she came to represent the fragility of marriage, and the inequality of men and women before the law. Moreover, bizarre as it may seem, she herself came to
stand for the virtues of home, hearth, and fidelity.

Caroline thus became a woman's cause. (442)

Caroline replied to the Briston Women's Address that "If an adultery can be established by remote inference, pleas for divorce will be indefinitely multiplied" (Laqueur 443). What happened, remarkably, was that Caroline, with none too savory a personal reputation, was translated for a time into the "good queen," the "queen above faction" (Laqueur 462). She was, for example, escorted into London on January 12, 1821 by an elaborate procession led by eight knights wearing white plumes. The Nottingham Ladies' Address to her asked "'all in whom the spirit of the days of chivalry are not utterly extinct' to rally to the queen, who, like the magnanimous Queen Elizabeth, 'trusted her defense to a brave people'" (Laqueur 463) Clearly, the people sided with the woman accused of adultery rather than with the king known for his profligate habits.

What had not yet developed in England was the intense concomitant emotional reaction against adultery that would be central twenty years later to Tennyson's Idylls of the King and in Parliamentary debates on the Divorce Bill. As women and home became more idealized, the threat that adultery posed became a more crucial issue. Gertrude Himmelfarb suggests:

It is perhaps no accident that at the very time the condition of working class women and children was seen as most grievous, middle class women were being exalted as paragons of virtue and domesticity, and middle class children as models of decorum and obedience. With factories, mines,
and slums conjuring up visions of a Hobbesian state of
take, with political economy appearing to legitimize the
laws of the jungle and Malthusianism holding out the
prospect of unending misery and vice, it became more than
ever necessary to assert the values of decency, propriety,
and chastity—to re-moralize what had been so fearfully
demoralized. (Idea of Poverty 143)

Deterioration seemed to threaten the nation as it had King Arthur’s
kingdom. No one accepted ideal held sway, just as Arthur’s knights
had been unable or unwilling to remain true to their vows to the
ideals of the Table Round. The threat of contagion from modern
adulterous Guineveres posed an especially fearsome prospect.

Adultery: Threat to the Home

The very centrality of the home and the heightened moral status
of women made the nation more than ever fearful of adultery as a sign
of moral decay. Adultery, then regarded as a "form of deviation," a
sort of criminal offense (Hartman 4), was also an act of extreme
individualism on the part of the woman, because an adulteress was
acting on her own behalf rather than obeying the dictates of duty
toward her family. If one’s husband were attracted to another woman
and could not be won back, Mrs. Ellis writes, "One earthly consola-
tion yet remains—it is that of having kept her own affection un-
changed and true: and oh! how infinitely preferable is the feeling
of having borne unfaithfulness, than of having been unfaithful ourselves" (Wives 66). Though she speaks of the husband's adultery, clearly the awful possibility of an erring wife is also present. As Walter Houghton points out, "After marriage, quite as much as before, the Victorian ethic made fidelity the supreme virtue and sexual irregularity the blackest of sins. For a man to be called a moral person came to mean, almost entirely, that he was 'not impure in conduct.' Adultery, especially in the case of the wife, and no matter what the extenuating circumstances, was spoken of with horror" (356). Fear of adultery, of course, was not a new phenomenon, but that fear was exacerbated in mid-Victorian England by men's growing awareness that middle-class women who were supposed to be angels of the house, submissive to their husbands' superior wisdom, were in many cases becoming increasingly self-aware and increasingly active outside the home. Their growing individualism posed an overt threat to the ideal.

Adultery represented, too, strong evidence of unrestrained passion. Those with political and social power, already uneasy because of the French Revolution and various riots and uprisings in England, feared "the socially disruptive potential of unrestrained sexuality," Mary Shanley suggests (367). During the course of the parliamentary debates in 1857 on the Marriage and Divorce Bill, for example, William Gladstone, himself a man who rescued prostitutes and engaged in self-flagellation (Stansky 51), warned his colleagues: "Take care, then, how you damage the character of your countrymen. You know how apt the English nature is to escape from restraint and
control: you know what passion dwells in the Englishman" (3 Hansard, CXLVII. 854). The ideals espoused by politicians such as Gladstone, intellectuals such as Carlyle, or Christian polemists such as Mrs. Ellis were hard pressed by the kind of reality reported by The Times of 7 May 1857, in which the author stated that thousands were "living in sin . . . almost without a thought of the misery they are causing, and the curse they are laying up for themselves" (qtd. in Pearsall 183). Idealists were even harder pressed by the supposed reality presented in Mayhew's Morning Chronicle series on "London Labour and the London Poor" with its statistics on prostitution and its emphasis on scientific classification of the problem. The Westminster Review ran a sixty-page article on prostitution as well. The Times in 1858 remarked that it was plain that "in no capital city of Europe" was there "daily and nightly such a shameless display of prostitution as in London" (qtd. in Trudgill 107). Such studies made it simultaneously more difficult to sustain the ideal of the home and more imperative to do so.

One example of public concern is illustrated by the deputations sent in 1856, 1857, and 1858 from St. James's, Westminster, to the Home Office to ask for greater police control of prostitution (Trudgill 115). Nothing lasting came of the attempts, and public interest in the subject waned. Eric Trudgill suggests:

Public opinion, if not skeptical about the reformers' strategy from the beginning, soon learned to become so . . . Many erstwhile enthusiasts for reform had made the chastening discovery that the problem was much bigger and
more complex than they had thought, that legal sanctions could only work if society underwent profound economic and social changes, and that intervention for the moment might do more harm than good. (116-117)

Parliamentary bills to control prostitution legally were not brought to a vote in either the Commons or Lords when submitted in 1842 and 1844, or again between 1882 and 1885. The society that condemned adultery condoned prostitution. Trudgill comments, "To understand this ironical situation we need to recognize . . . that many Victorians' attitude to the prostitute was governed not by the spirit of persecution, but by the spirit of evasion" (111).

Refusal to declare prostitution illegal, however, did not mean a similarly evasive acceptance of a wife's adultery. Instead, adultery became the central emotional issue in the Parliamentary debates concerning passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act to which Queen Victoria gave royal assent on 25 August 1857. The range of opinion was, as would be expected, wide. The debates that occurred on July 24, July 30, and July 31, 1857 after the bill had been passed by the Lords illustrate those tensions (Hansard, third series 147: 373, 722, 825). Though no direct correlation can be drawn, it is interesting to note that during the course of those debates Tennyson was writing "Guinevere," begun on 9 July 1857 and completed by March 1858. In those debates Gladstone, though in favor of protecting a woman's property rights within marriage, tried repeatedly to keep the bill from coming to a vote because he as a Christian was very much against divorce. Henley agreed, claiming that passage of the bill
"might have the effect of shaking the sanctity of the marriage vow, and so lay the foundation of a vast amount of social evil" (374).

Later in the debate Gladstone attacked a key inequity in the proposed bill, but saw it not as a reason to amend the Bill, but as a reason not to pass it:

It is impossible to do a greater mischief than to begin now, in the middle of the nineteenth century, to undo with regard to womankind that which had already been done on their behalf, by slow degrees, in the preceding eighteen centuries and to say that the husband shall be authorized to dismiss his wife on grounds for which the wife shall not be authorized to dismiss her husband. (393)

The "grounds", of course, refer to adultery, the only basis for divorce in the bill as finally passed. As Mr. Napier pointed out during the debate, "With respect to the question of dissolubility of marriage on the ground of adultery, he . . . should support the proposition, as he believed it was the only ground of divorce which was sanctioned by the Holy Scriptures." He went on to add that "sin in the members of one sex was greater as regards social consequences than in the other" (405). It was obviously the woman to whom he referred.

Frequently quoted to support the view that the woman's adultery was indeed worse than a man's was the scriptural command, "But I say to you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery." Lord Cranworth was afraid that adultery might be the "means of palming spurious
offspring upon the husband (Hansard 145: 813), a telling argument in an upper- and middle-class society based so firmly on hereditary land holdings. Cranworth had said in one of the early debates in 1854 that "It would be too harsh to bring the law to bear against a husband who was 'a little profligate'," and though he had been publicly chided and had modified his language, it was essentially on that basis that the law was finally passed (Shanley 366). Despite the position of those like Lord Lyndhurst, who believed that "in principle, there ought to be no distinction made between the adultery of the husband and that of the wife" (142: 416), "the majority of parliament readily acceded to the proposition that a woman's adultery was most inexpedient, while that of her husband was not," notes Shanley (367). In the light of this majority position, it is notable that Tennyson is sympathetic to Guinevere, makes Arthur partly to blame for Guinevere's adultery, and adds a scene found in none of the sources, a scene in which Arthur and Guinevere meet for the last time, but in which Arthur, though anguished, forgives Guinevere.

Arthur's position is far more forgiving than that of the Bishop of Oxford, who during the debate proposed an amendment that would forbid the remarriage of adulterers. As Shanley points out:

Because the provisions for divorcing a husband were so narrow, this prohibition would have applied overwhelmingly to women. Had the amendment passed, a husband would have been able to commit adultery repeatedly with total legal impunity, while a single transgression by a wife would have subjected her to divorce without the possibility of any
subsequent licit union. The amendment was finally defeated because of the fear that its adoption would doom an adulteress to a life of repeated sin, even prostitution, rather than one of enforced celibacy. That attitude itself revealed parliament's apprehension that female sexuality, if unchecked, might lead to social disorder. (368-9)

Those fears clearly parallel Gladstone's fear of what might ensue were an Englishman's passion unchecked.

In the bill as finally passed, the grounds for divorce for men were not changed, but a divorce became easier and cheaper to obtain because it was no longer necessary to make three expensive court appearances. Because of that, more women were able to get divorces, too, but in implicit legal recognition of a double legal standard, the grounds for women were far more rigidly defined. For a man to get a divorce, any adultery by the wife, no matter what the circumstances, was morally reprehensible enough to be sufficient grounds. Simple adultery on the part of the husband, however, was not sufficient, either morally or socially, to give cause for divorce.

Section 27 of the final bill reads:

It shall be lawful for any husband to present a petition to the said court, praying that his marriage be dissolved, on the ground that his wife has, since the celebration thereof, been guilty of adultery; and it shall be lawful for any wife to present a petition to the said court, praying that her marriage may be dissolved, on the ground that since the celebration thereof, her husband has been guilty of
incestuous adultery, or of bigamy with adultery, or of rape, or of sodomy or bestiality, or of adultery coupled with such cruelty as without adultery would have entitled her to a divorce a mensa et thoro, or of adultery coupled with desertion, without a reasonable excuse, for two years and upwards.

Note that in addition to the very explicit differences in the grounds for divorce, a subtle difference in enforced by the choice of language. A husband prays that his marriage "be dissolved," but a wife prays that her marriage, in conditional terms, "may be dissolved."

A real issue was the threat to the psychologically and morally important home as refuge and moral center. If a greater number of women obtained divorces, the feared moral decay of the nation surely would be advanced. Sir William Heathcote summed up what would be lost: "The sanctity of the family home, the purity of woman, and her equal position in the social scale, were now at stake" (147: 742).

Shanley points out another important aspect of the divorce debates, however:

Disputes over the grounds of divorce were, in essence, disputes over what constituted a violation of the marriage contract, and therefore over the fundamental purpose of marriage. The notion that only adultery justified severing the marriage bond assumed that sexual relationships and the legitimacy of a man's offspring were the basic considerations of the marriage contract. While the majority of parliament did not consider male adultery a significant
threat to such companionship, aggravations such as cruelty, desertion, or bigamy did seem to threaten this aspect of marriage. The discussions over the grounds for a wife's divorce contained the seeds of the idea that marriage could not properly be understood solely as an institution for sexual or reproductive bonding, but as a locus for companionship and mutual support. (370-71)

Tennyson makes just such a locus central to the tragedy in "Guinevere."

In an age when individualism was on the ascendant and in which women demanded rights within the framework of widespread reform ideology, women made remarkably slow legal progress. The tension between the ideal of marriage and the moral decay signalled by adultery was a center of anxiety for the mid-Victorians, and it was in this milieu that Tennyson began work on his Idylls of the King. Central to the Idylls are the effects of adultery, fear of the growing power of women, and the gap between the ideal and the real, including the ideal of the marriage of "companionship and mutual support."
Chapter 3: TENNYSON AND THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND

Mid-Victorian Interest in the Medieval

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* was not an isolated example of fascination with the medieval, but was both the product of a general interest and a spur to further interest. Numerous examples of the medieval appeal had appeared prior to the 1859 *Idylls*. George IV's coronation in 1821, for example, was a full-dress Elizabethan affair complete with newly installed Gothic archways and galleries in Westminster Hall and a King's Champion who entered the ceremonies on horseback. As noted earlier, there were pleas to those in whom chivalry was not dead to champion Queen Caroline's cause. Sir Walter Scott's popular novels fostered medievalism with their idealized depictions of the chivalric Golden Age, as did the widely read *The Broad Stone of Honour* by Kenelm Digby, published in four volumes in 1828-29 and reissued in 1844-48. Mark Girouard notes:

*The distinctive virtues of the chivalrous man, according to Digby, were belief and trust in God, generosity, high honour, independence, truthfulness, loyalty to friends and leaders, hardihood and contempt of luxury, courtesy, modesty, humanity, and respect for women.* (61-62)

Most of the items on the list were threatened by loss of the interdependent traditional society and by the rise of materialism. In the face of those factors, the appeal of the idealized past with its chivalrous and heroic virtues was great.
Further impetus for the love of the chivalric came with the well-publicized Eglinton Tournament held in 1839, a tournament complete with jousting, armor, and a Queen of Beauty. One observer noted, with suitably heightened language, that within the gothic hall bejewelled beauties occasionally flitted among the mailed knights. . . the birds of all climes had resigned their most beauteous plumes and from the lords of the forest to the miniver all animals had offered their gorgeous furs to enhance the peerless beauty of the daughters of that fair land, o'er whom a maiden sovereign transcendent reigns. (qtd. in Burn 62)

The Bal Costumé given by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1844 continued the theme. The two dressed as Edward III and Queen Philippa for the ball and later had portraits of themselves painted in costume. Prince Albert "had been brought up in an atmosphere of German Romanticism; he took chivalry very seriously indeed" (Girouard 112). The public school system adopted chivalry as its code; such painters as Maclise and the pre-Raphaelites Millais, Rossetti, and Holman Hunt popularized medieval themes, and were painters for whom Tennyson's poetry on medieval subjects was a favorite subject.

Tennyson's own early Arthurian poems, "Lady of Shalott" in 1832 and "Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere," "Morte d'Arthur," and "Sir Galahad" in 1842, were extremely popular and helped swell the enthusiasm. In addition, Thomas Wright published an influential new edition of Malory's Morte d'Arthur in 1858. When Idylls of the King appeared in 1859 it sold well; when the poem was reprinted and then
reissued in expanded form, enthusiasm remained high, partly, perhaps, because enthusiasm for the medieval remained strong throughout the nineteenth century and continued into the next. By the end of the nineteenth century, Girouard states:

A gentleman had to be chivalrous, or at least if he were not he was not fully a gentleman. A chivalrous gentleman was brave, straightforward and honorable, loyal to his monarch, country and friends, unfailingly true to his word, ready to take issue with anyone he saw ill-treating a woman, a child or an animal. (260)

Such an outcome was not accidental, Girouard says, but was the result of conscious effort on the part of those such as Digby, Carlyle, FitzGerald, and Kingsley to produce a new model for the ruling classes, to train, in fact, an elite. They had undertaken this aim in conscious reaction to certain features of their own age which they disliked, especially the increase of democracy, and what they saw as the worship of money, and the placing of expedience before principle (260). Although some hegemonic entrenchment is involved in their motives, a very Arthurian interest in providing the community with exemplary leadership is central. The didactic moral purpose of such writers as Mill, Carlyle, and Digby is evident, and contemporary criticism often praised such moral intent, including that found in Idylls of the King.
Tennyson's Works Prior to Idylls of the King

Long before publication in 1859 of the first four idylls in *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson had been fascinated with the Arthurian heritage. As a boy he wrote out in prose the various histories of Arthur; he later read many of the sources, including Malory and Lady Guest’s translation of the *Mabinogion*. Arthurian matter appeared in his poetry with the publication in 1833 of "The Lady of Shalott," in which Lancelot, who looks like a "bearded meteor, trailing light," is only seen reflected in the Lady's mirror of reality. He is "dazzling," a powerful, passionate, and phallic figure totally unaware of the Lady. In the revised 1842 version, however, his words close the poem when, looking at the Lady's lovely corpse, he "mused a little space;/ He said, 'She has a lovely face,/ God in his mercy lend her grace." This addition, besides prefiguring the parallel scene in "Elaine," adds dramatic possibilities to the poem and looks to the more complicated interactions between men and women that will occur in the *Idylls*.

"Morte d'Arthur," begun in 1833 after Arthur Henry Hallam's death, was Tennyson's next poetic response to Arthuriana and evinces Tennyson's concern with the passing of great men. Published in the 1842 *Poems*, "Morte d'Arthur" was later incorporated, with the omission of a single line, as lines 170-440 in the 470-line "The Passing of Arthur," the final idyll in the 1870 edition of *Idylls of the King*. It would have been easy to incorporate it into a fifth idyll in 1859; that Tennyson did not do so indicates, I think, his
intention to emphasize the interaction of women and men in the 1859 Idylls. No such focus appears in "The Passing of Arthur." "Morte d'Arthur" does indicate, however, Tennyson's early interest in the epic proportions of the Arthurian legend, as well as his interest in such themes as idealism in a flawed world and the importance of individual choice in such a world. "Sir Galahad," also published in the 1842 Poems, rests on Arthurian matter as well, but is limited to the immodest braggadocio of Sir Galahad, who states at the outset, "My strength is as the strength of ten,/ Because my heart is pure." Galahad shows the "insufferable priggishness" that Edwardian and twentieth century critics will condemn in Arthur (Johnson 127), a priggishness that Tennyson himself did not see in King Arthur, but deplored as a trait. To his son Hallam he said:

The real test of a man is not what he knows, but what he is in himself and in his relation to others. For instance, can he battle against his own bad inherited instincts, or brave public opinion in the cause of truth? The love of God is the true basis of duty, truth, reverence, loyalty, love, virtue and work. I believe in these although I feel the emptiness and hollowness of much of life. 'Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.' But don't be a prig. Most young men with anything in them make fools of themselves at some time or other. (H. Tennyson 1: 318)

In "Sir Galahad," Tennyson was experimenting with themes of masculine purity and strength, although it is difficult to believe that he admired Sir Galahad wholeheartedly.
Poems also contains "Sir Lancelot and Guinevere: A Fragment," a poem significant for its early treatment of the lovers. Guinevere "seemed a part of Joyous Spring," an identification of her with the earth and the passions of spring that will form an important part of her characterization in the "Guinevere" section of the Idylls. This 1842 "Fragment" mentions Lancelot by name only in the title, but its final lines complicate the issue of Lancelot's love much as it will be complicated in the Idylls:

She look'd so lovely, as she sway'd

The rein with dainty finger-tips,

A man had given all other bliss,

And all his worldly worth for this,

To waste his whole heart in one kiss

Upon her perfect lips.

The enigmatic "had given" (would have given, did give?) and "waste" (gladly give up everything for a single kiss, be destroyed by the kiss?) foreshadow the agonized blend of lust, courtly love, Round Table ideals, and inevitably broken vows in the Idylls.

When he wrote "Morte d'Arthur" Tennyson apparently had in mind a long poem on the Arthurian legend, but Sterling's review in the Quarterly Review of 1842 was cool toward "Morte," though not toward Poems as a whole. Tennyson, always sensitive to anything other than enthusiastic praise of his poetry, "later claimed that it had been the death of his ambition at the time to write an Arthurian epic of the twelve standard books" (Martin 266). In his diary entry for February 3, 1867, William Allingham writes that Tennyson had told him
that day, "I had it all in my mind, could have done it without any trouble" (150). But although he put aside the plan to write the *Idylls*, Tennyson didn’t abandon all Arthurian concerns. "In Memoriam," which he began writing soon after learning of the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam in September 1833, and continued to expand and revise until its publication in 1850, contains many of the same tensions found in the *Idylls*. Although King Arthur is not specifically alluded to in "In Memoriam," the conjunction of name and noble nature heightens the sense of loss in that poem. In each poem the greatness of the man lost is a central theme. Both poems, too, explore the importance of individual moral choice in a world beset with uncertainty and change.

Love and marriage, two themes also central to the 1859 *Idylls*, infuse "The Princess" as well. "The Princess," first published in 1847, asks questions about women’s place in society, about their legal rights, and about women’s education. Robert Martin says that Tennyson "was determined to show that he was concerned with contemporary issues and that he was capable of a great deal more than the 'foolish facility' that one reviewer had found in his poetry" (287).

Similar contemporary issues, masked in medieval trappings, are of course found in the *Idylls*. Tennyson’s definition of a woman’s role in "The Princess" is far from that of the submissive angel popularized in Patmore’s poem, *The Angel in the House*. Mary Hartman points out, "That code [of manners] defined the proper young woman as a frail but appealing, intellectually inferior but morally superior being, whose duty it was to be passive, decorative, and sexually
pure" (2). In contrast, the Prince says to his prospective wife, Ida:

For woman is not undevelopt man,
But diverse, could we make her as the man,
Sweet Love were slain: his dearest bond is this,
Not like to like, but like in difference.
Yet in the long years liker must they grow;
The man be more of woman, she of man;
He gain in sweetness and in moral height,
Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw the world,
She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care,
Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind;
Till at the last she set herself to man,
Like perfect music unto noble words. (VII: 259-270)

Though there is still something "childlike" in the married woman, and though the man gains "moral height" from his association with the woman, the emphasis is not on separate spheres but on the goal that "Yet in the long years liker must they grow." Though the man still be "in the world" he will gain "in sweetness and in moral height." The woman, still engaged in "childward care" yet will develop mental breadth. Tennyson starts from the mid-Victorian stereotypes of morally superior woman and mentally superior man and moves beyond them. In the Prince's famous definition of marriage, it is in marriage that complementariness is realized, the completeness that is so lacking in the royal marriage in the Idylls. Just as King Arthur hoped that his marriage and his Table Round would be the examples for
the entire kingdom, the Prince hopes that he and Ida can be living examples of what will exist more generally in the society of the future:

'Dear, but let us type them now
In our own lives, and this proud watchword rest
Of equal seeing either sex alone
Is half itself, and in true marriage lies
Nor equal, nor unequal: each fulfills
Defect in each, and always thought in thought,
Purpose in purpose, will in will, they grow,
The single pure and perfect animal,
The two-celled heart beating, with one full stroke,
Life.' (VII: 282-289)

Here Tennyson plays with the meaning of "equal," which is not used in the sense of legal equality as Mary Wollstonecraft or J. S. Mill would use it. Instead, while recognizing the differences between men and women, the prince says each is equally important in forming the whole of the "perfect animal" that neither could be alone. In marriage there is no question of equality, but of unity and wholeness.

