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THE MERLIN TRADITION IN TENNYSON

A Study of the Mantic Infrastructure of Tennyson's Poetry

by

Gerry D. Turcotte

A thesis presented to the University of Ottawa in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English.


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Gerry D. Turcotte.

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Dedication

To my parents, and to Erin.

## Table of Contents

Introduction. (Abstract).....	i-viii.
Chapter One. Old-world Subjects.....	1-19.
Chapter Two. The Voice Speaking in the Wind.....	20-30.
Chapter Three. Inheritors of the Lore.....	31-41.
Chapter Four. That Spirit of Poetry.....	42-69.
Chapter Five. A City of Enchanters.....	70-86.
Chapter Six. The Nameless Power.....	87-102.
Conclusion.....	103-107.
Notes.....	108-128.
Bibliography.....	129-134.

## Introduction

The poetic works of Alfred Lord Tennyson are suffused with a mystical quality often ignored or misunderstood by critics and readers alike; furthermore, the poetry's mantic elements are often inadequately appreciated since the tradition from which they derive is either obscure or completely forgotten. This study has as its principle objective to identify the importance of Merlin in Tennyson's work and ideology, as well as, by extension, to examine the predominance of mantic patterns in the Laureate's work.

By virtue of the poet's self-identification with Merlin, the magician has come to be regarded as an important, though little studied, source of insight into the poet and his work. Tennyson's Merlin is su*i* generis: a combination of medieval bard and modern-day poet. The former reflects the inescapable impress of Tennyson's sources, the latter the Laureate's topical concern for social duty. It is through the poet analogue, of which Merlin is an integral part, that Tennyson questions his own social responsibility as well as his personal struggle with individualism and private vision. Merlin is a fusion of this tension, and through his evolution in Tennyson's work can be seen the struggle with, and finally the resolution of, the poet's uncertainty over the role he himself must play in society.

In order that the scope of Merlin's influence be understood fully, this study must examine the variant forms under which he appears. Because

Merlin cannot be divorced from the wider perspective of the "prophetic" in Tennyson, this work will study the early mantic figures such as Magus in The Devil and the Lady, the speakers in "The Druid's Prophecies" and other early poems, as well as the incipient figures of Merlin described in early Arthurian poems and unpublished manuscripts. Moreover, Tennyson's proclivity towards what he defined as mysticism, and his belief in trances as a prelude to vision, will also be explored for the light these "leitmotifs" shed on the Laureate's fundamental concept of the poet. Tennyson's sense of closeness with mystical beings, his occasional lapses into trances, and his perceiving of "voices in the wind," are all corollary expressions of a "poet-concept" that culminates in the figure of Merlin.

Tennyson's notion of mysticism is never clearly defined in his work. In his early career, Tennyson's poetic use of the word mystic is conventional: he defines a mystic as one who intimates a nonempirical truth. In "The Mystic," a poem which Tennyson wrote, in part, to describe his own personal experiences of trances, the mystic is a figure who, like Tennyson, "hath heard/ Time flowing in the middle of the night." He is an outsider who has intimate knowledge of the Divine. The opening line begins: "Angels have talked with him, and showed him thrones." Tennyson's use of mystic as a noun is traditional, that is, refers to a figure who directly communes with the Divine or spiritual. This application of the word is sustained throughout many poems of the Juvenilia where his characters are Old Testament figures delivering the word of God. And yet, these same figures often possess prophet-skills and are made to function less as spiritualists communing with a Divine force than as bardic figures whose roles require them to teach, guide and forewarn society. Tennyson combined the functions of the bard, prophet, mystic, and magus when he created his Merlin. He described him as he

who knew the range of all their arts,  
 Had built the King his havens, ships and halls,  
 Was also Bard, and knew the starry heavens;  
 The people called him Wizard.

As well as architect, poet, astrologer, and Wizard, Merlin is also prophet, mystic, mage, sage, and wise man. Moreover, Tennyson mixes Christian with pagan characteristics so that, by the time he has completed the Idylls of the King, Merlin is not exclusively representative of any single figure.

Over time, therefore, Tennyson robs his terms of all precision. Whenever he uses words such as mystic or mystical in a non-literary context (as is recorded in Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir), his infelicitous usage becomes apparent. When he uses the word mystic, for example, he refers to everything from a youthful memory to a sense of closeness with nature. In an 1839 letter to Emily Sellwood he referred to the "mystic sympathies" he shared with "tree and hill." This closeness with nature is in some ways similar to the Romantic sense of communing with the essence of that which surrounds man, and is often what Tennyson actually means when he uses the word mystical. Like Wordsworth, Tennyson believed in the "non-empirical"; he believed, as Jerome H. Buckley phrases it, in "a questioning of sense and outward things, [in] a mystical response to life itself."<sup>1</sup> Tennyson called this nonempirical world the "Reality of the Unseen," and believed it to be "the only real and true" world.<sup>2</sup> In the Memoir, Tennyson is quoted as saying, "there (are moments when the flesh is nothing to me, when I feel and know the flesh to be the vision . . . the Spiritual is the real . . . . 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."<sup>3</sup> This is usually what Tennyson means when he describes the mystical. Unlike the

