The Arthurian Legend

from the Victorian perspective
IN TENNYSON'S
Idylls of the King

Ewa Młynarczyk

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Through the publication of this book, we memorialise Ewa Młynarczyk, a young and gifted scholar whose life and promising academic career were tragically cut short. During her time at the Institute of English Studies, Ewa demonstrated not only a profound dedication to her research but also a generosity of spirit that left a lasting impact on colleagues, students, and friends alike. Her intellect and curiosity were matched by a unique sensitivity and empathy that enriched her work and inspired those around her. She leaves behind a legacy of scholarship and camaraderie that we will carry forward in her memory. As we reflect on the time we shared with Ewa, we hold close the memories of her humour, kindness, and dedication to the scholarly path.

Ewa's work delved deeply into Victorian poetry and its connections with the Arthurian legacy. This book is a published version of Ewa's master's thesis, written under the supervision of Professor Grażyna Bystydzieńska, whose support was also invaluable in bringing this project to fruition. Ewa's dear friends, Małgorzata Ewa Skibińska and Jakub Niedziela, prepared the text for publication in honour of Ewa's legacy.

Justyna Włodarczyk
Head of the Institute of English Studies

Preface

From the Middle Ages onwards, Arthurian literature has become part of the heritage of the culture of the Western Europe. It seems that, in a figurative sense, the prophecy about the once and future king, which originated in Wace's account (Vinaver 1929: 90), has been fulfilling itself ever since, as each epoch discovers its own Arthurian world and instils it with new meanings reflecting its current concerns.

A sudden renewal of interest in the Arthurian literature seems to be especially remarkable in the nineteenth century. After a long period, during which the legend had been either completely forgotten or degraded to the level of mere farce in the eighteenth century (Pearsall 2003: 115–116), the Victorian poets and artists, inspired by the great medieval works, such as Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485), restored it to its place among high literature, and employed its main themes in their discussions of spirituality, morality, and the state of the human being in the ever-changing world of the times witnessing rapid scientific progress.

The Arthurian legend became the theme of the lifetime literary endeavour for the Victorian Poet Laureate, Lord Alfred Tennyson, and has found its best expression in his *Idylls of the King*. A work to which Tennyson devoted almost fifty years of his literary career, could not have passed unnoticed among literary critics, both Victorian and those writing in the twentieth century. One of the most controversial

issues that have been debated appears to be the actual genre, or rather, a mixture of genres, which Tennyson employed in the *Idylls*. This is also the main argument for those who have perceived the poem as a literary failure. However, after a considerable amount of negative criticism from some Victorians, such as Algernon Charles Swinburne or Thomas Carlyle, who argued that the *Idylls* was too escapist, as well as from the critics of the early twentieth century, who in turn found it too Victorian, the *Idylls of the King* seems to be once again enjoying a revival of popularity in literary circles (Priestley 1973: 126).

In this work I have attempted to explore the Victorian characteristics of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* by pointing to the major differences that the poet introduced with respect to his medieval sources, and by emphasising how these differences reflect both the Victorian consciousness and the uniqueness of Tennyson's rendition of the Arthurian legend. In my analysis of the Victorian aspects of the *Idylls* I have focused on the ideas of the poet himself, both as a Victorian Poet Laureate, involved in the most important debates of his times, and as a Victorian individual, struggling with deep personal dilemmas of faith and doubt. His thoughts and reflections have been revealed owing to the insightful works by his son, namely *Lord Alfred Tennyson. A Memoir* (1897) and The Eversley Edition of *The Works of Tennyson, Annotated* (1907–8). Tennyson's point of view was in turn challenged by the reception of the *Idylls* by the Victorian literary critics, whose responses can be found in Jump's *Tennyson. The Critical Heritage* (1967). However, certain aspects of a given epoch cannot be immediately apparent to its contemporaries; they emerge only after a necessary lapse of time. In such cases I have sought to support my argument by referring to sources exploring the characteristics of the Victorian modes of thought, such as Altick's *Victorian People and Ideas* (1973), Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (1985), and Pollard's *The Victorians* (1993). When comparing the *Idylls* to Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, I have taken into account Caxton's edition of 1485, as the Winchester manuscript was discovered as late as 1934, and thus must have been unavailable to Tennyson.

Introduction

Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* epitomises the renewal of interest in the Arthurian legend in the nineteenth century. The theme also influenced quite a few outstanding Victorian artists such as Matthew Arnold, Charles Algernon Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, which resulted not only in various poetical works but also in Julia Margaret Cameron's photographic illustrations for the *Idylls* of 1875, Arthurian stained-glass and mural painting (Pearsall 2003: 137–8). In fact, Victorian Arthurianism can be perceived as a part of Victorian fascination with the past, and with the Middle Ages in particular. The Victorian Medieval Revival was inspired by the Romantic nostalgia for the past, which permeates the medieval poems and novels by Sir Walter Scott, and manifests itself in many aspects of Victorian life, such as literature, art, philosophy and architecture.

However, this interest in the Middle Ages was not merely of an aesthetic kind. To the Victorians, challenged by the latest scientific discoveries and paralysed by the ensuing religious doubt, the idealised medieval world of the heroic past offered the comforting stability of the feudal system, restless energy, and simple Christian faith. Gilmour points out that in the 1830s "the Middle Ages were used [...] as a weapon against the mechanism, calculation, selfishness, and ugliness of the

emerging industrial civilization" (Gilmour 1996: 47; cf. Jenkins 1990: 192). While it seems that each Victorian artist developed his own personal vision of the Middle Ages, they all viewed that world as much more comprehensible than their own age of transition:

> They all felt that the nature of the Victorian intellectual and social scene was such that the imagination could only grasp it obliquely. [...] The medieval cult, in all its forms, witnesses to the strain of living and thinking in a society where facts, theories and principles must have seemed to many sensitive people like an unintelligible whirl of atoms. (Cockshut 1993: 22)

The same view of the past as more tangible and secure than the present can be found in Tennyson's letter to Emily Sellwood from 1839:

> To me often the far-off world seems nearer than the present, for in the present is always something unreal and indistinct, but the other seems a good solid planet, rolling round its green hills and paradises to the harmony of more steadfast laws. There steam up from about me mists of weakness, or sin, or despondency, and roll between me and the far planet, but it is there still. (*A Memoir* 1: 171–172)

Hence, to the future Poet Laureate, the past provided a peaceful and harmonious refuge, an alternative to the world dominated by the mists of uncertainty and confusion.

In architecture, the taste for the medieval was visible in the preference for the Gothic style. One of its signs was "the vogue for [...] erecting artificial ruins of nonexistent castles and abbeys on country estates" (Altick 1973: 102). Moreover, in Victorian times the Gothic look was applied not only to newly-raised churches and mansions, but also to "railway stations, town halls, banks, hotels, schools, lunatic asylums, lodging houses, jails, public baths, public libraries, and public houses" (ibid.). Such was the Victorian fascination with the medieval that the Medieval Court was even arranged at the Great Exhibiton of 1851, otherwise showcasing the greatest achievements of modernity. This enthusiastic although frequently historically inaccurate Gothicising in the name of the latest fashions led to outrageous damage to many old

churches and some cathedrals, and finally resulted in the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (Altick 1973: 103). In addition, the fascination with medieval architecture encouraged more in-depth historical studies of the Gothic style, such as that of Augustus Charles Pugin, the results of which were expounded in his major works, such as his *Specimens of Gothic Architecture* (1821–3), and *Examples of Gothic Architecture* (1828–36) (Brooks 2001: 161).

Probably the most vivid example of the Victorian attempts to re-create the Middle Ages was the infamous Eglinton Tournament of 1839. The event had been carefully planned and arranged by Lord Eglinton and Samuel Pratt, the latter providing wealthy Tory aristocracy not only with the armour, but also with "crests, horse armour and equipment, pavilions, tents, shields, banners, lances, swords, outfits for squires and pages, and medieval costumes" (Pearsall 2003: 119) from his armour showroom in Lower Grosvenor Street. Over 100,000 spectators came to see "Scott's romances brought to life", causing a "thirty-mile traffic jam on the Ayr-Glasgow road that led past Eglinton" (Altick 1973: 104). However, the enthusiasm of the participants was soon dampened by the torrents of rain, which covered the lists with large puddles of mud, and made further attempts at jousting rather uncomfortable to the knights and unattractive to the audience. The Queen of Beauty rode away in a closed carriage, the grandstand started to leak, and the pavilion prepared for the evening's ball collapsed. Even though the tournament and the banquet finally took place on the following Friday, it was the first unfavourable impression that was remembered, especially as it was later propagated by radical newspapers (Pearsall 2003: 119).

While the attempts to revive the Middle Ages in a literal sense in most cases turned out to be a failure, medieval imagery was quite successfully employed on the metaphorical level. The medieval world of noble lords and ladies proved to be not only a means of escape from the ugly world transformed by the Industrial Revolution but also a source of moral guidance that could be derived from chivalric conduct and the code of courtly love. Even though the prototypes had

been taken from medieval legends, they were used to discuss the issues that were of utmost importance to Tennyson and his contemporaries. Altick observes that it was the duty of the Victorian artist to show the themes drawn from the past "with an eye to their present-day relevance" (Altick 1973: 276).

The tendency to express Victorian ideas through medieval imagery can be found in the language of the renowned men of letters of the era. In his speech on sanitary reform, aimed at improving the conditions of industrial workers, Kingsley appealed to the audience by presenting philanthropy as a modern form of chivalry (Houghton 1985: 319). The same message appears in Sir Edward Strachey's introduction to his 1868 edition of Malory, in which he emphasises the importance of "redressing human wrong" (Tennyson, "Dedication": 9) in the nineteenth century: "we must remember that our nineteenth century world is yet far from cleared of the monstrous powers of evil, which still oppress and devour the weak". Hence, he calls for "the most adventurous enthusiasm" together with "the most patient endurance" to be engaged in the battle "in the true spirit of chivalry" in order to help "the poor, the weak, and the oppressed" (Strachey 1901: lvi). The medieval idiom was also employed by various organisations aiming at a moral reform, such as the White Cross League, which "enlisted boys and young men who promised to remain morally pure and to chivalrously protect girls and women of all classes" (Mitchell 1996: 256). This didactic purpose is also present in Tennyson's intention to depict Sir Gareth as "a pattern youth for his boys" (*A Memoir* 2: 83). He claimed that in his *Idylls* he tried to teach his audience the value of the "spirit of chivalry", which, in recent years, seemed to have fallen into oblivion (*A Memoir* 2: 337).

Moreover, the medieval notion of courtly love was useful in promoting the Victorian ideas concerning the role of the woman in society: "courtly love supports domestic ideology: the chivalric knight ventures forth in the world of action in order to serve and protect the lady who adorns his castle home with her beauty, both physical and spiritual" (Morgan 2002: 210). In return for protection against the dangers of the

morally suspicious outer world, the lady was supposed to assume the role of a spiritual and moral guide of her lord. She should bind him to herself with the vows of blind service and obedience, and thus, with the power of true love, save him from waywardness and temptation that he may encounter on his way during his adventures in the dangerous world outside. As Ruskin pointed out, "It is the type of an eternal truth — that the soul's armor is never well set to the heart unless a woman's hand has braced it; and it is only when she braces it loosely that the honor of manhood fails" (Ruskin 1906: 142–145).

Similarly, the glorification of the feudal system, shown in opposition to the inhuman conditions of living of the nineteenth-century working classes, to a large extent influenced the social thought of many eminent Victorian figures. In his work *Contrasts; or a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day, Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (1836), Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin presented a series of pairs of engravings, each showing the contrast between "medieval buildings, the product of a society at peace with itself and God" and "scenes in the modern city, whose ugly buildings were emblematic of dehumanisation and wage slavery" (Altick 1973: 105–6). Another Victorian to employ chronological contrast in discussing the degraded state of modem society was Carlyle, who, in his *Past and Present* (1843), juxtaposed the portrayal of the twelfth-century monastic community at St. Edmond's Abbey with the harsh reality of the Victorian Age. Yet, his conclusions are more complex than those of Pugin's. He stresses the positive and negative aspects of both the past and the present in order to point to the possible advantages which can be drawn from such a comparison, and applied for the benefit of his epoch (Gilmour 1996: 49). Similar reflections on the state of Victorian society as opposed to its medieval counterpart can also be found in the attitudes of Ruskin and Morris. The latter, himself a multitalented artist and craftsman, emphasised the liberating sense of independence which must have accompanied medieval workmen in the process of creating unique objects of art in

their entirety, which differentiated them from the debasing position of industrial workers, each of them responsible for only a fragmentary stage in mass production. This belief found its practical expression in the Arts and Crafts Movement initiated with the decorative arts, which were executed by the firm Morris established with his friends in 1861 (Stansky 1993: 344–5, 360–70).

The Victorians came up with an original idealised version of what they believed to be the reality of the Middle Ages. They chose particular images and imbued them with new meanings that were crucial to their own epoch. By means of medieval imagery, they sought to convey a moral message for their contemporaries. This seems to be the key to a proper reading of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. As his son Hallam remarks, "he has made the old legends his own, restored the idealism, and infused into them a spirit of modem thought and an ethical significance, […] as indeed otherwise these archaic stories would not have appealed to the modem world at large" (*A Memoir* 2: 121–2).

MERLIN PAINTS THE YOUNG KNIGHT'S SHIELD
engraving by Gustave Doré for an 1868 edition
of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*
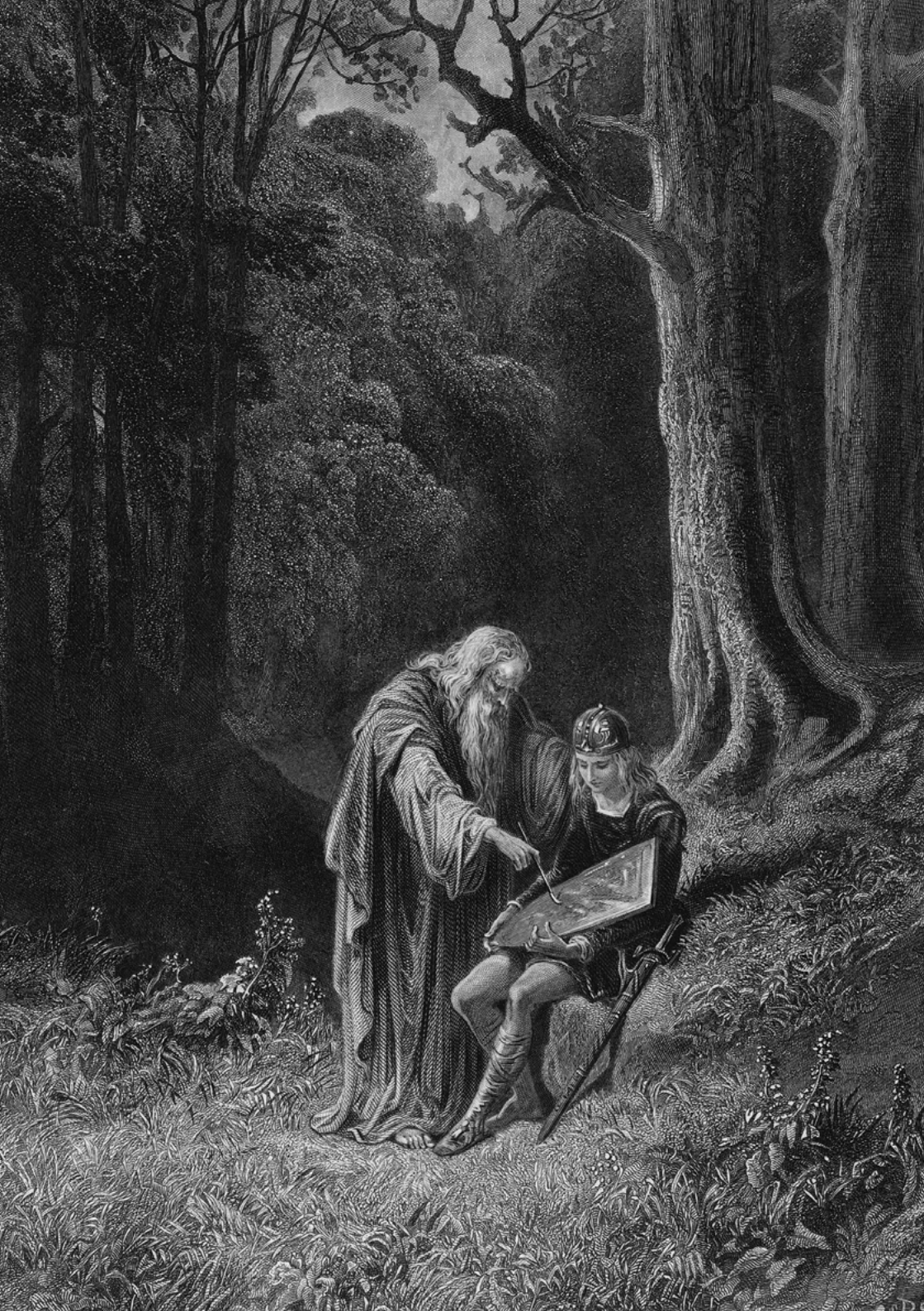
The Role of Literary Tradition in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