Such an androgynous blend is, as Carol Christ points out, very like Tennyson's conception of Christ, to whom he attributed "a union of male and female qualities" (156). In Volume I of Memoir, for example, Hallam Tennyson quotes his father as saying, "I am always amazed when I read the New Testament at the splendour of Christ's purity and holiness and at His infinite pity," a statement that Hallam annotates with the footnote, "What he called 'the man-woman'
in Christ, the union of tenderness and strength" (326). Frederick Locker-Lampson reported Tennyson as saying, nearly 20 years later on an 1869 tour of Switzerland, "If the rationalists are in the right, what is the meaning of all the mosques and temples and cathedrals, spread and spreading over the face of the earth? They will not easily beat the character of our Lord, that union of man and woman, sweetness and strength" (H. Tennyson 2:69). Although Hallam elsewhere says that his father "disliked discussion on the Nature of Christ 'seeing that such discussion was mostly unprofitable, for none knoweth the Son but the Father'" (1:326), the Christlike combination of strength and sweetness appears again in the Arthur of the Idylls. And the ideal of a marriage in which "purpose in purpose, will in will they grow" is very like King Arthur's ideal of marriage.

Angel in the House

If Patmore's Angel in the House speaks for a patriarchal society's hopes for marriage in a changing world, and Tennyson's Prince and King Arthur speak for a different sort of ideal marriage, where did Tennyson's personal beliefs lie? Tennyson publicly alluded to women's moral superiority and is reported to have admired Patmore's book. In 1870 Mrs. Bradley wrote of a dinner conversation at Tennyson's home in Farringford that Tennyson was amused at some of the Women's Rights activities in America. "He said that all the great men that had ever lived were made out as sort of beasts with a view to exalt women. 'You know,' he added, 'that I think women much better (morally) than we are'" (H. Tennyson 2:93-94). It is not
clear, however, who added "(morally)" so that the quotation is of limited value in proving Tennyson's beliefs. An additional proof, also of somewhat limited value, occurs in a letter that Aubrey deVere wrote to Hallam Tennyson in 1892 after the poet's death. DeVere wrote of an evening in 1854 when he and Tennyson had been reading together at Farringford: "On one occasion our book, which we agreed in greatly admiring, was Coventry Patmore's Angel in the House, then recent" (H. Tennyson 1:378). In 1854 only "The Betrothal," the first of the four parts of Angel in the House, had been published, so that Tennyson's comments would necessarily have been limited to that portion, and "admiration" of the book does not necessitate endorsement of its concepts, which center on a woman becoming a happily dependent child again once she becomes engaged.

But what of Tennyson's marriage to Emily Sellwood? In many respects Emily was very nearly the type of the angel in the house, although scholarship about the relations between Tennyson and his wife is greatly hampered by the fact that Hallam burned most of the correspondence between his parents and edited much of the rest, so that what remains may be very much an idealized portrait. Of the extant letters only those few that Hallam included in his two-volume Memoir, along with letters Tennyson wrote between 1821 and 1850, have been published to date. There are hints in two letters from Alfred to Emily, however, both written before they were married, that he thought of her as a being morally superior to himself. He concludes a letter written in 1839 with "I bless thee [who] am not worthy to bless thee, for I know thy worth" (Letters 169). In a letter of
1840, in which Tennyson breaks off their engagement, he writes, "I need thy assurance to make up the deficiencies (sic) in my own strength," and concludes the letter with, "Fine is it, that I should preach to thee, so much stronger and holier than I am (Letters 183). Since even then Emily was noticeably physically frail, Tennyson must have been alluding to what he perceived as moral strength.

Central to the question of Tennyson's attitude toward women is the question of his delayed marriage. The two had become engaged in 1838 after a courtship of nearly two years; two years later Tennyson broke the engagement and had little contact with Emily for the next nine years. Tennyson resumed his correspondence with Emily in 1849 and the two were finally married in June 1850. Robert Martin suggests that the delay was caused by Tennyson's lack of physical ardor and "perhaps an inarticulate but understandable desire simply to escape the ties of marriage" (248). An additional cause, Martin says, may have been Tennyson's fear of "marriage and paternity because of his own inheritance of mental instability" (248). Tennyson himself thought he was too poor to marry, but that would not explain the nine-years' lapse in correspondence or his reluctance to set a wedding date once the engagement had been resumed.

By 1849, however, for some reason Tennyson was once more inclined to marry. Whether it was relief from fear of transmittable epilepsy or fewer financial fears, whether it was because of the partial healing of the anguish caused by Arthur Henry Hallam's death, whether it was a matter, as he said to Aubrey Devere in 1845 "that he must marry and find love and peace or die" (Devere 87) or a
combination of all or some of these motives is not clear. As Charles Tennyson writes, "The causes leading up to the renewal of relations between the lovers will probably never be exactly discovered" (241). At any rate, marriage and passion were very much on Tennyson's mind when he wrote "The Princess" in 1847, published "Maud" in 1855, and composed the 1859 *Idylls*, written between February 1856 and February 1859.

In spite of his having put off marriage so long, Martin asserts, "There is no reason to think that [Tennyson] ever regretted his marriage for a moment" (334). In fact, Martin suggests that the "new contentment" that Tennyson found in marriage allowed him to return to the epic Arthurian project that he had been pondering for nearly 40 years (404). De Vere noted, "He is far happier than I ever saw him before and his 'wrath against the world' is proportionately mitigated. He has an unbounded respect for his wife, as well as a strong affection, which has been growing stronger ever since his marriage" (De Vere 72). Patmore, shortly after the marriage, wrote to his own wife of Emily: "She seems to understand him thoroughly, and, without the least ostentation or officiousness of affection, waits upon and attends to him as she ought to do" (Tennyson, *Letters* 335). Such a comment, of course, could have been as much suggestion as observation. Carlyle, too, applauded the marriage, and considered Tennyson "really improved," "cheerful in what he talks and looking forward to a future less 'detached' than the past has been" (qtd. in Hoge 20).
Tennyson was, apparently, considerate of his wife's frail health. He often pushed her in a wheeled chair on outings to the garden and beyond, for example. Trudgill notes:

Current notions of female delicacy ... were not always consistent with female health. The result for many husbands was weak, nervous wives continually suffering from lassitude and fatigue, all too easily worn out by the exertions of child-bearing and child-rearing (122).

James O. Hoge states, however, that

Certainly it was fashionable for Victorian ladies to be delicate, and refinement seems often to have entailed sickness as its accepted and expected corollary. From all indications, however, Emily's weakness was physical, not psychic ... though her specific ailments are rarely particularized, and her womanish infirmities may well have been expected and even encouraged by a husband predisposed to regard the highest type of woman as a rather unphysical being. (8)

Emily, Hoge says, "was troubled throughout her life by a severe spinal disorder" (7). Martin disagrees, however, and writes:

At the time of their marriage Tennyson was forty-one, she was thirty-seven. As his earlier life would have suggested, it was almost certainly not a passionate marriage. His choice of an invalid wife approaching middle age was no indication of overwhelming sexuality. Before their marriage Emily had frequently been confined to a sofa by
spinal trouble, and her affliction worsened afterwards. There was surely a physical cause of her increasing illness, but it is hard to avoid the suspicion that it was also connected psychologically with a dislike for or difficulty with sex. Certainly, within a short time after their marriage they habitually went to bed at different hours, and during much of their life together they occupied separate bedrooms. (335)

That "rather unphysical being" did give birth to three sons, the first of them stillborn, within four years of her marriage, however, and proved capable of running a household with two active sons, a husband who was often absent, and frequent houseguests. After a visit to Farringford in 1859 Edward Lear wrote of Emily to a friend:

I should think computing moderately, that 15 angels, several hundreds of ordinary women, many philosophers, a heap of truly wise and kind mothers, 3 or 4 minor prophets, and a lot of doctors and schoolmistresses, might all be boiled down, and yet their combined essence fall short of what Emily Tennyson really is. (qtd. in Martin 427)

That description points to a woman far more complex and competent than a frail angel who was "passive, decorative, and sexually pure."

During the same visit, Lear wrote in his diary, "E. T. is assuredly a most complete angel--and no mistake--but--poor dear--she is ill and weary. 'Please God, if I live one or two years more' she said once today. But what labour for him!--how little he seems to regard it!" (qtd. in Martin 427). That observation might well indicate a bit of
hypochondria on Emily's part since she was 83 when she died, having outlived Tennyson for four years. And it may indicate, too, that Tennyson, recognizing Emily's competence, yet took her ministrations for granted.

Not only did Tennyson depend on Emily for household management, but for secretarial skills as well so long as she was physically able. He turned to her, too, for criticism of his poems: "As always, Tennyson's deepest need was for uncritical praise, which she supplied in generous measure, for without it she thought he would be rendered incapable of creation" (Martin 426). Although Emily apparently felt free to comment on the poems, she noted in her journal, "It is a mistake in general for him to listen to the suggestions of others about his poems" (Martin, no fn, 426). In contrast, Elizabeth Barrett Browning observed, "Tennyson is too much indulged. His wife is too much his second self, she does not criticize enough" (Fields 352). Nothing in any of these comments indicates that the marriage was an unhappy one. Tennyson's last words to his wife were, "My joy," and although Emily died four years after her husband's death, among her last words were, "I tried to be a good wife" (Hoge 372). Emily was valued for her intellect as well as for her household skills, but both were dedicated to the furtherance of Tennyson's goals. He did not hesitate, for example, to leave her more and more alone at Farringford while he made trips to the social and intellectual stimulation to London. But neither is there any indication that she objected. She was not a George Eliot or even an Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Although the accompaniment was more sostenuto than
brilliant, Emily had set herself "like perfect music unto noble words."

Idylls of the King

Tennyson's long-term interest in Arthurian legend, in themes of individual moral responsibility, in marriage, and in the relations between men and women surfaces again and again. But why did Tennyson choose the Arthurian matter as the subject on which to devote so much time? Clearly the 1859 Idylls were to be incorporated into a larger work planned from the outset, as Kathleen Tillotson and John Rosenberg prove (Tillotson, "Tennyson's Serial Poem" and Rosenberg, "Idylls of the King: Evolving the Form"). Certainly as a major poet he would have been interested in writing in the epic genre, and if...so, the Matter of Arthur would have been the logical choice of subject matter for England's Poet Laureate. It is, perhaps, the one subject that compares favorably with that of the Odyssey or the Aeneid, or with the Matter of Charlemagne. It was a time of growing nationalism for the country as a whole (Houghton 324), and Tennyson, both by personal bent and by virtue of his role as Poet Laureate, had strong nationalist leanings. King Arthur, a hero of mythic proportions, had united Britain and was, therefore, a fitting precursor of nineteenth century nationalism, which also appears in Tennyson's "Maud," in which the protagonist volunteers to fight in the Crimean War, Tennyson wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade" in 1854 in praise of such men who fought bravely despite leadership that had "blunder'd." Widespread anger at the mismanagement of the Crimean War
swept the country; lack of moral responsibility was summed up in the widely used phrase, "Nobody's Fault" (Butt and Tillotson 229), an idea that Charles Dickens developed in a bitter essay in the August 30, 1856 issue of Household Words:

The power of Nobody is becoming so enormous in England, and he alone is responsible for so many proceedings, both in the way of commission and omission; he has so much to answer for, and is so constantly called to account; that a few remarks upon him may not be ill timed.

The hand which this surprising person had in the late war is amazing to consider. It was he who left the tents behind, who left the baggage behind, who chose the worst possible ground for encampments, who provided no means of transport, who killed the horses, who paralyzed the commissariat, who knew nothing of the business he professed to know and monopolised, who decimated the English army. ("Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody" 145).

With poor military and political leadership, and with a monarchy noted more for its domesticity than its statesmanship, England was in need of another Arthur, especially since England feared a coup d'état in France and increasingly feared the might of a unifying Germany and an expansionist Russia. The soldiers were as brave as ever, and men like Nicholson, Havelock, and Sir John Lawrence were lauded, but a noble military giant was missing, one of the "dark spots" of which Tennyson complained to his wife. With "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," published a month after the Duke's death in 1852,
Tennyson commemorated the last of the great heroes. In an age of individualism, heroes are few, but the needs are great for people of Arthur's stature.

John Stuart Mill, in his essay "Civilization" written in 1836 looked at the modern commercial society and concluded that men were concentrating their energies on "money getting" and that success depended "not upon what a person is, but what he seems." An individual had become "lost in the crowd"; individual character was "enervated" (the same complaint that Mrs. Ellis voices about the young ladies of 1843). "The spectacle, and even the very idea of pain," the "harshness, rudeness, and violence" of "the struggle of one indomitable will against another" had been removed from the daily lives of the middle classes. Therefore, Mill pointed out, while the "refined classes" of modern society possessed more of the "amiable and humane" qualities, they had "much less of the heroic." People now evinced "a moral effeminacy, an ineptitude for every kind of struggle" (qtd. in Semmel 90). Thomas Carlyle wrote of the same sort of enervated society and the same need for a leader, a hero:

I liken common languid Times with their unbelief, distress, perplexity, with their languid doubting characters and embarrassed circumstances impotently crumbling-down into ever worse distress towards final ruin;--all this I liken to dry dead fuel waiting for the lightning out of Heaven that shall kindle it. The great man . . . is the lightning. His word is the wise healing word which all can believe in. In all epochs of the world's history, we shall
find the Great Man to have been the indispensable saviour of his epoch. (Heroes, Lecture 1:13)

Matthew Arnold, too, in his Preface to the 1853 Poems, saw the times as so "wanting in moral grandeur," so unsettled spiritually, that he told the modern poet to turn to the past, to "delight himself with the contemplation of some noble action of a heroic time, and to enable others, through his representation of it, to delight in it also" (213).

The story of Arthur provided for Tennyson and his readers the struggles of indomitable wills, involving noble actions and moral grandeur. "The martial ideal emerged as a popular antidote to overcivilization," Jackson Lears says, and provided "critics of overcivilization" a "clearly premoorden alternative to lackluster 'industrial man.'" "The chivalric hero of romantic fiction could be a brute fighter, a man of honor, or both at once" (100-101). Arthur, with his chivalric ideals and his hopes for the entire kingdom, seemed the heroic leader in a Golden Age, a mythic figure. He was a brute fighter and a man of honor, a leader who had unified the kingdom, fought off foreign invaders, and established a code of conduct for his followers. To the mid-Victorian he represented what Robert Elliott calls "The Golden Age and utopia, the one a myth, the other a concept, . . . both projections of man's wishful fantasies, answering to the longings for the good life which have moved him since before history began" (7). King Arthur combined both the "amiable and humane" qualities of the nineteenth century gentleman and the "heroic" qualities of vigorous medieval knights.
But the story of Arthur represented more than the wishful fantasies of people wanting to escape to the heroic past. Bernard Semmel identifies the "three great problems of social metaphysics" as "those of free will and determinism, virtue and happiness, and of order and progress," all interrelated problems (187). Those were issues that King Arthur and his court faced just as mid-Victorians had to face them. How much does Arthur have to do with his destiny? How important is individual action as compared with Merlin's prophecies? Tennyson changes important "facts" in Malory's version so that, for example, Arthur is more a free agent, so that Vivien has no supernatural power before she seduces Merlin. Semmel notes of the Victorians:

With the decline of religious faith, Science was to replace theology as the chief rival of the humanist spirit. Just as religion had once postulated a system under which man and the universe were subject to divine will, so now the philosophers depicted a world in which all are under the aegis of scientific laws. . . . While liberal rhetoric sounded appeals to freedom, liberal 'science', repudiating individual liberty and responsibility saw men as virtual puppets in the unremitting grip of relentless laws of physics and biology, psychology, history, and economics. (8-9)

But not all mid-Victorian thinkers accepted either theological or scientific determinism, although they had to grapple with the problem. Carlyle, with his emphasis on heroes, finds the will most
operative in great men. Semmel notes, "For Carlyle . . . the will of the strong operated as an instrument of a necessitarian history. For Mill, history was an arena in which an individual will might act in however limited a way as a counter to the powerful drives of necessity" (122). Mill, concerned with moral development, "insisted that our character was in part formed by our will and that 'we are under a moral obligation to seek the improvement of our moral character'" (Semmel 51).

As noted above, free will is to a certain extent operative in the Idylls. Hallam Tennyson reports that his father believed man's will be free, but only within certain limits:

Man's Free-will is but a bird in a cage; he can stop at the lower perch, or he can mount to a higher. Then that which is and knows will enlarge his cage, give him a higher and higher perch, and at last break off the top of his cage, and let him out to be one with the Free-will of the Universe. . . . If the absorption into the divine in the after-life be the creed of some, let them at all events allow us many existences of individuality before this absorption; since this short-lived individuality seems to be but too short a preparation for so mighty a union.

(1: 318-319)

Individual choices had to do, inevitably, with choices between virtue and happiness, often between the happiness of the individual and the good of society. The tensions inherent in such choices torment both Guinevere and Lancelot, and impel other characters as
well. Tennyson not only makes of Guinevere and Lancelot much more complex characters than those found in Malory, but also places them in situations more morally enigmatic than those in Malory. Like Mill, Tennyson does not pretend that the choice of virtue is an easy one. Guinevere and Lancelot love one another; Arthur is absorbed in the business of the Table Round and neglects Guinevere; the community is at fault. Lancelot, torn between virtue and pleasure, and even between two virtues, is "visibly scarred" as the result of his guilty passion. But for Tennyson, as for Mill, the individual should use his free will to choose for the good of society, not for self. With increased possibility of free choice comes increased responsibility for unselfish choice. As Mill points out in his 1861 Utilitarianism, nobility of character means a readiness voluntarily to give up individual pleasure for the happiness of others. The true utilitarian standard, then, is not that of Bentham, not the numerically quantified greatest happiness of the greatest number, but the happiness of the entire community as determined by individually responsible moral choices (Semmel 176). This, too, is Arthur's dream and the conclusion reached by Guinevere in her final parting from Arthur as Donald S. Hair points out:

The central figure in the tragedy is not Arthur but Guinevere, and it is possible to see all other responses to Arthur as types of Guinevere's response. Like the knights, she takes vows which wed her to the ideal. But the complexity of human nature is such that she is attracted to Lancelot; and she later rationalizes that attraction by
arguing that Arthur's ideal is humanly impossible. Her actions lead directly to her downfall, and her last meeting with Arthur at Almesbury is a moment of tragic insight, when she realizes that Arthur is the 'highest and most human too.' (137-138)

Only through correct moral choices can there be order, and with order, progress, two important themes in Idylls.

Nineteenth century bourgeois morality, Lear's notes, centered on "the autonomous individual, whose only moral master was himself" (12). Although such freedom could be exhilarating, many feared being adrift without warning lights or buoy (Froude 312). Thus, many mid-Victorians looked to women to exercise the moral restraint they felt to be beyond men's power. And if so, women like Guinevere and Vivien, who chose not to follow "moral restraint," were potentially more dangerous than men who lost control. The Reverend William Tuckniss expresses that fear in his Introduction to Henry Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor:

Who can tell the pestiferous influence exercised on society by one single fallen woman? Who can calculate the evils of such a system? . . . The weight of this influence is untold: view it in the dissolution of domestic ties, in the sacrifice of family peace, in the cold desolation of promising homes; but, above all, in the growth of practical Atheism, and in the downward tendency of all that is pure and holy in life! (xxxix)
Women were "expected to be not only submissive helpmates but pillars of strength in times of trouble and repositories of moral and cultural authority. Their roles simultaneously prescribed self-effacement and self-reliance" (Lears 16). And if they became more self-reliant, might they not become frighteningly more assertive? Similarly, if men such as Gladstone were fearful of passions breaking out of control, their almost obsessive concern with prostitutes shows their fear that women, supposedly morally superior, also contain a Magdalene side to their nature. Tuckniss concludes his Introduction by depicting woman as potentially either Magdalene or Mary:

> You will never fulfill a mission dearer to Christ, you will never promote a charity more congenial to the spirit of this gospel; you will never more surely wake up joy in heaven, and force tears into the eyes of sympathising angels, than when you can bring a Magdalene face to face with her Redeemer, and thrill her poor heart, even to breaking, with the plaintive music of that divine voice, calling her by name--MARY. (xl)

If the Magdalene potential were to erupt in a married woman, the result could be adultery. Mill's dream, says Semmel, was that of an "innocent Magdalene," a woman "making virtue and sensual happiness one" (qtd. in Semmel 54-55) Such was Arthur's dream; such was Guinevere's potential.

The 1859 edition of the Idylls illustrates the culmination of Tennyson's interest in the Arthur legend as applied to mid-nineteenth
century tensions. "Vivien" was begun in February and finished on 31 March 1856; "Enid" was started on 16 April 1856 and completed by 5 November; "Guinevere" was begun on 9 July 1857 and completed by March 1858; and "Elaine," begun in July 1858, was virtually complete by 8 February 1859.

The fact that Tennyson named each of the idylls for its central woman is significant, especially in light of his later change of "Enid" into the two books "The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid," "Vivien" into "Merlin and Vivien," and "Elaine" into "Lancelot and Elaine." Only the title "Guinevere" remained unchanged. Such emphasis implies less a later diminution of interest in women than it does a current centrality of interest, both in his personal life and in the nation. Women are central in the poems just as the role of women is central to the health of the Round Table community, and to the health of the mid-Victorian community. Equally important, each of these women plays an active rather than a passive role. These women are far less shadowy, far more psychologically complex than are their counterparts in earlier Arthurian writing. Each is an individualized portrait of a woman capable of effecting change. Enid is no mere patient Griselda, Vivien subdues the wisest man in the kingdom, Elaine's pure love causes rupture between Lancelot and Guinevere, showing Guinevere in a new light to Lancelot; and Guinevere's adultery is seen as directly affecting the demoralization of the entire Round Table and as leading to the eventual destruction of order within the kingdom.
Tennyson also underscores the women's individual importance by choosing the idyll as his poetic form. Tennyson himself said of the form, "Regarding the Greek derivation, I spelt my Idylls with two 1's mainly to divide them from the ordinary pastoral idyls usually spelt with one 1. These idylls group themselves round one central figure" (Ricks, ed, Poems, fn. 1467). Additionally, according to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, an idyll is "a short descriptive poem usually dealing with pastoral or rural life." Tennyson's idylls, in being neither short nor pastoral, but in dealing with chivalric courtly traditions, make effective use of the interplay between idyllic and fallen, between the roles of women and the ideal of the King.