Romantics, Tennyson did not contemplate nature for its own sake, but to enable himself to reach a higher level of awareness, to come into contact with the spiritual world. Again, to quote Buckley, Tennyson believed that "the soul's true awakening is outside nature; it demands the muting of all sensation."<sup>4</sup>

The words mystic and mystical eventually come to describe the kind of spiritual experience Tennyson himself had known through self-induced trances and out-of-body experiences. The words constantly surface as adjectives describing the mysterious or the spiritual: "As in some mystic state I lay"; "Merlin's mystic babble"; "And many a mystic lay of life and death/ Had chanted"; "some confused dream/ To states of mystical similitude." Tennyson's use of the word prophet is equally loose. It can mean a man particularly receptive to the knowledge of future events (the Merlin of "Merlin and Vivien," for example), or it can be applied to a poem's preface. Tennyson once said that the "Prologue" to The Princess prophesied what was to come later in the poem: "there is scarcely anything in the story which is not prophetically glanced at in the prologue."<sup>5</sup> In one way, it could be argued that a comparison is being drawn between the prophet who foretells the future and the poet who suggests, and so foretells, the events of the poem which are to come. So it is with all Tennyson's mantic terms.

Tennyson's sense of what he defines as the mystical seems to have had much to do with intuition; what he felt, sensed, or imagined was a spiritual realm outside his immediate, tactile world, he considered mystical. He did not specifically observe distinctions between Divinely inspired mystics and simple magi. Again, Merlin is a case in point: he is a bard, an architect, a counsellor, a wise man, a magician, a mage, and, finally, in "Merlin and the Gleam," a true

mystic, one who has come into contact with the Divine and who has discovered, to quote from "The Ancient Sage," the "[F]orce . . . from the heights."

Because Tennyson did not observe any major distinctions among mantic terms, this study has tried to acknowledge and work within Tennyson's own definitions. It is hoped, then, that when terms such as "Mage," "Mystic," and "Prophet" are used to describe Merlin, it will be remembered that Tennyson used these interchangeably. The word mystical has been used throughout this study to suggest the noumenal, or what Tennyson referred to as the "Reality of the Unseen." The word mantic, which is not one the poet used, is a more modern term which refers to both the poems, and/or figures, who reveal a spiritual quality.

Mystics, for Tennyson, are figures privy to a special truth, to an awareness of a spirit greater than themselves. Because of their special sensitivity, these "men of spirit" have an important responsibility towards society as castigators of human wrongs, redressors of evils, and, basically, as voices of conscience. In Tennyson's poetry, the mystic's role is to provide the impetus to activate the dormant or "potential" power of the spirit in all men. Tennyson sees poets as providing this same impetus, and his equation of the two, mystic and poet, is both logical and powerful. The idea of a poet -- like a mystic -- open to an exclusive, Divine voice (an idea Tennyson strongly believed), surfaces often in his poetry. The works that strongly emphasize the dual role of poet and mystic, for example, "Merlin and Vivien," "Tiresias," and "Merlin and the Gleam," usually also explore the crushing weight of a visionary's responsibility to himself and to society.

Although Tennyson's mantic poetry includes several prophet figures, it is

Merlin who ultimately comes to represent the essence of the poet's ideology: Hallam Tennyson stressed this fact, as well as the connection between his father and Merlin, when he wrote his father's biography: "From his boyhood he had felt the magic of Merlin -- that spirit of poetry -- which bade him know his power and follow throughout his work a pure and high ideal, with a simple and single devotedness and a desire to ennoble the life of the world." <sup>6</sup> The "connection" is further reinforced by Tennyson's own equation of Merlin with himself: "For those who cared to know about his literary history he wrote 'Merlin and the Gleam'." <sup>7</sup>

This study specifically explores Merlin's evolving role throughout the poetry, and shows how, in the end, Tennyson relies on Merlin to represent his resolved notion of a social and private poet-figure. Ironically, "Merlin and the Gleam," although one of Tennyson's weaker poems, is the culmination of a career-long struggle with conflicting notions of the poet's role.

Three brief studies of Merlin in Tennyson should be mentioned since they attempt to treat different aspects of the "temperament of the mystic," as T. S. Eliot once called it, <sup>8</sup> in Tennyson's work.

"Tennyson's Merlin," Gordon S. Haight's study of Tennyson's mythological and etymological sources for Merlin, is a useful investigative piece, but provides no detailed study of the symbolic or allegorical aspects of Merlin in the Idylls of the King. <sup>9</sup>

For Fred Kaplan in "Woven Paces and Waving Hands: Tennyson's Merlin as Fallen Artist," <sup>10</sup> Merlin represents the positive aspects of imagination defeated by the "perverseness" of negative imagination as represented by Vivien in "Merlin

and Vivien." Kaplan's statement that "[a]lmost everything we know of Vivien and most of what we know of Merlin comes from the *Idyll* to which they give their names,"<sup>11</sup> is erroneous, for it ignores the important accretion of characteristics in pre-*Idylls* poetry that eventually forms the "Merlin and Vivien" mystic.