The Arthurian legend seems to be a perfect theme for a major literary work and a lifetime challenge for the Victorian Poet Laureate. Yet, while Tennyson had already chosen a suitable theme for his major work, for a long time he was reluctant to decide on a final shape of his Arthurian endeavour. Among those he tried to adopt were a drama in blank verse, a sketch in prose, most probably written about 1833, a memorandum bearing symbolical overtones, and a draft of a scenario of a musical masque dating from the years 1833–1840 (*A Memoir* 2: 121–5). At the same time, regardless of the poet's protests and the term 'idyll' in the title, his contemporaries did not hesitate to call his work by the name of the epic. What is more, some literary critics have even perceived the *Idylls* as a failed epic, accusing the work of fragmentariness, elusiveness and the lack of genuine energy that they could find in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

The controversy concerning the classification of the *Idylls* as a modern form of the epic apparently began with the ambiguous attitude to the issue of the poet himself. This uncertainty is already visible in the first publication of his "Morte D'Arthur" (1842), where the main poem had been put within a frame set in modern times, the whole tellingly entitled "The Epic". The short narrative of the last battle of

the legendary King Arthur had been put in the mouth of one of the poet's college friends, Everard Hall, thus creating a distance between the real poet and his work. The title is further undermined by the derogatory remarks concerning the genre from the supposed author, who, unwilling to read the last surviving fragment of a once long epic poem, teases his companions:

> 'Why take the style of those heroic times?
> For nature brings not back the Mastodon,
> Nor we those times; and why should any man
> Remodel models? these twelve books of mine
> Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth.
> Mere chaff and draft, much better burnt.'
> ("The Epic", 35–40)

The same doubting tone can be found in Tennyson's response to a letter from the Duke of Argyll of 1859, in which he was urged to "continue *the epic*" (emphasis mine, E.M.). The poet replied: "Many years ago I did write 'Lancelot's Quest of the Grail' in as good verses as I ever wrote, no, I did not write, I made it in my head, and it has now altogether slipt out of memory" (*A Memoir* 1: 457). Tennyson strongly opposed calling his work an epic, since he was highly suspicious as to the appropriateness of this particular genre in his times: "I wish that you would disabuse your own minds and those of others, as far as you can of the crazy fancy that I am about an Epic of King Arthur. I should be crazed to attempt such a thing in the heart of the 19th Century" (Tennyson, as quoted after Culler 1977: 223). Still, he did not have such objections as to modernising the Arthurian theme itself. In the final lines of "Morte D'Arthur", which thematically belong to "The Epic", the poet dreams of accompanying the once and future King on his final journey, and wakes up on the Christmas morning with the vision of the glorious comeback of Arthur cheered by his people:

> [...] till on to dawn, when dreams
> Begin to feel the truth and stir of day,
> To me, methought, who waited with a crowd,
> There came a bark that, blowing forward, bore
> King Arthur, like a modern gentleman
> Of stateliest port; and all the People cried,
> 'Arthur is come again: he cannot die.'
> ("Morte D'Arthur", 290–6)

The dream vision not only re-establishes the theme as universal, but also seems to be showing Tennyson the mode in which to represent his King Arthur, as "a modern gentleman / Of stateliest port". This passage also gave rise to the speculations that the poet was going to depict the ideal royal figure of his own times, Prince Albert, thus provoking Swinburne to nickname Tennyson's future work as "the Morte d'Albert, or Idylls of the Prince Consort" (Jump 1967: 339).

Still, in spite of the protestations from the author, it seems that even Tennyson's contemporaries could not refrain from identifying his work as an epic. The label reappears in the reviews by Hutton (Jump 1967: 355, 383, 388) and Swinburne, the latter calling it, somewhat mockingly, "an epic poem of profound and exalted morality" (Jump 1967: 318). It is also the name that Hallam Tennyson, the poet's son, recurrently uses in relation to his father's work. Moreover, in his review from 1859, Gladstone did see the theme as carrying some potential for an epic:

> Though the Arthurian Romance be no epic, it does not follow that no epic can be made from out of it. It is grounded in certain leading characters, men and women, conceived upon models of extraordinary grandeur; and as the Laureate has evidently grasped the genuine law which makes man and not the acts of man the base of epic song, we should not be surprised were he hereafter to realise the great achievement towards which he seems to be feeling his way. (Jump 1967: 260)

In the above-quoted passage, Gladstone justly points out to some characteristic features of the epic that can also be identified in the *Idylls of the King*. Apparently, the work conforms to a set of features which

characterise the great epics of the ancient past. It is a narrative poem written in a formal, lofty style, carried out in blank verse, which deals with a great national theme, the Arthurian legend. It retells the deeds of the heroes, personages of truly "extraordinary grandeur", namely the Knights of the Round Table. It is set in an indefinite heroic past at a turning point for its nation. In addition, the *Idylls* consists of twelve books, which is supposed to be a perfect form of an epic established by Virgil in his *Aeneid*, being half of the twenty-four books in Homer (Merchant 1986: 47). Moreover, Tennyson's poem makes use of several formal literary devices characteristic for the genre, such as elaborate metaphors and the Homeric similes, some of which have been employed to enrich the scenes of combat. One such simile may be found in one of the scenes in "Geraint and Enid":

> But at the flash and motion of the man
> They vanish'd panic-stricken, like a shoal
> Of darting fish, that on a summer morn
> Adown the crystal dykes at Camelot
> Come slipping o'er their shadows on the sand,
> But if a man who stands upon the brink
> But lift a shining hand against the sun,
> There is not left the twinkle of a fin
> Betwixt the cressy islets white in flower;
> So, scared but at the motion of the man,
> Fled all the boon companions of the Earl,
> And left him lying in the public way;
> So vanish friendships only made in wine.
> ("Geraint and Enid", 467–79)

In this passage, the cowardly companions of the Earl Limours have been compared to a shoal of skittery fish which can be easily scared by a mere shadow, just as the knights are scared at the very might of Geraint. This as well as other similes in the poem, both original and imaginative, shows the poet's sensitivity to nature and his perceptiveness in observing its minutest details.

Another literary device of the epic that is also present in the *Idylls* is a technique of starting the narrative *in medias res*, i.e. in the middle of the action, thus foregrounding the main theme of the following poem. This, in turn, creates the need for recounting the story as a flashback. Even though this device has not been used as the beginning of the whole work, it nevertheless has been employed in a number of particular idylls, such as "The Coming of Arthur", "The Marriage of Geraint", "Merlin and Vivien", "Lancelot and Elaine", "The Last Tournament", and "Guinevere". This lack of the main introduction in the tradition of the epic, also marked by the absence of the invocation, may be perceived as one of the signs of the breach of the unity of the whole epic.

As far as the development of the plot is concerned, it is interesting to notice that the *Idylls* has been based upon a theme which might be familiar from the Homeric epic, as the fall of a whole order has been caused by a forbidden love, between Paris and Helen in the latter and between Lancelot and Guinevere in the former work. However, it should not be forgotten that the main source of inspiration for Tennyson's major literary endeavour was Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, a chivalric romance the features of which can also be found in the Victorian work. The *Idylls* represents aristocratic characters, such as "kings and queens, knights and ladies" following their "chivalric pursuits", which are often arranged around "a quest, whether for love or adventure, and involve a variety of marvellous elements" (Fuchs 2004: 4).

However, from the chronological point of view, the medieval romance is in itself a literary successor to the epic genre, and thus it seems that certain features of the epic found their way into Tennyson's work indirectly, after being absorbed into his medieval sources. In the Middle Ages the characteristics of the epic were embraced by the *chansons de geste* (Merchant 1986: 48). On the other hand, the medieval romance adopted the epic subject matter of another nation, and at the same time, by introducing some modifications, reflected the evolution of the cultural context. Thus the change of the audience and their demands resulted in shift of emphasis and in the foregrounding of different

motifs (Pearsall 2003: 20). This attempt at modernising the theme in order to attract the attention of the reading public is also present in the *Idylls*, as the medieval themes have been filtered and transformed through the Victorian point of view.

This can be illustrated by Tennyson's treatment of the supernatural. Giants, monsters, mysterious beasts, along with wizards, sorceresses and magical weapons are indispensable both for the ancient epic and the chivalric adventure. An invisible knight, the shape-shifting Merlin, or Morgan le Fay changing herself and her companions into stones in order to mislead the chase are only a few examples of the intervention of the supernatural powers in the plots of *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Bakhtin observes that in the world of the chivalric romance "[t]he unexpected, and only the unexpected, is what is expected. The entire world is subject to "suddenly", to the category of miraculous and unexpected chance" (Bakhtin 1988: 152). In fact, Malorian Arthur cannot begin his yearly feast of Pentecost without some miraculous happening taking place in front of the whole Round Table:

> So ever the king had a custom that at the feast of Pentecost in especial, afore other feasts in the year, he would not go that day to meat until he had heard or seen of a great marvel. And for that custom all manner of strange adventures came before Arthur as at that feast before all other feasts. (Malory, Bk. VII, ch. 1)

Thus the very existence of the supernatural is not only taken for granted, but it is virtually sought for by the knight errant as an escape from boredom, a way of proving his knightliness, and an opportunity to engage in a chivalric activity as an aim in itself, as the very name of the Questing Beast may suggest. Bakhtin further comments that "[by] his very nature he can live only in this world of miraculous chance, for only it preserves his identity. And the very code by which he measures his identity is calibrated precisely to this world of miraculous chance" (Bakhtin 1988: 152). Such a point of view cannot be accepted by a disillusioned, scientifically-bent Victorian. Hence, it seems that all the elements of magical origin have been discredited either by

possible rational explanations[1] or by the introduction of unreliable, diegetic narrators, whose credibility can be easily undermined. Such an unreliable narrator may be exemplified by the little maid assisting Guinevere in the abbey, who tries hard to entertain the Queen with the story of elves and spirits appearing in the realm "[b]efore the coming of the sinful Queen" ("Guinevere", 268) which she, in turn, has heard from her father.

The evil spirits and fantastical wild beasts, whose physical existence was beyond a shadow of a doubt in the ancient epic and in the chivalric romance, in Tennyson have turned into the symbolic representations of the mind. This can be best illustrated in "Balin and Balan", in which the beast image seems to be the unifying theme of the idyll. The story is based on the account of an evil spirit who haunts the forest and attacks the knights from behind:

> […] some demon in the woods
> Was once a man, who driven by evil tongues
> From all his fellows, lived alone, and came
> To learn black magic, and to hate his kind
> With such a hate, that when he died, his soul
> Became a Fiend, which, as the man in life
> Was wounded by blind tongues he saw not whence, […]
> We saw the hoof-print of a horse, no more.
> ("Balin and Balan", 121–130)

In Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* this mysterious Fiend turns out to be an invisible knight, Sir Garlon. In Tennyson's *Idylls*, however, the same Sir Garlon is the companion of damsel Vivien, merely a dishonourable knight who takes advantage of the superstitiousness of other knights.

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1 In his reading of the *Idylls* in the review from 1870, Knowles posits a series of rational explanations which may account for the supernatural elements in Tennyson's work; for example, he suggests that in "'The Holy Grail,' the various apparitions of the mystic vessel are explicable by passing meteors or sudden flashes seen in a season of great tempests and thunderstorms" which influenced the imaginations of the nun and the knights eager to undertake a new adventure (Jump 1967: 316).

But it is the fiends of Balin's mind that prove to be the true monsters of this story. Balin the Savage, a quick-tempered knight of the Round Table, comes back from his three-year exile and struggles to take control over his unruly passions by following the standards of chivalry set by the Round Table. As the symbol of his metamorphosis, he exchanges the "rough beast" upon his shield, "Langued gules, and tooth'd with grinning savagery" (192–3) for the crown-royal of the Queen. Also his brother Balan, upon his leaving for the quest, warns Balin not to be carried away by hatred and jealousy, but to think of such emotions as "outer fiends, / Who leap at thee to tear thee" and to "shake them aside" (138–9). Yet, despite his inner struggle, they are finally let loose at the suspicion of Guinevere's infidelity to Arthur. Tormented by doubt, Balin runs headlong into the forest, where the two fiend motifs become entwined. At the woodman's remark that the knight could defeat the devil of the wood, Balin mocks his credulity and sarcastically exclaims that "To lay that devil would lay the Devil in me" (296). Finally he himself is taken for the demon of the woods by his brother who finds Balin yelling and trampling over the shield bearing the emblem of the Queen.

Moreover, dream visions, a characteristic of the epic which can also be found in the chivalric romance, in Tennyson's work no longer serve as a means by which the world of the supernatural communicates with the world of mortals. To some extent they still function as forebodings of the future events. The casting of the diamond in Elaine's dream ("Lancelot and Elaine", 210–14) foreshadows Guinevere throwing the jewels into the stream later in the idyll (1225–29), and the phantom of the dead Gawain appears in Arthur's dream before his last battle to tell the King that he is going to pass away and depart to "an isle of rest" ("The Passing of Arthur", 29–46). More importantly, however, the dreams often become the projection of the subconscious, as they reveal "a vision of the dreamer's true self" (Kincaid 1975: 205) which remains suppressed in the daylight. Thus the two Isolts struggling over the rubies in Tristram's dream ("The Last Tournament", 406–18) may symbolise his divided loyalties to his wife and his lover. Interestingly,

his red dream may be perceived as providing additional commentary on the parallel bloody scenes of massacre, as Arthur subdues the rebellion of the Red Knight. In "Guinevere", the growing sense of guilt, "a vague spiritual fear" (70), which haunts the Queen, in the dead of night turns into scattered nightmarish images of fires caused by Guinevere's shadow blackening and swallowing the whole land (74–82). Finally, the vision in King Leodogran's dream helps him to solve his dilemma concerning the true kingship of Arthur, a question he was unable to tackle by means of rational judgment ("The Coming of Arthur", 425–45; cf. Kincaid 1975: 163).