Rosenberg points out that "An idyll is a 'little picture' of a character or mood colored by a single, dominant emotion" (Fall 25). Each idyll can be read as an isolated unit, therefore, and does not connect in unbroken time sequence with the next. They are unified, however, in ways that stress both the importance of the individual and the fact of an organic society. Each of the idylls relates to King Arthur, each reacts to the adultery. And in each of the idylls the adulterous story is told by the same impersonal narrative voice, but with the stress on the details and viewpoint that would appeal to the central woman in each, as will be explained later.

Although highly individualized, the 1859 Idylls illustrates all three of the problems of social metaphysics: free will and determinism, virtue and happiness, and order and progress. The medieval setting emphasizes the timeless nature of the problems; the choices each of Tennyson's characters can make are choices open to
mid-Victorians as well. Free will exists within the framework of social need; individuals must choose between personal gratification and the good of the community, the higher happiness; and the actions of the individuals very much affect the order within and the progress of society. Tennyson, however, in widening the breadth of possible individual moral choice, adds a strong sense of the individual human potential for redemptive action within a society that is in grievous need of such action. Tennyson tailors the Arthurian story to fit the problems of his own era.
Chapter 4:  IDYLLS OF THE KING

Introduction

Although Guinevere is the central character only in the idyll named for her, her adultery is the unifying link among all four idylls and influences the action to a degree not found in either the Mabinogion or in Malory. Despite the striking differences between organic and hierarchical medieval society and the increasingly capitalistic, individualistic nineteenth century society, Tennyson draws clear parallels between the two. Guinevere's adultery, a highly individualistic choice based on her passions rather than on her vows or the good of society, influences the fabric of the entire society just as Mrs. Ellis's wife of England is responsible for the moral state of the nation. Breaking the marriage vow is a potent act in both societies, with effects that range far beyond the immediate family.

Adultery in both societies threatens society itself. The mere rumour of the Queen's adultery is enough to taint Geraint's belief in Enid. The accusation of Guinevere's adultery is the one immorality that Merlin is unable to defend against Vivien's attack on the court; as a result, Merlin is weakened and more vulnerable to defeat by Vivien. Lancelot is unable to love the pure Elaine, truly worthy of his love, so that a potentially ideal marriage cannot take place. And, finally, because of Guinevere's infidelity, King Arthur's great and idealistic plan for the kingdom is first marred, then destroyed. As Tony Tanner points out in Adultery in the Novel, society's very
existence is predicated on rules, including those "governing what may be combined and what should be kept separate" (12-13). Unpunished adultery challenges those rules, and by extension, reveals other rules to be "arbitrary rather than absolute." Adultery, adulteress, and adulteration all imply "pollution, contamination, a 'base admixture,' a wrong combination." Adultery, then, always a threat to society, would be particularly apt to cause anxiety in a society like that of the mid-Victorians, who already felt numerous threats to order and stability, as noted earlier, and who were consequently concerned with sorting things into their proper categories.

In a society threatened by rising individualism among women, and with a female monarch whom the public needed to see as personifying domestic virtue, the well-known story of Guinevere, but with emphasis on the effects of adultery, would be an old story with new significance. If, as Tennyson says in "The Epic" that introduces the 1842 "Morte d'Arthur," "a truth/ Looks freshest in the fashion of the day," the issue of adultery held a newly heightened significance for the mid-Victorian worried about the sanctity of the home and the changing role of women. A Guinevere was as great a threat to Victorian England as she had been to Arthur's kingdom.

Although adultery was the most blatant moral threat to the stability of the home, Tennyson's Idylls reflects other and more subtle dangers that many mid-Victorians perceived as inherent in woman's increased assertiveness. Nina Auerbach points to "the ease with which the Victorian angel becomes demonic" in Victorian art and literature (63). Angels had formerly been powerful male figures with
boundless freedom, and although constrained by society's expecta-
tions, the new female angel in the house retained some of that mythic
power. Those who look only at her imprisonment in the house fail to
see that power. "This apparently quiescent figure is an implicit
revolt against the patriarchal imagery of official Christianity,
suggesting less a passive withdrawal from life than an active dis-
placement by female of male religious icons," Auerbach states (73).
In other words, by calling the wife an "angel in the house," men were
both noting and accepting that new power. Additionally, such men
were part of what Auerbach calls a "surge toward the establishment of
a new mythos," a mythos in which women gain both power and esteem.
Such a mythos in turn lends itself to the androgynous ideal expressed
in Tennyson's definition of Christ as "a union of male and female
qualities," as well as in Tennyson's portrayal of Arthur and of
Arthur's dream for the kingdom. Arthur believed that his "purpose"
for the kingdom depended on both male and female contributions.

Although Patmore himself stressed only the moral superiority
within woman's submissive role, many writers and artists, including
Tennyson, were acutely aware of the power, the other side of the
morally superior coin. The ideal of angelic moral superiority
partook of the power of the demonic; the wife was not simply a
paragon of virtue "enveloped in family life and seeking no identity
beyond the roles of daughter, wife, and mother" (Auerbach 69).
Outside Patmore's pages the woman was increasingly a power to be
reckoned with--and feared. Tennyson's Merlin, for example, in a line
without precedent in the sources, says, "For men at most differ as
Heaven and earth, / But women, worst and best, as Heaven and Hell" ("Vivien," 812-13). Clearly the angel in the house has a base counterpart far more powerful and dangerous than the worst of men. All four women in the 1859 *Idylls* use sex and language to gain power, although they run the spectrum from romantically ineffectual Elaine to the completely self-absorbed Guinevere. In all of the idylls Tennyson rings telling changes on his sources. Even Enid, apparently an angelic wife based closely on the *Mabinogion*, is subtly menacing. In each of the four idylls, then, Tennyson explores the relations between men and women, with special focus on the woman's exercise of power.

The form in which Tennyson chose to write his 1859 *Idylls* also reflects mid-Victorian concerns. As noted, each idyll is a little epic that can stand alone and yet is united thematically with the other three. Although Arthur is central to the book's title, his point of view does not appear until the fourth idyll, "Guinevere." Additionally, although none of the idylls is told in first person narration, the details given in each concerning Guinevere and adultery are those appropriate to the woman named in the title of that idyll. The least sympathetic portrait of Guinevere appears in "Elaine," for example, the most sympathetic in "Guinevere." Tennyson, then, is using a technique that will receive high praise in the hands of such twentieth century novelists as Joyce or Woolf, the technique that Joyce in *Ulysses* calls parallax, the ability to see the same thing from several different angles, the inability to see anything "whole" from a single angle.
Such a technique was not without precedent in mid-nineteenth-century thinking. In July of 1839 Tennyson wrote to Emily Sellwood, "The light of this world is too full of refractions for men ever to see one another in their true positions" (Letters 172). The statement implies not only that it is impossible to understand one another completely, but that truth is colored by the observer. Such a statement is, in turn, part of a larger aspect of mid-Victorian thinking—the doubt that afflicted so many thinkers in a time of social, religious, scientific, and industrial upheaval. Mill's diary entry for January 13, 1854, summarizes the situation:

Scarcely anyone, in the more educated classes, seems to have any opinions, or to place any real faith in those which he professes to have... It requires in these times much more intellect to marshal so much greater a stock of ideas and observations. This has not yet been done, or has been done only by very few: and hence the multitude of thoughts only breeds increase of uncertainty. Those who should be the guides of the rest, see too many sides to every question. They hear so much said, or find that so much can be said, about everything, that they feel no assurance of the truth of anything. (qtd. in Houghton 13)

"Too many sides to every question" coincided with a new intellectual liberalism that tended to produce a society that was "simply a collection of individuals, each motivated--naturally and rightly--by self interest," Walter E. Houghton notes (77).
 Joined with the individualism and its concomitant doubt was the tendency, Houghton believes, for the Victorian mind to be rigid: "It tended to follow one line of thought, to look at objects from a single point of view, to shut out wide interests" (161). Such rigidity would give the illusion of stability in face of change. Matthew Arnold wrote of such a mind when he spoke in 1869 of "our want of flexibility, with our inaptitude for seeing more than one side of a thing" (Culture and Anarchy 49). By the complexity that Tennyson introduces into the Idyls, he condemns both rigidity of mind and the possibility of having a single "truth." Instead, he places himself in the intellectual camp of Mill who wrote that he now tried "to go all round every object" and to look "at all points of view, so as to have the best chance of seeing all sides" (Letters 1: 88). Tennyson does not deny the possibility of learning truth, as some twentieth-century writers will, but comes close to the conclusion that Arnold reaches in 1865:

To try and approach truth on one side after another, not to strive or cry, nor to persist in pressing forward, on any one side, with violence and self-will,--it is only thus, it seems to me, that mortals may hope to gain any vision of the mysterious Goddess, whom we shall never see except in outline, but only thus even in outline. He who will do nothing but fight impetuously towards her on his own, one, favourite, particular line, is inevitably destined to run his head into the folds of the black robe in which she is wrapped. (Preface to Essays in Criticism: v)
By revealing the story of the adultery gradually during the course of all four idylls, Tennyson, unlike Malory, can show the adulterous relationship from several differing points of view. He also avoids the single morally "right" angle of a Mrs. Ellis. To a mid-Victorian who tends to see a woman's adultery in uncompromising moral terms, a "right" angle is more comforting than is parallax. Tennyson, however, though often accused of prudery, by his very choice of technique forces the issue into one of complexity. The Idylls portrays not a tidy parliamentary debate about adultery as grounds for divorce, but offers a series of insights into the specific adultery of two unusually attractive people. Though Tennyson does not minimize the deleterious effects on society of one woman's succumbing to passion, neither does he minimize the contributing circumstances, the misunderstandings, the deep love involved, the suffering, or the different ways of looking at the situation. His choice of form for the literary work enhances his subject matter.

ENID

Although the order of composition of the first four idylls was "Vivien," "Enid," "Guinevere," and "Elaine," the order in which they appear in published form is "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere," the order in which I will treat them. "Enid" and "Vivien," first published in a trial edition of six copies in 1857 and titled Enid and Nimue: the True and the False, portray loving wife and false sensualist. The 1859 edition, titled Idylls of the King, contains all four idylls and presents the even more compelling
contrast between Enid and Guinevere, a contrast Tennyson makes far more explicit than that found in either the Mabinogion or Malory. In the Idylls the mere rumor of adultery is enough to make Geraint fear Enid's potential for adultery. That fear is present in the Mabinogion as well, but in that source the Queen's adultery is not mentioned in the "Gereint and Enid" section, nor is there even mention of Guinevere's love for Lancelot (Staines 38). Tennyson adds the motivation. Tennyson also introduces a subtle change in Enid's character. In the Mabinogion Enid is truly at fault for breaking Gereint's command, "Whatever you see or hear about me, do not turn back, and say nothing to me unless I speak to you first" (Mabinogion 279), because she warns Gereint only of dangers of which he is already aware. In "Enid," however, she warns of dangers that Geraint does not perceive. With that subtle change Tennyson hints at the fears mid-Victorians had of the growing assertiveness of women, a theme he develops further in later idylls.

Enid admires the Queen so much that Geraint, who has heard the rumors, is afraid of "taint" and removes Enid from the court:

    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. (24-32)
Mid-Victorians feared the spread of moral infection just as they feared infectious physical disease. Charles Dickens, for example, wrote in *Little Dorrit*, published first in 1857:

That it is at least as difficult to stay a moral infection as a physical one; that such a disease will spread with the malignity and rapidity of the Plague; that the contagion, when it has once made head, will spare no pursuit or condition, but will lay hold on people in the soundest health, and become developed in the most unlikely constitutions: is a fact as firmly established by experience as that we human creatures breathe an atmosphere. A blessing beyond appreciation would be conferred upon mankind, if the tainted, in whose weakness or wickedness these virulent disorders are bred, could be instantly seized and placed in close confinement (not to say summarily smothered) before the poison is communicable. (627)

Tennyson not only complicates the source by adding Guinevere's contagious adultery as the cause of Geraint's mistrust of his innocent wife, but he also complicates it further by adding the complicity of the community, which is all too eager to believe and spread rumor to the detriment of wholly virtuous marriages. It is the sort of community that, in Tennyson's time, delighted in newspaper reports of the scandal associated with Mrs. Caroline Norton's divorce and in the rumors associated with Lady Blessington's divorce and her suspect relations with her former son-in-law, Count d'Orsay. Tennyson
himself saw the adultery issue as one dangerous to the stability of society, but he was not personally rigid. Although there is no indication that he was anything other than monogamous, when he went to London, for example, he socialized with both Lady Blessington and Count d'Orsay (Martin 285). An example of someone who reacts rigidly and blindly to the mere mention of adultery is, of course, Geraint, who is a uxorious fool. In both Mabinogion and Malory, Geraint's uxoriousness, not Enid's infidelity, is the true source of Enid's tears and her fear that she is not a "true wife." But only in "Enid" do the Queen's adultery and the community's eager gossip play a key role.

New, too, is Enid's poignant and wifely lament, a lament that both Mrs. Ellis and Patmore would admire:

Far better were I laid in the dark earth,
Not hearing any more his noble voice,
Nor to be folded more in these dear arms,
And darken'd from the high light in his eyes,
Than that my lord thro' me should suffer shame. (97-101)

Ironically, those are the sentiments that Guinevere, not a morally superior woman, should utter and does not. In addition, although we are not told in the Mabinogion or in Malory why the Queen slept late the morning she first met Geraint, Tennyson tells us exactly why:

So with the morning all the court were gone.
But Guinevere lay late into the morn,
Lost in sweet dreams, and dreaming of her love
For Lancelot, and forgetful of the hunt. (156-159)
Neither Geraint nor Enid has access to that information; only the narrator and reader are privy to Guinevere's consciousness. It is, however, as much as Enid, faithful in her love for Geraint, could possibly credit if she did know of it. Her values would not let the Queen act on that illicit passion. Her values and understanding place the limits on what we learn of the adultery in this first idyll.

When, after many lines of poetry, Enid proves her own innocence through virtuous action, Geraint reinstates her as beloved wife and, in a lengthy addition to the Mabinogion, the two return first to Arthur's court and then to their own court. Geraint now trusts his wife despite Guinevere's example and theirs is the only fruitful marriage in the Idylls:

But Enid, whom her ladies loved to call
Enid the Fair, a grateful people named
Enid the Good; and in their halls arose
The cry of children, Enids and Geraints
Of times to be; nor did he doubt her more,
But rested in her fealty, till he crown'd
A happy life with a fair death. (961-967)

Tennyson adds the details of the happy life together, of children, of the fact that Enid becomes not only Fair, but Good, an adjective that Guinevere never earns from the people (Staines 40). Enid very much resembles the Victoria of whom Tennyson wrote as a young poet laureate in 1851.

Her court was pure, her life serene;
God gave her peace; her land reposed;
A thousand claims to reverence closed
In her as Mother, Wife, and Queen.

("To the Queen" 25-29)

Geraint's and Enid's eventual married happiness comes from a mutuality not found in the marriage of Guinevere and Arthur; Geraint trusts Enid and Enid is trustworthy. Theirs is a model marriage. As Wendell Johnson points out:

For Tennyson the failure of marriage is the failure of the most basic social relationship, the relationship on which the family and thus the entire social fabric seems to rest; for Tennyson childlessness means sterility and death. The ideal of marriage signifies not only reconciliation of male and female, action and passivity, self and other, but also fruitfulness, new birth, promise for the future. (Johnson 117)

Tennyson, married only six years at the time of writing "Enid," and with a four-old son and a two-year old son, was particularly sensitive to the possibilities inherent in a good marriage.

Tennyson adds complicating subtleties not found in the Mabinogion, however. His Enid is assertive in ways that the source's Enid is not. In both versions, Geraint/ Gereint charges Enid not to speak without permission, but Tennyson's Geraint voices the fervent hope of the Victorian husband when he demands, "I charge thee, ask not, buy obey" (133). That request, of course, echoes the marriage vows in the Anglican marriage ceremony in which the husband agrees
"to love and to cherish, till death us do part," and in which the woman agrees to the same thing, except for an important addition. She agrees "to love, cherish, and to obey, [emphasis added] until death us do part." In a traditional patriarchal marriage such vows would add official credence to the position that Mrs. Ellis endorses in her advice to wives in 1843:

One important truth . . . is the superiority of your husband simply as man. It is quite possible you may have more talent, with higher attainments, and you may also have been more generally admired; but this has nothing whatever to do with your position as a woman, which is, and must be, inferior to him as a man (10).

In the character of a noble, enlightened, and truly good man, there is a power and a sublimity, so nearly approaching what we believe to be the nature and capacity of angels, that as no feeling can exceed, so no language can describe the degree of admiration and respect which the contemplation of such a character must excite. (Wives 24)

In the Mabinogion, Enid does learn to obey and achieves a happy marriage as a result. Tennyson's Enid, on the other hand, possesses some of the power of the female angel in the house. Her breaking of the command to obey in silence is based on a thoughtful decision. She effects action, effects change. Tennyson's Enid realizes the difference between "I charge thee, ask not, but obey" and "How should I dare obey him to his harm" (136)? Tennyson gives her the power to
obey or to disobey so long as the decision is in her husband's best interests, and as a result, Geraint finally allows Enid to speak when she thinks it is necessary. Hers is not a decision based on selfish passion as is Guinevere's decision to disobey her vows to Arthur, but a decision based on reason. She does not try for absolute control of the male as Vivien does, but she has sufficient power to affect both Geraint and the bestial Earl Doorm, who wants to marry her because "And out of her there came a power upon him."

After killing Doorm to protect Enid, Geraint submits to a different kind of power, however. He will no longer question any of Enid's actions and, as a result of that decision, will be a sort of prisoner just as Merlin is imprisoned in the tree:

'Enid, I have used you worse than that dead man;
Done you more wrong: we both have undergone
That trouble which has left me thrice your own:
Henceforward I will rather die than doubt.' (734-737)

That could, of course, simply mean that he will no longer doubt her fidelity, and there is every reason to believe that a wise decision. Just as Enid is no mere patient Griselda, Geraint is no longer sunk in jealous uxoriousness. He becomes the balanced man, faithfully loving to Enid and yet serving Arthur's ideals. Even in this model marriage, however, Tennyson typically inserts a flaw, the same flaw that will keep Guinevere and Arthur from fully realizing complete understanding at their final parting. When Geraint admits to Enid that he was wrong and then says, "I heard you say, that you were no true wife:/ I swear I will not ask your meaning in it," she has the
opportunity to comfort him with the truth. Instead we read, "And Enid could not say one tender word,/ She felt so blunt and stupid at the heart" (745-6). Instead: "She only pray'd him, 'Fly, they will return/ And slay you.'" That is reasonable advice, because slain Earl Doorm's retainers might return at any moment, but she does tell him what to do, although the moment cries out instead for a compassionate response. Geraint agrees to leave, and the moment for healing him has passed.

Are we to think Enid too assertive, the power shift too great? Tennyson doesn't answer, but it is she, not they, who feels the purest "pleasure unto mortal kind" since "high in Paradise/ O'er the four rivers the first roses blew." It is she who has Eve's power over Adam.

And it is Enid who, though sitting behind her husband on the horse as they flee, warns him of the knight in the gateway when Geraint surely would have seen him first. In this further departure from the story line in Mabinogion, Tennyson adds an incident that makes Enid act like the Welsh Enid before she learns her wifely lesson of silent obedience. While clinging lovingly and submissively to Geraint's back, her eyes misted with happy tears, Enid parleys with the strange knight. It is she who recognizes the knight as Edryn, she who stops the incipient attack. Enid takes over the husband's and knight's role; she takes over the masculine role as the source of order (Auerbach 72). It is Enid who has the power, and significantly, we find that Edryn in turn has been tamed by Queen Guinevere:
And all the penance the Queen laid upon me
Was but to rest awhile within her court,
Where first as sullen as a beast new-caged,
And waiting to be treated like a wolf,
Because I knew my deeds were known, I found,
Instead of scornful pity or pure scorn,
Such fine reserve and noble reticence,
Manners so kind, yet stately, such a grace
Of tenderest courtesy, that I began
To glance behind me at my former life,
And find that it had been the wolf's indeed. (853-863)

Women have power to tame the beast, the earthly, in men, and
that ability is a positive force. But Enid acts to control the
situation when it is not necessary for her to act, and Geraint does
not this time chide her for speaking. In fact, he does none of the
speaking. Here, then, Tennyson adds an incident that illustrates
exactly how Geraint will not "doubt" Enid any longer. He has let her
usurp his role. Is there a hint that Enid, the perfect wife, yet
wields a frightening kind of power? Enid has all she wants.
Geraint, submissive to her will, is as loving as ever, but has agreed
never to doubt her. Geraint has also returned to the active role of
knight and leader, so that he is no longer the man of whom the people
used "to scoff and jeer and babble of him/ As of a prince whose
manhood was all gone,/ And molten down in mere uxoriousness" (58-60).
His "molten" passions are now controlled. Yet he is the man whom
Enid wants him to become, just as his relationship to her is now the
one that she has defined. Formerly controlled by his molten physical passion, he is now more invisibly controlled by the morally superior angel in his house.

In the succeeding idyll, Vivien's power to subdue Merlin will come not from magic but from her sexuality and her clever use of words. Enid's control of Geraint springs, though unselfconsciously, from those same sources. Is an Enid, then, as dangerous as a Vivien? Is this Enid rather frighteningly more powerful than her counterpart in the Mabinogion, the Enid who really learns proper submission? Clearly she contrasts with Vivien, but not in the simple contrast often expressed, and as stated by David Staines, for example: "Whereas Vivien is a demonically active being, ever working the ruin of her victim, Enid is an angelically passive being, ever thinking of her ability to aid her husband" (32). Enid and Vivien are not simple contrasts of the true and the false.