The main interest of Kaplan's article is its approach to "Merlin and Vivien" from the viewpoint of romantic meditative poetry, and the tradition established therein of the artist's loss of power over his art.

Catherine Barnes Stevenson's "Druids, Bards, and Tennyson's Merlin" is the most comprehensive of these studies, identifying the druidic sources for Tennyson's bardic figures and tracing the evolution of this mantic figure in the poet's work.<sup>12</sup> Stevenson concurs with the theory that "Merlin and Vivien" is an analogue of the poet in defeat; consequently, her study is modelled to represent this approach both in its description of the early work and in its too brief analysis of the later poems.

"The Merlin Tradition in Tennyson" differs substantially from Tennysonian criticism dealing specifically with Merlin. The six chapters are all based on the assumption of a progressive, positive ideological movement in Tennyson's work. Moreover, the readings of the poems which this study suggests, support the notion of "victory" for the poet of "Merlin and Vivien" and imply an even stronger movement toward a cogent reappraisal of the artist as a personally and intuitively self-reliant individual true to his special private insights, but sensitive as well to his concomitant social duty. The Merlin in Tennyson's poetry, a consummate and positive figure, reveals through his changing role an increasingly positive and reconciled poet. Contrary to Eliot's assertion that "there followed no reconciliation, no resolution" in Tennyson's poetry after *In Memoriam*, and that he "faced neither the darkness nor the light in later years,"<sup>13</sup>

Tennyson strove to validate his own personal vision and justify the worth of his own efforts to edify society. In the end, rather than finding a "gloomier end than that of Baudelaire,"<sup>14</sup> Tennyson expressed in writing a belief in the value of the poet's role.

CHAPTER ONE  
Old-world Subjects

Tennyson made his partiality for the Arthurian legends clear when he described them as "the greatest of all poetical subjects."<sup>1</sup> His passion for the medieval romance, however, was not immediately shared by the Victorian public. Tennyson's 1832 version of "The Lady of Shalott" was "received with discouraging sarcasm in the most influential reviews," and the possibility of a major medieval epic, which the publication of two lesser Arthurian poems as well as the "Le Morte d'Arthur" suggested, was quickly rejected by public and critics alike.<sup>2</sup> In his review of the 1842 Poems, John Sterling wrote: "The miraculous legend of 'Excalibur' does not come very close to us, and as reproduced by any modern writer must be mere ingenious exercise of fancy," and in 1851, Carlyle is said to have told Sir J. Simeon that Tennyson's propensity for brooding "over old-world subjects for his poems" was the equivalent of "sitting on a dung-heap among innumerable dead dogs."<sup>3</sup>

Labels of irrelevancy notwithstanding, Tennyson's evocation of "old-world subjects" was sufficiently forceful and appealing to disarm the critics and sway his public, of whom a large number were themselves writers. Many of Tennyson's peers, including Arnold, Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters, increasingly focused their own artistic efforts on Arthurian subjects.

The credit for resuscitating Arthurian literature must be shared equally

by Tennyson and by the eighteenth-century antiquarians whose "painstaking labours recovered medieval romance from obscurity and brought it to a large body of cultured readers."<sup>4</sup> It was the latter who reintroduced Malory's hitherto inaccessible Le Morte Darthur to the general public, and, more importantly, to the poets who would later transform the myths in their poetry.

More than any other Victorian, Tennyson created the tremendous enthusiasm that eventually greeted Arthuriana.<sup>5</sup> One factor which helped contribute to Tennyson's successful resuscitation of the legends was timing: his introduction of medieval romance into the grim, colourless world of industrialism and utilitarianism, of philosophical materialism and "the first sensational theories of evolution and astronomy which would radically change man's consciousness of his own destiny,"<sup>6</sup> was propitious despite the initial antipathy towards his purpose. Tennyson anticipated the need his public would develop for the beauty and pageantry of the medieval lays to offset the "ferment in which he and his contemporaries lived."<sup>7</sup> This need for the escapist quality of the romances became an obsession of the Victorians and spread from writing to painting and architecture to the extent of inspiring a Gothic Revival. Due to its colourfulness, medieval romance became a popular vehicle for non-moral or "light" tales such as those written by John Thelwall or John Hookman Freere.<sup>8</sup>

It has been suggested that the widescale indulgence in the escapist aspect of the tales had as its goal "to stop the clock,"<sup>9</sup> to ignore or mask the actual disintegration of modern, that is, Victorian society. The tenets of crass industrialism, dominating the nineteenth century, distorting religious and social values and shifting class priorities, were in strict opposition to the antinomian values expounded by the medieval tractates.

Medieval literature was useful, as well, as a moral sounding-board, as a

reflective mirror by which "unpoetical" society, as Matthew Arnold termed it, could see its own faults in stark contrast to the noble precepts of an earlier age. At the same time, medievalism's flagrantly "dated" quality allowed the audience to distance itself from the sharp social criticism which such writers as Tennyson and Arnold infused into their work; the veil of time muted the discomfitting aspect of the criticism, rendering it palatable.