In the *Idylls*, the change in the role of dreams has been especially significant to the interpretation of the quest for the Holy Grail. While this theme constitutes one of the highlights of the whole cycle of the Matter of Britain, elevating chivalry onto a spiritual level, in Tennyson it has been deprived of its medieval grandeur and glory. Prophetic dreams abounding in allegorical meanings, directing the Grail knights onto the right path, both earthly and spiritual, have been turned in the *Idylls* into feverish hallucinations of exhausted knights. In Percivale's visions, all the pleasant images he encounters disappear, while everything he touches falls into dust, so that he finds himself alone, "in a land of sand and thorns" ("The Holy Grail", 375–439). In this way, in spite of the achievement of the full vision of the Holy Vessel by Galahad, the whole quest takes on a much gloomier and ominous meaning, marking another step in the gradual, outward and inward, disintegration of the Round Table.

The need to adapt the theme to the new political and cultural situation of the Middle Ages may account for the gradual replacement of the battle scenes with single combats and tournaments, the number of which has been greatly reduced in the *Idylls*. It seems that the sources provided the poet with many passages that could have become true battle scenes in the old heroic style. The two crucial battles mark the beginning and the end of Arthurian world, thus setting the frame for Tennyson's work. A full account of Arthur's victorious deeds on

the battlefield is later given by Lancelot in his retelling of the twelve legendary battles that led to the recognition of Arthur as a rightful king ("Lancelot and Elaine", 284–309). Culler remarks that this passage may have given rise to a true Arthuriad; a plan for a heroic epic that Tennyson had in mind for same time, but eventually decided to abandon (Culler 1977: 222). Yet another theme that could potentially have expanded into a fully-fledged epic in the Homeric style can be found in the following passage:

> There at the banquet those great Lords from Rome,
> The slowly-fading mistress of the world,
> Strode in, and claim'd their tribute as of yore.
> But Arthur spake, 'Behold, for these have sworn
> To wage my wars, and worship me their King;
> The old order changeth, yielding place to new;
> And we that fight for our fair father Christ,
> Seeing that ye be grown too weak and old
> To drive the heathen from your Roman wall,
> No tribute will we pay:' so those great lords
> Drew back in wrath, and Arthur strove with Rome.
> ("The Coming of Arthur", 503–13, emphasis mine, E.M.)

The theme of the glorious conquest of Rome later reappears in "Gareth and Lynette", in which Gareth defends the honour of his noble king and uncle exclaiming: "Not proven, who swept the dust of ruined Rome / From off the threshold of the realm" (133–4). While in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* this fabulous deed is given the scope of one whole Book, in the *Idylls of the King* it is barely mentioned in retrospect. One more battle scene takes place in "The Last Tournament", in which Arthur leads his knights to fight the Red Knight and his "Round Table in the North", the very antithesis of Arthur's knighthood. However, the siege of the tower, meant to be another example of "redressing human wrongs" ("Guinevere", 468), turns into a shameful, unheroic massacre, which leaves Arthur with a heavy heart and overshadows the satisfaction of his victory, becoming a sure sign of the decline of the ideal Arthurian realm.

The disappearance of epic battle scenes was directly linked with another significant alteration, which reflected different expectations of the medieval audience, namely the creation of a different type of the main hero. While the epic glorifies the image of the fighter defending his country from the enemy, the chivalric romance, developed in a politically stable "leisured, wealthy, sophisticated" and "woman-oriented" late medieval society, puts greater emphasis on the image of a knight going out on adventures as a means of proving himself, on the principles of chivalric conduct and on the rules of courtly love that he should follow (Pearsall 2003: 20–25). This difference in character can be observed in the *Idylls* in the comparison of the two most renowned personages of the Round Table, the King himself and his best knight, Sir Lancelot:

> For Lancelot was the first in Tournament,
> But Arthur mightiest on the battle-field —
> ("Gareth and Lynette", 485–6)

While Lancelot epitomises the new concept of ideal knighthood, entailing the knowledge of chivalric code of conduct, and shows his prowess in tournaments, Arthur represents an epic warrior who proves his true leadership and charisma on the battlefield, fighting to protect his country from the real enemy. This difference is openly stated by Lancelot himself:

> However mild he seems at home, nor cares
> For triumph in our mimic wars, the jousts —
> For if his own knight cast him down, he laughs
> Saying, his knights are better men than he —
> Yet in this heathen war the fire of God
> Fills him: I never saw his like: there lives
> No greater leader".
> ("Lancelot and Elaine", 310–16)

Since Arthur has already established his position as a king, and asserted the respect of his knights, he no longer needs to "triumph in our mimic

wars, the jousts". He is aware that his duties lie elsewhere, and so he is preoccupied with issues of weightier importance than a victory in a tournament, which he considers a mere chivalric entertainment. He assumes the role of the ruler in the times of peace and it is only in "The Last Tournament" that he is forced to resume his role as an active defender of his kingdom and to suppress the rebellion of the Red Knight, a knight who dares to question and mock the very foundations of Arthur's Round Table.

Hence, unlike in the ancient epics, in which the poet elaborates upon the descriptions of the many episodes from the battlefield, and gives much space to the long catalogues of names of famous warriors, a characteristic that is also present in Malory, Tennyson introduces those few recollections of battle scenes solely in order to provide a further characterisation of his ideal King. In "The Coming..." and "The Passing of Arthur", he is presented as a great warrior and defender of his realm in a truly heroic style, a larger than life, almost superhuman figure. A similar characterisation of a great epic hero can be found in Merchant: "It is this sharp focus on to the central figure in his massive isolation that gives the great epics their grandeur and universality. We are confronted not by a man at a moment in history, but by Man in History. We are all involved in what becomes of him" (Merchant 1986: 4). Indeed, the isolation that Merchant mentions also distinguishes Arthur from among his fellow knights. While they struggle to gain worldly fame and honour, his eyes are turned inwards in an attempt to understand his part in the great scheme of God.

This lack of full descriptions of great battles appears to be yet another argument in support of the view that Tennyson's work has not come up to the epic standard. Richards actually claims that, in his *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson wasted "the vigorous sense of life" of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (Richards 1993: 113). However, this only shows the misunderstanding of the poet's aims. Apparently, within the poem itself the place of the great battles has been taken over by a battle of a different kind, the universal and timeless "unending war of humanity in all ages,

the world-wide war of Sense and Soul" (*A Memoir* 2: 130). This spiritual war of symbolic importance should be looked upon as the main theme that unites all the idylls into a coherent whole, with the central figure of Arthur, "the pure, generous, tender, brave, human-hearted" (ibid.) king, who, even though not always in the foreground of the action, is yet constantly present in the principles he established for his knighthood of the Round Table, which become a central point of reference in each idyll, and influence the behaviour of the knights. This is what Tennyson called "a parabolic drift" which elevates the work onto a universal level of meaning. As the poet himself put it,

> [t]he whole is the dream of man coming into practical life and ruined by one sin. Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the tableland of life, and its struggles and performances. It is not the history of one man or of one generation but of a whole cycle of generations. (Eversley III: 443)

Actually, Knowles views this departure from a traditional epic formula as a sign of a greater maturity of the poet, who, by delaying his great literary accomplishment, was able to write a poem "which could not have been produced without wide acquaintanceship with the world and human nature" (Jump 1967: 317).

It seems that the major source of confusion concerning the genre of Tennyson's work, not only for modern critics but already for Tennyson's contemporaries, was its title — the *Idylls*. In the light of his earlier poems, published as the *English Idyls*, and conforming to the popular notion of the 'idyl' as a short pastoral poem, a picture which presents idealised innocence of country life, the same term used in relation to the Arthurian legend appeared to be at least somewhat inadequate. Thus Hutton protested against "somewhat unfortunate modesty" of the title which greatly misled the public (Jump 1976: 374). Gladstone took the argument even further, claiming that it was inappropriate for "the breadth, vigour, and majesty which belong to the subjects, as well as to the execution, of the volume" and consequently suggested that the work be given the name of "Books" (Jump 1967: 251). Later critics

considered the title a visible proof of Tennyson's failure in grasping and expressing the grandeur of an epic that would be adequate to the Arthurian theme. Richards claims that "[a]ll that Tennyson could manage were allusive glimpses into relatively brief and often isolated episodes, though he was sufficiently intelligent to be aware of his deficiency" (Richards 1993: 102).

Even though the critics have been using the two terms, 'idyl' and 'idyll' indiscriminately, overlooking the seemingly minor difference in the spelling applied by Tennyson,[2] to the poet this difference appears to be crucial for its proper meaning: "Regarding the Greek derivation, I spelt my *Idylls* with two *l*'s mainly to divide them from the ordinary pastoral idyls usually spelt with one *l*. These idylls group themselves round one central figure" (Eversley III: 450). This grouping "round one central figure", which may be considered an answer to the fragmentariness charge, has also been pointed out as an important feature of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* in the entry for the idyll in the *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*:

> Note that Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859) is hardly pastoral. Perhaps Tennyson thought the use of the term was appropriate: each idyll contains an incident in the matter of Arthur and his Knights which is separate (or framed) but at the same time is connected with the central theme; the contents treat the Christian virtues in an ideal manner and in a remote setting. (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*)

In fact, the idyll as a literary form seems to be much more appropriate for a work based on a medieval romance, which has been perceived as a collection of eight separate romances, and consists of endless quests and errantries of individual knights or small groups of knights, whose only linking point is the figure of King Arthur and his court at Camelot.

The original thirty idylls by Theocritus consisted of various genres which apart from the pastoral proper included "panegyrics, love-poems,

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2   Cf. Hutton (in Jump 1967: 357), employs the term 'idyll' to discuss Tennyson's earlier poems, such as "The Miller's Daughter", and "The Gardener's Daughter".

epithalamia, or brief scenes from epics treated in the decorative manner prescribed by Callimachus" (Marinelli 1971: 39). Theocritus and Callimachus, Alexandrian poets of the third century BC, adopted a new approach to the literary form and matter, focusing on new interpretations of well-known Greek myths or on those aspects of the myths which had not yet been explored. They concentrated on short but elaborate forms, such as "the elegy, the idyll, the pastoral, and the 'little epic,'" or, if on the long poem at all, this was "the composite or discontinuous epic that consisted of a number of short poems united by a narrative thread" (Culler 1977: 90). The last genre seems to be a perfect definition of Tennyson's work, consisting of separate idylls, grouped around the common theme of Arthur and his Round Table. Tennyson himself is quoted by his son as remarking on the shortness of his work as a necessary means to make a mark on literature, and comparing it to "[a] small vessel, built on fine lines", which "is likely to float further down the stream of time than a big raft" (*A Memoir* 2: 230). This characteristic was pointed out by one on the poet's contemporaries, Edmund Lushington, who posited that the *Idylls of the King* should rather be entitled the *Epylls of the King*. According to Lushington, "they were little Epics (not Idylls) woven into an Epical unity", however, this suggestion was dismissed by Tennyson because he did not like the sound of the word 'Epylls' (Eversley III: 446).

Moreover, the similarity lies not only in the form but also in the treatment of the subject matter. Just as the Alexandrians thought the old myths already too familiar to the audience to be of interest, and looked for their new aspects, the Victorian poet also attempted to render the well-known Matter of Britain from a new perspective. Thus, it is possible to consider the Idylls as a new kind of epic, which nevertheless is not completely disentangled from the colouring and shortness of the idyll.

Still, even if it is the most popular definition of the term that is considered, the statement that "Tennyson's *Idylls* is hardly pastoral" is not altogether true. Some features of the idyll as a genre can yet be distinguished in Tennyson's work, probably the most important

ones being idyllic time and space. Such a characteristic feature of the pastoral closely related to the notion of time, which was introduced into the genre by Spenser and later modified by Pope, is the implied repeatedness of the events achieved through their association with the cyclicity of the seasons (Marinelli 1971 : 50, 52). The changing seasons in the particular idylls mark the changing moods of the Arthurian world. The springtime in "Gareth and Lynette" reflects the joy and innocence at Camelot, Vivien arrives at Arthur's court in "a time of golden rest" ("Merlin and Vivien", 140), the "Last Tournament" begins with the accompaniment of "one low roll / Of Autumn thunder" (152–3), and the last battle in "The Passing of Arthur" takes place on the day of winter solstice, "when the great light of heaven / Burn'd at his lowest in the rolling year" (90–1, cf Eversley III: 508), which at the same time is the last day of the old year. In this way the poet puts emphasis on the end of a certain epoch, while the dawning of the first day of the New Year clearly marks the beginning of the new post-Arthurian world. Moreover, the King himself is born and then departs to the Isle of Avilion on the "the night of the new year" ("The Coming of Arthur", 208; "The Passing of Arthur", 469). Thus once again, as it was stated at the beginning of the reign of King Arthur, "The old order changeth, yielding place to new" ("The Passing of Arthur", 408). In addition, the cyclicity is most importantly stressed by Merlin's prophecy of the once and future king, who, though wounded, cannot die and is bound to return. In this way, the Arthurian legend is both one-time, in retelling the story of the original Arthurian realm, and cyclical in the promise of the second coming, incidentally, bearing strong Christian overtones.

This cyclicity is also visible in the pattern of alternate reappearances of Chaos and Order in the beginning and in the end of the *Idylls*. The introductory passages of "The Coming of Arthur" depict the world in the state of physical and symbolic Chaos. The land is plunged in endless wars between petty kings, leaving the people completely unprotected either from the heathen forces, which "Swarm'd overseas, and harried what was left" (9), or from beasts that inhabit the thick woods and steal

human children. The ultimate state of this degeneracy is represented by the appearance of wild men, raised by the wolves in their dens:

> And ever and anon the wolf would steal
> The children and devour, but now and then,
> Her own brood lost or dead, lent her fierce teat
> To human sucklings; and the children, housed
> In her foul den, there at their meat would growl,
> And mock their foster-mother on four feet,
> Till, straighten'd, they grew up to wolf-like men,
> Worse than the wolves.
> ("The Coming of Arthur", 26–33)

Into this world Arthur appears almost as a saviour, who not only suppresses the territorial conflicts and draws "all their petty princedoms under him / Their king and head" (18–19), but also symbolically tames this wilderness by establishing and imposing a new order, based on the moral values represented by the Round Table. As Dowden observes, "Arthur's task has been to drive back the heathen, to quell disorder and violence, to bind the wills of his knights to righteousness in a perfect law of liberty" (Jump 1967: 332). This resembles what Marinelli describes as an attempt to recreate the prelapsarian state of Nature by the beneficial imposition of Art (Marinelli 1971: 22). Still, even if Arthur succeeds, his victory is only temporary, "for a space" ("The Coming of Arthur", 16), and after his defeat in "The Passing of Arthur" one might suppose that the land will once again relapse into the state of total confusion. As Arthur observes in his dark hour of despair: "and all my realm / Reels back into the beast, and is no more" (25–26). In Malory, the return of the reign of Chaos is marked by the appearance of the pillagers and robbers, who come to the battlefield to strip the corpses of the dead knights "of many a good ring, and of many a rich jewel; and who that were not dead all out, there they slew them for their harness and their riches" (Malory, Bk. XXI, ch. 5). In contrast, this same scene in the *Idylls* is suffused with an acute sense of loneliness. After the King has been taken into the barge and set out on his way

to Avilion, Bedivere remains on the shore in "The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn" ("The Passing of Arthur", 442) to face the dawn of a new, post-Arthurian world.