Instead, there is a tension between Tennyson's desire to let Enid be an individual and his wish to maintain the traditional hierarchical marriage relation. By extrapolation, is there then necessarily a bit of the demon Vivien in every Victorian angel in the house? What looks like a marriage based on Arthur's ideal of "free love" freely bound in marriage doesn't look completely ideal because there exists in Enid the kind of angel/demon duality that Auerbach identifies. What exists in Enid in small degree Tennyson will explore fully in the next idyll, "Vivien."
Vivien

The subtitle of the 1857 trial edition of *Enid and Nimue*: The True and the False indicates a basic contrast between Vivien and Enid. Staines sums up the differences: "Enid represents the truth that Vivien lacks, the true beauty that Vivien feigns, the love that for Vivien can only be lust" (32). Staines also notes that in order to give a portrait of unmitigated evil Tennyson ignores those "redeeming moments" found in the *Romance of Merlin*, the Vulgate version that Southey translated and included in his 1817 edition of Malory as well as the redeeming aspect of Nimue in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

In the Vulgate *Merlin*, Merlin admits that he is "so taken" with love for Viviane that he is in her power. Just as does Tennyson's Vivien, this Viviane shows only semblance of love:

Dame, said Merlin, I will tell you. Well I know that you are devising how you may detain me; but I am so taken, that perforce will I or not, it behoves me to do your will. When Viviane heard this, for her great treason, and the better to delude and deceive him, she put her arms round his neck, and began to kiss him, saying, that he might well be hers, seeing that she was his. (qtd. in Ricks, 1594-1595)

Then, using enchantments that Merlin has taught her, Viviane encloses Merlin in a "tower" from which only she can leave, though as she promised Merlin before learning the enchantment from him, she often returns:
Fair friend, she replied, I shall often be here, and you shall hold me in your arms, and I will hold you in mine. And in this she held her covenant to him, for afterwards there was never night nor day in which she was not there. And Merlin never went out of that tower where his mistress Viviane had inclosed him. But she entered and went out again when she listed; and often time she regretted what she had done, for she had thought that the thing which he taught her could not be true, and willingly would she have let him out if she could. (qtd. in Ricks 1595)

The same emphasis on sexual symbolism, of enthrallment by the flesh, and of a woman's unbreakable power over a man also appear in Tennyson's "Vivien," which ends with Vivien's victory:

Then crying 'I have made his glory mine,' And shrieking out 'O fool!' the harlot leapt Adown the forest, and the thicket closed Behind her, and the forest echo'd 'fool.'

To Vivien, Merlin is a fool, but her power over him leaves her with no such regrets as those that Viviane feels and with no sense of commitment to the man whom she has imprisoned.

Malory, too, sees his Nimüe as making the most of Merlin's besotted state, but his Merlin is the sexual aggressor whom Nimüe finally enchants so as to be rid of his wearying attentions:

She was one of the damsels of the lake, which hight Nimue. But Merlin would let her have no rest, but always he would be with her in every place; and ever she made Merlin good
cheer, till she had learned of him all manner of things that she desired, and he was so sore assotted upon her, that he might not be from her. ... So, by her subtle craft and working, she made Merlin to go under that stone to let her wit of the marvels there; but she wrought so there for him, that he came never out, for all the craft that he could do: and so she departed, and left Merlin.

(qtd. in Ricks 1594-1595)

Although this Nimue imprisons Merlin and never feels remorse, Malory redeems her with her later love for Pelleas. Tennyson provides no such redemption. Instead, his Vivien works with Modred not only to bring about the public humiliation of Guinevere and Lancelot but also the final dissolution of the kingdom. Her powerful machinations are part of the pattern of decay from within.

Enid is certainly "true" to Geraint, just as Vivien is "false" in feigning love. Vivien also lacks "true beauty" in the moral sense, beauty that Enid has. Enid throws a silken noose that allows Geraint many freedoms; Merlin gives up "life, and name and fame" when he is imprisoned inside the oak. Enid possesses all the seductive attractiveness of the faithful and apparently submissive wife, Vivien the seductiveness of alluring flesh. Vivien is an extreme, and evil, extension of Enid. At one point Vivien even sounds like a parody of Patmore or of Mrs. Ellis when she says, "Lo now, what hearts have men: they never mount/ As high as woman in her selfless mood"

(440-441), an ironical statement because her mood is never selfless.
Tennyson leaves absolutely no doubt, however, about Vivien's powerful attractiveness:

And lissome Vivien, holding by his heel,
Writhed toward him, slided up his knee and sat,
Behind his ankle twined her hollow feet
Together, curved an arm about his neck,
Clung like a snake. (236-240)

The 's' sounds, the repeated long 'i' in "lissome," "writhed," "slided," "behind," and "twined," together with the internal rhyme and the alliteration, give the sense of sinuous climbing and clinging, all impressions made sure in the word "snake." The echoes here go beyond those of a seductive Eve; Vivien is the snake itself, evil at its most powerful, a Coleridgian Lamia. And if she is merely an extreme example of the tendency that also exists in Enid, Tennyson is making a sharp point about the potential destructiveness of women.

It is not lust that impels Vivien, as Staines suggests, but a drive for power. In her scheming to convince Merlin to prove his trust in her by giving her power over him, Vivien is simply acting as Enid does toward Geraint at the end of "Enid." But what was unconscious in Enid is totally contrived in Vivien.

Vivien does not simply react to Merlin as do Viviane and Nimüe. In the 1875 edition Tennyson adds powerful motivation for her acts in her arrival at court not to seek Merlin, but to get revenge. Daughter of a knight killed by Arthur and born of a dying mother on the battlefield, Vivien comes to court determined to harm it and Arthur (Johnson 159). But in the 1859 Idylls Tennyson concentrates on her
manipulative power, her search for "glory." When, after imprisoning Merlin in the oak, she cries, "I have made his glory mine," glory clearly includes the power she has assumed. When she is unable to seduce Arthur, she turns to Merlin, as the next most powerful man in the kingdom, and breaks down his defenses by a series of calculated moves.

Arthur is impervious to her advances, for reasons to be explained later, but Merlin has weak spots. An "old man," he "at times/ Would flatter his own wish in age for love,/ And half believe her true" (181-184). The fact of an old man falling in love with a flattering younger woman is sufficiently common to need no comment on its psychological aptness. But to a mid-Victorian who idealized the wife as angel, entrusted the moral education of his children to her, was away from home in the business world, and feared the woman's growing independence, trust was a key factor in any relation. And it is upon the theme of trust that Vivien harps in her assault on Merlin, a theme ironic, of course, for the most untrustworthy of women, but ironic in its larger implications for the other three idylls as well. Trust is a central theme in "Enid"; reference to Guinevere's untrustworthiness weakens Merlin's defenses against Vivien; Arthur's blind trust of his wife and friend are explored in "Elaine"; and, finally, the matter of trust is first explored and then resolved in "Guinevere." Central to Vivien's campaign is the theme of trust: "As proof of trust. O Merlin, . . . grant me some slight power upon your fate" (329-331). Vivien sings to Merlin, "Trust me not at all or all in all," a song about which she comments
ironically, "I heard the great Sir Lancelot sing it once." The seductive power of the song is so great that Merlin feels literally bewitched by it:

'But, Vivien, when you sang me that sweet rhyme,
I felt as tho' you knew this cursèd charm,
Were proving it on me, and that I lay
And felt them slowly ebbing, name and fame.' (431-435)

Trust in Vivien, in seductive woman, in other words, costs man his power and his good reputation.

Vivien's enthralling song contrasts to the energy-releasing song that Merlin remembers being sung at the founding of the Table Round "for the love of God and men/ And noble deeds" (410-411). That song, Merlin remembers, had "such fire for fame,/ Such trumpet-blowings in it, coming down/ To such a stern and iron-clashing close,/ That when he stopt we long'd to hurl together" (415-418). That song led to action, to noble deeds, to fame. Vivien's seductive song, on the other hand, leads to impotence and imprisonment. Once trusted, Vivien literally enthralls Merlin, the most powerful mind in the kingdom.

If the best mind and those highest in the kingdom can be duped by a wily Vivien, is Tennyson saying that no man is safe from such a woman? Perhaps, but Arthur in his purity is totally unswayed by her. Despite his personal imperviousness, however, Vivien does harm his kingdom. She is, as Tennyson points out at the end of the idyll, a "harlot," the sort of woman, in other words, who was regarded by the mid-Victorian with "remarkable venom." Trudgill points out that "The
worst of all bad women for the Victorians was the harlot and she was
indeed seen as often some kind of moral monster" (101) Merlin, in
his anger over Vivien's slander of so many at court, calls her a
harlot (819), and thinks:

What did the wanton say:

'Not mount as high;,' we scarce can sink as low:
For men at most differ as Heaven and earth,
But women, worst and best, as Heaven and Hell. (810-813)

Grammatically, the parallels read that the worst are as Heaven and
the best women as Hell, a subtle stroke that illustrates the
mid-Victorian male's ambivalent attitude toward women and sex. Women
were both attractive and repellent.

Merlin is a good example of this ambivalent attitude. He calls
Vivien a harlot and yet tells her the magic charm that will imprison
him. Merlin knows Vivien is a harlot, but he is dispirited with the
knowledge that he cannot deny the rumors of Guinevere's adulterous
betrayal of "Arthur, blameless King and stainless man" (777). He is
disheartened because society itself is flawed. Those who judge
Guinevere's "feet of clay" are a crowd of harlots themselves who take
"insane delight" in judging her and are "Without the will to lift
their eyes, and see/ Her godlike head crown'd with spiritual fire/
And touching other worlds" (833-836). It is as if Merlin sees women
in terms of madonnas or harlots, so that when Guinevere's "godlike
head" becomes sullied by persuasive rumor, Merlin turns to Vivien the
harlot. When Vivien plays upon his sympathies with first anger, then
tears, and then with flattery of his greatness, his need to be
comforted leads him to weaken, "till he let his wisdom go/ For ease of heart, and half believed her true" (890-891). Tennyson, in commenting on Charlotte Guest's translation of Mabinogion, said, "Some even among the highest intellects become the slaves of the evil which is at first half disdained," an insight appropriate to Merlin's yielding. (Ricks 1595)

Merlin's yielding should also be evaluated in light of the mid-Victorian belief that, as George Watson points out, liberty does not give one the right to do as one pleases, but as one ought, and to do so requires exercise of the will. Of such liberty John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859:

A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist; that were he . . . desirous of altogether throwing them off, there would not be required for that purpose a stronger desire than he knows himself to be capable of feeling.

(On Liberty 86-87)

In yielding, then, Merlin clearly does not do as he morally "ought."

Not only has he used his liberty to choose to succumb to a harlot, but in so doing he literally loses his liberty: "And in the hollow oak he lay as dead, / And lost to life and use and name and fame" (963-964). Tennyson, as a socially responsible author, uses Merlin to teach a moral lesson to the mid-Victorians. But the scene of yielding is more complicated than that.
Merlin yields in part because of Vivien's successful wiles, in part because of world-weariness. But, significantly, he yields at the climax of a great storm and at the one moment when Vivien reaches out to him in fear. Vivien, after defiantly asking heaven to "make/ My scheming brain a cinder, if I lie," leaves Merlin just as lightning strikes. In a moment of genuine fear and honest need, she runs to him:

But Vivien, fearing heaven had heard her oath,

flying back and crying out,

'O Merlin, tho' you do not love me, save,
Yet save me!' clung to him and hugg'd him close;
And call'd him dear protector in her fright,
Nor yet forgot her practice in her fright,

But wrought upon his mood and hugg'd him close. (938-946)

It is finally her genuine response, her genuine need for Merlin that breaks down his reserve. It is this genuineness combined with "her practice" that finally allows her to overcome the wisest man in the kingdom. Guile and sensuous appeal are not enough. Those in combination with genuine need make up woman's devastating appeal. At the moment of Vivien's real need for him, Merlin gives in to his real sexual need of her; their sexual climax is represented in the climax of the storm (Buckler 108):

... and in change of glare and gloom

Her eyes and neck glittering went and came;

Till now the storm, its burst of passion spent,
Moaning and calling out of other lands,
Had left the ravaged woodland yet once more
To peace; and what should not have been had been,
For Merlin, overtalk'd and overworn,
Had yielded, told her all the charm, and slept. (957-964)

The sexual intercourse and the telling "all the charm" are conflated, so that there is a suggestion that at the moment of intercourse Vivien takes on his power, the same issue that W. B. Yeats will later explore in "Leda and the Swan." If so, then in misusing the liberty to do as he pleases, Merlin loses some of his power. Support for the idea that Tennyson is thereby condemning the excesses of the flesh can be found in his change of the place of imprisonment from Malory's "under a stone" to "an oak, so hollow, huge and old/ It look'd a tower of ivied masonwork" (3-4). He is imprisoned in the ivied tower, a symbol both of male and female sexuality, but also in a tree. The tree is reminiscent of the one in which the spirit Ariel was trapped before Prospero released him, and Merlin, like Ariel, is "trapped in the tree of fallen human nature (in medio ligni)" (Berger 257).

As noted earlier, however, Merlin is not only enthralled by Vivien, but is also world weary, so that there is, additionally, the sense that he has chosen to yield. He may be one of those "who even in yielding . . . knows that he could resist," and chooses not to resist. He yields at the height of the storm, and when the storm leaves the woodland "to peace," Merlin is asleep. The lines "For Merlin, overtalk'd and overworn,/ Had yielded, told her all the
charm, and slept," with their open vowels, slow cadence, and calm finality, give no feeling of anguished sleep. Lear writes in No Place of Grace of the desire for escape:

At its most extreme, withdrawal was animated by the desire to abandon autonomous selfhood and sink into a passive state of boundless union with all being, by the wish to experience what Freud called an 'oceanic feeling.' That yearning has existed at least as long as religious aspirations have been recorded, but during the nineteenth century it acquired new psychological and cultural significance. As the 'feminine' side of the newly dominant achievement ethos, it promised liberation from the systematic morality of the male bourgeoisie. As the psychic counterpart of pantheism, it helped to energize the romantic assault on the modern superego. Goethe advised his followers to abandon futile striving and 'Live in the All.' (218)

Though Merlin is "lost to life and use and name and fame," he is nevertheless "in a passive state of boundless union" with nature. There is a double-pronged, overlapping sense that by giving in to sexual passion Merlin is not only imprisoned by the female, but is also, in a profound sense, a part of nature. His action has brought him passive release. Houghton says of the Victorian that he "tends to divide ideas and people and actions into tight categories of true-false, good-bad, right-wrong; and not to recognize the mixed character of human experience" (162). Such may have been the case for many of Tennyson's mid-Victorian readers, but it is clearly not
true of Tennyson himself. In his later years Tennyson characterized
the Idylls in his statement that "Poetry is like shot-silk with many
glancing colours. Every reader must find his own interpretation
according to his ability, and according to his sympathy with the
poet" (H. Tennyson 2: 127) Tennyson does not draw a black-white
picture of virtue and evil, of seduction and yielding, of man versus
woman, but a complex and vivid picture suffused with all the flashing
color and subtlety of shot silk. It is in that framework that we
should evaluate what Vivien says of Guinevere, whose adultery is as
central to this idyll as to the other three.

Vivien's statements are nearly always suspect, but two of her
statements about Guinevere and the adultery ring true. Early in
"Vivien" Vivien tries without success to seduce the "blameless" King:

With reverent eyes mock-loyal, shaken voice,
And flutter'd adoration, and at last
With dark sweet hints of some who priz'd him more
Than those who should prize him most; at which the King
Had gazed upon her blankly and gone by. (155-159)

The King's response can be read as total guilelessness, as the
response of a man who has no suspicions about Guinevere and is so
constant in his love that Vivien's wiles have no effect; or perhaps
the King is a fool; or perhaps he is feigning blindness for the good
of the kingdom. Vivien, however, is convinced that he is a fool, and
says of Arthur, "Man! is he man at all, who knows and winks"
(779-780)? She concludes that he is "coward and fool." Arthur's role
is one of the central puzzles of the four idylls, but Vivien would be
expected to see him as a fool because she sees woman as power, man as dupe. There is, however, no question about her inability to seduce the King, no matter what the reason.

The second aspect of her account that we must accept as true is Vivien's accusation of Lancelot's "commerce with the Queen." Mere rumor and "dreaming" in "Enid" now become sexually explicit "commerce" in "Vivien." Merlin is unable to disprove this scurrilous attack as he is able to explain away the errors in her accusations about morally suspect behavior by other court members. He admits that he has heard the rumor, and the best he can do is to modify it by saying that Guinevere mistook Lancelot for the King at first sight, and "So fixt her fancy on him." If so, Merlin implies, at least in making excuses to Vivien, that the noble marriage was false from the outset, that Guinevere has never been true to her wedding vows. The issue, then, is complicated by the fact that Guinevere was unable to marry the man she chose to love. Does that make her adultery less culpable? Or is this just a weak excuse Merlin has made in an attempt to defend her behavior? Is it a subtle attack on any marriage made for reasons other than love? Marriage, adultery, and divorce were all increasingly important issues in England at the time Tennyson was writing these idylls. Merlin subtly opts for free choice of marriage partner. For the mid-Victorian wife not in love with her husband, and in a society in which divorce was still nearly impossible, the whole question of love and adultery was a compelling one.
Merlin, though willing to defend Guinevere, is equally unwilling to fix any blame on Arthur, whom he consistently characterizes as "blameless," "stainless," and "selfless." His overwhelming pro-Arthur bias, then, makes him almost as poor a witness as is Vivien, who would be quick to point out Arthur's faults. On the other hand, Merlin's wisdom makes him believable, especially in his description of Arthur as the chivalric ideal: "O selfless man and stainless gentleman,/ Who wouldst against thine own eye-witness fain/ Have all men true and leal, all women pure" (790-792). Merlin's description sounds very much like a nineteenth-century ideal as well; perhaps Tennyson, through Merlin, is suggesting that the holding of an ideal is more important than being an accurate eye-witness of truth. That hint, however, is balanced by the suggestion that Merlin submits to Vivien's pleadings and thereby dooms himself when he imitates Arthur's naive actions and lets "his wisdom go/ For ease of heart, and half believed her true." If so, and the text is enigmatic, then by extension Arthur in his inaction is as much to blame for the disintegration of the court as is Guinevere. If so, both men have let themselves weakly be swayed by the unfit uses of power by women. What Merlin sees in Vivien as Eve-like curiosity, "this vice in you which ruin'd man/ Thro' woman the first hour" (360-361), is a far more dangerous drive toward control, a drive by woman for power over man, a power that insidiously becomes greater the more a man trusts a woman, Mrs. Ellis's "influence" at its worst. Vivien is the extreme, and frightening, example of female individualism. Her self love impels her only to seek power. She is the feared harlot of the
mid-Victorian world, typifying not only the Victorians' fear of sexual immorality, the harlot denounced by Bible-wielding Evangelicals, but also the feared extremist of the ever-widening liberty in society. She chooses not out of morality, not with the good of society in mind, but out of selfishness.

If Enid is the angel in the house flexing her increasingly powerful wings, Vivien is that angel run absolutely amok. In "Elaine," the third idyll, Tennyson compares Elaine's pure love with Guinevere's now explicit adultery.

Elaine

Although "Elaine" differs from its source, Malory's "The Fair Maid of Astolat," it does so not because of major deletions or changes in the story line that concerns Elaine, but because of the added material about Guinevere and the adultery. Elaine remains essentially the same as the Elaine sketched by Malory: she combines both passion and purity, as exemplified in her "red sleeve/ Broider'd with pearls" (370); unlike Guinevere, she is unwaveringly steadfast in her love for and devotion to Lancelot; she is willing, if Lancelot will not marry her, to "Serve you, and to follow you thro' the world" (934). She remains a maid not because of self-imposed strictures of chastity, but because Lancelot refuses either to marry her or to be her lover. She is "pure," however, in the sense of remaining completely loyal to the one man she has vowed to love.

Elaine's capacity both for faithful love and for passion make her the ideal potential wife for Lancelot, the greatest of Arthur's
knights, just as Guinevere is potentially the ideal mate for King Arthur. Unlike Guinevere, Elaine will not settle for less than "the highest" among the unmarried knights. The adultery, however, spoils both potentially ideal marriages.

Because Elaine is so directly affected by Lancelot's attachment to Guinevere, and because Elaine, like the little novice in "Guinevere" knows so little "of the world, and all its lights/And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe," the picture of Guinevere that emerges in "Elaine" is necessarily the harshest in all the four idylls. But because part of the idyll takes place after Elaine's death, Tennyson is not bound completely to the parallax of Elaine's bias. In addition to the source, he complicates all the interactions among Elaine, Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur, although the portrayals of Guinevere remain for the most part as Elaine would perceive them.

"Elaine" centers on the story of Elaine's innocent and loyal love, but has embedded in it a great deal of new information about Guinevere, who, in this idyll as in the preceding two, plays a central motivating role. In the progression from "rumour" in "Enid" to "commerce" in "Vivien," to fact in "Elaine," Guinevere in this idyll both admits adultery and in part blames Arthur for it.

For Guinevere, Arthur is neither Merlin's "blameless king" nor Lancelot's "faultless lord." Instead, scornfully echoing Lancelot's characterization, Guinevere says:

Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King.

That passionate perfection, my good lord--
But who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven?
He never spake word of reproach to me,
He never had a glimpse of mine untruth,
He cares not for me: only here to-day
There gleam'd a vague suspicion in his eyes:
Some meddling rogue has tamper'd with him--else
Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round,
And swearing men to vows impossible,
To make them like himself: but, friend, to me
He is all fault who hath no fault at all:
For who loves me must have a touch of earth;
The low sun makes the colour: I am yours,
Not Arthur's, as ye know, save by the bond. (121-135)

Replying to Lancelot's praise of Arthur as "a King who honours his
own word,/ As if it were his Gods's," Guinevere angrily retorts that
Arthur is "A moral child without the craft to rule,/ Else had he not
lost me" (145-146). Guinevere blames Arthur for being cold, distant,
unresponsive. She interprets his lack of chiding, his blindness to
the adultery, as proof that he "cares not for me." For her there is
no possibility that he loves and trusts her so much that he therefore
suspects nothing. The only passion she finds in him is the passion
for "perfection," for being "faultless," goals for which she, with
her "touch of earth," has no sympathy. She is annoyed, moreover,
that rumor has at last kindled a "vague suspicion" in him, for
otherwise he would have remained "rapt" in his work of the Table
Round. There is more than a hint here of the mid-Victorian wife who
could simultaneously be jealous of the many hours her husband spent working away from home and yet be pleased with the freedom that such absence allowed her.

Guinevere blames Arthur chiefly, however, for focusing his passion on the Round Table, and indicates that it was Arthur who drove her into the arms of someone equally as physically passionate as she. "For who loves me must have a touch of earth," Guinevere tells Lancelot; "The low sun makes the colour." There is something appealing about being "of earth," especially if it is just "a touch of earth," a phrase that does not suggest gross sensuality. Instead, the phrase ties Guinevere with nature, with the whole concept of earth mother, although that concept will be questioned in "Guinevere." Neither is there anything intrinsically pejorative in "The low sun makes the colour." Despite its overtones of "low life," it also evokes the sunset's rich, warm tones, colors that can be looked at and enjoyed as compared with the bright light of the "Sun in heaven." Clearly, this is not a completely unsympathetic portrait of Guinevere. In a daring departure from the Victorian ideal, then, Tennyson both blames the husband and acknowledges that a wife's sexual needs might not be satisfied by her standards even though the husband might meet all of society's ideals. It is the obverse of Mrs. Ellis's "And O! how infinitely preferable is the feeling of having borne unfaithfulness than of having been unfaithful ourselves."