Tennyson was not interested in merely providing colourful tales and "empty nostalgia"; he was one of the first Victorian writers to recognize the "literary potential of Arthuriana."<sup>10</sup> Another factor contributing to the success of his Arthurian revival was the gradual recognition by public and critics alike of the wide socio-moral spectrum the tales revealed, an aspect that Tennyson was quick to perceive. Thus, where there had been lack of interest, reluctance, or even vehement opposition to "old-world" subjects, there was suddenly enthusiasm and support. By the mid-1850s a plethora of Arthuriana began to circulate in Victorian England, and by 1873 Arthurian tales had become household words. As Kathleen Tillotson points out, there "is no clearer instance of a poet creating the taste by which he was enjoyed."<sup>11</sup>

A perplexing particularity of the Arthurian renaissance of the nineteenth century is the absence of a major depiction of Merlin in this same period in all but Tennyson's work. Although Arthurian figures such as Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot and Tristram generated many varied depictions, only Tennyson seems to have valued, indeed favoured, Merlin, who emerges as a central figure, not only in the "Merlin and Vivien" idyll, but also in the Poet Laureate's overall poetic ideology.

Tennyson's singular interest in the "riddling bard" is consistent with

Merlin's historic literary popularity, and is particularly fascinating because of Tennyson's original treatment of him as an artist figure, a treatment which breaks readily with tradition. Although Tennyson was familiar with Merlin's complex literary evolution he judiciously selected what he considered to be the best aspects of the sources, and supplemented these "borrowings" with his own imaginative touches. Familiarity with what Tennyson both followed and ignored, then, is essential to understanding Tennyson's ultimate mystic character. It is necessary, therefore, that these sources be investigated in order to provide a contextual framework by which Tennyson's work may be understood more clearly.

Merlin's inauspicious literary beginnings can be traced back to a brief appearance in Nennius's Historia Britonum (c. 746), where, as a youth referred to only as Ambrosius, he reveals the mysterious causes behind Vortigern's disappearing "citadel" and displays a talent for prophecy.<sup>12</sup> Merlin next appears one century later as Myrddin Wilt (or "Merlin the Wild") in the Welsh Myrddin poems. A.O.H. Jarman believes that the "crystallization of much early Welsh legend into verse form occurred during the ninth century."<sup>13</sup> The earliest example of these works is a three-stanza remnant called the Afallønau (dated somewhere between 850 and 1050), which contains "the debris of a legend concerned with Myrddin . . . and the battle of Arfderydd."<sup>14</sup> In this fragment Myrddin is a disheartened recluse hiding in the "Forest of Gwenddydd" (the Caledonian Forest), "wandering with madness and madmen" for fifty years.<sup>15</sup>

The grim depiction of Merlin in early Welsh poetry is deceiving, for already infused in the character are many of the traits that have made him popular and enduring in folklore throughout the centuries. In an early Welsh

poem entitled Armes Prydein (The Omen of Britain, c. 930), Merlin is already associated with prophecy, his most characteristic skill.<sup>2</sup>

The late date of these poems notwithstanding, it is highly possible that the Merlin legend originated in the sixth century, where an actual historical figure, probably a simple bard, came to be revered and celebrated for his "having become insane," subsequent to the "disastrous battle of Arderydd" where many of his race were killed. Much of the confusion over Merlin's etymological and mythological origins is the result of the spoken transmission of the tale, the general and inevitable corruption of language, and the wilful manipulation of facts by later chroniclers for political or other reasons. As to the second of these, many efforts have been made by experts, with varying degrees of success, to disentangle the knots which medieval translations from Welsh to Latin to English have engendered; in the last instance, the inventiveness of a Geoffrey or a Villemarqué can only be regarded as justified authorial liberties which generated a different type of character and ultimately provided a richer tradition for future generations to call upon.

Although the Welsh poems provide many of the pieces of the Merlin legend that have been passed down through the ages, the short mantic poems lack the sustained and accessible elements that have given Merlin his mythopoeic quality. It is Geoffrey of Monmouth who is most strongly responsible for assembling all the various legends into one homogeneous form, creating the magician known today.<sup>16</sup> Drawing upon Nennius's "Ambrosius" fragment as well as on Celtic folklore, Geoffrey presented and elaborated the dramatic encounter between Ambrosius Merlin and King Vortigern in his Historia Regum Britanniae,<sup>17</sup> and gave the stories "literary dignity and consideration which they had not enjoyed before."<sup>18</sup>

Geoffrey had previously published a work called the Libellus Merlini or the "Little Book of Merlin" (c. 1135) which knew a great deal of success and which he subsequently incorporated whole, as chapter seven, into the Historia.<sup>19</sup> Another poem, the Vita Merlini or "Life of Merlin," presumed to be written about 1148, attests to Geoffrey's preoccupation with Merlin. It is this preoccupation that is most responsible for Merlin's widespread popularity:

Thanks chiefly to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Merlin was revered for his mantic powers from Sicily to Iceland, and the prophecies concocted for him in 1135 were still taken seriously enough in Germany nearly 500 years later as to be published in 1608.<sup>20</sup>