Kincaid suggests that the use of the term 'idyll' in the title is clearly ironic, as it has been employed to mark the contrast between illusory suspension of the passing of time and the slow but yet acutely felt degeneration of the actual Arthurian world. Timelessness implied by the 'idyll' may be considered characteristic for the romance, in which there is always some space for more chivalric adventures (Kincaid 1975: 151–2). Indeed, the structure of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, though initially chronological, later on seems to diffuse into Books retelling parallel stories, each devoted to the adventures of a particular knight and his companions, the only central point being the Round Table.[3] New generations of knights appear on the scene, as the sons set out to take revenge for the wrongs done to their fathers, but, at the same time, the renowned knights introduced in the previous Books still seem to be enjoying outstanding successes in tournaments, always showing their prowess and knightliness. Thus, apparently more and more stories of adventures could be still added to the work without contributing to the development of the main plot, which has only been established in the initial and final Books, depicting the rise and fall of Arthur and his realm, and this downfall comes somewhat unexpectedly.

In Tennyson's *Idylls*, on the other hand, the framing pattern of "The Coming…" and "The Passing of Arthur" has been retained, yet the passing of time has been nevertheless suggested by the increasing feeling of decadence anticipating the ultimate fall of the Arthurian world, which is present throughout the whole poem. The optimistic

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3   In her discussion of the theme of adventure in the medieval romance, Fuchs remarks that "the expansive device of the Round Table, with its multiple cast of knights, proves singularly flexible and productive: there is always another knight to follow, another adventure to recount. Thus the Arthurian corpus enables the iterative quality of romance, since writers may return again and again to the same material, using the Round Table as a literal point of departure for their own narratives" (Fuchs 2004: 56).

initial part, showing the beginnings of the knighthood of the Round Table, has been greatly reduced to one–third of the whole work, and its ideal values have been only looked back upon with nostalgia in the following two-thirds of the poem, otherwise devoted to images of the gradual decline of the ideal world established by Arthur. This effect has been achieved through a careful choice and structuring of the medieval materials. Tennyson appears to be even more successful than Malory in continuing his strategy of disentangling separate tales from a greater work, in which the threads have been interlaced into a complicated pattern. Thus, many subplots have been left out resulting in a more distinct focus on the plots and characters that have been incorporated into the *Idylls* (Pearsall 2003: 122).

Therefore, even though the *Idylls* may seem to be a loose collection of short descriptive narratives, the final shape of the work is far from being random. Tennyson has carefully chosen the episodes out of endless adventures in *Le Morte D'Arthur* so that each of them directly contributes to the evolution of the main theme of the rise and fall of Arthurian world and its growing decadence. In spite of the form of a long narrative poem, the work reflects the initial intentions of the poet to develop the plot in a dramatic form. As Priestley observes, the twelve idylls can be divided into three groups of four idylls, "corresponding closely to the three acts of modern drama" (Priestley 1973: 645).

The first group begins with "The Coming of Arthur", in which the narrator sketches out Arthur's achievements on the battlefield only to focus on the spiritual aspect of establishing the Round Table. This initial enthusiasm and optimism of the new order is embodied in the second idyll in the character of Gareth, who comes to Camelot, attracted by the ideals of its knighthood. The idyll is pervaded by humorous tones, as the young knight is constantly being scolded by his lady Lynette, unaware of the noble lineage of her companion, and the last and most dangerous opponent turns out to be "a blooming boy / Fresh as a flower new-born" ("Gareth and Lynette", 1373–4). This idyll was written quite late, as Tennyson decided that he should still expand

the portrayal of the "innocent early days of the Round Table" (Pearsall 2003: 132). Even though the last two idylls of the first group, retelling the story of the marriage of Geraint and Enid have a happy ending, they are already affected by the gossips of the relationship of Guinevere and Lancelot, which, as Geraint fears, might have negative influence on his good-hearted wife, Enid.

The following eight idylls gradually add to the deepening sense of disillusionment and moral decline, while the place of faith and optimism is being taken over by doubt, and later, by scepticism and irony that enter the Arthurian world with the introduction of Vivien and Tristram. Visibly, in the consecutive stories there appears a tragic note which impedes a happy resolution. Thus the repenting knight, marred by doubts, cannot be fully reintegrated with the knighthood of the Round Table in the story of "Balin and Balan", instead, due to a fatal mistake, engages in a duel against his own beloved brother, and both die of wounds. "Lancelot and Elaine" and "Pelleas and Ettarre" seem to be continuing the pattern established in the initial idylls, however, this time innocent love and commitment remain unrequited. Yet, while Lancelot is truly remorseful for his inability to love Elaine, Ettarre turns out to be a base creature delighting in humiliating a somewhat naive but true knight, who is unable to cope with the shattering of his ideals, while there is no Malorian Lady of the Lake to soothe his anger. It is only at this point that the great wizard, Merlin, who disappears from the Malorian romance rather early, lets himself be cheated by the "lissome Vivien" and thus is withdrawn from the plot. "The Holy Grail" retells the story of the disintegration of the Round Table, and "The Last Tournament" shows Arthur fighting for a supposedly good cause which turns into a bloody massacre, while at the same time, the Tournament of the Dead Innocence is far from being governed by the rules of chivalric code. The retrospective, elegiac "Guinevere" and "The Passing of Arthur" signal the last farewell to the Arthurian realm.

Thus it seems that Kincaid is right when he comments that

> there is no real freedom from the laws of time, especially from the principles of decay and dissolution. Arthur tries to establish a world in which past, present, and future cooperate "as if Time / Were nothing" ("Gareth and Lynette", ll. 222–23), but, despite Arthur, despite even the idyll form, time wins. (Kincaid 1975: 152)

Arthur's struggle to create a timeless, universal realm of stability and constancy proved to be not enough to conquer the inevitability of the passing of time. Still, Tennyson has succeeded in creating a legendary time and space, removed from historical dates and sites, which is appropriate for the universal significance of his work, quite unlike Malory, who attempts to sustain at least seeming credibility by painstakingly providing the dates and names of actual places of the battles.

The creation of an idealised temporal-spatial dimension arises from an acute sense of nostalgia for the past, which, according to Marinelli, is a necessary condition for writing a pastoral work (Marinelli 1971: 9). This feeling must have been common to both authors. However, while it led Malory to depict the Arthurian chivalric past as a refuge from his own late medieval world, in Tennyson the sense of nostalgia is present already within the work itself and reflects the prevailing mood of the Late Victorian Period. Thus longing for the idealised past, in both authors, has its roots in the dissatisfaction with the present situation. The retreat into the mythical or nearly mythical dimension of the golden past serves not only as an escape from the ugly world of contemporaneity, but owing to the temporal distance that is thus created, it also provides space for indirect criticism of the author's times. Marinelli points out that

> a note of criticism is inherent in all pastoral from the beginning of its existence. It is latent in the form in its very desire for movement away from an unsatisfactory time and place to another time and place that is imagined to be superior. (Marinelli 1971: 12)

By referring to the cultural context of his times, both directly and indirectly, the author establishes a dialogue with his audience. Gifford observes that

> The discourse of retreat will exploit the location in order to speak to the cultural context of its readership. If the pastoral is successful, the audience will know that what is perceived to be happening in Arcadia has relevance for them in their own time and (urban) place, with its own anxieties and tensions. (Gifford 1999: 82)

In Malory the references to the present appear in the form of direct authorial comments on the inconstant nature of the English people that manifests itself in political unrest in the times of the Wars of the Roses, as well as in his criticism of rising against the rightful ruler, in the words of King Mark (cf. Vinaver 1929: 8–9) and of the fickleness of feelings, best expressed in his May passage on true love in the olden times. In Tennyson's *Idylls*, its overt connection with the Victorian epoch has been effected by the distancing from the legend through the establishing of the double frame. Apart from the above-mentioned diegetic frame within the legendary past marked by the parallel titles, "The Coming…" and "The Passing of Arthur", the whole work has been given another, extradiegetic frame established by the "Dedication" and "To the Queen", in which the poet addresses his Queen, makes direct references to contemporary issues concerning the British Empire, and states the superiority of the real man, the lately departed Prince Albert, over

> […] that gray king, whose name, a ghost,
> Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak,
> And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still; or him
> Of Geoffrey's book, or him of Malleor's, one
> Touched by the adulterous finger of a time
> That hovered between war and wantonness,
> And crownings and dethronements: […]
> ("To the Queen", 39–45)

It seems that, apart from these straightforward references to the nine-teenth-century reality, there is yet another and much more subtle and indirect kind of allusions to the contemporaneity that can be found in the *Idylls*. One such parallel can be identified between the ideal King Arthur and the poet's friend, Arthur Hallam, both of them, dying or dead, being carried away in a ship, leaving the mourners behind (Jenkins 1990: 195). Still, the *Idylls of the King*, a work written by a Poet Laureate, bears similarities with the present not only on the individual but also on the social level. Tennyson's Arthurian personages, though based on their medieval counterparts in Malory, in many respects represent Victorian stereotypes and attitudes. This relevance was already apparent to Tennyson's contemporaries. Hutton points out that "[t]he old Arthurian epic has been rendered by Tennyson significant to modern ears. In it he has found the common term between the ideas of chivalry and the ideas of an age of hesitating trust, an age of a probing intellect and of a trusting heart" (Jump 1967: 388).

In his introductory essay, "Criteria for the Epic: Borders, Diversity, and Expansion", Kelly perceives the constant development of the epic as a mediation between the characteristic features passed on by tradi-tion, the so-called 'mnemonic traits,' enriched and innovated by the new ones, the 'regenerative traits,' reflecting the cultural and liter-ary demands imposed on the genre by the consecutive epochs (Kelly 1994: 4). He remarks that it is the skilful combination of the two types of features that results in a successful literary work, both grounded in tradition and diversified enough to save it from artificiality and routine (Kelly 1994: 8). This seems to be the right approach to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. The poet consciously uses certain characteristics of the epic and at the same time draws on the tradition of the idyll. By incorporat-ing and combining the features of these genres in the *Idylls*, Tennyson comes up with a novel, eclectic work, which in turn reflects the needs and demands of the Victorian Age.

Arthurian Characters
in the Victorian Milieu

As has already been posited in the Introduction, the Victorians sought inspiration and moral example in the Middle Ages. However, what they believed to be medieval was to a large extent shaped by their own nineteenth-century ideals which they projected onto the medieval imagery. This tendency can also be traced in the delineations of the Arthurian characters and themes in Tennyson's *Idylls*. Sometimes it seems that there was no need for change, as the depiction of a character in Tennyson's medieval sources perfectly matched his Victorian viewpoint. In other cases, however, the portrayals of Arthurian characters had to undergo a considerable readjustment.

Apparently, no major alterations were necessary in Tennyson's rendition of the story about Geraint and Enid, which has been based on the account in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the *Mabinogion*. The main female character, Enid, ideally reflects the Victorian concept of womanhood, as posited by Ruskin. He claims that she should be "enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise". He then develops the idea of female wisdom as one not intended "for self-development, but for self-renunciation [...] not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side". Finally, she should not be filled "with the narrowness of insolent and

loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely varia-
ble, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service – the true change-
fulness of woman" (Ruskin 1906: 146–7). Even though she has been
taken from her safe refuge to the outside world, the domain of men,
she manages to pass the trial and turns out to be a perfect wife, faithful,
constant and forbearing and in the end, much more prudent than her
steadfast husband. As Kincaid observes, while Geraint is wilfully lost
in his doubts, it is his Enid who "leads him back into himself" and thus
"saves him from himself" (Kincaid 1985: 175–6).

    All those features can be found in the medieval Welsh story. Still,
while the general outline of the two idylls, "The Marriage of Geraint"
and "Geraint and Enid", remains faithful to the original one in "Geraint
the Son of Erbin", the Victorian point of view has been conveyed by
the introduction of certain characteristic details. In the *Mabinogion*,
the scene in which Geraint meets Enid has been described very briefly:

> And in the chamber he beheld an old decrepit woman, sitting on a cushion,
> with old, tattered garments of satin upon her; […] And beside her was a maiden,
> upon whom were a vest and a veil, that were old, and beginning to be worn
> out. And truly, he never saw a maiden more full of comeliness, and grace, and
> beauty than she. (*Mabinogion*, 160–1)

In fact, in this passage, Enid appears to be a precious jewel hidden be-
hind the worn-out garments and surrounded by the walls of an old ru-
ined palace. Tennyson elaborates this scene, so that in the *Idylls* Geraint
is not only struck by her exceptional beauty, but is first enchanted by
her clear, sweet voice, which reminds him of the notes of a nightingale:

> The voice of Enid, Yniol's daughter, rang
> Clear through the open casement of the hall,
> Singing; and as the sweet voice of a bird,
> Heard by the lander in a lonely isle,
> Moves him to think what kind of bird it is
> That sings so delicately clear, and make
> Conjecture of the plumage and the form;
> So the sweet voice of Enid moved Geraint;

And made him like a man abroad at morn
When first the liquid note beloved of men
Comes flying over many a windy wave
To Britain, and in April suddenly
Breaks from a coppice gemmed with green and red,
And he suspends his converse with a friend,
Or it may be the labour of his hands,
To think or say, 'There is the nightingale;'
So fared it with Geraint,
("The Marriage of Geraint", 327–43)

It seems that a beautiful voice is not her only virtue, since she is apparently also skilled in handiwork, which Geraint admires after the meal:

[…] then Geraint,
For now the wine made summer in his veins,
Let his eye rove in following, or rest
On Enid at her lowly handmaid-work,
Now here, now there, about the dusky hall;
("The Marriage of Geraint", 397–401)

Hence, this medieval damsel is apparently accomplished in all that was required of a Victorian young lady in search of a husband. Petrie remarks that music "was an infallible method of attracting a husband", and calls it "a very important weapon" in a girl's "armoury". He also enumerates "Needlework, drawing, and painting flowers" as "considered good bait in the husband fishing business" (Petrie 1976: 204–5).

Enid is a static character, yet this lack of development may be seen as a conscious device that has been employed to stress the constancy of her feelings. This most prominent feature of her personality has been further emphasised in the *Idylls* in the message of her song about perseverance in the face of the changing wheel of Fortune:

Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel with smile or frown;
With that wild wheel we go not up or down;
Our hoard is little, but our hearts are great
("The Marriage of Geraint", 350–2)

Perhaps Tennyson has chosen this particular story because Enid embodies his favourite type of women, namely "women of the quiet and domestic type [...], women whom you might meet every day in a modern home, women of the garden-flower kind rather than of the wild-flower kind" (Hutton in Jump 1967: 356–7).

Apparently, the Victorian poet found another such flower in Malory's tale of Lancelot and Elaine (Malory, Bk. XVIII, ch. 9–20). The sweet, simple and modest "Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable, / Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat" ("Lancelot and Elaine", 1–2), seems to be another epitome of the maidenly virtues, and a perfect companion to Lancelot. She proves to be the most devoted, serviceable and tender nurse he could ever wish for:

> [...] but the meek maid
> Sweetly forbore him ever, being to him
> Meeker than any child to a rough nurse,
> Milder than any mother to a sick child,
> And never woman yet, since man's first fall,
> Did kindlier unto man, but her deep love
> Upbore her; till the hermit, skilled in all
> The simples and the science of that time,
> Told him that her fine care had saved his life.
> ("Lancelot and Elaine", 850–8)

This, as she explains to her father, is the first duty of a maiden to the knight that carries her token on his shield. Incidentally, this statement may appear very relevant in the epoch in which, by the efforts of Florence Nightingale, nursing was rehabilitated as a respectful profession for women, after many years of being mainly associated with loose moral standards (Mitchell 1996: 9).

Still, there is one seemingly minor difference, which makes the depiction of Tennyson's Elaine characteristically Victorian. After her proposal to Lancelot has been rejected, the Elaine in Malory asks the knight: "Then, fair knight, said she, will ye be my paramour?" (Malory

Bk. XVIII, ch. 19). In the corresponding passage in the *Idylls*, the Victorian Elaine cries:

> 'I care not to be wife,
> But to be with you still, to see your face,
> To serve you, and to follow you thro' the world.'
> ("Lancelot and Elaine", 932–4)

As Richards observes, "[o]ne cannot quite imagine a medieval woman offering to serve her lover, and is far from specific about what 'to be with you' might involve" (Richards 1993: 115). Unfortunately, according to the Victorian moral standards, even this apparently innocent offer has to be turned down by Lancelot.