There is, in fact, almost a reversal of the stereotypical mid-Victorian roles. Here Arthur plays the stoical "wifely" role of
bearing unfaithfulness. In "Enid" only the pure such as Enid and
Arthur did not hear the rumours of adultery; in "Vivien" Merlin could
still call him the "blameless" king, and it was not certain that
Arthur knew of the rumors. In "Elaine" the situation is still
enigmatic, but less so. When Guinevere tells Arthur that she is too
sick to attend the tournament, and Lancelot pleads his old wound as a
reason for not going, the medieval overtones of both the wound of
love and the wound of war come into play in a single phrase that
encapsulates Lancelot's loyalties divided between King and Guinevere.
But Tennyson makes it clear that Lancelot is lying and merely gives a
hint of Arthur's suspicions:

    Urged him to speak against the truth, and say,
    'Sir King, mine ancient wound is hardly whole,
    And lets me from the saddle;' and the King
    Glanced first at him, then her, and went his way. (92-95)

It is this glance that Guinevere interprets as the result of someone
telling the king of the rumors, but it may well have been the result
of Lancelot's eager indiscretion. As Guinevere tells him, after the
king leaves, "the crowd/ Will murmur, 'Lo the shameless ones, who
take/ Their pastime now the trustful king is gone!'" Lancelot then
points out to Guinevere her former almost blatant indiscretion and
his own open devotion:

    Are ye so wise? ye were not so wise,
    My Queen, that summer, when ye loved me first.
    Then of the crowd ye took no more account
    Than of the myriad cricket of the mead.
Surely Tennyson was aware of the double entendre in "together in his lay" and "in this union," as were the "crowd" and the knights of whom Lancelot says, "Them surely can I silence with all ease" (109). But Arthur merely listens, "smiling." Despite the widespread knowledge of "the crowd" and the evidence of his own eyes, Arthur takes no action except to tell Lancelot late in the idyll that he wishes Lancelot had fallen in love with Elaine, "Who might have brought thee, now a lonely man,/ Wifeless and heirless, noble issue, sons/ Born to the glory of thy name and fame" (1359-1361), words that ironically describe Arthur's actual situation. But Arthur takes no action against Guinevere in "Elaine," takes no action until the adultery is made so public in "Guinevere" that he has no choice. If, prior to that, he sees evidence and ignores it, is he a fool as Vivien claims? Does he represent the aristocratic mid-Victorian view that it was "ill-bred" to proclaim a wife's infidelity (Pearsall 25)? Tennyson purposely keeps Arthur shadowy until his vigorous confrontation with Guinevere in "Guinevere" and fleshes him out only when Guinevere begins to glimpse him as someone other than the husband "who cares not for me," as will be discussed later.
Arthur also departs from the stereotypical mid-Victorian role by being the "pure" one in the marriage. As Trudgill points out:

For the Victorian wife . . . there was the desexualizing nature of her upbringing, reinforcing what was considered her natural lack of appetite. For the Victorian husband, born an animal instead of an angel, born into a sex in which appetite far from being lacking seemed almost incurably demanding, for the Victorian husband it was natural to believe like Thackeray in *Pendennis* that 'women are pure, but not men' (p. 164), it was natural to have different expectations of the sexes' moral behaviour. Even if he did not view his own shortcomings with indulgence, he would be likely to view the frailty of his womenfolk with a yet more severe disfavour. And he would be likely too to invest his wife with the responsibility of controlling his desires.

(Trudgill 73)

Guinevere, however, not only has an uncontrollable sexual appetite, but also blames her husband's misplaced passion for driving her to Lancelot's earthly nature. Arthur is the one with the angelic nature, the one who is like the "sun in heaven," the one who does not control his wife's desires. By means of the role reversal, Tennyson complicates the issue. Guinevere is false to Arthur, but she is also steadfastly true to Lancelot, although their quarrel and Lancelot's reference to "when ye loved me first" indicate a rift in their relations. Arthur is true to Guinevere, but has not satisfied her need for physical passion or for love. In exploring the nature of
male/female relations, of love, marriage, and adultery, Tennyson does not ignore the love and passion long associated with Lancelot and Guinevere, whose lasting and mature love links them with such other legendary figures as Paolo and Francesca, Anthony and Cleopatra, and Tristram and Isolt.

Because neither Tristram nor Isolt appears in the 1859 Idylls except in a single brief allusion ("Guinevere," line 485), they are not dealt with in this paper, but Tennyson later reduces Tristram to a self-centered individualist, a free love advocate who sings, "New loves are sweet as those that went before:/ Free love--free field--we love but while we may" ("Last Tournament" 280-281). Tristram's attitude is in contrast with Arthur's ideal of "free love" freely bound in marriage.

As John D. Rosenberg notes, the entire idyll centers on broken ideals:

The idyll is a study in shattered illusions and broken trusts, symbolized by the diamonds that are won by Lancelot, slip in dreams from Elaine's hands, pass perfidiously through Gawain's, and are flung in rage from Guinevere's. Elaine loves with obsessive fidelity the 'falsely true' Lancelot, who half loves her but remains true to the adulterous Guinevere, who mistakenly believes him false. (Fall 121)

Changes are rung on the true/false motif in "Elaine," as they were in "Enid" and in "Vivien," but Tennyson complicates the issue even more than Rosenberg notes. Neither Guinevere nor Lancelot remains
absolutely true to one another, despite their love. Guinevere believes the rumors about Lancelot and Elaine. Lancelot misleads both Elaine and Guinevere when he wears Elaine's favour in the tournament, but more importantly, he realizes that Elaine loved him "surely with a love/Far tenderer than my Queen's" (1383-1384). And that realization leads him to compare the "fair lily's" love with that of Guinevere:

Farewell, fair lily. 'Jealousy in love?'
Not rather dead love's harsh heir, jealous pride?
Queen, if I grant the jealousy as of love,
May not your crescent fear for name and fame
Speak, as it waxes, of a love that wanes? (1386-1390)

When he questions Guinevere's love for him, that is surely a variety of unfaithfulness to his vows to her.

But if Arthur is partially at fault, and if Lancelot is having remorseful second thoughts, that does not mean that Tennyson is saying that Guinevere is right either. When she says that Arthur is "Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round, / And swearing men to vows impossible, / To make them like himself," it is, after all, her point of view, not the narrator's, and her view is necessarily biased in her own behalf. Such rationalization is an expected response in an individualistic world in which there are no absolute moral anchors. Guinevere doesn't realize, however, that she has contradicted herself in saying that Arthur swears men to vows impossible, / To make them like himself." Unwittingly, she confirms Merlin's perception of Arthur as a "blameless king," because, by her own admission, one man
has lived up to those vows. Arthur is as passionate as Guinevere, but his passion and vows are directed outward for the good of the community; he has kept the impossible vows.

Guinevere, on the other hand, gives in to passion, something suspect in the mid-Victorian lexicon. On the title page of *Women of England*, for example, Mrs. Ellis writes:

Would you judge of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of pleasure, take this rule: Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind, that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself.

Guinevere has given in to the authority of her body, and though Arthur himself is a "passionate perfection," she thinks it is only the passion for the Table Round that possesses him, and excuses her actions because "he cares not for me," because she needs "a touch of earth."

Because Guinevere gives in to passion, she also acts cruelly toward faithful Lancelot, quarreling with him for staying home from the games with her, giving in to groundless and passionate jealousy, and finally, in a scene not found in Malory, flinging away the diamonds worth

The price of half a realm, his costly gift,
Hard-won and hardly won with bruise and blow
With deaths of others, and almost his own,
The nine-years-fought-for diamonds. (1157-1160)
She is far from the ideal of Queen, wife, or lover, and gets little pleasure from her passionate responses. That, of course, is the Guinevere as Elaine would see her, the jealous Guinevere who would not be as sensitive to Lancelot as Elaine believes she would be. Elaine is dead by the time the diamonds are flung away, but the portrait of Guinevere is nonetheless true to the conception of her that Elaine would have.

It would follow, then, that in Elaine's idyll the presentation of Lancelot would be particularly favorable, and so it is. He is far more deeply conflicted than Guinevere and is, literally, scarred by the experience: "The great and guilty love he bare the Queen,/ In battle with the love he bare his lord,/ Had marr'd his face, and mark'd it ere his time" (244-246). Unlike Guinevere, he is unable to find fault with Arthur and so excuse his own conduct. To Elaine he praises Arthur, saying, "Yet in this heathen war the fire of God/ Fills him: I never saw his like: there lives/ No greater leader" (314-316). And to Guinevere's complaints about Arthur he replies that he is "a King who honours his own word,/ As if it were his God's" (143-144). As a result of the conflict within Lancelot, "His mood was often like a fiend, and rose/ And drove him into wastes and solitudes/ For agony, who was yet a living soul" (250-252). In Malory's version, Guinevere's anger drives Lancelot mad; here complex remorse tortures him.

Lancelot recognizes that Elaine loves him with "a love beyond all love/ In women, whomsoever I have known," but is also wise enough
to realize that "Yet to be loved makes not to love again" (1284-1286). The example of Elaine's pure love makes Lancelot realize, however, that the Queen's love may have degenerated into "dead love's harsh heir, jealous pride" (1387). As Elaine would wish, that realization, along with the agonized knowledge that the King still regards Lancelot as his "greatest knight" and thinks Lancelot "unbound as yet" by love, makes Lancelot decide to break "These bonds that so defame me," makes him groan in "remorseful pain" (1417).

Guinevere is depicted in a decidedly unattractive light in "Elaine," despite the sympathetic touches, as if Tennyson portrays her as Elaine would see the situation were she the narrator. Guinevere is despicable; Lancelot torn, troubled, and remorseful; Elaine sweet and pitiable. In Elaine's ideal world, love would be free to choose and would not be bound against its will with "shackles of an old love" (870), as she would like to think that Lancelot's is, even though Elaine is aware that "it is no more Sir Lancelot's fault/ Not to love me, than it is mine to love/ Him of all men who seems to me the highest" (1068-1070). That knowledge is echoed in the exchange between Arthur and Lancelot, who says to the king:

'Yea, to be loved, if what is worthy love
Could bind him, but free love will not be bound.'

'Free love, so bound, were freêst,' said the King.

'Let love be free; free love is for the best:
And, after heaven, on our dull side of death,
What should be best, if not so pure a love
Cloth'd in so pure a loveliness?" (1367-1373)

In "Elaine," then, Tennyson raises the issue of how adultery affects marriage, either the existing one between Arthur and Guinevere, or the potentially ideal one between Elaine and Lancelot. Love should be free to choose "the highest," but once the choice is made, that love should be "bound"; a marriage between such a pair as Elaine and Lancelot would be the best possible "on our dull side of death." In "Guinevere" the parallax changes once more, and the story is told as Guinevere would perceive it, but the issue of "free love, so bound" is central to this final idyll as well.

Guinevere

"Guinevere," like "Vivien," is largely Tennyson's own invention so he can emphasize very different aspects of the story than does Malory, who briefly summarizes Guinevere's fate as follows:

And when queen Guenever understood that her lord, king Arthur, was slain, and all the noble knights, sir Mordred and all the remnant, then she stole away, and five ladies with her: and so she went to Almesbury, and there she let make herself a nun, and wore white clothes and black: and great penance she took, as ever did sinful lady in this land, and never creature could make her merry, but lived in fastings, prayers, and alsmdeeds, that all manner of people marvelled how virtuously she was changed. Now leave we queen Guenever in Almesbury, that was a nun in white
clothes and in black, and there she was abbess and ruler as reason would. (qtd. in Ricks 1725)

Malory simply has Guinevere flee to Almesbury after the death of Arthur, become a nun and abbess, and do penance. In Malory the emphasis is far more on the disintegration of Arthur’s dream than on the relationship between Guinevere and Arthur. Tennyson, however, in order to emphasize the adultery and the marriage, changes the order of events so that Guinevere flees to Almesbury before Arthur’s death. This change allows Tennyson to introduce the parting of Guinevere and Lancelot before she goes to Almesbury, their discovery together by Modred and his "creatures," the interchange between the little novice and Guinevere in the convent, and most important, the final parting of Arthur and Guinevere. The haunting quality of "Guinevere" comes as much from the failed marriage as from the failed Round Table; the change in parallax makes it difficult for any reader to judge the adultery in simplistic terms.

Guinevere does indeed become first a nun and then the abbess, but only at the end of an idyll that is one of the most intensely visual and dramatic of all the idylls. The idyll starts, as do the other three, in medias res:

Queen Guinevere had fled the court, and sat
There in the holy house at Almesbury
Weeping, none with her save a little maid,
A novice: one low light betwixt them burn’d
Blurr’d by the creeping mist, for all abroad,
Beneath a moon unseen albeit at full,
The white mist, like a face-cloth to the face,
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was still. (1-8)
The progression from the past perfect "had fled" to the past tense of "sat" to the present participle "weeping" gives the reader a simultaneous sense of past and present, of distance and presence. (See John Dixon Hunt's "The Poetry of Distance: Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King'" for a discussion of painting and Tennyson's aesthetic poetic distancing). The reiterated "white and black" in Malory is transferred from distinct contrast to the pervading "white mist" that clings to the dead earth like a cloth to the face of one dead. The candle and moon give only "blurred" light. This softening of the sharp contrast between black and white not only reflects Guinevere's softened, weeping state of repentance, but also underscores Tennyson's theme that adultery is not an easily defined, black and white issue. As has been stated, Guinevere's adultery is central in importance to each of the idylls, but the Guinevere pictured weeping at the opening of "Guinevere" is not the Guinevere that Enid sees, not the queen whom Vivien flatters and slanders, certainly not the queen that Elaine thinks has bound Lancelot to false vows. Although there is a progression through the idylls from rumor to slander to deed to repentance, the main difference in the Guinevere in this idyll named for her doesn't center in that progression. Rather, this narrative is "centered heavily in the consciousness of the Queen" (Buckler 126). This is the Guinevere as Guinevere would like to see herself portrayed. In "Elaine" it was Lancelot who decided to "break/ These bonds that so defame me: not without/ She wills it"
(1409-1411). In "Guinevere," the queen, after nightmares of guilt, says:

'O Lancelot, get thee hence to thine own land,
For if thou tarry we shall meet again,
And if we meet again, some evil chance
Will make the smouldering scandal break and blaze
Before the people, and our lord the King,'
And Lancelot ever promised, but remain'd,
And still they met and met. (87-93)

In "Elaine" it was Lancelot who groaned "in remorseful pain," but here Lancelot "ever promised, but remained." In "Guinevere" it is she who finally persuades him to leave by tying his departure to his love for her: "Again she said, 'O Lancelot, if thou love me get thee hence'" (94).

It is Guinevere, too, who speaks first after the pair has been discovered together by Modred, and it is of "shame" that she speaks.

And all was still: then she, 'The end is come,
And I am shamed for ever;' and he said,
'Mine be the shame, mine was the sin; but rise,
And fly to my strong castle overseas:
There will I hide thee, till my life shall end,
There hold thee with my life against the world.'
She answer'd, '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.' (109-121)

It is Guinevere who decides not to seek the safety Lancelot offers, but instead to bide her "doom." And it is Guinevere, not Lancelot, who, as she rides away from Camelot, realizes that it is "too late" not only for their love, but for the country as well. Her imagina-
tion is the one that sees beyond their personal tragedy to "a field
of death":

'For now the Heavnen of the Northern Sea,
Lured by the crimes and frailties of the court,
Begin to slay the folk, and spoil the land.' (134-136)

In "Guinevere" the queen shows none of the anger and spite so central
to her reactions in "Elaine," but instead is a woman tortured by the
tension between her love for Lancelot and her knowledge that the
affair must end. Such a change can be explained in part by
Guinevere's growing fear of Modred and by her nightmares, but it is
nonetheless a far more sympathetic portrait of her than Elaine would
paint. By so changing the expectations set up in "Elaine," Tennyson
forces a reader--or moral critic--into looking at the nuances of the
situation. By showing the situation from a different point of view,
Tennyson reflects what George Watson calls the "Victorian passion for
discrimination." "From Mill to Acton, from Dickens to George Eliot
and her successor novelists," Watson says, "is a process of refine-
ment in moral choice, an increasing ethical awareness of the delicate
and the borderline" (Watson 48).
The idyll's starkly unadorned opening, "Queen Guinevere had fled the court, and sat/ There in the holy house at Almesbury/ Weeping," simultaneously summarizes the action, parallels the closing lines of the preceding idyll, "So groan'd Sir Lancelot in remorseful pain,/ Not knowing he should die a holy man," and disposes the reader to sympathy with the sorrowing queen. The adultery is not thereby minimized, but Guinevere is not presented so as to elicit a simplistic response. The parallelism, for example, suggests that Guinevere, too, may die a holy woman, the weeping asks for sympathy, and the fact that her only companion is "a little maid,/ A novice," suggests that Guinevere is still fit company for someone innocent. The whole interplay between the novice and Guinevere, in fact, allows Tennyson to explore the complexity of the problem. Gerhard Joseph states that "The rest of the convent scene during which a babbling novice unknowingly humiliates Guinevere by continually saying the wrong thing is too patly ironic to be convincing, and Guinevere groveling before Arthur as he fulminates is merely embarrassing" (Joseph 173). Joseph's criticism is in some ways apt, but the interchange is more complex than simply "patly ironic." When the novice says to Guinevere, for example, "This is all woman's grief,/ That she is woman, whose disloyal life/ Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round" (216-218), she is telling the truth as she sees it. It is true that the adultery has been central to the community's breakdown, but it is a narrow reduction such as Mrs. Ellis might make, or that an idealist unschooled in life's complexities might reach. Tennyson does not let such a view stand unchallenged, but later has Guinevere
reply, "O closed about by narrowing nunneries-walls,/ What knowest thou of the world, and all its lights/ And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe?" (340-42). Those words, coming from the depths of Guinevere's pain, ring true.

In an even more subtle move, Tennyson uses reverse irony in connection with the novice. It is she who tells Guinevere about the bard's prophecy for Arthur:

... and could he find
A woman in her womanhood as great
As he was in his manhood, then, he sang,
The twain together well might change the world.
But even in the middle of his song
He falter'd, and his hand fell from the harp,
And pale he turn'd, and reel'd, and would have fall'n,
But that they stay'd him up; nor would he tell
His vision; but what doubt that he foresaw
This evil work of Lancelot and the Queen? (296-305)

The irony of her telling this to Guinevere, whom she does not recognize as the queen, is apparent. As William E. Buckler notes, "The irony is both delicate and devastating."

It is, in fact, "the simple, garrulous, foolish-wise novice who prepares the way for Guinevere's consciousness breakthrough later in the night" (Buckler 128). It is the novice who leads Guinevere to consideration of the moral truth that "Guinevere is such a child morally that she must be returned to the unsophisticated stage of moral fundamentals... such truths as simple honesty, obedience,
responsibility, non-erotic love, reverence for innate nobility, childlike faith, joy and tenderness, respect for imaginative wisdom, and a disinclination to order reality through intellective wordplay” (131-132). But although Tennyson uses the novice to condemn Guinevere’s actions and their subsequent evil effect on the community, he also uses the novice to undercut Arthur. The novice, who has already told Guinevere that her father “himmself was knight/ Of the great Table--at the founding of it,” now tells Guinevere that her father “died,/ Kill’d in a tilt, come next, five summers back,/ And left me” (318-320). The novice was orphaned, then, as a result of the knightly code promulgated by King Arthur, and is confined within narrow nunnerly walls through no wish of her own. Despite her obvious zest for life, her almost compulsive need to talk after her isolation, her life, too, is reflected in the landscape of blurred mist and dead land, but not because of Guinevere’s adultery.

A further dimension to Guinevere’s adultery emerges during her reverie after she dismisses the novice. When she thinks back to the “golden days” they are for her the days with Lancelot before her marriage, the “maytime” when “as yet no sin was dream’d.” The description of that time is reminiscent of Eden. The pair

Rode under groves that look’d a paradise
Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth
That seem’d the heavens upbreaking thro’ the earth.

(385-87)

Heaven and earth are combined in their relationship, so that Tennyson undercuts the very idea of guilt, of the wrongness of Guinevere
thinking such thoughts when she has just vowed never to think of Lancelot again, by making the lost past so idyllic, so Edenic. A "touch of earth" seems a necessary ingredient, and especially so when Guinevere's thoughts progress to her first meeting with Arthur:

But when the Queen immersed in such a trance,
And moving thro' the past unconsciously,
Came to that point where first she saw the King
Ride toward her from the city, sigh'd to find
Her journey done, glanced at him, thought him cold,
High, self-contain'd, and passionless, not like him,
'Not like my Lancelot'. (398-404)

This reverie confirms Merlin's assessment, and in Guinevere's mind provides at least a slight excuse for her adulterous conduct. Had she been free to choose whom to marry in that maytime, King Arthur would surely not have been her choice. What Guinevere doesn't realize, however, is that she sized up and dismissed Arthur with a "glance," and that this version of Arthur doesn't square with Lancelot's perception of him, with Merlin's evaluation of Arthur, or with Arthur's perception of himself. She has never known the man who says to her in farewell:

But how to take last leave of all I loved?
O golden hair, with which I used to play
Not knowing! O imperial-moulded form,
And beauty such as never woman wore,

Until it came a kingdom's curse with thee--
For I was ever virgin save for thee,
My love thro' flesh hath wrought into my life
So far, that my doom is, I love thee still.
Let no man dream but that I love thee still. (543-557)

In the gap between Arthur's speech and Guinevere's "He cares not for me" lies the tragedy of the two. Arthur here confesses love and fleshly needs that Guinevere never recognized in her husband despite her own need for "a touch of earth." In his comment on her "golden hair, with which I used to play/ Not knowing!" Arthur reveals that he had indeed been blind to the adultery. And that very blindness, ironically, gave Guinevere 'proof' that "He cares not for me."