Following Geoffrey are a series of "paraphrases" of the Historia which are, more often than not, so richly supplemented by the "translator" that they are practically new works. Wace's Roman de Brut is such an example. The Norman poet's "adaptation" of Geoffrey is more than double the original's length. Wace's prolixity and inventiveness notwithstanding, his handling of the Arthurian legend seems cautious and "marks a stage between the comparative sobriety of his model and the charming extravagances of Arthurian romance."<sup>21</sup> Wace's "sobriety" significantly affects his delineation of Merlin; his initial references to Merlin's feats, for example, are punctuated with disclaimers and qualifiers. His particular type of censure -- his hesitancy to endorse Merlin's full prophetic powers -- means that his mystic is credited with most of the traditional skills, particularly prophesying the battling dragons, erecting Stonehenge, and transforming Uther Pendragon into Gorlois, without the authorial conviction necessary to make Merlin fully convincing. Of Merlin's prophecies -- that portion Geoffrey had detailed at

great length in the Libellus Merlini and again in the Historia -- Wace writes:

I say no more, for I fear to translate Merlin's Prophecies, when I cannot be sure of the interpretation thereof. It is good to keep my lips from speech, since the issue of events may make my gloss a lie.<sup>22</sup>

Wace displays a similar reserve in his account of Uther's disguised intrusion at Tintagel to seduce Igerne. Merlin is clearly made responsible for putting "forth his arts" and effecting the transformation of Uther and his people into the likenesses of their opponents, but the feat is down-played. Wace also removes Merlin's much more significant role as protector and tutor to Arthur. The "wise clerk, and the best counsellor of any man living" has no hand in Arthur's ascendancy to the throne. In fact, the latter's rise to kingship is rather dry and abridged compared to earlier sources, since Arthur knows neither controversy nor protest. He merely appears, at age fifteen, and assumes control of the realm. Merlin vanishes after the young king's rise to power and reappears at the close of the tale, where Wace, following tradition, recalls the sage's prophecy: "Master Wace, the writer of this book, cannot add more to this matter of his [Arthur's] end than was spoken by Merlin the prophet. Merlin said of Arthur . . . that his end should be hidden in doubtfulness. The prophet spoke truly."<sup>23</sup> It is interesting that the author, once "unsure" of his own power for interpreting the magus's prophecies, resorts to the most traditional of endings, featuring just such an interpretation of Merlin's most important forecast. In the end, even the Norman sceptic was unable to escape the sage's transcendent literary and mythical appeal.

Layamon's thirteenth-century Brut is the first English-language account of Arthurian romance and is highly indebted to Wace. Like the Norman poet's

account, the Brut not only doubles the length of its source but also elaborates considerably on the original. For instance, Layamon continues the account of the origin of the Round Table which Wace had only sketched, and retells the story of Arthur's voyage to Avalon. Unlike Wace, however, Layamon treats "Merlin the wise" without suspicion and relates fully the prophecies described in Geoffrey's work. Although he contributes nothing of significance to the Merlin legend, he does use the magus in an interesting and sophisticated way. Merlin is clearly much appreciated by the author as a spiritually "important" figure, and the magician's feats are always described with great relish in detail and much mystical inference; belief in the mantic power of Merlin suffuses the text in more than an imagistic fashion. Layamon uses the prophecies of Merlin as an on-going thread that pulls together the entire work. Thus, whenever an event takes place that has been previously forecast by Merlin, as with the birth of Arthur, Layamon interjects a phrase such as "[a]nd so it was foreboded, ere he were born; so said him Merlin, that was a prophet great, that a king should come of Uther Pendragon."<sup>24</sup> This technique of unifying the storyline, consistent throughout the work, is a testimony to an early yet sophisticated narrative technique.

The Merlins of Wace and Layamon, different in many respects, are similarly unoriginal. Where Geoffrey greatly changed the figure he had borrowed from Welsh folklore, adapting him to fit his imaginative needs, Wace and Layamon contributed few innovative changes of their own.

Robert de Boron (?-1210?) wrote three Arthurian romances, Joseph d'Armathie, Merlin, and Perceval, of which only fragments of the first two remain. The Merlin fragment is approximately 500 lines and is said to be the "first time

the enlarged story of Merlin takes definite independent shape, with Merlin as the central figure.<sup>25</sup> Robert de Boron's account is important for its deft elimination of the demonic overtones from the story of Merlin. Although the magician is still the half-child of demon stock, de Boron ensures that the sage receives a decent baptism and rejects his otherworldly heritage. Merlin is endowed with all his traditional powers without the chthonian implications. De Boron's account was continued in the Vulgate cycle (1215-40), which includes the Vulgate Estoire de Merlin and the Huth Merlin or Suite de Merlin. The Vulgate Merlin, like Layamon's work, is believed to have influenced Tennyson in his delineation of Merlin.<sup>26</sup>

It has often been stated that Tennyson's great talent as a writer arose in part out of his ability to choose important scenes, events, characters or moments from his sources. As Charles Tennyson has stated, "Tennyson's omissions, additions and alterations were made with the greatest skill."<sup>27</sup> One such example of Tennyson's "good judgement" can be found in a comparison of his choices with those of Malory:

The most marked and distressing instance [of Malory's poor judgement in selecting scenes for his work] is his preference of the trivial and distasteful version of the Merlin and Vivienne episode as found in the 'Suite de Merlin' to the exquisite version of the Vulgate-Merlin, which, in its mingling of wild romance and delicate sentiment, is perhaps the most beautiful and characteristic story of mediaeval literature.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to note that Tennyson chose the Vulgate over the Huth version, thereby deviating from the most influential source available at the time. His interpretation stands as clear evidence of his good judgement as well as his willingness to modify the sources in order to produce a definitive and ennobled

edition of the romance.