Yet another example of an Arthurian character showing Victorian features can be found in the portrayal of King Arthur. Gilmour posits that Tennyson's King Arthur is not only "the apotheosis of chivalry" but, more important, he also seems to be a "troubled Victorian gentleman at the heart of a middle-class national epic" (Gilmour 1996: 50). This King Arthur is not some distant figure that could be placed on the pedestal and worshipped from a distance,

> that gray king, whose name, a ghost,
> Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak,
> And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still; or him
> Of Geoffrey's book, or him of Malleor's,
> ("To the Queen", 39–42)

Tennyson cherished the theme of the Arthurian legend for many years before he actually started writing his first piece on the subject and during that time the character of Arthur, though taken from his readings of Malory, had been personalised and filtered through Tennyson's own imaginings about this great legendary King (cf. *A Memoir* 2: 121, 128). Hence, the King Arthur that emerges from the *Idylls* is yet another character, different from the one that can be found in Malory, and

voicing the issues that might have struck a strangely familiar note to Tennyson's contemporaries.

A change which testifies to the Victorian viewpoint of the author of the *Idylls* is his attitude to the importance of a knight's lineage to his knightly behaviour and achievement. Whereas the objections of other kings concerning the coronation of Arthur as their rightful lord are present in both Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, in Malory's work there is no doubt as to the parentage of Arthur being the son of the King, as it is directly stated in the following conversation between King Uther and his Queen Igraine:

> Then Queen Igraine waxed daily greater and greater, so it befell after within half a year, as King Uther lay by his queen, he asked her, by the faith she owed to him, whose was the child within her body; then she sore abashed to give answer.
>
> 'Dismay you not,' said the king, 'but tell me the truth, and I shall love you the better, by the faith of my body.'
>
> 'Sir,' said she, 'I shall tell you the truth. The same night that my lord was dead, the hour of his death, as his knights record, there came into my castle of Tintagil a man like my lord in speech and in countenance, and two knights with him in likeness of his two knights Prastias and Jordanus, and so I went unto bed with him as I ought to do with my lord, and the same night, as I shall answer unto God, this child was begotten upon me.'
>
> 'That is truth,' said the king, 'as ye say; for it was I myself that came in the likeness, and therefore dismay you not, for I am father of the child;' and there he told her all the cause, how it was by Merlin's counsel. Then the queen made great joy when she knew who was the father of her child. (Malory, Bk. I, ch. 3)

In Tennyson, however, this version, though seemingly the most probable, is only one among other contradicting testimonials concerning Arthur's parentage. Apparently, the controversy aroused by the uncertainty of Arthur's royal descent serves only to undermine its importance and to show that the basis of his true kingship lies elsewhere. Arthur is approved as the king by his companions who have seen

his deeds on the battlefield, and even though he was initially helped by Merlin, who placed him on the throne, it is through his courage and endurance that he gains respect and love from his fellow knights. This shift of importance is also reflected in the question Leodogran, the King of Cameliard and Guinevere's father, asks in his quest for knowledge about Arthur. Greatly confused after hearing some of the versions concerning Arthur's decent, he no longer inquires "Hold ye this Arthur for King Uther's son?", but reformulates his question into: "think ye this king — / [...] / — Hath body enow to hold his foemen down?" ("The Coming of Arthur": 170, 249–52).

The pattern of gaining fame and honour by one's own prowess is later repeated in the story of Gareth, who comes to Camelot attracted by the values it represents. Yet he recognises the fact that his road to knighthood does not only consist in being officially knighted by his personal role model, Sir Lancelot. He decides to conform to his mother's condition and earn the right to join the illustrious Knights of the Round Table after a year of remaining at King Arthur's court *incognito*, and testing his forbearance as one among the kitchen-knaves. His patience is finally rewarded as he gets the chance to prove himself in the challenge, which consists in saving the oppressed Lyonors. Thus, while in Malory the noble blood manifests itself in noble deeds of a knight,[4] in Tennyson the significance of the former has been undermined for the sake of the latter. It is one's actual prowess and noble conduct that count in the evaluation of a character.

This change of focus from the importance of one's descent to one's independence and industriousness reflects the trend in society that was gradually taking place in the nineteenth century. Greater mobility

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4   Lynet, by now greatly displeased with the fact that she has been assigned a mere kitchen knave rather than a knight to perform the role of a saviour of her sister, is amazed at Gareth's prowess and remarks that he must be of noble lineage: "'O Jesu, marvel have I,' said the damosel, 'what manner a man ye be, for it may never be otherwise but that ye be come of a noble blood, for so foul nor shamefully did never woman rule a knight as I have done you, and ever courteously ye have suffered me, and that came never but of a gentle blood'." (Malory, Bk. VII, ch. 11).

within the middle and upper-middle class allowed the social advancement by means of one's moral discipline, earnestness and hard work. This attitude was promoted in such popular works of the epoch as Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help*. Mitchell observes that even "genius" or "natural ability" were looked upon with some degree of suspicion, "success, […], came instead from practical experience and perseverance. Necessity, difficulty, and even poverty were welcomed as spurs to achievement" (Mitchell 1996: 260).

In the portrayals of the above-mentioned characters it was enough to emphasise certain features or to introduce slight changes to turn them into Victorian rather than medieval figures, however, some other characters had to undergo a much greater metamorphosis in order to fit Tennyson's intentions. Such a crucial change can be found in his presentation of Nimue, or Vivien, as she came to be known after 1859.

Tennyson based the idyll "Merlin and Vivien" on a single episode in Malory, in which Nimue, one of the 'damosels' of the lake, is weary of Merlin and finally frees herself from his unwelcome advances by imprisoning him under a great stone:

> And so, soon after, the lady and Merlin departed, and by the way Merlin showed her many wonders, and came into Cornwall. And always Merlin lay about the lady to have her maidenhood, and she was ever passing weary of him, and fain would have been delivered of him, for she was afeard of him because he was a devil's son, and she could not beskift him by no mean.
>
> And so on a time it happed that Merlin showed to her in a rock whereas was a great wonder, and wrought by enchantment, that went under a great stone. So by her subtle 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 he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin. (Malory, Bk. IV, ch. I)

In the *Idylls* however, it is Vivien who offers herself to Merlin and persuades him to reveal the mysterious charm "With woven paces and with waving arms" ("Merlin and Vivien", 205), which could be interpreted as symbolising the spellbinding powers of infatuation. In the climactic

scene of the encounter with Merlin, she proves herself the mistress of persuasion and temptation, a worthy successor to Miltonic Satan.

Her affinity with the Miltonic snake has been established both by linguistic and pictorial means. From the beginning, she is described as "the lissome Vivien" (236), who enters the court at Camelot as King Mark's spy, in order to stir the "snakes within the grass" (33) and make them sting. In the scene of the seduction of Merlin in the forest of Broceliande, she

> *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*;
> ("Merlin and Vivien", 237–240, emphasis mine, E.M.)

This imagery of snake-like writing movement is further amplified, when Vivien wraps herself in Merlin's beard, pretending that she wants to partake in his great wisdom:

> [...] then adding all at once,
> 'And lo, I clothe myself with wisdom,' drew
> The vast and shaggy mantle of his beard
> Across her neck and bosom to her knee,
> And called herself a gilded summer fly
> Caught in a great old tyrant spider's web,
> Who meant to eat her up in that wild wood
> Without one word.
> ("Merlin and Vivien", 252–59)

Moreover, in her rage she is compared to a viper, while her braid "uncoils" and is described as a "snake of gold" that "slid from her hair" (885–6).

In this way, the Damosel of the Lake, a beneficent fairy who, in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, is always ready to help King Arthur and his knights, in the *Idylls* has been transformed into a dangerous *femme fatale* . Such a rendition met with disapproval from Edward Burne-Jones. After

the private publication of "Nimuë" in 1857, he appealed to Tennyson to change her name and "to leave 'the ancient name of Nimuë' to the mysterious figure in *Le Morte D'Arthur*" (Marsh 1995: 112), so that the reputation of the chaste and morally spotless Damosel of the Lake should not be stained with such an unwholesome story. The poet agreed and renamed his character as Vivien, the form being an alternative of the same name, which is attributed to scribal miscopying (Jenkins 1990: 204). To Burne-Jones, the "lissome Vivien" embodied the element of bourgeois vulgarity, which should not have been imported into the world of medieval romance (Marsh 1995: 112). Still, the unwilling fascination with the story of Merlin and Vivien got fixed in the painter's mind to such an extent that he returned to the theme in five of his works (Pearsall 2003: 137). In *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874), Burne-Jones has emphasised the snake-like nature of the temptress. She has been portrayed as reading from the great book of spells that she has finally obtained from Merlin, with the magician himself lying at her feet, apparently already under the influence of her charm, while "the sinuous lines of limbs, drapery and branches mesh together with the snakes entwined in Nimuë's hair" (Marsh 1995: 112).

Thus divorced from her literary prototype, Vivien seems to have absorbed the role of Morgan le Fay, Arthur's wicked sister, who in Malory tries to deprive him of Excalibur and its supernatural power, and plays her lover Accolon off against her brother, hoping in vain that Arthur will be killed in the duel. Yet, in *Le Morte D'Arthur* it is not clear why Morgan becomes the adversary of her brother, whereas in the *Idylls* Vivien's malice is clearly directed against the values represented by the Round Table. Even though she seems to be playing her tricks out of sheer spite, one has to bear in mind that from the very start she is bound to find herself on the wrong side of the argument, since her father fought and was killed on the battlefield fighting against Arthur, and her mother died on that very day in childbirth: "My father died in battle against the King, / My mother on his corpse in open field; / She bore me there, for born from death was I" (42–4). A child of death,

she possesses some deathly characteristics: "from the rosy lips of life and love, / Flashed the bare-grinning skeleton of death!" (844–5).

Vivien appears in the Idylls for the first time in "Balin and Balan", a poem which was written specifically as an introduction to "Merlin and Vivien" (*A Memoir* 2: 121). On her way through the forest, she encounters Balin and poisons his mind with slanderous lies concerning the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere. In this scene she resembles Spenser's false Duessa who also wanders through the forest, accompanied by the Saracen knight, exercising her mischief and causing confusion. Still, unlike Fradubio, who tries to flee from the very moment Duessa's true repulsive nature is revealed, Merlin is already enthralled by Vivien's physical beauty and sweet flattery. In the end, instead of being stripped of her attractive appearance and shamefully banished into the forest, as happens in the case of Duessa, Vivien runs away into the forest victorious, having previously imprisoned Merlin in the hollow oak, where "he lay as dead, / And lost to life and use and name and fame" ("Merlin and Vivien", 967–8).

The Pre-Raphaelite painter was not the only famous Victorian who was puzzled with such a rendition of Vivien. In his review from 1859, Gladstone finds her lacking in the gratification of moral delight and thus confounding the expectations of the readers:

> No pleasure, we grant, can be felt from the character either of the wily woman, between elf and fiend, or of the aged magician, whose love is allowed to travel wither 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. (Jump 1967: 252)

Still, he tries to justify her presence in the poem by claiming that Poetry has to be true to life, without excluding its negative aspects, and Vivien's highly doubtful morality provides a necessary contrast to the other virtuous characters so that they "stand in far clearer and bolder relief when we perceive the dark and baleful shadow of Vivien lowering from between them" (Jump 1967: 253). On the other hand,

in his response to a critical stand of yet another "virtuous journalist", Swinburne asserts that he does not object to "the presentation in art of an unchaste woman", yet he demands that such a *femme fatale* be imbued with "some trace of human or if need be devilish dignity" which he does not find in the Tennysonian figure. According to Swinburne, she has been degraded to the role of a mere prostitute, "the most base and repulsive person" that has ever appeared in serious literature (Jump 1967: 320). His arguments have, in turn, been challenged by Hutton, who claims that dignity in Vivien is not a necessary feature, on the contrary, her elevation would run against the purpose of the poet, since she represents "the power which sensual natures, partly *because* they are without dignity, may attain over the highest and most experienced intellects unprotected by something higher yet" (Jump 1967: 384).

To the Victorians, the story of the fall of Merlin at the hands of the "wily Vivien" (5) may have sounded as a warning that mere sexual passion and infatuation, unaccompanied by true spiritual love, always leads to destruction. This can also be seen as the subconscious fear of active female sexuality threatening the masculine role in society (cf. Morgan 2002: 212). Pearsall posits that "Tennyson's Arthurian cycle as a whole is interestingly related to the effort of nineteenth-century male writers to respond to and contain the growing clamour of women's voices to be heard, which they construed [...] as the threat of sexual domination and promiscuity" (Pearsall 2003: 135).

Perhaps the most striking difference between the medieval theme and its rendition in the *Idylls* concerns the presentation of courtly love. Tennyson ridicules the medieval conventions of courtly love a couple of times in the whole poem. In "Pelleas and Ettarre", on his coming at Arthur's court, Pelleas asks the King: "Make me thy knight, because I know, Sir King, / All that belongs to knighthood, and *I love*" (7–8, emphasis mine, E.M.). A few lines later, however, it turns out that "he loved all maidens, but no maid / In special" (39–40). Pelleas is aware that loving a lady is a necessary condition for becoming a knight. He is so much concerned with following the code of courtly love that he takes

the cruelty of his lady Ettarre for one of its conventions. In "Merlin and Vivien", Vivien is clearly mocking the Knights of the Round Table who think it proper to fall in love with married women, as they follow the example set by their greatest Knight:

> youths that hold
> It more beseems the perfect virgin knight
> To worship woman as true wife beyond
> All hopes of gaining, than as maiden girl.
> They place their pride in Lancelot and the Queen.
> ("Merlin and Vivien", 21–5)

However, according to the medieval concept of courtly love, it was taken for granted that the lover addressed the wife of another man (Lewis 1953: 2–3).

It is this adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere that proved to be the most problematic for the Victorian writers. Pearsall remarks that, in order to avoid impropriety, Lancelot "was made to worship the queen from afar, or else it was just a mysterious 'treason' that Lancelot and Guinevere were guilty of, adultery remaining unmentioned, or else the accusations were mentioned but condemned as false and as the product of the others' envy" (Pearsall 2003: 137). Tennyson has adopted a different solution and decided to use the theme to teach a moral lesson to his contemporaries.

Yet, before turning to the treatment of courtly love in the *Idylls*, it is worth noticing that the subject seems to be a difficult one even to Malory. He tries to defend the lovers, by elaborating on the true and constant love of the past as opposed to the instability of feelings in his own times:

> But nowadays men can not love seven night but they must have all their desires: that love may not endure by reason; for where they be soon accorded and hasty heat, soon it cooleth. Right so fareth love nowadays, soon hot soon cold: this is no stability. But the old love was not so; men and women could love together

seven years, and no licours lusts were between them, and then was love, truth, and faithfulness: and lo, in like wise was used love in King Arthur's days.

Wherefore I liken love nowadays unto summer and winter; for like as the one is hot and the other cold, so fareth love nowadays; therefore all ye that be lovers call unto your remembrance the month of May, like as did Queen Guenever, for whom I make here a little mention, *that while she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end.* (Malory, Bk. XVIII, ch. 25, emphasis mine, E.M.)