Tennyson is here enigmatic about whether that blindness means that Arthur is a fool or coward, as Vivien would assert, or whether, because by his own admission he was "ever virgin" and because, by Guinevere's admission, Arthur was able to keep the vows of the Round Table, he simply believed that his wife and his greatest knight would be equally idealistic. Perhaps such naïveté would constitute being a fool, but many mid-Victorians believed in individual responsibility for character formation. Mill points out in A System of Logic, for example, that:

[One's] character is formed by his circumstances . . . ; but his own desire to mould it in a particular way is one of those circumstances. . . . We are exactly as capable of making our own character, if we will, as others are of making it for us. (485)
Mill represents the secular emphasis on character building, but
the Evangelical and Oxford movements emphasized the same thing. R.
W. Church, in a study of the sermons of Newman and the Oxford Move-
ment from 1825-1843, concluded that

A passionate and sustained earnestness after a high moral
rule, seriously realized in conduct, is the dominant
character of these sermons. They showed the strong reac-
tion against slackness of fibre in the religious life. (21)

Houghton notes that such a comment applies to the entire Oxford
Movement as well as to the Evangelicals, and says, "To be an earnest
Christian demanded a tremendous effort to shape the character in the
image of Christ" (231). King Arthur is just such an "earnest Chris-
tian," but in an age in which he is no longer an effective leader.
Tennyson's *Idylls* shows few people engaged in "a passionate and
sustained earnestness after a higher moral rule," shows many infected
by moral contagion.

Although Arthur was shadowy in the preceding three idylls, in
"Guinevere" he is increasingly etched as he becomes increasingly
clear to Guinevere. In this idyll, their relationship, not the
adultery, is central. When Tennyson began writing "Guinevere," he
gave the first lines to his wife for a birthday present on July 9,
1857 (H. Tennyson 1: 419). The lines, which have no precedent in
Malory, are Arthur's final agonized words to Guinevere:

'But hither shall I never come again,
Never lie by thy side; see thee no more:
Farewell!'
Even in this brief beginning, the emphasis is on the parting, on the physical aspects of the relationship. How the physical aspects accord with being an "earnest Christian" forms the crux of Tennyson's theme in "Guinevere."

When Arthur enters the room to find Guinevere, he sees that she is prone, that she "grovell'd with her face against the floor," and she stays there until Arthur leaves. Perhaps too much is made of the aspect of abasement in Tennyson's use of "grovelling." In an 1839 letter to Emily Sellwood, for example, he writes of his mother's fear of a storm: "I had just gone to my mother's room: she was grovelling on the floor in an extremity of fear when the clap came" (Letters, 171). Guinevere could be prostrate with fear and even penitence without the suggestion of a demeaning inferiority. Her apparently subservient posture and Arthur's monologue have angered many readers who feel that such a posture is demeaning to Guinevere and that Arthur acts like a first-rate prig. George Meredith, for example, says that Arthur sounds like a "crowned curate" (Martin 424). A. C. Swinburne reacts even more violently:

Mr. Tennyson has lowered the note and deformed the outline of the Arthurian story, by reducing Arthur to the level of a wittol, Guinevere to the level of a woman of intrigue, and Lancelot to the level of a 'co-respondent'. Treated as he has treated it, the story is rather a case for the divorce-court than for poetry. . . . Adultery must be tragic and exceptional to afford stuff for art to work upon; and the debased preference of Mr. Tennyson's heroine
for a lover so much beneath her noble and faithful husband
is as mean an instance as any day can show in its newspaper
reports of a common woman's sin. . . . All the studious
care and exquisite eloquence of the poet can throw no
genuine halo round the sprouting brows of a royal husband
who remains to the very last the one man in his kingdom
insensible of his disgrace. (36)

Although both Swinburne and Meredith express attitudes still commonly
held, they were reacting to later editions of the Idylls than the
1859 edition, however. As Martin points out, "Arthur's long speech
of condemnation of Guinevere, delivered as she grovels on the floor
in contrition, with her arms around her husband's feet, was wildly
popular with most of Tennyson's readers" (423). Martin then com-
ments, "A good bit of its appeal is lost today, when it may seem
merely priggish." Wendell Johnson, in a 1975 commentary, notes
"Arthur's unbearable priggishness and arrogance in part of this
speech--in another part [lines 529-557] he is almost poignantly the
real, wronged human being" (177).

Clyde Ryals carries the criticism a step further, denying the
human aspect:

Critics have objected that Arthur here speaks like a prig,
and so indeed he does. For Arthur is the redeemer, the
hero from the realm of pure value who is more messiah than
man; he is exactly what Tennyson said he is: an ideal
man--and the ideal man simply does not talk like the usual
cuckolded spouse. Arthur is, in fact, less the wronged husband than the wronged ideal ruler. (87)

Such a statement is only partly correct. Tennyson himself, in the last correction he made to the Idylls, inserted in 1891 the line that would not be published until after his death: "Ideal manhood closed in real man," line 38 in the epilogue "To the Queen." Hallam Tennyson commented on the insertion, "My father thought that perhaps he had not made the real humanity of the King sufficiently clear in his epilogue; so he inserted in 1891, as his last correction, "Ideal manhood closed in real man" (2: 129). The emendation indicates that Tennyson thought of Arthur as both real and ideal, a combination that accords well with Arthur's human and Christlike attributes in "Guinevere." Throughout, Arthur exemplifies the Christian ideal of forgiving rather than of demanding justice. Unlike Malory's Arthur, who condemns Guinevere to death at the stake, Tennyson's Arthur says:

The wrath which forced my thoughts on that fierce law,

The doom of treason and the flaming death,

(When first I learnt thee hidden here) is past. (534-536)

Biblical echoes of Isaiah 41:10, "Fear not for I am with you" and of Isaiah 43:1, "Fear not, for I will redeem you," appear in Arthur's "Fear not: thou shalt be guarded till my death." Arthur admits that he did not suspect the adultery because his heart was "Too wholly true to dream untruth in thee"; he discloses that he wept when he learned the truth. Jesus, too, wept at the time of his betrayal. Though Arthur does not spare Guinevere any of his understandably human anger at her betrayal, Arthur, like Jesus, forgives: "Lo! I
Forgive thee, as Eternal God/ Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the rest" (541-542).

Tennyson emends Malory, in fact, to further Arthur's ideal nature. In the 1859 edition, for example, lines 9-12 establish Modred as Arthur's nephew, not the product of incest with his sister as he is in Malory:

For hither had she fled, her cause of flight
Sir Modred; he the nearest to the King,
His nephew, ever like a subtle beast
Lay couchant with his eyes upon the throne.

In the 1859 version, too, Arthur tells Guinevere that he must leave to fight "that great battle in the west,/ Where I must strike against my sister's son." In subsequent editions, Tennyson makes the point even more clearly, changing the first lines to omit reference to "nephew" and changing the latter citation to:

Far down to that great battle in the west,
Where I must strike against the man they call
My sister's son--no kin of mine. (568-570)

And though Tennyson makes reference to Arthur's prowess as warrior, he omits any reference to Arthur's Herodlike slaughter of children in Malory. His birth, too, is mysterious, and, as he tells Guinevere, he goes to meet "Death, or I know not what mysterious doom," so that his death will be mysterious as well.

Hallam Tennyson points out his father's emphasis on Arthur as ideal man:
He felt himself Justified in having always pictured Arthur as the ideal man by such passages as this from Joseph of Exeter: 'The old world knows not his peer, nor will the future show us his equal: he alone towers over other kings, better than the past ones and greater than those that are to be.' So this from Alberic,

'Hic Jacet Arturus, flos regum, gloria regni,
Quem probitas morum commendat laude perenni.'

And this from the Brut ab Arthur, 'In short God has not made since Adam was, the man more perfect than Arthur.' (2: 128-129)

Hallam then added:

My father felt strongly that only under the inspiration of ideals, and with his 'sword bathed in heaven,' can a man combat the cynical indifference, the intellectual selfishness, the sloth of will, the utilitarian materialism of a transition age. (129)

Arthur, "Ideal manhood closed in real man," as Christ was the word made flesh, represents the successful but almost impossible struggle to form one's own character, to do one's duty, to be faithful to one's vows, to be true to a personally defined ideal in a world in which the community as represented by Modred, Vivien, and the rumor mongers is less than ideal; in a world in which one's wife may be unfaithful; in a world in which one's best knight and closest friend may be untrustworthy. For the mid-Victorian in a transition age without clear mooring or buoy lights, for the individual trying to
define himself in a sea of similarly struggling individuals, even
defining the "ideal" became increasingly difficult. With heroes and
leaders in short supply, their importance grew proportionately.

Echoing the Tennysonian sentiment concerning the "lack of great
men now-a-days," Florence Nightingale writes in Cassandra, her
"family manuscript" written in 1852 and printed privately in 1859:

People have no type before them in their lives, neither
fathers nor mothers, nor the children
themselves. . . . But what standard have they before them
of the nature and destination of man? The very words are
rejected as pedantic. (qtd. in Norton Anthology II, 1664)

W. L. Burn, in The Age of Eulipoise, notes:

The age showed an evident taste for noble feelings, for
goodness and compassion and tenderness. . . . The 'good'
mid-Victorians did not for a moment assume that the nation
was safe on a plateau of goodliness: their insistence on
the need for honesty, chastity, temperance and thrift was
dictated by the threats of dishonesty, sensuality, drunk-
enness and improvidence; the virtues were flags to which
men rallied in battle, not decorations for ceremonial
parades. (40-41)

William Gladstone said of Arthur, "We know not where to look in
history or in letters for a nobler and more overpowering conception
of man as he might be than in the Arthur of this volume. Wherever he
appears, it is as the great pillar of the moral order, and the
resplendent top of human excellence" (Quarterly Review 477).
Gladstone, himself a devout Christian, does not speak of an unattainable goal, but of "man as he might be." In putting forth a moral model, Tennyson was very much part of the mid-Victorian belief that art should make a moral comment, should raise virtues as flags to rally men's efforts. J. D. Coleridge, for example, writing in 1854 in the Christian Remembrancer, stated:

The art that has no relevancy to actual life, the passing by God's truth and the facts of man's nature as if they had no existence, the art that does not serve to enoble and purify and help us in our lifelong struggle with sin and evil, however beautiful, however serene and majestic, is false and poor and contemptible. (qtd. in Watson 40)

Arthur's striving to live the ideal Christian life has more than individual implication, however. Girouard believes that Tennyson's Arthur "was deliberately designed to be an inspiration to modern members of the ruling class" (184). "The Idylls of the King," Girouard states, "were designed as a warning. Their pessimism reflected Tennyson's own belief that the age was getting worse and would continue to do so until the English were to live up to the moral standards necessary for members of an imperial nation" (184). Arthur tells Guinevere that he had started the Table Round "To serve as model for the mighty world,/ And be the fair beginning of a time" (462-463). Such thinking fit with the mid-Victorian interest in colonial expansion. As Girouard points out, they believed that "Good would not spread of its own accord," and that "Most people were not able to govern themselves and needed wise and strong rulers. The
English, of all races, were the most capable of justly ruling those not able to rule themselves. It was their duty to take the leading role in the world" (221). In 1859, for example, Charles Kingsley told an audience of ladies in London that "The English race is the very noblest race the world contains" (qtd. in Girouard 222). That attitude, of course, accords nicely with the fervent nationalism of Mrs. Ellis.

Arthur--and Guinevere--knew the heathen hordes were ready to swoop in as soon as the kingdom showed signs of weakness. Tennyson is pointing, with the example of Arthur, to the importance of strong Christian leadership necessary for the increasingly nationalistic England under Queen Victoria. It was during the writing of "Guinevere" that he commented to Emily on "the want of reverence now-a-days for great men, whose brightness, like that of the luminous bodies in the Heaven, makes the dark spaces look the darker" (H. Tennyson 1: 424). Tennyson recognized, as had deTocqueville in 1831, that in an age of growing individualism, great men were few and willing followers even fewer. Peter Gay observes that Tennyson's contemporary, Henri-Frédéric Amiel, concluded in 1851 after reading deTocqueville:

One sees that the era of mediocrity in everything is at hand, and the mediocre freezes every desire. Equality engenders uniformity', it sacrifices 'the excellent, the remarkable, the extraordinary.' ... Inevitably, 'the useful will replace the beautiful; industry, art; political economy, religion; and arithmetic, poetry.' In the coming
age of individualism and increasing division of labor, 'ideal individuals' will disappear; the 'time of great men is passing, the epoch of crowds' is at hand. Society 'will become everything and the individual man will be nothing.'

(62)

The parallels with Arthur's kingdom are clear. Only Arthur is an "ideal individual." Others, who by their positions in society should be "luminous bodies," the Queen and Arthur's greatest knight, have given in to selfish desires. The "epoch of crowds" is present in the sense that the great leader can no longer lead and the moral contagion of lesser examples holds sway among the community. Selfish individualism has become the rule, although because this is a time of transition, the sway of "society" in Amiel's sense has not yet predominated.

Arthur, however, is clearly one of Tennyson's "luminous bodies." He is consistently identified with images of light, culminating with Guinevere's last glimpse of his crest, when she sees "Wet with the mists and smitten by the lights,/ The Dragon of the great Pendragonship/ Blaze, making all the night a steam of fire" (593-595). But Guinevere, Arthur points out, cannot be 'reseated in thy place of light,/ The mockery of my people, and their bane" (522-523). Her example, Arthur says, caused a series of sins within the kingdom:

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 enample from fair names,  
Sinn'd also, till the loathsome opposite  
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,  
And all thro' thee! (483-490)

It is the duty of the leaders, in other words, to set luminous examples.

Then, echoing the mid-Victorian stereotypical reaction of the wronged husband, and blissfully unaware that he himself has exacerbated the situation by his previous inaction, Arthur winds up his condemnation with:

I hold that man the worst of public foes  
Who either for his own or children's sake,  
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife  
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house:  
For being thro' his cowardice allowed  
Her station, taken everywhere for pure,  
She like a new disease, unknown to men,  
Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,  
Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and saps  
The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse  
With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young. (509-519)

Because Arthur has no children and knows that he is leaving to meet his "doom" and is therefore unlikely to have any, this speech is a bit out of character. Perhaps unconsciously, Tennyson has moved into a mid-Victorian vein and is describing the mid-Victorian fears on the subject, the kind of situation depicted in the popular series of
paintings of an adulterous wife painted by Augustus Egg in 1858. Arthur sees Guinevere not just as an adulteress, but as prostitute spreading disease throughout the community.

But at the height of Arthur's increasingly punitive assault, something happens to change that attack into a softened response, forgiveness, and a confession of love: "He paused, and in the pause she crept an inch/ Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet" (524-25). With that small act Tennyson moves the action from the verbal to the physical level. In a parallel with the scene in which Merlin's resistance is overcome by Vivien's clinging to him in unfeigned fear, it is Guinevere's touch that makes Arthur both realize and confess his physical love for her. It evokes the poignant assertion that

My love thro' flesh hath wrought into my life
So far, that my doom is, I love thee still.
Let no man dream but that I love thee still. (555-557)

And it is Arthur's confession both of love and fleshly passion, along with his forgiving of her, that makes Guinevere see Arthur for the first time. He has been able to move beyond the condemnation of harlotry into the hope that

'We two may meet before high God, and thou
Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and know
I am thine husband--not a smaller soul,
Nor Lancelot, nor another' (561-564)

Arthur leaves Guinevere, in Buckler's words, "forgiven, illuminated, and hopeful" (137). Despite Arthur's new-found ability to put his
feelings into words, and Guinevere's newly acquired ability to appreciate Arthur as the man who is "highest and most human, too,"
Tennyson denies them what would be a sentimental reconciliation and parting. It is, indeed, "too late" for the marriage as for the country. Guinevere is as unable to speak the healing word to her husband as was Enid. Her only hope is that God will forgive her as her husband has, so that she and Arthur can meet in heaven.

But in the pathos of their failure Tennyson holds up the ideal. When he married Guinevere, Arthur had believed that she would be "mine helpmate, one to feel/ My purpose and rejoicing in my joy"
(482-483). Guinevere makes the ideal relationship even more explicit when, after Arthur's departure, she says:

Ah my God,
What might I not have made of thy fair world,
Had I but loved thy highest 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.
We needs must love the highest when we see it,
Not Lancelot, nor another. (649-656)
Guinevere, of course, had not "seen" that Arthur was the "highest."
The pathos inherent in their shared, but unfortunately unspoken, understanding is the sort that Florence Nightingale also despised of achieving:

The intercourse of man and woman--how frivolous, how
unworthy it is! Can we call that the true vocation of
woman—her high career? Look round at the marriages which you know. The true marriage—that noble union, by which a man and woman become together the one perfect being—probably does not exist at present upon earth. . . . But any real communion between husband and wife—any descending into the depths of their being, and drawing out thence what they find and comparing it—do we ever dream of such a thing? Yes, we may dream of it during the season of 'passion,' but we shall not find it afterwards. (Cassandra, qtd. in Norton, II: 1666-1667)

By demonstrating how heartbreakingly close Guinevere and Arthur come to such understanding, Tennyson once more holds up a rallying flag.

Though it sounds harsh to make love a duty, Tennyson is quick to point out that such dutiful love of the "highest" will bring "profit." Such love benefits the individual, the community, and the nation. When, at the end of "Elaine," Lancelot said to Arthur, "But free love will not be bound," Arthur replied:

'Free love, so bound, were freest,' said the King.
'Let love be free, free love is for the best:
And, after heaven, on our dull side of death,
What should be best, if not so pure a love
Clothed in so pure a loveliness?' (1369-1373)

In other words, the individual is free to choose, but has a moral duty to choose the "highest." Only then will the choice be the best choice not only for the individual, but for the community. The clear implication is that the best that can be made of God's "fair world"
can be accomplished only within the bonds of marriage. All four
idylls explore the relations between men and women. In this final
1859 idyll, Tennyson makes clear that King Arthur needed Guinevere to
accomplish his purpose.

Family, then, is the cornerstone for Tennyson as it was for many
mid-Victorians. When Paul Janet published a series of lectures on La
Famille in 1856, Peter Gay notes, they were immediately adapted for
English audiences by the Saturday Review, which summarized Janet’s
message:

Mistrust the man who speaks jestingly of hearth and home.
Not from a corrupt spring can pure waters flow. . . . If
we would make fast the foundations of England, and further
the reign of peace and happiness, truth and justice,
religion and piety, we must do all that in us lies to
cultivate a reverence for the household gods. Family,
country, humanity, these three--but the greatest of these
is Family. Such is the moral we would draw from the work
before us.
(qtd. in Gay 429)

Note the religious significance given to the family simply by the
echo of "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three, but the
greatest of these is charity" (I Corinthians 13:13).

Such "free love" freely bound in marriage is another variety
altogether than that earlier endorsed by Shelley, whose "free love"
is an extreme example of individualism:
A husband and wife ought to continue so long united as they love each other: any law which should bind them to cohabitation for one moment after the decay of their affection would be a most intolerable tyranny. . . . But if happiness be the object of morality, of all human unions and disunions . . . then the connection of the sexes is so long sacred as it contributes to the comfort of the parties, and is naturally dissolved when its evils are greater than its benefits. There is nothing immoral in this separation. . . . Love is free: to promise for ever to love the same woman is not less absurd than to promise to believe the same creed. (I: 301-302)

Shelley's premise is the reverse of Tennyson's mid-Victorian stand. Tennyson, instead, finds himself in the camp of someone like J. S. Mill, who "certainly did not believe the choice between virtue and happiness a simple one. Happiness was not mere sensual pleasure, the gratification of impulse. At its highest level, it conformed to the dictates of morality and reason, and therefore, properly understood, was an entirely desirable good," Bernard Semmel notes of Mill's essay, "On Genius" (13). Tennyson believed, as George Eliot wrote, that "sensuous force" should be "controlled by spiritual passion," that lust must be mastered by love (Gay, in an unfootnoted quotation, 460). Once bound in marriage, free love was, for Tennyson, truly bound; happiness could be found within such restraints.

But a further element is present. Tennyson makes clear that without Guinevere's help, Arthur cannot accomplish his great purpose,
a belief that is not his alone. George Eliot, for example, in an essay published in 1855, writes:

Men pay a heavy price for their reluctance to encourage self-help and independent resources in women. The precious meridian years of many a man of genius have to be spent in the toil of routine, that an 'establishment' may be kept up for a woman who can understand none of his secret yearnings, who is fit for nothing but to sit in her drawingroom like a doll-Madonna in her shrine. No matter. Anything is more endurable than to change our established formulae about women, or to run the risk of looking up to our wives instead of looking down on them (qtd. in Norton, II: 1659).

Eliot's statement fits more accurately Lydgate's situation in Middlemarch than it fits King Arthur, but the parallel is illuminating, I believe. A wife's ethical qualities are vital to the husband's ethical success.

Tennyson, however, takes the blend of masculine and feminine a step further. U. C. Knoepflmacher, in an unfootnoted statement in his essay, "Genre and the Integration of Gender," says.

All creative artists, Tennyson once observed, possess an imagination that is necessarily hermaphroditic. . . . In the Victorian era, when gender stereotyping was at its height, men as much as women vacillated between tendencies too rigidly labeled as 'feminine' or 'masculine' (94).

I noted earlier that Tennyson thinks of Christ in hermaphroditic terms: "a union of male and female qualities, of sweetness and
strength, which he called the man-woman in him." In "The Princess,"
too, the expressed goal is that "The man be more of woman, she of
man," and in that same poem the goal of the ideal marriage is delin-
eated:

. . . either sex alone
Is half itself, and in true marriage lies
Nor equal, nor unequal: each fulfills
Defect in each, and always thought in thought,
Purpose in purpose, will in will, they grow,
The single pure and perfect animal,
The two-celled heart beating, with one full stroke,
Life. (VII: 283-290)

Here in marriage, then, is another of the "highest ideals" toward
which it is the individual's duty to work. Hallam Tennyson writes of
his father's Utopian ideals:

My father would explain that the great resolve (to enable
and spiritualize mankind) is kept so long as all work in
obedience to the highest and holiest law within them: in
those days when all the court is one Utopia:

'The King will follow Christ and we the King,
In whom High God has breathed a secret thing.'

(H. Tennyson 2: 130)

But the King who follows Christ, who tries actively to emulate him,
must possess the hermaphroditic man-woman qualities. Therefore,
Guinevere is essential to Arthur's success in a dual sense. The best
of male and female qualities must be represented both in the ideal
individual and the ideal marriage. "The true marriage--that noble union, by which a man and woman become together the one perfect being" becomes the parallel ideal to the hermaphroditic Christ-like Arthur. Ralph Waldo Emerson in an 1843 Journal entry combined the metaphors:

The finest people marry the two sexes in their own person. Hermaphrodite is then the symbol of the finished soul. It was agreed that in every act should appear the married pair: the two elements should mix in every act. (115)

Such thinking represents a radical departure from that represented in placing men and women in separate spheres, in which man is "in the world" and woman is the "angel in the house."