The French romance inspired a series of English versions: the thirteenth-century Arthor and Merlin, the Prose Merlin, and Henry Lovelich's Merlin, both c. 1450, and, finally, Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur. Malory's treatment of Merlin, the culmination of these works, is largely derivative, "substantially the Merlin available to anyone familiar with the French romances of the thirteenth-century."<sup>29</sup> His treatment, however, is notable in the way it stresses Merlin's consultative relationship with Arthur. Malory's "dream-reader" is suitably impressive and prominent (at least in the first book of the tale), and so stands out as one of the most interesting characters of the Morte. Malory's unfortunate choice of "seduction" scenes, however, diminished the otherwise noble character of the magus. Moreover, due to the overwhelming influence of Malory's work on Victorian writers, it is this version of the Merlin tale (that is, the Huth interpretation) which predominated in the nineteenth-century imagination. This undoubtedly is responsible for a large part of the Victorian antipathy towards Merlin; few writers bothered to study other versions of the romances, as Tennyson had done.

After the Morte Darthur there is a lull in interest in Arthurian literature that lasts close to three hundred years. Several theories attempt to explain the lull. Maynadier believes that the "changes which were now to crowd thick and fast on [Renaissance] Europe made thinking men even more sceptical . . . as to the reality of Arthur."<sup>30</sup> And Beverly Taylor, noticing that references to Arthurian characters, when they occur, are often acontextual, that is, citing the name but excluding the medieval legend, believes the cause to be partially political:

After reaching its peak in Malory's stately compression of the massive story cycle, Arthur's literary fortunes declined over the next three centuries. . . . For 150 years after Caxton's printing of Malory, Arthurian story reappeared in works by respected poets. But the political controversies of the seventeenth century increasingly narrowed the usefulness of a legend long associated with royalist sentiments, and the rationalism of the eighteenth century nearly extinguished the appeal of Arthurian matter.<sup>31</sup>

Whatever the reason, medieval matter did not disappear completely, and Merlin surfaced in such works as Ariosto's sixteenth-century Orlando Furioso, Spenser's Faerie Queene,<sup>32</sup> Shakespeare's King Lear (III, ii), as well as in various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works which used the legends as vehicles to express political sentiments. Dryden's King Arthur; or the British Worthy, a "dramatic opera" dated 1684(?),<sup>33</sup> and Blackmore's Prince Arthur and King Arthur, dated 1695 and 1697 respectively, are examples of works intended to celebrate a particular monarch, in this case to rejoice over the restoration of Charles II and William III to the throne.<sup>34</sup> In the former work, the "famous enchanter," Merlin, is contemporized to such an extent that he is divested of all interesting qualities, as, indeed, are most of the characters in the play.

During this "quiet" period Merlin remains a central character of the tales, his stature greatly diminished: "Merlin . . . appeared in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century publications more often than any other Arthurian character, but he had become nothing more than a stereotyped prophet. Divorced from medieval story, his name lent interest to cheap pamphlets of prognostication."<sup>35</sup> Maynard describes this phenomenon of Merlin: "none of these [Arthurian] heroes could hope for serious or widespread recognition from the reading public, with one exception . . . who still enjoyed a kind of honor . . . Merlin."<sup>36</sup>

In "Outlines of the History of the Legend of Merlin," W.E. Mead points to

the propensity of the age to ascribe "general prophecies and almanac predictions" to the "national prophet,"<sup>37</sup> and Daniel Defoe, in his A Journal of the Plague Year, alludes to the myriad prophet-charlatans who established themselves during the outbreak of the black plague and used "Merlin's head" as their logo.

Sadly, despite the "popularity" of Merlin in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Arthuriana itself was at its lowest level of popularity "in the whole history of English Literature."<sup>38</sup> As Beverly Taylor points out, much of the antipathy toward Arthurian works was consistent with the tenets of the Age of Reason. To the people of the eighteenth century tales of barbarism and magic were of little functional value, and ranked quite low compared to the Bible and classical literature. It is understandable, therefore, that Merlin too was held in low esteem by all but the "vulgar readers": the epitome of the supernatural -- of superstitious thought -- Merlin contradicted every notion of logic imposed by the eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

The beginnings of Romanticism, with its rejection of the values expounded by Neo-Classicism, marked a return -- albeit sluggish -- to medieval romance. The interest in Arthuriana was not strongly renewed until the antiquarians of the eighteenth century had provided the populace with easily accessible medieval texts. Yet even before this availability quite a few eighteenth-century writers wrote Arthurian works; though, as Taylor mentions, "these works generally had little connection with medieval tradition other than names or occasional episodes familiar from the Middle Ages."<sup>40</sup> A list of these authors would include Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, Southey, Scott and Wordsworth.