Moreover, what appears to be central in his handling of the relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere is the heroic devotion Lancelot bears for his lady, which in turn is yet one more proof of his being the most worshipful knight of the Round Table (cf. Lambert 1975: 207). The preoccupation with chivalric values is also expressed in Arthur's reaction to the accusations against Lancelot, and to Aggravain's offer to disclose their adulterous love. Malorian Arthur is in the first place an ideal king, thus he is mostly concerned about the practical consequences of such a move for the knighthood he has created. Even if he might have been suspecting something, as "he had a deeming" (Malory, Bk. XX, ch. 2), he does not want to lose his best knight and he is aware that the disclosure will result in the unalterable split of the most worshipful community of the knights that ever existed (Malory, Bk. XX, ch. 7). He is not much concerned about losing his Queen, because, as he remarks, "queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company" (Malory, Bk. XX, ch. 9).

In Tennyson however, the role of the Queen in relation to her King is of far greater importance. She is essential to the very sense of his kingship and to the fulfilment of his ideal realm. This is what he thinks of her after seeing her for the first time:

> (...) for saving I be joined
> To her that is the fairest under heaven,
> I seem as nothing in the mighty world,
> And cannot will my will, nor work my work
> Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm
> Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,

Then might we live together as one life,
And reigning with one will in everything
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,
And power on this dead world to make it live.'
("The Coming of Arthur", 84–93)

This passage may have had a familiar ring to the Victorian audience, being reminiscent of the duties of a Victorian wife to her husband: "Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give" (Ruskin 1906: 144).

Yet Guinevere refuses to be an obedient wife and to conform to Arthur's idealised vision. As Ryals observes, "Guinevere is not, however, made of the same metal as the King. A real woman and not an abstract ideal presence, she has all the passion and longing for life of a normal woman" (Ryals 1963: 58–9). She bears herself with this insolent pride, which was so much criticised in women by Ruskin. "Proud and pale" ("Lancelot and Elaine": 610) towards the people around her, she seems to be extremely lonely and torn by jealousy at the news about Lancelot's supposed affection towards Elaine on the one hand, and by some faint pangs of conscience about her unfaithfulness to Arthur on the other. This inconsistency between her haughty behaviour towards Lancelot and her inner feelings, to which she gives way only when alone in her chamber, make her a much more interesting and convincing character than the stainless maidens from other idylls that have been discussed above.

Even though adultery was perceived by the Victorians as one among the gravest sins, and Guinevere's infidelity seems to be the main and most immediate cause of the destruction of Arthur's ideal world of the Round Table, she may have been treated with sympathy, even by Tennyson's contemporaries. Her search for love and happiness in the relationship with Lancelot seems to be at least partly justified by her unhappy marriage. Apparently, she was left without choice as to

her future spouse; it was Arthur who fell in love with her at first sight, seeing her in passing as she was standing by the castle walls, but:

> [...] since he neither wore on helm or shield
> The golden symbol of his kinglihood,
> But rode a simple knight among his knights,
> And many of these in richer arms than he,
> She saw him not, or marked not, if she saw,
> One among many, though his face was bare.
> ("The Coming of Arthur", 49–54)

Moreover, being already a king, he did not even come to bring his bride to Camelot personally, but sent his best knight, Lancelot, in his stead.[5]

> Sir Lancelot went ambassador, at first,
> To fetch her, and she watched him from her walls.
> A rumour runs, she took him for the King,
> So fixt her fancy on him: let them be.
> ("Merlin and Vivien", 772–5)

Since Guinevere initially took Lancelot for her royal bridegroom, her love may be justified as the feeling of love is the only rightful one that a maiden should bestow upon her future husband. Consequently, it is she who becomes the main victim of this unhappy mistake.

Guinevere is very disappointed with the right bridegroom, who turns out to be "cold", "high", "self-contained" and "passionless", the very opposite of the gentle Lancelot ("Guinevere", 402–4). This notion of being simply sold in marriage also reverberates in William Morris's attempt to vindicate the Queen in his poem, "The Defence of Guenevere":

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5   Tennyson has founded this episode on a similar one in the love story of Tristram and Isolt from Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (cf. Eversley III: 504). But the relationships within the triangle Guinevere–Lancelot–Arthur become the more complicated as the friendship and respect Lancelot bears for his King does not at all resemble the suppressed mutual hatred between Tristram and his uncle, King Mark.

> Belonging to the time ere I was bought
> By Arthur's great name and his little love;
> ("The Defence of Guenevere", 82–3)

She is depicted as if she were living in a trap, with no honourable solution that would release her. She states that she shuns to "break those bounds of courtesy / In which as Arthur's Queen / I move and rule: / So cannot speak my mind" ("Lancelot and Elaine", 1213–15).

Even though in the end she admits her wickedness, regrets her "false voluptuous pride" ("Guinevere", 636), and hopes that she will be able to atone for her sin by doing her penance and living a pure life in the nunnery, the scene of her final conversation with Arthur appears to be very artificial. Arthur finds her at Almesbury, where she has fled after her relationship with Lancelot was brought to light by Modred, and starts lecturing her on the consequences of her sin. He blames her not only for the ruin of their marriage but also for the destruction of the world of ideals he created and believed in so deeply.

> Bear with me for the last time while I show,
> Even for thy sake, the sin which thou hast sinned.
> ("Guinevere", 451–2)

Jenkins posits that "even in 1859 Arthur's reproaching his wife with the ruin of his life's work as she lies prostrate on the floor, was felt by some people as disagreeable. Meredith said that Arthur lectured his Queen as if he were a curate" (Jenkins 1990: 206).

Finally, Arthur announces that now he must leave her to her shame, so that his assertions of love and pity that he still feels for his wife do not sound very convincing either. He forgives and blesses her in the end, yet, after the torrent of accusations that he has poured over Guinevere, it seems that he does it not out of his love to her, but only because this is what a true Christian should do. At the same time he refuses to touch either her lips or her hand, as he finds her a base polluted creature, not worthy of her noble King. His mercy appears to be so artificial that it is no wonder that it chokes Guinevere. After his departure she declares that:

> 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.
> ("Guinevere", 652–6)

This confession of guilt and regret, with its visible emphasis on her duty and profit, seems to be more of a means to convince herself, an evidence of an acutely distressed state of mind rather than a genuine conclusion originating from her suddenly awakened love for her husband.

After all, it seems that the blame for the unhappy marriage of Arthur and Guinevere should not be attributed solely to the Queen. To the Victorians, a marriage without true love was considered "the ultimate transgression", as it was necessary that "any form, any custom, any constitutional principle must be informed with living faith and love — otherwise it was merely, in Carlyle's words, [...], 'buckram' or 'sham'" (Cockshut in Pollard 1993: 2). Houghton points out that marital love is "a great ethical force which can protect men from lust and even strengthen and purify the moral will; it is not an experience limited to courtship but continues throughout life, animating husband and wife no less than the lover and his lass" (Houghton 1985: 375).

Since in the Middle Ages all marriages were "matches of interest" which excluded the very idea of passionate love within the marriage or a free choice of the spouse, courtly tradition emerged as a natural means to fill this gap. Lewis remarks that "[t]he love which is to be the source of all that is beautiful in life and manners must be the reward freely given by the lady, and only our superiors can reward". Still, he adds, "a wife is not a superior". He concludes that "where marriage does not depend upon the free will of the married, any theory which takes love for a noble form of experience must be a theory of adultery" (Lewis 1958: 13, 36–37). By the time of the Victorian epoch, those ideals had been suffused into the idea of marital love, which has been discussed above. Unfortunately, they are absent in the marriage of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. Ironically, it is Arthur himself

who utters this truth about ideal love: "Let love be free; free love is for the best" ("Lancelot and Elaine", 1370); but he means it as an advice to Lancelot concerning the unrequited affection of Elaine's, whereas he does not follow this rule in his own marriage.

Lewis observes that "only courteous can love, but it is love that makes them courteous. Yet this love, though neither playful nor licentious in its expression, is always what the nineteenth century called 'dishonourable' love" (Lewis 1958: 2). This is also the case in the *Idylls*. While in Malory courtly love is portrayed as an ennobling passion, in Tennyson this very passion leads to moral decline of the two greatest Knights of the Round Table, Lancelot and Tristram. In "Lancelot and Elaine", the sinful love of Lancelot and Guinevere is depicted as an obstacle which impedes a happy resolution in marriage of Elaine and Lancelot:

> And peradventure had he seen her first
> She might have made this and that other world
> Another world for the sick man; but now
> The shackles of an old love straiten'd him,
> His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
> And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.
> ("Lancelot and Elaine", 867–72)

Instead, the adulterous love of Lancelot and the Queen results in the death of an innocent maiden. Moreover, the glorious love of Tristram and Isolt of the medieval legends in "The Last Tournament" turns out to be the very reversal of the spiritual ideal of the medieval courtly love, being merely sensual, transitory, and hence unhappy. As Tennyson comments in his notes to "The Last Tournament", "Tristram the courteous has lost his courtesy, for the great sin of Lancelot was sapping the Round Table" (Eversley III: 502).

The characters in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, supposedly heroes and heroines of the Middle Ages, in fact turn out to be surprisingly Victorian. Apparently, Tennyson did not even have to change the plots he found in his medieval sources, he only developed and elaborated upon those themes which appeared to be relevant to the most

important issues of his epoch. Nevertheless, in Tennyson's portrayals of the female characters there seems to be present an undertone of attraction with the ones who call into question the widely accepted Victorian social norms. As Culler observes, "Guinevere is more attractive to Lancelot than Elaine, and Vivien is far more powerful than Enid" (Culler 1977: 239) .

MERLIN AND VIVIEN
engraving by Gustave Doré for an 1868 edition
of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

The Victorian Crisis of Faith
in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

A parable, the term suggested by Tennyson as the most appropriate for his literary endeavour, implies that it is its spiritual dimension that he intended to be of major importance for a proper understanding of his narrative poem. While he aimed at a universal theme, symbolically reflecting the struggle of all humanity, "not the history of one man or of one generation but of a whole cycle of generations" (*A Memoir* 2: 127), it should not be forgotten that such a stance was deeply rooted in the mood of the Victorian era as well as in the personal crisis of belief of the poet himself.

Due to the influence of the German approach to the Bible on the one hand, and scientific evidence on the other, from the thirties onwards, Victorian England witnessed an acute religious crisis. German biblical criticism of the early nineteenth century posited that the Old Testament was a collection of "tribal histories, genealogies, digests of laws, erotic songs, biographies", and "folk myths" rather than a divinely inspired work it had been considered to be before. Similarly, the Gospels consisted of "several versions of a biography of a historical figure named Jesus", whose divinity as the Son of God and, consequently, his miracles were ascribed to him by his disciples (Altick 1973: 220). The literal veracity of the Bible was further undermined by the publication of

works such as Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–33), Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), and Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). The outcomes of scientific geological and palaeontological studies showed that the world was hundreds of thousands of years older than 5,800 years, the period which had been based on Scriptural evidence by a seventeenth-century bishop of Armagh, James Ussher (Altick 1973: 98–99), and that human beings had appeared on earth already in "the last icy age, twenty thousand years ago, some fourteen thousand before the Biblical Creation" (Altick 1973: 100). At the same time, Darwin's evolutionary theory implied that the concept of "the fittest" was dissociated from that of the morally superior, thus rendering Christian ethics precariously insignificant. Hence man was suddenly reduced from the perfect Creation of God to the currently best developed species in the long chain of species in the state of constant struggle for survival, in a world devoid of divine Presence, without any certainties that his predominance over other species will continue into the future. As a result, the religious faith of many educated Victorians was severely tried and, in many cases, completely shattered. Houghton observes that

> the Victorians were utterly unprepared for the radical crisis in thought and society which burst over England in the thirties and forties. The assumptions of the old order had been bred into the young minds of almost all mid-Victorians; and now in the nineteenth century, in the early manhood of individuals like Carlyle and Kingsley, Froude and Arnold, they suddenly began to crumble. (Houghton 1985: 66)

He goes on to point to the feelings of constant anxiety and alarm that accompanied every new scientific discovery, which were comparable to the state of anticipation of a series of earthquakes (Houghton 1985: 66–67). This initial confusion and regret at the loss of faith of one's childhood resulted in such varied responses as deep isolation, spiritual inertia, melancholia, "free thought, skepticism, rationalism, agnosticism, secularism" and "humanism" (Altick 1973: 233) only to turn into

atheism, and consequently, religious detachment and decadence as the century was drawing to its close.

Tennyson, an amateur scientist, suffering from the untimely loss of his friend Arthur Hallam, fully shared in the general feelings of anxiety and religious doubt of his times. As a Victorian poet, and later, a Poet Laureate, he became not only a participant but a spokesman for the fears of his epoch. While *In Memoriam* has been considered to be the most representative of the spiritual state of the Victorian period, it is the main theme of the *Idylls of the King* that was defined by his contemporaries as "the unending war of humanity in all ages, the worldwide war of Sense and Soul" (*A Memoir* 2: 130), or rather, to put it differently, the conflict between belief and unbelief, Faith and Scepticism. King Leodogran, the Knights of the Round Table, Guinevere and finally even King Arthur himself in turn set out on a personal quest for spiritual truth and seem to mirror the Victorians in undergoing states of doubt, frustration, loss of faith, scepticism and atheism (cf. Eversley III: 446–7).

Initially, Camelot, with its ideal King and simple vows of conduct, offers an attractive opportunity for young men to improve their lives and gain fame by their joining in the Knighthood of the Round Table:

> Arthurianism thus emerges as a grand symbolic opportunity for change — a new "order" in the stricter sense of that term set against an old disordered symbolic knight-errantry and providing men in this world with a new code of value and conduct by which to self themselves authentically. At the heart of the symbol is the idea of order itself, man's craving for a way of constructively organizing his life against the chaos without and within. (Buckler 1984: 166)

Soon, however, the kingdom is freed from the immediate threat from the lawless Edyrns, Earls Limours and Earls Doom, and the lack of challenges coming from without results in the stagnation within, a lazy summer of Arthurian world: "While all the heathen lay at Arthur's feet, / And no quest came, but all was joust and play" ("Merlin and Vivien", 142–3). Moreover, Merlin, seized with melancholy at the foreboding of the future destruction of the Arthurian world and thus

paradoxically unable to prevent it, withdraws and is no longer able to perform the role of the adviser of his King. The Intellect lets itself be lulled and seduced by the tricks of wily Vivien.

The latecomers, such as the idealistic Pelleas or the repenting Balin, are acutely disappointed with what they come to understand as the truth, the double morality at Camelot. The sudden shock that they suffer exposes the weakness and insufficiency of their fresh belief in the Arthurian values. Hence, as Ryals observes,

> even the rumor of an illicit sexual relationship on the part of the Queen is enough to disenchant the knights of the Round Table. They have been forced to believe in an ideal; and when they see that their ideal is merely human after all and subject to the same delusions and faults as real people, they immediately are led to suspect that nothing is true – neither the idea of the Round Table nor their loved ones. (Ryals 1963: 59)

They are not able to cope with their disillusionment and thus let violent emotions fully control their reason and influence their actions, which results in their self-annihilation. In his rage, Pelleas decides to challenge the court of Arthur by establishing his own Round Table in the North, the very antithesis of Camelot, the aim of which is to reveal the hypocrisy of Arthurian knights and ladies. Thus,

> [...] whatsoever his own knights have sworn
> My knights have sworn the counter to it [...]
> My tower is full of harlots, like his court,
> But mine are worthier, seeing they profess
> To be none other than themselves[...]
> My knights are all adulterers like his own,
> But mine are truer, seeing they profess
> To be none other;
> ("The Last Tournament", 79–86)

The two episodes, which in the *Idylls* signal a considerable change in the mood, introducing the darker turn in the legend, in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* seem to be merely of marginal importance to the later

crisis at Camelot. The tale of Balin is shown as a chain of unfortunate events, with Balin becoming more and more entangled in them due to his limited knowledge of the circumstances and his stubbornness. Pelleas's disappointment in love and in fellowship, on the other hand, is soothed by the Damosel of the Lake. Moreover, Pelleas does not perceive Ettarre and Gawain's treachery as a sign of the degeneration of the whole Round Table.