Mid-Victorian reality, however, often exhibited power plays in both spheres. Gay points out (169) that although "Man's fear of woman is as old as time," during the nineteenth century,

Woman's increasingly open display of her power seemed the public counterpart of that private power that men evoked, more and more anxiously, in the second half of the nine
ten nineteenth century: both furnished them with formidable argu-
ments against woman's emancipation. (169)

The 1859 Idylls gives ample evidence that Tennyson was very much aware of woman's power and its potentially destructive consequences. Witness Enid's subtle manipulation of Geraint, Vivien's captivation of Merlin, Elaine's inability to compete with Guinevere, Guinevere's effect on the community as a whole. When, in "Guinevere," Arthur says that his great purpose had been spoiled "And all thro' thee,"
his statement reflects both the mid-Victorian belief in woman as guardian of the moral virtues and the spreading poison of a bad example. Arthur, of course, ignores his own inaction, Lancelot's part in the adultery, the actions of Modred, and the somewhat shadowy prophecy of his own "doom," complications of which the reader is very much aware. Arthur may think that the woman bears all the blame, but Tennyson subtly indicates that such is not so. Tennyson is not intent on making Guinevere, and therefore woman, the scapegoat, despite his focus on individual responsibility. In summarizing what his father said in later years of the Idylls, Hallam writes:

But in the later 'Idylls' the allowed sin not only poisons the spring of life in the sinner, but spreads its poison through the whole community. In some natures, even among those who would 'rather die than doubt,' it breeds suspicion and want of trust in God and man. Some loyal souls are wrought to madness against the world. Others, and some among the highest intellects, become the slaves of the evil which is at first half-disdained. Tender natures sink under the blight, that which is of the highest in them working their death. (2: 131)

That statement refers to the completed, twelve-idyll work, and so applies to Tristram, Pelleas, Balin and Balan, all of whom both suffer and cause tragedy, but Geraint, Lancelot, Merlin, and Elaine are all implicit in the summary as well.

Tennyson, however, condemns the sin, not the woman. In forgiving Guinevere Arthur acts in a Christian way, and of Christ Tennyson
had written in 1850, "I am always amazed when I read the New Testa-
ment at the splendour of Christ's purity and holiness and at His
infinite pity." Instead of leaving Guinevere prostrate with remorse,
Tennyson lets her believe, "I must not scorn myself: he loves me
still./ Let no one dream but that he loves me still" (667-668).
Those words could apply equally well to either Christ or Arthur.
Tennyson's emphasis rests, finally, on love, love that does not deny
sexuality, but a love that celebrates the hermaphroditic oneness
possible only in marriage, and only in marriage of two individuals,
each of whom contains the man-woman qualities found in Christ. That
ideal is not met in any of the Idylls, but it is yet held up as an
ideal.

The necessary combination of man-woman, tenderness and strength,
is vital for the ideal Christian leader, the ideal marriage, and by
extrapolation, for an England turbulent with rising individualism for
both men and women, an England increasingly important on the interna-
tional level. Tennyson wrote, fully aware of the dangers his own
society faced, of the parallel dangers and missed opportunities in
the medieval world that so fascinated his contemporaries. To what
degree did his contemporaries recognize or agree with those paral-
lels? A look at correspondence and published reviews of the Idylls
shows a wide range of reaction.
CHAPTER 5: CRITICAL RESPONSE

Reactions to Tennyson’s 1859 *Idylls* were generally favorable, although responses ranged from conservative to "liberal" in the sorts of comments made and in the author’s emphasis. The most conservative tended to stress Guinevere's wrong-doing, the loveliness of the poetry, and Arthur’s Christian example. They often pointed to the unpleasantness of the Vivien episode, or ignored it altogether. The moderates tended to see contemporary relevance in the poem, to accept the inclusion of Vivien’s story, and were not so harsh in judgment of Guinevere (interestingly, nobody criticized Lancelot), and also praised Arthur’s example. The most "liberal" of the critics also often spent considerable time praising the *Idylls* as poetry, found the poem relevant to mid-Victorian concerns, and tended to be liberal in their views of all the women in the poem. In their concern for contemporary values, however, some went even further in "liberal" judgments. John Nichol for example, wished that Tennyson had chosen rather to write about mid-nineteenth-century London, in which "lie richly scattered the yet unwrought materials for modern tragedy," (Westminster Review 525) because he feared that retreat into the imagined medieval past might "conceal from us the duty of remedying the evils of the earth" (523).

Because the conservative critics wrote from a desire to preserve the values of the past or to escape from the present into the past, they tended not to write within a framework of personal or national optimism. The "liberals," and some of the moderates, however, did
tend to see the *Idylls* in terms of how it would have a positive effect on its readers. Whether writing from a religious, political, or social perspective, these writers assumed the possibility of change within the reader, and also assumed, to varying degrees, the poet's ability to effect that change. Even those, like John Nichol, who said that the poem's subject matter should be different, wrote from the assumption that a good poem can change a sensitive reader.

Evaluations in personal correspondence, such as Carlyle's letter to Emerson, tended, perhaps because they were private, to be more critical than published reviews, although they, too, evinced a range of response. Perhaps the most denigrative—and most widely quoted—response occurs in the letter that Carlyle wrote to Emerson in January, 1867:

> We read, at first, Tennyson's *Idyle* (sic), with profound recognition of the finely elaborated execution, and also of the inward perfection of vacuum,—and, to say truth, with considerable impatience at being treated so very like infants, though the lollipops were so superlative. (Correspondence ii: 303-304)

This wittily derogative comment is often quoted by critics, none of whom also notes that when Carlyle read the *Idylls*, he was on his first trip out of London after his wife's death less than four months earlier. In the same letter, he admits to Emerson that he was "much bankrupt in hope and heart," and that "I often feel that I had better be dead than thus indifferent, contemptuous, disgusted with the world and its roaring nonsense, which I have no thought farther of lifting
a finger to help, and only try to keep out of the way of, and shut my door against" (301). Under such conditions it is small wonder that Idylls, with its emphasis on love, marriage, and adultery, would not appeal to a newly bereaved man "gazing into the final chasm of things." Carlyle’s conservatism was that of age, loneliness, and despair.

In the Memoir, Hallam Tennyson cites several letters his father received after the 1859 publication. As would be expected, some are simply uncritical praise. Thackeray, for instance, wrote to thank Tennyson:

Gold and purple and diamonds, I say, gentlemen and glory and love and honour, and if you haven’t given me all these why should I be in such an ardour of gratitude? But I have had out of that dear book the greatest delight that has ever come to me since I was a young man; to write and think about it makes me almost young. (1: 445)

The Duke of Argyll wrote to Tennyson of the reactions of Macaulay, whose "Lays of Ancient Rome," also about the heroic past, was enormously popular:

Macaulay is certainly not a man incapable of understanding anything but I knew that his tastes in poetry were so formed in another line that I considered him a good test, and three days ago I gave him "Guinevere."

The result has been as I expected, that he has been delighted with it. He told me that he had been greatly moved by it, and admired it exceedingly. Altho' by
practice and disposition he is eminently a critic, he did not find one single fault. Yesterday I gave him the "Maid of Astolat" with which he was delighted also. (1: 447)

Prince Albert, whose interest in things medieval has been noted, wrote to Tennyson asking that his copy be autographed. He praised the work, especially the "beautiful songs," that "quite rekindle the feeling with which the legends of King Arthur must have inspired the chivalry of old, whilst the graceful form in which they are presented blends those feelings with the softer tone of our present age. (1: 455). The comment is so politic as to be apolitical.

Perhaps more surprising is the reaction from Tennyson's mother, who by all accounts was an exceptionally devout woman. Apparently neither the sensuous Vivien nor the adulterous and earthy Guinevere bothered her; she concentrates, instead, on the moral message:

It does indeed . . . give me the purest satisfaction to notice that a spirit of Christianity is perceptible through the whole volume. . . . O dearest Ally, how fervently have I prayed for years that our merciful Redeemer would intercede with our Heavenly Father, to grant thee His Holy Spirit to urge thee to employ the talents He has given thee, by taking every opportunity of endeavouring to impress the precepts of His Holy Word on the minds of others. My beloved son, words are too feeble to express the joy of my heart in perceiving that thou art earnestly endeavouring to do so. (1: 452)
An even more moderate appraisal appears in the letter from the Reverend B. Jowett, a tutor and soon to be Master of Balliol College, Oxford, and a close friend who normally spent Christmases with the Tennysons at Farringford. In light of public concern with the issues of prostitution, adultery, divorce, and women's assertiveness his response as one of the leading intellectual figures of the period is particularly interesting. Jowett, after praising the "Maid of Astolat" and saying that "'The Lily Maid' seems to me the fairest, purest, sweetest love-poem in the English language," then turns to "Vivien." "Of the other poems I admire "Vivien" the most (the naughty one), which seems to me a work of wonderful power and skill." Jowett adds, "It is most elegant and fanciful. I am not surprised at your Delilah reducing the wise man, she is quite equal to it" (1: 448-449). Jowett admires the morally unscrupulous Vivien and says not a word about the repentant Guinevere. Although Jowett is not shocked by the subject matter, he does not take the step of applying it to mid-Victorian concerns as do Ruskin and Elizabeth Browning.

John Ruskin's letter to Tennyson is the only one cited by Hallam Tennyson that blends praise with criticism. Ruskin is uneasy about "that increased quietness of style" and adds that "I am not sure but I feel the art and finish in these poems a little more than I like to feel it," a criticism not surprising from the man who in Stones of Venice will praise Gothic cathedrals for their roughness. Ruskin's main criticism, however, concerns the subject:

Treasures of wisdom there are in it, and word-painting such as never was yet for concentration, nevertheless it seems
to me that so great power ought not to be spent on visions of things past but on the living present. For one hearer capable of feeling the depth of this poem I believe ten would feel a depth quite as great if the stream flowed through things nearer the hearer. (1: 452-453)

This seems an ironic comment in light of Ruskin's strong interest both in the medieval and in social reform. Perhaps the memory of his own seven-year unhappy marriage, annulled just five years earlier after never having been consummated, made Ruskin shy away from the marriage-centered Idylls. He made no mention of his marriage in Praeterita, the autobiography in which Ruskin said he would write "of what it gives me joy to remember" (Author's Preface: 1). In sum, the combination of quiet tone and "distant" subject proved an unsatisfactory combination for Ruskin, despite his admiration for the four songs and "bits" here and there.

In an October 1859 letter to William Allingham, Elizabeth Barrett Browning carried the same criticism to a more specific conclusion:

Perhaps the breathing, throbbing life around us in this Italy, where a nation is being new-born, may throw King Arthur too far off and flat. . . . The colour, the temperature, the very music, left me cold. Here are exquisite things, but the whole did not affect me as a whole from Tennyson's hands. I would rather have written Maud, for instance, than half a dozen volumes of such Idylls. (104)
"Maud," in which the hero gallantly throws himself into action in the Crimean War, would certainly seem more timely to one emotionally involved in the current Italian fight for political unity.

The published reviews show as wide a range of reaction as do the letters. John Walter, chief proprietor of The Times and a self-styled "liberal-conservative" MP from Nottingham, wrote the unsigned review in The Times. At the opposite end of the spectrum from Mrs. Browning, he neither objected to the subject matter nor saw any timely relevance to the poem, although one of his comparisons was couched in terms of contemporary concerns: "Another character, the Sparrow-hawk, seems an apocryphal personage, and his repentance has a horrible resemblance to that of a ticket-of-leave, who with hair smoothed upon his forehead mouths holy texts to cheat the parson" (5). Though the review praises the *Idylls* in such comments as "Mr. Tennyson has found a noble subject, and it is impossible not to admire the skill with which the character [Arthur] is portrayed," (5) the review ends with:

Nobody wants a metaphysics in poetry, and we are quite content with the information that lying is shameful, and that flesh is grass, that it is difficult to repent, and that it is nice to have new clothes. It is a great relief to be able to forget our modern wisoms, and to find ourselves in a primitive world, where the hard facts of life have not become contemptible through familiarity, where the more palpable lessons have not lost their freshness, and where use has not lessened the marvels of
existence. In company of Arthur and his noble brotherhood of knights we breathe pure air and we go back to nature.

(5)

This conservative reviewer apparently had no more faith in poetry's ability to effect change for the good than he had faith that a ticket-of-leave man would become other than the cheating rogue he was prior to his prison experience. Poetry has its place as a refuge from the "hard facts" of modern life in a world that looks, not optimistically to the future, but yearningly toward the "pure air" of the pre-industrial past, a world that looks appealingly less complex and less filled with uncertainty.

Although it consists to a great extent of quotation and plot summary, the review in Fraser's Magazine shows a strongly conservative bias as well, though religious in emphasis: "The subject of Vivien ... is skilfully treated, but beyond all measure painful to dwell upon" (306). Sounding even more vindictive than does Arthur when he first speaks to Guinevere, this critic wrote:

But as the same Nemesis moves on to overtake the Queen, the action of pity is suspended by the sense of justice. The retribution is a work of necessity; it would be impossible to let her depart in peace. (309)

That same demand for retribution, a demand that totally ignores Arthur's example of Christian forgiving, appears again in the critic's analysis of the poet's role:

How far the poet is answerable for the moral influences of his work in all its bearings, is a matter of grave
consideration, . . . it is certain that a kind of moral
government is demanded by the reader, and that we require
to see the condemnation of crime in the development of the
poem. The poet must act as judge, and sentence his crim-
inals, or we are left unsatisfied. (310)

Such an analysis reflects the mid-Victorian demand for moral art, but
rests lightly indeed upon the reading of the Idylls itself. There is
no Gladstonian sympathy here, no optimistic belief in the efficacy of
an inspiring example, but only the heavy-handed moralistic certainty
of the woman's guilt in such matters of adultery.

At the conclusion to one of his letters to Tennyson, the Duke of
Argyll wrote, "I hear the article in the Edin. Review is not to
contain much criticism, it consists to a great extent of long ex-
tracts. But I have not seen it myself, nor am I sure who wrote it"
(H. Tennyson I: 447). The Duke's information was correct. That
review, one of two unsigned reviews published by Coventry Patmore,
does indeed consist to a large extent of plot summary and quotation.
Patmore is ranked among the conservative critics, however, because
although he sees parallels between Arthur's world and his own, he
does not draw them strongly, and although he sees Idylls as a nation-
alistc poem, that, too, is a weak claim.

Patmore is, however, among those critics who commented on the
poem's moral aspects: "In these poems, moral beauty--without which
there is no true work of art--is to be found . . . in the prevading
(sic) tone of heroic simplicity and magnanimity" (reprinted in
Eclectic: 248). He is also, as Kathleen Tillotson points out, one
of the few reviewers with any first-hand knowledge of the sources (note: 94); as such, Patmore provided valuable insights for the reader with such comments as:

Many of our readers will be surprised when we inform them that there is not the slightest foundation for the above incident [King Arthur finding a king's skeleton crowned with diamonds] in any of the Arthurian romances; and that the poet has, in all cases, allowed himself unbounded liberty in the invention, suppression, or modification of incident, limiting himself only to the conditions of unity of tone, and traditional characters of the personages introduced. (Eclectic, 252)

He did not pursue the argument, however, and neglected to question the possible reasons for the changes. Patmore's review ends with his only negative comment, and even that he turned to praise:

But his great powers, exercised as they always are with a true knowledge of his art, have not been able to give a strong personal interest to his subject, or to turn the knights and ladies of King Arthur's court into living men and women. They belong to faery land, and the more indistinct their forms remain, the more we are disposed to accept them as the mythology of ancient Britain. (255)

Although Patmore said of the idylls that "There is scarcely one of them which does not turn upon some outrageous violation of modern manners and morals," (247) he made nothing of that distinction either.
Patmore's nationalistic interest is central to his opening arguments in his other review, found in the *North British Review*. He pointed out that, "The legends of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table have always been regarded as one of the very few great epic subjects open to a British Poet." Praising Malory's prose work, Patmore concluded that a modern poet would have to do as well in poetry as Malory did in prose, would have to use Saxon rather than Latinized language, and would have difficulty in trying "to represent the manners and morals of these heroic, and once exemplary, personages, without either falsifying them or giving offense to modern readers." "In the Arthurian romances," Patmore said, "love is held as more than half justifying a great deal for which modern ethics makes no excuse" (148-149). Tennyson has, Patmore asserts, met all objections by writing "the most purely Saxon of modern poetry," unequalled in any prose except that of Sir Thomas Malory; has overcome the problems inherent in an epic by using the reappearance of characters as connectors, especially the figure of King Arthur, "who constitutes the ideal standard of purity and honour and prowess, around which all else is grouped" (151); and by distancing the morality issues. Patmore makes no comment on the subtler touches by which, for example, Tennyson makes Arthur partly responsible for the adultery and by which he shows Guinevere in one light in "Elaine" and in a vastly different one in "Guinevere." Patmore's ethical standards as evinced in *Angel in the House* would admit no such distinctions.
"The third difficulty on our list, namely, that of how to treat the moralities of primitive chivalry, is done away with by an admixture of the improbable and supernatural to such an extent," Patmore adds, "that the interest is removed beyond that immediate human sympathy, the existence of which would have rendered such things objectionable" (151). In other words, distasteful subjects such as adultery and seduction must not be dealt with directly, even in art, but must be suitably distanced so as to minimize any possible deleterious effects on readers. His own popular Angel in the House, of course, presents a highly moralized and idealized picture of love and marriage. Patmore failed to note, however, despite his knowledge of the sources, that Tennyson eliminates much of the supernaturalism found in Malory; Patmore even contradicts himself by pointing out that Vivien, "an enchantress, whose chief magic was a fair stock of outward feminine attractions, and cunning in the use of them, is what may be called a great representative subject." "The thing has happened a hundred times," Patmore says, "and will happen a hundred times again; and every time it happens, testimony is borne to the marvellous defect of human nature, and the nullity of the best human wisdom in the face of temptation" (165). Patmore then hastens to add, "The reader is never made to share, even for a moment, Merlin's weakness for Vivien, who is always so detestable to the spectator as she is attractive to the subject of her machinations" (165).

Such self-contradiction perhaps puts Patmore in the camp of those mid-Victorians who perceived women as either madonnas or harlots, as angels or enchanting temptresses. He would, therefore,
focus his attention on Arthur, the most moral of men, and on Vivien, the enchantress to whom even a wise Merlin would succumb. His muddled review reflects his own fears and those of many other mid-Victorians. As a result, he avoided many of the poem's chief issues, kept the *Idylls* fixed firmly in the past, and focused on plot summary and poetic form.

Walter Bagehot, a well-known political liberal, journalist and economist from whom one might expect a pithy, politically oriented review, produced instead in *The National Review* twenty-six bland pages that focus mainly on Tennyson's rank among other nineteenth-century British poets. The more liberal of the reviewers often commented on the effect the *Idylls* would have on the common people, but Bagehot contented himself with "The feelings are natural, the thoughts such as people in life have or might have," and concluded that "The general public will like this" (373). In what sounds like a purposeful avoidance of controversial contemporary topics, Bagehot applauded Tennyson's choice of the medieval setting:

The events of the chivalric legend are better adapted to sustained and prolonged poetry than the events of recent times and of the present day; and that they are so because they abound much less in dangerous detail, are confined to selected events and chosen characters, show us human passions in a more vivid form, present human actions in a more easily intelligible shape, give us a sort of large-hand copy of life which it is comparatively easy to understand and imitate. (378)
He is, however, among those commentators who disapproved of Vivien's inclusion in the book: "It rather mars our enjoyment of the new book of chivalry, to have a character so discordant with its idea placed in such prominence and drawn out in such development" (383). The "unlawful affection" between Guinevere and Lancelot, "evidently a very delicate topic for art to handle," (381) is a problem well solved by Tennyson's choice of form, however:

There can be no doubt that Mr. Tennyson has judged wisely in telling the story of Arthur and Guinevere in a series of tales rather than in a single connected epic. The peculiar and painful nature of that story requires, in a singular degree, the continual use of relieving elements. (384)

Bagehot, like Patmore, apparently wished to avoid direct treatment of sensitive and important issues such as seduction or adultery.

J. M. Ludlow indicated his bias in the title of his review in the November 1859 issue of Macmillan's Magazine: "Moral Aspects of Mr. Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King.'" Ludlow was an active social reformer and prolific writer, but a thoroughly conservative Christian. He emphasized the possibility of Christian redemption rather than the necessity for punishment, but he did so within a thoroughly conservative framework. Noting that "Always in the background of each successive picture, yet growing at every touch more distinct and prominent, is the guilty love of the Queen for Lancelot," (64) Ludlow said that Tennyson makes the reader feel, "as only true genius can, the self-punishing power of guilty love" (65). But, added Ludlow:
He has a higher lesson to teach than that of the adulterer's anguish of self-reproach. He knows that beyond the black terrors of the violated law lies a day-streak of forgiveness and hope. He is a Christian poet. (65)

Then, after pointing out how Arthur's "noble" words have made Guinevere and reader realize "the reality of the deep well-spring of passionate life which that seemingly passionless figure has been bearing within it," Ludlow stated that "the key-note, the crowning lesson of the whole of the book,-- is Reformation through Love; Love abounding beyond all sin; in other words, the very Gospel of Christ's Redemption" (66-67).

That "Christian spirit," Ludlow then said, is the best answer to those who object to the book's "revolting" subject. Tying the Idylls to the world of the mid-Victorians, he added, "But, unfortunately the 'revolting' is all around us. Year-long betrayals of the husband by the wife, of the friend by the friend, are not the monopoly of the mythical or semi-mythical personages of the Arthurian legends" (67). Although "one does not expect that the story of Lancelot and Guinevere will recall man or woman from actual sin, committed or about to be committed, like the preaching of a Samuel Wilberforce," reading the book will be beneficial in the moral development of those "trembling on the verge of maturity" (67). Clearly worried about the present state of moral behavior, Ludlow says that the country was fortunate to have Tennyson rather than Byron and added:

I take it that no one can exaggerate the service rendered to morality by Tennysonian pictures of Lancelots and
Guineveres, whose one sin mars all their worth and loneliness, and turns all their qualities and virtues into means of self-torturing retribution. (68)

Tennyson's "pure heart and fancy have been at work amidst the gross elements of the older legends," so that, "if Mr. Tennyson has deemed it right to treat a subject painful in itself, he has carefully divested it of all details which were not indispensably necessary to the bringing out of its lessons" (69).

Then, in a criticism that makes Ludlow's article perhaps the most interesting of the 1859 reviews, a criticism that anticipates late-Victorian critics such as Swinburne, who reduces Arthur to a "wittol" (36) or twentieth-century critics such as Ryals and Joseph (171), both of whom call Arthur a prig, Ludlow criticized Arthur:

I have one fault to find with the morality of the work. It surely is a serious mistake to have represented Arthur free from self-reproach at the last. It was partly his fault that Guinevere had sinned, -- at least, that she had sinned for so long. His forgiveness is too self-righteous.