In 1817 Keats said that he wanted to write an Arthurian piece -- "a tale of chivalry." In fact, he wrote three: "Calidore: A Fragment," a rather weak

foray into the world of chivalry and adventure, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," and "The Eve of St. Agnes." It is this last poem that mentions Merlin, though only once: "Never on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt." It is Merlin's sole appearance in all of Keats' work.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, there is but a single reference to Merlin in all of Coleridge's poetry. It appears in "The Pang More Sharp Than All":

For there still lives within my secret heart  
The magic image of the magic Child,  
Which there he made up-grow by his strong art,  
As in that crystal orb wise Merlin's feat.<sup>42</sup>

The source of reference is Spenser's Faerie Queene (III, ii, 19), rather than medieval Arthurian sources per se.<sup>43</sup>

Shelley's only reference to Merlin -- in an early drama entitled Charles the First -- recalls one of the magician's prophecies:

Will you hear Merlin's prophecy, now three posts  
"In one brainless skull, when the white horn is full,  
Shall sail round the world, and come back again:  
Shall sail round the world in a brainless skull,  
And come back again when the moon is at full."<sup>44</sup>

The "forecast," delivered by the court fool, accounts for five lines of the drama.

In general, Merlin's treatment at the hands of the writers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, demonstrates that the authors never made effective symbolic use of Merlin, despite his constant appearance in their works. It is perhaps testimony to the perdurability of the Merlin legend that he survived this perfunctory and exploitative tradition, and could reemerge credibly in Tennyson's poetry.

In Madoc, Robert Southey proposes that the "master of mystic lore" is alive and well, the companion of a mermaid beneath the sea. Both the subject matter and the storyline in general are weak and slightly silly; by comparison Malory's version of Merlin's "death" is brilliant and subtle. If, as Taylor points out, the subject matter of the poem "hardly offered Arthur a promising re-entry into British poetry,"<sup>45</sup> the story promises to do even less for Merlin. The legend referred to is insipid and surprisingly uncomplex, coming as it does from a man who had a long-standing interest in Arthurian material and who was chosen to edit an edition of Malory.

Scott always displayed an interest in medieval subjects. From Ivanhoe to The Betrothed to Count Robert of Paris to Castle Dangerous, he depicts a world of romance and chivalry that ignores the actual historicity of medieval times. In his sole Arthurian tale,<sup>46</sup> an episode in The Bridal of Triermain, he satirizes modern society's disintegrating values through a didactic medieval analogue told by a nineteenth-century Arthur to his haughty paramour. The narrative mentions two magicians, the modern Lyulph and the medieval Merlin, and alludes to a long line of "druid sires / And British bards" (I, vi). Scott's Merlin is yet another in a long tradition of ancillary sages whose task it is to direct stage action or set up various "situations" for other characters. Scott's ancient sage is moral, powerful, and impressive, a magician who has a social role that involves punishing the amoral and indifferent. In the end, however, Scott's work is useful only in that it is among the first satires of Arthurian romance, and therefore inspires attempts by other authors to do the same.

Wordsworth's "The Egyptian Maid," casts Merlin as the central figure. In the prefatory note to the poem (one of the few Arthurian poems in Wordsworth's canon), the poet states that "for the names and persons in the

following poem see the 'History of the renowned Prince Arthur and his knights of the Round Table;' for the rest the author is answerable."<sup>47</sup> Wordsworth's Merlin is an inconsistent, highly fickle figure, appearing to be pleased at the sight of the Maid's arrival, and then suddenly calling up a storm to destroy her ship. The "Necromancer's" ambiguity is neither appealing nor interesting, for the tale is almost carelessly told and any psychological intrigue or development is secondary to the jarringly moralistic plot. Although Merlin is central, it is difficult to understand why the poet bothered with him at all.<sup>48</sup>

These are but a few examples of the treatment of Merlin in the Arthuriana written prior to Tennyson's earliest Arthurian work;<sup>49</sup> a more thorough investigation into the many poetic treatments would be beyond the scope of this work. The purpose of the specific examples has been to provide both Merlin's origins, and the manner in which he has evolved throughout the ages; the choices have been based on two factors: first, the most important appearances of Merlin in literature; second, the most important writers to utilize the character. It is hoped that these examples will provide a sufficiently broad overview of Merlin's evolution to allow the reader to understand and appreciate Tennyson's unique version of the sage. Perhaps the overview will offer a context within which to measure Tennyson's success.<sup>50</sup>

With the publication of "The Lady of Shalott," the "Morte d'Arthur," and, later, the first four idylls of Tennyson's major work, the status of Arthuriana was destined to change. Tennyson's own trepidation, which had prompted him to enclose the "Morte d'Arthur" within the almost apologetic frame of "The Epic," yielded to a certitude in the value of the "dated" material, a certitude soon shared by increasing numbers of Victorian writers. But despite the important role accorded to Merlin in the Idylls of the King, all of Tennyson's brilliant

characterization, all his carefully crafted poetry, was unable to raise Merlin to prominence in Victorian literature. Moreover, the centrality of the figure of Merlin, not simply in the Idylls but in all aspects of Tennyson's life and career, seemed to pass unnoted by critics, and such oversight continued into the next century. Indeed, only Tennyson, and later, his son, recognized and stressed Merlin's central importance to Tennyson's work.