However, in Tennyson's *Idylls*, both Pelleas and Balin are disillusioned with the attitudes and acting of certain characters, and not with the King himself. They fall victim to the falsity and cruelty of Ettarre, Gawain and Vivien, sceptics and contesters of the principles of Round Table, living by their own rules of conduct. Their amoral attitude, associated with the court of King Mark, adds another meaning to the central theme of "the unending war of the Sense and Soul". Here, this may be interpreted as the rejection of spirituality for mere sensual pleasure. Tristram, King Mark's nephew and his fiercest enemy, who in Malory is one of the noblest knights, in his knightliness comparable only to Lancelot, in Tennyson defies moral values of the Round Table as ridiculous and no longer adequate, and instead propagates free love: "Free love — free field — we love but while we may" ("The Last Tournament", 275). His disillusioned scepticism makes him unable to promise his beloved Isolt to love her "ev'n when old, / Gray-hair'd, and past desire, and in despair" (647–8). His gift for Isolt, the jewels which he won in the Tournament of the Dead Innocence, is tainted, as it is suggested by the blood-red glow of rubies which turn into "frozen blood" (412) in his dream of the two Isolts.

The opposite attitude to that represented by the court of King Mark can be found at the court of King Pellam, who, "once / A Christless foe" of Arthur ("Balin and Balan", 93–4), suddenly decides to leave "all matters of this world" (114) and live a life of an ascetic. He has even taken the vows of celibacy and pushed aside his "faithful wife, nor lets / Or dame or damsel enter at his gates / Lest he should be polluted" (103–5). He traces his origins to Saint Joseph of Arimathea, and manifests pious veneration of the holy relics which his illustrious ancestor is said

to have brought with him to Britain. Yet, his intentions are far from being pure. Actually, the main motivation behind his conversion is to imitate Arthur in his successful Christian reign, and surpass him by adopting even stricter rules of conduct:

> but seeing that thy realm
> Hath prosper'd in the name of Christ, the King
> Took, as in rival heat, to holy things;
> ("Balin and Balan", 95–7)

Jay interprets this reworking of the Fisher King motif as the poet's "warning against the excesses of second-generation Tractarianism" (Jay 1986: 45) as opposed to "Protestant manhood and Victorian family life" (ibid.). She argues that "Pellam's reliance upon legend as the basis for his appeal to a greater apostolic purity [...] reflects popular scepticism at the Tractarian enthusiasm for republishing the legends of the Early Church" (Jay 1986: 46). She posits that celibacy is portrayed in the *Idylls* as the opposite of the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere, as "[b]oth threaten the very foundation of society and social responsibility" (Jay 1986: 46). Hence, in the character of King Pellam, self-denial and sacrifice propagated by Newman and Wesley as a good way of exercising one's will against temptations (Houghton 1985: 233–7) are ridiculed, and become mere outer forms, by which the artful king is trying to gain greater worldly fame than that of his adversary, King Arthur.

Still others embrace the Quest of the Holy Grail as an escape from "vainglories, rivalries, / And earthly heats" ("The Holy Grail", 32–33) of Camelot, and as a chance to regain religious faith. Yet, Arthur sees the Quest as a desertion of one's earthly duties; the majority of the Knights of the Round Table are no Galahads, nor Percivals, fit for achieving the higher vision of the Grail, "but men / With strength and will to right the wrong'd" (308–9). By undertaking the Quest, they forgo many a "chance of noble deeds" (318) to chase "wandering fires / Lost in the quagmire" (319–20). In this way, the Quest of the Holy Grail, which in Malory bas been presented as an ennobling religious experience, with

the dreams leading the knights to spiritual progress, in Tennyson turns into a mass hysteria (cf. Culler 1977: 228), and the visions into inconsistent projections of a feverish mind. Tennyson's cautious treatment of the supernatural elements in the *Idylls*, so that "the natural, [...], could always be made to account for the supernatural" (*A Memoir* 2: 63), is a sure sign of the rationalism and scepticism of the Victorian epoch, in which there is no room for the belief in religious wonders. Culler points out that even the first vision of the Grail is not a purely religious experience as it "originated [...] in the frustrated sexual desires of a young woman who had been disappointed in love and gone into a nunnery" (Culler 1977: 228). Thus the Quest of the Holy Grail in the *Idylls* shows how "religion in many turns from practical goodness to the quest after the supernatural and marvellous and selfish religious excitement. Few are those for whom the quest is a source of spiritual strength" (Eversley III: 487).

The loss of religious faith has been symbolically rendered in the *Idylls* as the blurring of the vision. In "The Coming of Arthur", the future king is endowed with almost supernatural clearness of vision, so that he can see "The smallest rock far on the faintest hill / And even in high day the morning star" (97–8). This may be interpreted as symbolic of his strong belief in God and in the meaning of his aim, for which he fights against the heathen on the battlefield. In the end however, doubt and confusion, which have gradually been affecting his knights, creep to the heart of King Arthur himself. Lost in the mists of the final battle, he no longer knows who he is, or where he is. He seems to himself "but King among the dead" ("The Passing of Arthur", 146).

The Victorian crisis of faith, which has been sketched out above, created the need to look for compensation in the admiration for secular role models. Distinguished military leaders and statesmen, such as Napoleon, Nelson and Wellington, the captains of industry, as well as outstanding men of letters, were exalted to the rank of modern prophets (Houghton 1985: 305–340). Altick comments on the amount of fan mail addressed to the "literary celebrities" such as Dickens and Tennyson, in which they were asked, *inter alia*, for spiritual advice and

consolation, and observes that the greatest Victorian poets were perceived by their contemporaries as "sources of spiritual counsel, moral guidance, admonition, and reassurance" (Altick 1973: 279–280). Hence, poetry became a substitute for religion, with the poet cast in the role of the spiritual guide of his nation. In his Lecture 3, "The Hero as Poet" from his series of lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle posits a Romantic idea of the Poet as Prophet, the *Vates*, who is endowed with insight into "the sacred mystery of the Universe" (Carlyle 1935: 105), and is thus bound to communicate his message to his people. This message concerns both goodness and beauty, of which goodness is an integral part.

However, as it is argued in Carlyle's lectures, the spiritual leaders could be found not only among the most prominent figures of the contemporaneity, but also among the heroes of the glorious past, both historical and legendary. Houghton observes that "At a time when the Bible and the Church were no longer able to satisfy the religious instinct of many Victorians, heroic legend, like nature and great men, could be welcomed as another manifestation of the divine spirit working in the world" (Houghton 1985: 316). In his last lecture on "The Hero as King" Carlyle discusses kingship as the supreme form of Heroism, in which all the previously mentioned embodiments of the hero, such as Priest and Teacher, combine to form the exceptional individual whose role is "to *command* over us, to furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell us for the day and hour what we are to do" (Carlyle 1935: 257).

Even though not mentioned by name, King Arthur seems to be the epitome of Carlyle's royal ideal. In both Malory and Tennyson, Arthur has been presented as "the truest-hearted, justest, the Noblest Man" (Carlyle 1935: 258), a noble leader and protector, the elect chosen to introduce order into the confusion of a barbaric world. For, as Carlyle observes, the true King "is here to make what was disorderly, chaotic, into a thing ruled, regular. He is the missionary of Order" (Carlyle 1935: 267). Yet, it seems that it is Tennyson's Arthur who conforms to Carlyle's notions better, since he is able "to see into the awful *truth* of

things; — to see that Time and its shows all rested on Eternity, and this poor Earth of ours was the threshold either of Heaven or of Hell!" (Carlyle 1935: 279). This may be best seen in his words to the knights returning from the Quest of the Holy Grail:

> And some among you held, that if the King
> Had seen the sight he would have sworn the vow:
> Not easily, seeing that the King must guard
> That which he rules, and is but as the hind
> To whom a space of land is given to plow.
> Who may not wander from the allotted field
> Before his work be done; but, being done,
> Let visions of the night or of the day
> Come, as they will; and many a time they come,
> Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,
> This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
> This air that smites his forehead is not air
> But vision — yea, his very hand and foot —
> In moments when he feels he cannot die,
> And knows himself no vision to himself,
> Nor the high God a vision, nor that One
> Who rose again: [...]
> ("The Holy Grail", 900–916)

This speech appears to be central to the proper understanding of the whole *Idylls* in that it reflects the innermost beliefs and convictions of the poet himself. His son remembers him saying that

> it is true that there are moments when the flesh is nothing to me, when I feel and know the flesh to be the vision, God and the Spiritual the only real and true. Depend upon it, the Spiritual *is* the real: it belongs to one more than the hand and the foot. You may tell me that my hand and my foot are only imaginary symbols of my existence, I could believe you; but you never, never can convince me that the *I* is not an eternal Reality, and that the Spiritual is not the true and real part of me. (*A Memoir* 2: 90)

Hence, Arthur counters the fleeting and deceptive visions of the Grail with his personal insights into the higher reality, which to others

remains hidden behind appearances of the physical world. Yet, his revelations prove to be obscure and unintelligible to his knights. The only comment that Percivale can make about the above-quoted speech is that of incomprehension: "So spake the King: I knew not all he meant" (917). Thus, to the world around him, this visionary-king in most cases remains silent and keeps his mind to himself (cf. Carlyle 1935: 290, 293). He seems to be separated, as it were, withdrawn from reality; a solitary figure, wrapped in his dreams, alone in his wanderings and in his glimpses into eternity.

This emphasis on Arthur's spirituality in Tennyson seems to be the most important aspect that distinguishes him from his Malorian prototype. While both Malory and Tennyson portray King Arthur as a living embodiment of what is considered to be of highest value in their respective epochs, the King Arthur of *Le Morte D'Arthur* is first and foremost the greatest leader of all time, whose prowess has been proved on the battlefield: "Then Sir Arthur did so marvellously in arms, that all men had wonder" (Malory, Bk. I, ch. 14). He frees his land from the homage due to Rome, and through his greatness, overthrows the emperor himself. Even after asserting his position as king he does not hesitate to venture into the wilds on his own and get involved in a single combat, in this way gaining the respect of his knights:

> And when they heard of his adventures, they marvelled that he would jeopard his person so, alone. But all men of worship said it was merry to be under such a chieftain, that would put his person in adventure as other poor knights did. (Malory, Bk. I, ch. 25)

A parallel episode can be found in the *Idylls* in "Balin and Balan", in which Arthur, unrecognisable in his armour, leaves Camelot and challenges the two brothers sitting at the fountain outside. Still, more importantly, Malory's Arthur is the very epitome of knightliness: "he was so full of knighthood that knightly he endured the pain" (Malory, Bk. IV, ch. 9), and at the same time, the living warrant of the existence

of the greatest knighthood in history, the Knighthood of the Round Table, which he has gathered around him.

In Tennyson's *Idylls*, King Arthur is again a great warrior and a just king of the times of peace, who is yet always ready to stand up and fight for his kingdom. However, he seems to be much more than his Malorian counterpart. Tennyson's contemporaries perceived Arthur as "the impersonation of spiritual authority" (Hutton in Jump 1967: 386), "the 'King within us' — our highest nature, by whatsoever name it may be called — conscience; spirit; the moral soul; the religious sense; the noble resolve" (Knowles in Jump 1967: 313), "the great pillar of the moral order, and the resplendent top of human excellence" (Gladstone in *A Memoir* 2: 130). Tennyson himself meant his great King "to represent the Ideal Soul of Man coming into contact with the warring elements of the flesh" (Eversley III: 443 fn).

The symbolic role of King Arthur has been achieved in the *Idylls* by the employment of recurrent biblical images and allusions, which have yet been intermingled with signs and beliefs originating in folklore. In his recollection of his first impressions of Arthur, Tristram compares the King, sitting with his foot "on a stool / Shaped as a dragon" ("Last Tournament", 666–667) to "Michael trampling Satan" (668). Still, it seems that the most consistent imagery of his divine nature, which can be found throughout the *Idylls*, is the comparison of Arthur to the figure of Christ. The King is presented as "Ideal manhood closed in real man" ("To the Queen", 38; cf. *A Memoir* 2: 129). Moreover, in Tennyson's "Morte D'Arthur" (1842) the vision of the returning Arthur appears to the poet in his dream on the night preceding "the Christmas-morn" (303). Also Merlin's prophecy concerning Arthur's healing of his deadly wound on the Isle of Avilion and his second coming, which reverberates throughout the *Idylls*, even though apparently a mere folk tale, has been rendered much more powerful and imaginative than in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, in which any hope of Arthur's second coming has been thwarted by the discovery of his tomb the day after the final battle.

The scene of crucial importance to such a reading of Arthur is the coronation scene, retold by Bellicent in "The Coming of Arthur". The figure of the young king is presented as the bearer of light, which descends upon him, as if sent from the cross above, and passes onto his knights.[6] The "momentary likeness of the King" (270) that lights up the faces of his knights right after their taking of the vows shows how they become unified in the common purpose of creating a new orderly world, and resembles the likeness of God in his Creation immediately after the act of creating in *Genesis*. The vows, strait and delivered in "simple words of great authority" (260), are also metaphorically represented as pure light that leaves the knights "dazed, as one who wakes / Half-blinded at the coming of a light" (264–5).

Arthur is accompanied by three beneficent queens, themselves "clothed with living light" ("The Passing of Arthur", 454), who may be seen as symbols of Faith, Hope and Charity (Everlsey: 442).[7] Next stands the great "mage Merlin" (279), who is going to serve his King with his exceptional intellect and wisdom of "hundred winters" (280). Yet another, and apparently, the most important of Arthur's supporters that is present at the coronation is the Lady of the Lake, "Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful" (284), who, according to Tennyson, represents the authority of the Church (Eversley III: 456). She is depicted as a mysterious figure, enshrouded in "a mist of incense" (286–7), with her face "hidden in the minster gloom" (288), with her voice "as of the waters" (290)[8], "heard among the holy hymns" (289). While she is the symbol of Church, her portrayal indirectly introduces the church-like

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6 Cf. in his Lecture I, "The Hero as Divinity", Carlyle defines a great man as "a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, [...], of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness; — in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them" (Carlyle 1935: 2).

7 Tennyson did not want the role of the three queens to be narrowed down to only one interpretation: "They mean that and they do not. They are three of the noblest of women. They are also those three Graces, but they are much more" (Eversley III: 442).

8 Cf. "And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters" (Rev. 14: 2), an allusion which has been pointed out by the poet himself (Eversley III: 456).

character of the setting, the image which is rounded off with the holy cross hanging over Arthur and the red, blue and green lights falling on the three queens, which suggest the presence of a stained-glass window, in this way emphasising the solemnity of the event. Just like her Malorian prototype, the Lady of the Lake lives under the surface of a lake and "Hath power to walk the waters like our Lord" (293). However, unlike in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, where this ability is taken for granted, as she belongs to the supernatural world of the medieval romance, in the *Idylls of the King*, it takes on a new meaning, bringing to mind the lines from the *Gospel According to Matthew*: "And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea" (Matt. 14: 25).