... He has no right to speak as if Guinevere had not been given into his keeping, and as if he had not failed to keep her safely, by neglecting to understand her feelings and her character. It is true that he has sacrificed his wife to his ideal Round Table, and the discovery ought well-nigh to overwhelm him. (70)

Even though Ludlow blames Arthur in part for the adultery and also condemns Arthur's self-righteousness, he evidences the Paulian
mid-Victorian view, expressed in the Divorce Bill debates, that a husband is responsible for his wife's behavior. Although Ludlow is liberal enough in his views to criticize the man who spends so much time at the office that he neglects his wife, he yet persists in seeing the wife as an entity both defined by and protected by her husband. Ludlow does, however, deviate from popular critical opinion by concluding that Tennyson "ought not to leave any with the impression that this lofty self-righteous Arthur is his ideal of true manliness" (71).

Ludlow's conservative paternalistic attitude toward women expressed itself in modified form in his concern that the Idylls would not appeal to the "people." Tennyson's language and subject matter would keep him from ever becoming "a poet of the people," even though he has a "vivid sense of the present." He does not appeal, Ludlow says, to those not in the "leisurely class:"

To the great mass of readers in the working, and what may be called the quasi-working classes (clerks, assistants, and such like), King Arthur and his Court are personages very far removed from all subjects of ordinary interest. The 'fashionable vice,' though, alas! far from unknown amongst them, exhibits generally for them few of those softer features which it may assume in tales of knighthood, which form, perhaps, its chief danger among the more leisurely classes. (71)
Ludlow, then, could be termed a conservative with moderate tendencies, the sort of mid-Victorian who worked hard for social reform, but under the aegis of traditional Christian values.

Moderate optimism imbues the review in the Dublin University Magazine as well. The writer states, "Art is not mere imitation, its aim is to idealize. It is not merely to flatter or embellish, but to transform" (54). Tennyson apparently meets that standard because the reviewer concluded: "Arthur's hope for Guinevere is our's (sic) for ourselves." Although framed solely in religious terms, the emphasis is on the efficacy of a good example and the possibility of change.

Elizabeth J. Hasell's unsigned review in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine provides a moderate, common-sense feminine evaluation. Hasell, a self-taught classical scholar, was, like Ludlow, a devout Christian who contributed frequently to quarterly journals and spent many hours on behalf of education and welfare of the poor. Noting that the "Laureate's devotion to the fair sex evidently glows with unabated ardour," she wrote: "The feminine element predominates decidedly in the work. Arthur, Lancelot, and Merlin . . . are represented to us, not so much in council or in action as in their dealings with, and in the effect they produce on, Guinevere, Elaine, and Vivien" (610). Hasell then complains of Tennyson's concern with clothing in "Enid," and asks, apparently not familiar with "Enid's source:

How could Mr Tennyson think it worth his while to adorn by his fancy--to discourse to us in the sweet music of a voice we love so well--a tale of such mediocre interest--of a
hero so utterly stupid? In the name of the ladies of England (who, we are sure, will agree with us), we beseech him, for the future, to wed his gentle Enids—those patterns of womanhood whom he draws so well—to men somewhat worthier of them. (613)

Her feminine viewpoint is refreshing. A Patmore extols the virtues of a patient wife; Hasell notes the husband's stupidity.

Hasell then utterly condemns "Vivien" because of the "incurable fault in its original design" (615); Merlin gives up his secret not for love, but because of Vivien's "importunity." This feminine reviewer apparently reads romances other than the Idylls. Vivien is "a most unlovely damsel," and Hasell characterizes the scandal Vivien tells Merlin about the knights of the Round Table as "scandal of which we will say nothing, but that we are truly sorry it should pollute the pages" (614). But for "Elaine" the writer has "unfeigned admiration" because of its moral lessons:

We see in Elaine how the strongest and best human affections work death, not life, when they reign in the soul unsubordinated to a higher love; in Lancelot, how they, who seek happiness in forbidden paths, are doomed by a divine decree to find one day or other that they have lost the substance while wildly grasping at the shadow. (622)

"Guinevere," however, receives Hasell's highest praise, praise based on the moral message in Arthur's two speeches to Guinevere, about whom nothing sympathetic is said. Indeed, Hasell berates Guinevere
for having the same moral failing found in some mid-Victorian wives. Sounding much like Mrs. Ellis, Hasell writes:

Saddest of all reproaches to a woman, to have been chosen by Providence as a good man’s help-meet in some worthy and noble undertaking, and not merely to have failed to help him (sad enough and common enough as that is!) but to have worked against him! (624)

The "manly purity" and "noble forgiveness" of Arthur’s speech will bear witness "that the age which produced it could not be wholly corrupt," Hasell says, when some future Macaulay looks at nineteenth-century England and sees the popularity of "Traviata," passage of the Divorce Bill, and the "coarse passages in 'Vivien'" (624). Apparently a woman tired of references to woman's angelic nature, this critic happily points out that

Here it is the Man, not the Woman, whose eyes are fixed on Heaven, and whose face has caught a radiance from above; the Woman, not the Man, who is to rise from the dust and gain wings wherewith to soar upward through the blessed attraction of the Form that stands beside her. (626)

Hasell’s feminine bias adds interest to her moderate Christian stance.

The _Saturday Review’s_ stand is moderate as well. The writer sees the poem as very contemporary in impact, praises Arthur particularly for his political stability, and although the author is pleased with the poem’s "higher moral tone," he is also pleased that Tennyson’s "style never tends to become thin, didactic, or
declamatory" (76). Gertrude Himmelfarb points out that the article's overall response is a bit surprising from a magazine "as orthodox" in religion as it was "conservative in politics" (Darwin 282). The "noble and tender reproof" and Guinevere's contrition fit orthodox Christian belief, but no objection to Vivien's human successes occur, though they are certainly not representative of "a higher moral tone." Himmelfarb notes that apparently the reviewer chose to ignore in the text what did not fit with a Christian definition of "dramatic propriety or illusion" in art that is meant "to transform" the individual into a morally responsible citizen. Such internal inconsistency is not unusual in the reviews, however, and may well reflect the conflicting pulls that any mid-nineteenth century moderate probably felt. He takes the conservative stance of praising Arthur as "the perfect ruler, the suppressor of anarchy" (75), and ignores the obvious dissolution of Arthur's kingdom. The reviewer says that of all the idylls, 'Guinevere' will probably be the most popular, while 'Vivien' is perhaps still more purely and exclusively poetical" (76). It is in Vivien's words that the reviewer couches his final lines of praise for the Idylls:

'O Master,' Vivien asks, 'Do you love my tender rhyme?' And
Merlin, as well he might, 'looked and half believed her true.' (76)

Moderate, too, are the views expressed in The British Quarterly Review, whose reviewer has faith in the individual's power to effect change and therefore has faith in Britain's future, but at the same time objects to the subject matter in "Vivien." He finds ample timely
significance in the *Idylls*. "No modern poet is more national than our Laureate," the reviewer states, and adds, "Mr. Tennyson has a place among us which his art, almost perfect as it is, could not have gained if the pulsation of his verse had not beat in harmony with the nation's life" (481). Noting that the story of Arthur had been popular with many writers, the critic says,

"It is but natural that Arthur should reappear with other worthies of the world, or that in our sympathy we should revive the fictions. . . . In fact, there is reason for this faith in men, rather than circumstance. The achievements of the Round Table are conceivable to the heroes of India. The knightly qualities of Lancelot have been emulated by many a Crimean soldier" (483).

In writing of King Arthur, the reviewer adds, "Mr. Tennyson is not the reviver of a dead worthy, but the dramatist who sets the immortal champion of British virtues before us" (488). Poetry should "reflect to us a vision of the Eden whence we are exiled. However darkened by the stains of the mirror that shows them to us, the gleams of the lost world pictured by the imagination interpret to us our present life, and bid us hope for a better" (484). There is "no more moral lesson than the bitter ending of Lancelot and Guenevere's unlawful love" (484), the writer adds, and praises the choice of Arthur as subject, "the perfect man who is the theme of the highest poetry" (489). "Vivien," however, is another matter:

"We hardly understand Mr. Tennyson's insertion of this poem between the noble pictures which precede and follow it."
Vivien intrudes as a mocking Death between the figures of Enid and Elaine, and we seem to lose half our pleasure in their wifely and maidenly devotion when we see it parodied by this woman-fiend. . . . Mr. Tennyson has painted for us that loathsome thing, a fleshly woman without soul" (495).

Moderate and optimistic though he is, the British Quarterly Review writer is not far enough along the scale of moderate to "liberal" to find any defense of Guinevere. William Ewart Gladstone does, however.

Just as they are in most of the other reviews, moral issues are at the forefront of Gladstone's unsigned review in The Quarterly Review. "The Arthurian romance," he writes, "has every recommendation that should win its way to the homage of a great poet. It is national: it is Christian. It is also human in the largest and deepest sense; and, therefore, though highly national, it is universal" (468). Although he defends Tennyson's inclusion of Vivien because "Poetry, the mirror of the world, cannot deal with its attractions only, but must present some of its repulsions also," he also admits:

No pleasure, we grant, can be felt from the character either of wily woman, between elf and fiend, or of the aged magician, whose love is allowed to travel whither none of his esteem or regard can follow it: and in reading this poem we miss the pleasure of those profound moral harmonies, with which the rest are charged. (471)
Gladstone does not join those who condemn Guinevere, however, but describes her as a woman of "deeply impassioned and powerful nature," (474) one who, even while profoundly repentant, maintains an "air of nobleness." Such a view is not surprising in one who walked the streets of London to try to reclaim prostitutes, or in a man who, as earlier noted, feared the "passion" within himself and other Englishmen. Gladstone even goes so far as to blame Tennyson a bit for changing Arthur's character from Malory's conception. He notes that, unlike Malory, Tennyson drops any reference to Arthur's statement, "Much more I am sorrier for my good knight's loss than for the loss of my queen; for queens might I have enough, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company" (478). Instead, Gladstone points out:

And it is but a debt of justice to the Guinevere of the romancers to observe, that she loses considerably by the marked transposition which Mr. Tennyson has effected in the order of greatness between Lancelot and Arthur. With him there is an original error in her estimate, independently of the breach of a positive and sacred obligation. She prefers the inferior man; and this preference implies a rooted ethical defect in her nature. In the romance of Sir T. Mallory the preference she gives to Lancelot would have been signally just, had she been free to choose. (478)

Despite Gladstone's recognition of Guinevere's somewhat diminished stature, he realizes that Lancelot is "inferior" to Malory's Lancelot only in comparison with the heightened moral character that Tennyson
attributes to Arthur. In Malory, Gladstone points out, "Lancelot is of an indescribable grandeur," but Arthur's character is limited by such statements as "Much more I am sorrier for my good knight's loss." By adding the entire parting scene between Guinevere and Arthur, Tennyson of course shifts the emphasis to that relationship. Tennyson's 1859 Arthur does not mourn the loss of his knights more than the loss of his queen.

Gladstone approves the change of emphasis, writing of Arthur's two speeches to Guinevere that they are "of a lofty, almost an awful severity; and yet a severity justified by the transcendent elevation which the poet has given to the character of Arthur" (476). He then notes:

He has encouraged . . . us to conceive of Arthur as a warrior no less irresistible than Lancelot, as even perfect in purity, and as in all other respects more comprehensive, solid, and profound. . . . We know not where to look in history or in letters for a nobler and more overpowering conception of man as he might be than in the Arthur of this volume. Wherever he appears, it is as the great pillar of the moral order, and the resplendent top of human excellence. (477)

Gladstone, then, who believes that "Lofty example in comprehensive forms is, without doubt, one of the great standing needs of our race," (465) sees Tennyson's Arthur in those terms. "With mind and character themselves lies the highest occupation of the Muse" (465).

Although Gladstone is sympathetic to Guinevere's weaknesses, his emphasis is clearly on Arthur's splendid Christian example.
Tennyson's elevated portrait of Arthur is of importance as a moral example, more important to Gladstone than is Guinevere's diminution resulting from choosing the "inferior" man. The tragedy moves from a Malory situation in which Guinevere is unable to be with Lancelot, the man she loves, to a situation in which the more important loss occurs when she fails to recognize Arthur as a potentially exemplary husband as well as political leader. Gladstone focuses on Arthur because he believed that England needed just such a "lofty example." Gladstone shows not the slightest overtone of thinking Arthur a prig as later critics will. For Gladstone the medieval story is full of significance for the mid-Victorian who, in making moral choices, would profit by reading of Guinevere's failings as well as of Arthur's strength as a "moral pillar."

The reviewer in Chamber's Journal, however, would probably say that Gladstone's dream of moral influence is illusory. Apparently writing too early to know that the Idylls would sell 10,000 copies in the first week and nearly 40,000 within a few weeks of publication, the reviewer said, "Alfred Tennyson is not in any sense a popular poet. His admirers, although numerous, and always increasing, are among 'the upper ten thousand' only" (121). The reviewer noted that Tennyson's "conservatism; and his total lack of humour, will for long, and perhaps for ever, prevent him from becoming a poet of the People" (121). "Among the intellectual classes . . . there has never been poet so hailed as Alfred Tennyson," the reviewer admits (121). "The hard-working curate in his homely lodgings, the would-be hard-worked barrister in his briefness chambers, welcome the rare
utterances of the Laureate with an affectionate admiration that they accord to no other living writer" (121). Sales of 50,000 would probably not impress this reviewer, who apparently is a liberal much concerned with the welfare of the lower classes.

John Nichol combined the liberal tendencies of both William Gladstone and the Chamber's Journal reviewer in his attitude toward women and his desire that poetry serve the needs of the people. Nichol, a graduate of Balliol College, where he studied with Benjamin Jowett, was later Professor of English Literature at the University of Glasgow; he was active in literary pursuits and in liberal political causes. In an unsigned review in the Westminster Review he wrote of Enid that "Surely the new law of divorce would be stretched to afford relief to any lady who could prove such an offence against her husband" (507). He is not repulsed by the inclusion of "Vivien," saying rather that "The art with which she beguiles Merlin is exquisite. The description of her beauty and wanton wiles is to the last degree luxuriant. She seems to lie before us . . . like a rich spotted snake, at once repulsive and fascinating. [She is] the genius of seduction" (509). He does admit, however, that "The passage in which she pours forth her spleen is the only one which in our judgment gives any countenance to the censure which this volume has met with on the ground of indelicacy (immorality is a wider word)" (511). He concludes his analysis of "Vivien" with:

We can understand why this poem has been called immoral without concurring in the verdict. The morality of a story is determined by the impression which it leaves as a whole
on the reader's mind, and not by shades of expression; and surely a poem is not necessarily immoral, unless it deals exclusively with noble motives and pure actors. As it seems to us "Vivien" is neither moral nor immoral but a masterpiece of simple art, luxuriant in its colour, thrilling in its action. (512)

The most generous toward Guinevere of all the critics cited, Nichol notes, "In Mr. Tennyson's softened version the tragedy of Guinevere is brought near to that of Francesca da Rimini, for whom the sternest of poets, and the world with him, has more of pity than condemnation. He puts into Merlin's mouth a palliation of her crime" (517). Nichol says of Arthur's parting speeches to her that,"Perhaps there is nothing of equal extent in English poetry which for sustained majesty of thought, ineffable solemnity, and pathos, can be well compared" (518). "Writing like this, and that which concludes the poem, carries us beyond the region of criticism and praise. He who reads it well, will read it alone in silence with a sense of awe, and thoughts that lie deeper than tears" (519).

Despite such praise, however, Nichol, like Ruskin, concludes his review by wishing that Tennyson had used his talents not on a medieval subject, but on the tragedy to be found in a modern great city such as London. Although he sees relevance in the Idylls to contemporary questions, Nichol, unlike the Times reviewer, fears the escape into the past:

In an age of overwrought activity, when the elements adapted for the purposes of imagination are hidden beneath
the dust of the strife, we are strongly impelled to revert to our memories of a time before the rivers were poisoned and the fields charred by furnaces (522). . . . But there is a danger of its alluring us into mere luxurious contemplation of a greatness which exists after all mainly in our own imaginations. Our poets and painters are then . . . singing songs of Paradise to conceal from us the duty of remedying the evils of earth. (522-23)

Such an attitude is the reverse of the conservative opinion of the Times reviewer who wished to retreat to such an Eden. Instead, Nichol states:

The new life which the poet has thrown into his version of the romances . . . does not prevent our regarding them, in some degree, as exquisitely beautiful fossils. . . . There is a poetry of the past . . . but a great city, seen aright, is tenfold more poetical than them all. Surely, beneath its repulsive exterior . . . lie richly scattered the yet unwrought materials for modern tragedy. (524-525)

The sort of liberal bias that makes Nichol unusually sympathetic to the women in the Idylls also impels him to wish that the poem were more timely in setting and subject matter.

Tennyson's Idylls of the King, then, attracted wide attention from reviewers, whose responses ranged from politically conservative to "liberal." Most specifically praised Arthur's parting speeches to Guinevere, most commented on the poem's moral aspects, many objected to the inclusion of at least some portions of "Vivien." Although some
commented on the relevance to mid-Victorian concerns, none of the
critics saw the Idylle as widespread social commentary; two wished
that the poem appealed to a wider segment of the People rather than
to the intellectuals. The most explicit parallels drawn between
Arthur's world and that of the mid-Victorians concern adultery or the
knightly behavior of the Crimean War heroes. The lessons to be
learned were the destructiveness of adultery, the moral desirability
of Christian forgiveness, and the need to follow Arthur's heroic and
selfless example. Only one critic commented on Arthur's self-right-
eousness, and in doing so, placed it in a framework of Arthur's
neglected duties as protector of his wife. The larger questions of
the potentially ideal marriage, of what the relationship between man
and woman might be, of the role of the individual in society, are
largely ignored. Many reviewers, in fact, ignore the grim aspects of
the poem in favor of commenting on the moral message. They may
comment on the intricacy of the poetic form, but to a great extent
avoid comment on the intricately wrought subject matter. What, then,
can we conclude?
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* does, as one critic so condescendingly puts it, teach us "that lying is shameful, and that flesh is grass, that it is difficult to repent, and that it is nice to have new clothes." But a far broader range of mid-Victorian intellectual, moral, and psychological concerns emerges.

All four idylls are cast in the framework of the free will/determinism question, with emphasis placed on individual responsibility for moral behavior. In each, individual action is crucial; in each, a woman's decision to act is central. Enid takes action in spite of her husband's orders to the contrary; Geraint voluntarily changes his mode of treating his wife. Vivien acts only from motives of personal power and is cunningly successful; Merlin chooses to let Vivien overpower him partly because of weltschmertz and partly because he hopes that fleshly lust will make him feel young again. Elaine chooses death because of Lancelot's adulterous and apparently unbreakable bond with Guinevere, a voluntary bond that keeps him from realizing his highest moral potential either as knight of the Round Table or as husband and father. From the moment of her marriage, Guinevere is torn between her love for Lancelot and her duties as wife and queen. She chooses not to flee with Lancelot to his castle after the adultery is made public; Arthur chooses to visit Guinevere in the abbey for a final farewell and then chooses to forgive her. In each of these incidents, Tennyson departs from his source in order to give the element of free choice greater sway.
In each of the idylls the rumor or fact of the adultery plays an influential role, but in each Tennyson emphasizes the pain rather than the pleasure that comes of the relationship. The rumored adultery kindles Geraint’s distrust of Enid. The adultery, the one scandal Vivien cites that Merlin cannot disprove, is therefore a factor in his defeat. Elaine and Lancelot, a potentially ideal couple, are kept apart because of the adulterous liaison. Finally, in "Guinevere," Arthur makes plain both his personal pain at the deception and the adultery’s demoralizing effect on the kingdom as a whole; Guinevere regrets not having loved Arthur as she should. The Idylls, then, illustrates the mid-Victorian upper and middle class anxiety about the perceived growing laxness of moral standards as well as the optimistic belief that individual action could have an effect on the community as a whole as well as on the family, the microcosm of the nation.

Arthur’s ideal example as the "moral pillar of the moral order" puts the moral framework into Christian terms both of striving for moral excellence and of forgiving those who fail. Certainly those are the terms in which Guinevere finally sees Arthur when she decides, "It was my duty to have loved the highest;/ It surely was my profit had I known." Her lament, "Ah my God,/ What might I not have made of thy fair world,/ Had I but loved thy highest creature here?" echoes King Arthur’s words, "For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life." Tennyson’s emphasis, however, on their parting and their recognition, "too late," of what their marriage might have been indicates that their tragedy is on a personal as well as national
level. Just as Tennyson conceived of Christ in hermaphroditic terms, Christ the "man-woman," he held up the ideal of the blend of man-woman in marriage as well. In such a marriage the husband does not dominate the wife, nor she him, but the best aspects of both man and woman work together for the good of "this land of Christ." Christ is whole because of a blend of masculine and feminine qualities; so, too, is the ideal marriage. It is important, too, that such an ideal marriage is based as firmly on the sensual as it is on moral ideals. Lancelot, shown in sympathetic terms, gave Guinevere the "touch of earth" she required, and it is, by Arthur's own admission, "thro' flesh" that his "love . . . hath wrought into my life" so that "'Let no man dream but that I love thee still." Tennyson, then, is neither a misogynist nor a man fearful of sex.

Beneath all Tennyson's powerful assertions, however, lurks doubt. Submissive Enid, the ideal wife, wields a powerful weapon of control over Geraint. Vivien, evil as she is, is yet described in the loveliest and most sensuous of poetry-- and is successful in her endeavors. Elaine, the pure lily, offers to follow Lancelot without being his wife and then wastes her potential in willful suicide. Lancelot, in spite of being unable to live up to his vows to King Arthur, and in spite of his long-standing adultery with the queen, remains an enormously attractive figure who dies "a holy man." Nor is Tennyson's portrait of Guinevere totally unsympathetic despite the adultery and her sometimes spiteful treatment of Lancelot. Arthur, despite his status as an ideal figure, ignores complex factors in the breakdown of his realm, and in telling Guinevere that he will not
reseat her in her "place of light" because she is so poisonous an example, ignores the fact that the poison has been spreading for years because of his inaction and that the infection is already fatal to the kingdom.

None of the characters, then, is totally consistent or totally knowable to the others. Each is refracted by the "Light of this world"; each sees even a "fact" like the adultery from differing perspectives. The disconnected form of the idylls themselves, as well as the differing parallax within the idylls, emphasizes the discontinuity of the real as compared with the androgynous ideal. Not only are ideals difficult to live up to for the mid-Victorian in his complex and individualistic world, but it is increasingly difficult even to define truth. Not merely an artful story of the romantic and medieval past, the Idylls instead reflects concerns both timeless and yet exceptionally timely for the mid-Victorian.
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