The Lady of the Lake bestows on Arthur Excalibur, the "huge *cross*-hilted sword / Whereby to drive *the heathen* out" (485–6, emphasis mine, E.M.). It is:

> […] rich
> With jewels, elfin Urim, on the hilt,
> Bewildering heart and eye — the blade so bright
> That men are blinded by it
> ("The Coming of Arthur", 297–300)

The name of the jewels, "elfin Urim" refers to the Urim and the Thummim, signifying "the lights" and "the perfections", the twelve jewels which, in the Old Testament, were placed in the breast-plate of the High Priest (Hancock 1984: 252). Hancock explains that "[w]hen light shines from God into the renewed heart it tends to produce 'perfections'". "The twelve stones", he continues "are all Urim when viewed as media of the divine illumination, and all Thummim when viewed as the receptacles and exponents of the resulting 'perfections'" (Hancock 1984: 253). In this way, Excalibur becomes the instrument of the divine illumination, a perfect weapon for King Arthur as the bearer of light to effect his vision of a Christian kingdom. Moreover, through the introduction of the Urim, the poet establishes another link with the figure of Christ, since the jewels appear among the weapons, by the power of

which the Son of God defeats the rebellious Angels in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "He, in celestial panoply all armed / Of radiant Urim, work divinely wrought, / Ascended" (Bk. 6, 760–2). The idea of Arthur as a warrior of God has already been introduced in the battle scene, in which Lancelot recognises Arthur as his true lord, as his performance on the battlefield is inspired by "the fire of God" ("The Coming of Arthur", 127). However, the epithet "elfin" points to the folk belief that Arthur is not only a Christian ruler but also a favourite with fairies. In "Guinevere", the little novice at Almesbury tells Guinevere that "the land was full of signs / And wonders ere the coming of the Queen" (230–1) and that on his way to Camelot, her father witnessed how:

> in the light the white mermaiden swam,
> And strong man-breasted things stood from the sea,
> And sent a deep sea-voice thro' all the land,
> To which the little elves of chasm and cleft
> Made answer, sounding like a distant horn.
> ("Guinevere", 243–247)

The appearance of fairies and spirits shows that in his rendition of the Arthurian legend, Tennyson was also influenced by Layamon's *Brut* (cf. Eversley III: 452; Jenkins 1990: 208).

Yet another parallel between Arthur and Christ may be traced in Arthur's soliloquy before that "last weird battle in the west" ("The Passing of Arthur", 29), overheard by Bedivere:

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

> And enter it, and make it beautiful?
> Or else as if the world were wholly fair,
> But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,
> And have not power to see it as it is:
> Perchance, because we see not to the close; —
> For I, being simple, thought to work His will,
> And have but stricken with the sword in vain;
> And all whereon I lean'd in wife and friend
> Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
> Reels back into the beast, and is no more.
> My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death:
> Nay — God my Christ — I pass but shall not die.'
> ("The Passing of Arthur", 9–28)

These words mark the nadir of the whole *Idylls of the King*. Arthur, by now unwavering in his faith and consequent in the execution of his vision, is himself overcome by doubt and disillusion. He thought he was right in fighting in the name of God, but the only reward which he has earned for his efforts is treason on the part of his wife and his best friend, and an acute sense of alienation, alienation the more painful as it arises from the loss of trust both in man and in God. His appeal to God: "My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death" (27) evokes the cry of the crucified Christ: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? [...] My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27: 46). His despair makes him speculate about the existence of two gods, "the lesser god" (14) preceding the coming of "the High God" (16). The former refers to the demiurge of Plato, while the whole notion reflects "the gnostic belief that lesser Powers created the world" (Eversley III: 399). However, the moment of weakness quickly turns into reassertion of faith and renewal of trust in the divine Purpose: "Nay — God my Christ — I pass but shall not die" (28). Arthur ascribes the inability of man to gain full insight into the true reality to the limitation of the senses. This view apparently mirrors that of Tennyson himself, who believed that there existed a way to reconcile the scientific evidence with spiritual purpose in the world, "though such comfort is diminished by its inaccessibility to mortal vision" (Jay 1986: 107–8).

Such a portrayal of King Arthur excludes even the slightest possibility that Modred could be his illegitimate son from his incestuous relationship with his artful sister Margawse, who, in the *Idylls* becomes the good Bellicent. On the contrary, "the blameless King", as the Tennysonian Arthur is repeatedly called throughout the poem, remains manifestly uninterested in other women, so that he reacts to the wooing tricks of Vivien with nothing more than a blank gaze ("Merlin and Vivien", 150–162). This crucial change in the narrative proved consequential to the meaning of the whole work, and provoked vivid criticism among the Victorian men of letters. Swinburne thought that such a treatment of the Arthurian legend belittled and ruined the complexity of the tragedy which led to the final fall of the Round Table in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and degraded Arthur to the role of "a wittol", Guinevere to that of "a vulgar adulteress" and "a woman of intrigue", and Lancelot to a mere "co-respondent" (Jump 1967: 319).[9] In fact, the omission of the incest motif was absolutely necessary for the portrayal of his Christ-like ideal King. While Malorian Arthur does not realise that Margawse is his sister, and learns of his sin and the ensuing punishment only afterwards, from the wizard Merlin, his orders to send to death all children of noble origin that were born on May-day, apparently a desperate attempt to eliminate his future enemy, equate him to quite a different biblical figure, namely that of Herod

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9   "The hinge of the whole legend of the Round Table, from its first glory to its final fall, is the incestuous birth of Mordred from the connection of Arthur with his half-sister, unknowing and unknown; [...] from the sin of Arthur's youth proceeds the ruin of his reign and realm through the falsehood of his wife, a wife unloving and unloved. Remove in ether case the plea which leaves the heroine less sinned against indeed than sinning, but yet not too base for tragic compassion and interest, and there remains merely the presentation of a vulgar adulteress... Mr. Tennyson has lowered the note and deformed the outline of the Arthurian story, by reducing Arthur to the level of a wittol, Guenevere 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..." (Swinburne in Jump 318–319).

of the *Gospel According to Matthew* and his Massacre of the Innocents (Matt. 2: 16).[10]

The reasons behind the fall of the Arthurian world are yet complex, both in Malory and in Tennyson. In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the love affair of the Queen and the best Knight of the Round Table seems to be only a pretext seized by Modred to take personal revenge on Lancelot, which lays bare conflicts that have been gradually accumulating almost from the beginning of Arthur's reign. Yet, it is the unintentional killing of Gareth by Lancelot, which is of much greater importance, as it starts a chain of inevitable events, leading to the break-up of the Round Table into the party of Lancelot and that of the King. Engaged in the conflict in France, Arthur and his knights are not able to prevent the plotting of the treacherous Modred.

While in the *Idylls of the King* the adultery of Guinevere and Lancelot is much more prominent throughout the whole poem, it is not certain whether this is the main cause of the failure of the Arthurian world that the poet meant by saying that "The whole is the dream of man coming into practical life and ruined by *one sin*" (Eversley III: 443, emphasis mine, E.M.). The reasons for the final disintegration of the Round Table may also be found in the attitudes of the other knights, in their lack of faith and miscomprehension of the purpose of their great visionary-king. Hence Camelot is destroyed "by the lusts of the flesh, by the corruptions of superstition, by human passions and selfishness" (Eversley III: 443).

Moreover, although it was probably not the intention of the poet, it seems that even Arthur is not free from blame. He is so much concerned with pursuing the spiritual reality that he loses sight of what happens at his court, and hence cannot act in time to avert the disaster. As Guinevere comments, he constantly lives "Rapt in this fancy

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10   It seems that the account of Modred's miraculous survival from the destroyed ship in Malory might have served as a model for one of the fantastical versions of the coming of Arthur that Bleys retells to Bellicent in the *Idylls* ("The Coming of Arthur", 366–389) (cf. Jenkins 1990: 209).

of his Table Round" ("Lancelot and Elaine", 129). The relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere, an open secret to everyone else at Camelot, merely induces "a vague suspicion in his eyes" (127), and this only after "Some meddling rogue has tamper'd with him" (128). Nor does he pay any attention to the rumours and calumnies spread by Vivien.

The ending of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* leaves the reader with a sense of the inexorable passing of time and the deterioration of moral values. The golden epoch of Arthurian knighthood is irretrievably gone. In contrast, Tennysonian Arthur finds consolation in the hidden meaning of God's purpose behind the cyclicity of epochs. Once again, as with the beginning of Arthur's reign in "The Coming of Arthur",

> The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
> And God fulfils himself in many ways,
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
> ("The Passing of Arthur", 408–409)

In this passage Arthur voices the Victorian belief in the spiritual progress ingrained in the course of history of the humanity:

> When traditional faith declines and the Bible is reduced to a human document full of superstition and the Church is no longer a divine temple, God is sought in nature and in history. His spirit is felt rolling through all things or his beauty is found reflected in natural beauty; his will is seen active in human affairs, working out in time his divine purposes or fulfilling his moral law in the rise and fall of nations. (Houghton 1985: 315)

Thus the triumph of the evil and "the confusion of moral order, closing the Great Battle of the West" (Eversley III: 507) prove to be only temporary, and the idyll ends with the reassuring vision of the barge with King Arthur and the three queens disappearing in the light of the dawn of the first day of the New Year, bringing in the hope of a new beginning and a new order.

Even though Tennyson took great pride in the fact that "there is no single fact or incident in the *Idylls*, however seemingly mystical, which

cannot be explained as without any mystery or allegory whatever"
(Eversley III: 442), such a rationalistic interpretation still remains only
a possibility which more inquisitive readers could explore, whereas
one cannot deny that it is the spiritual aura that is immediately felt as
permeating the whole work. The *Idylls* thus becomes the expression of
the Victorian longing for spirituality, for the safety in unwavering faith
in the modern world dominated by rationalism and science.

Conclusions

In his *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson has drawn upon a well-known medieval legend and transformed it into an original literary work, a new poetic form which may be considered as a modern attempt at the epic. From the abundance offered in his sources, Tennyson has chosen only particular episodes and characters, and endowed them with symbolic meanings, thus turning his work into a parable of human struggle towards spirituality against the limitations of the senses.

Even though both Malory and Tennyson have attempted to recreate the ideal world of the chivalric past, in the *Idylls* this world appears to be already past redemption. Unlike in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, where the Arthurian world seems to be immune from danger, with the causes of destruction for a long time remaining latent and insignificant, the world of the *Idylls* is almost from the very beginning doomed to fall, and the whole work is pervaded with the sense of loss and decadence. This seems to be its main theme, intended by Tennyson as the mirror image of the late Victorian age.

However, in many respects, Tennyson seems to have expressed in his Arthurian work more than he had actually aimed to. On closer inspection, from his reflections on the topic as well as from the *Idylls* itself, it is possible to distinguish two levels of meaning, as if conscious and subconscious, concerning all the three aspects which have been

discussed in this book. To begin with, his overt rejection of the very idea that he could create an epic in the nineteenth century seems to run counter to the Romantic sense of longing for the grandeur of the Arthurian times, already expressed in the final part of "Morte D'Arthur" (1842), and to his long-cherished wish to write his Arthurian story as a modern epic, which is revealed by his son in *A Memoir*. Second, his portrayal of Queen Guinevere is so vivid and convincing that Arthur's judgment passed upon her in one of the final scenes of the work renders the strict Victorian morality at least somewhat equivocal. Finally, despite the poet's strong emphasis on his treatment of the supernatural, so that it could be explained by realistic explanations, in the end his rationalism and scepticism give in to the more reassuring hope found in religious belief.

Probably the most important paradox of the whole *Idylls of the King* concerns the place of its eponymous hero, King Arthur. Even though most of the time he remains in the background, he nevertheless makes his presence known through the vows that become the central point of reference for each idyll. Throughout the whole work, Arthur assumes various roles which shed new light onto this important figure. Thus, he may be perceived as an epic hero of the past and as a king of the times of peace; as a modern Victorian gentleman achieving his position by means of his perseverance rather than by the rights of his birth, and finally, as a spiritual leader of his Knights of the Round Table and the epitome of a Christian king.

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A Summary

The Arthurian Legend from the Victorian Perspective in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

Key Words: Arthurian legend, Victorian era, Tennyson, Malory, king Arthur, epic, idyll, hero-worship, crisis of faith

The aim of this work is to show how the medieval Arthurian legend presented in Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* actually differs from Malory's original and how it reflects the Victorian worldview. The episodes chosen by the poet from the rich medieval sources reveal issues and values that proved particularly relevant to the Victorian middle class. In the gallery of characters, we can distinguish both positive male and female role models, as well as negative ones, condemned attitudes of an unfaithful wife or a seductress devoid of any sense of morality. The Victorian crisis of faith, and the hero-worship resulting from it, become particularly visible in the depiction of King Arthur himself, while his reflections lend the piece a parabolic and timeless dimension. Moreover, the work attempts to answer the question to what extent Tennyson's narrative poem meets the criteria of an epic and at the same time refers to an idyll suggested in the title of the work.

translated by Jakub Niedziela

Streszczenie

Legenda arturiańska z perspektywy wiktoriańskiej w *Idyllach królewskich* Tennysona

Słowa klucze: *legenda arturiańska, epoka wiktoriańska, Tennyson, Malory, król Artur, epos, idylla, sielanka, kult bohatera, kryzys wiary*

Praca ta ma na celu pokazanie, w jaki sposób średniowieczna legenda arturiańska, przedstawiona w *Idyllach królewskich* Alfreda Tennysona, w rzeczywistości odbiega od pierwowzoru Malory'ego i staje się odzwierciedleniem wiktoriańskiego światopoglądu. Epizody, jakie poeta wybrał spośród bogatego średniowiecznego materiału, ukazują problemy i wartości, które okazały się szczególnie istotne dla wiktoriańskiej klasy średniej. Pośród galerii postaci można wyróżnić zarówno pozytywne wzorce męskie i kobiece, jak i negatywne, potępiane postawy niewiernej żony albo pozbawionej poczucia moralności kobiety-uwodzicielki. Wiktoriański kryzys wiary oraz będący jego efektem kult bohatera stają się szczególnie widoczne w przedstawieniu samego króla Artura, a jego przemyślenia nadają utworowi wymiar paraboliczny i ponadczasowy. Co więcej, w pracy tej została podjęta próba odpowiedzenia na pytanie, w jakim stopniu narracyjny wiersz Tennysona spełnia kryteria eposu i jednocześnie nawiązuje do zasugerowanej w tytule utworu tradycji sielanki.

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"They had studied Tennyson's poem in school the preceding winter, the Superintendent of Education having prescribed it in the English course for the Prince Edward Island schools. They had analyzed and parsed it and torn it to pieces in general until it was a wonder there was any meaning at all left in it for them, but at least the fair lily maid and Lancelot and Guinevere and King Arthur had become very real people to them, and Anne was devoured by secret regret that she had not been born in Camelot. Those days, she said, were so much more romantic than the present".

L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*

EWA MŁYNARCZYK (1982–2022) studied English Philology at the Institute of English Studies of the University of Warsaw. The book is based on her dissertation of the same title written under the supervision of Professor Grażyna Bystydzieńska and submitted in 2008 in part-fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of MA.

Ewa went on to become a PhD student in the Institute, and continued to explore the field of nineteenth-century literature with Professor Bystydzieńska. In the years 2010–2015 she published eight articles on the poetry of the Victorian epoch (the articles are available online: ewamlynarczyk.pl/en).

Her PhD dissertation, entitled *Literary Appropriations of Myth and Legend in the Poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Butler Yeats* was published posthumously in 2024 by the Institute of English Studies of the University of Warsaw. It had already been positively reviewed before her untimely death. Ewa's main interests included Victorian and modern theories concerning the interpretation of myths as well as the transformations of mythological motifs in Post-Romantic and Victorian British poetry. While she was a PhD student, she worked as a teacher of English as a foreign language at the University of Warsaw.

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