The Arthurian poetry written by Victorians such as Charles Swinburne, William Morris and Matthew Arnold reflects almost a reluctance to deal, even perfunctorily, with Merlin. Tennyson's closest rival as Arthurian chronicler, Swinburne, was highly incensed at his contemporary's version of the old lays. His work, therefore, is both a refutation of the Laureate's interpretations and a heavy imitation of the mediæval sources. As to the latter, Swinburne, in seeking to contradict Tennyson's approach, found himself re-telling the tales with a furious fidelity to the sources. Like Tennyson, Swinburne depicts Merlin as a bard and prophet; the latter's character, however, is useless since his prophecies arrive "too late." When the "sacred mouth of Merlin set[s] forth fate," it is into an already "fated" environment and to a people who can no longer benefit from Merlin's prophecies. Although Merlin figures prominently in "The Tale of Balen," his role, as in many of the Romantic works, is merely ancillary.

Morris also rejected Tennyson's interpretation of Arthurian lore, and his own fascination led him to explore the sensuous and passionate side of the tales. Morris' interest lay in the individual strength and flare of Guinevere, and in the illicit, uncontrolled passion of the two adulterers, the Queen and Lancelot. In comparison to the above, the "potential" sensuality of the seduction scene in Merlin's tale held little appeal for Morris, and so the sage was omitted from the poet's work.

Arnold's commitment to social duty brought him closer to Tennyson's approach to rewriting the tales than to either Swinburne or Morris. Less interested in the veiled sexuality of the romances than in their potential use as didactic pieces, Arnold's only Arthurian work, "Tristram and Iseult," is a modern treatment of the old tales designed principally as a didactic warning against the dangers of uselessness:

Tennyson and Arnold wanted to make a modern poem out of Arthurian romance rather than to revive the charm of the original legends. They depicted the strange disease of modern life that sets in when Merlin, who for Arnold is Goethe, "physician of the Iron Age" ("Memorial Verses"), no longer exercises a vital influence upon society.<sup>51</sup>

The Merlin of Arnold's poem, unlike the sage of Tennyson's work, is a symbol for the despair that Arnold himself felt, and what he recognized as the future despair of a society unable to strive, a society which, like Iseult of Brittany, sits purposelessly, stagnating. Merlin is an emblem of the force that can sap the strength of youth epitomized by the children. Iseult, like Merlin, is described as "one dying in the mask of youth."<sup>52</sup>

It is perhaps fitting that the Merlins of the two "social" poets -- Tennyson and Arnold -- have developed into equally significant figures mirroring society's possible decline. The difference between both characters is that Tennyson's Merlin is a positive symbol while Arnold's is not. Tennyson's character augurs the possible restitution of a positive order, Arnold's the depressing "furnace of the world" that "kills in us the bloom, the youth, the spring."<sup>53</sup> The cyclical pattern that promises the return of a new order in the Idylls is sadly absent in Arnold's poem.

Of the major Victorian writers, only Arnold used Merlin in an important

symbolic way, and even then, the mystic's "function" is reduced to that of a device or necessary integer in an equation primarily featuring other factors. This rejection of Merlin in favour of Tristram and Iseult, the Grail, or Lancelot and Guinevere is further seen in the works of such Pre-Raphaelite painters as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Holman Hunt, and others. The Pre-Raphaelites, fascinated by the colour and sensuality of the Arthurian tales, based many of their paintings on Arthurian poetry. Tennyson's fascination with these same tales made his work the popular focus of many of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings. As David Staines suggests, their knowledge of the romances was almost restricted to Tennyson: "Tennyson became the source of their understanding of the legends. Their medievalism owed more to Tennyson than to the medieval world and the Idylls of the King came to hold the inspirational force that Malory occupied for Tennyson."<sup>54</sup>

Despite the "inspirational force" of the Idylls in general, Tennyson's pointed emphasis on Merlin was not shared by the Pre-Raphaelites. Of the Arthurian paintings executed by Rossetti, Hunt, Maclise, Stephens, Watts and Burne-Jones, only the latter produced a painting based on the Merlin tale.<sup>55</sup> Typically, the painting (The Beguiling of Merlin) deals with the confrontation between Merlin and Vivien. Also by Burne-Jones was a fresco entitled "Death of Merlin," part of the ill-fated Oxford Union frescoes under Rossetti's supervision.<sup>56</sup>

Tennyson's daunting presence, responsible as it was for the Arthurian revival in Victorian England, did little to re-ignite interest in the old magician. His poetry confirmed that a credible treatment of Merlin could be effective, not merely as a gratuitous character sketch, but as a complex and important symbol for poet figures. That no Victorian poet other than the

Laureate could see this or deign to explore the magician's potential is a mystery that bears investigation. This study, however, must limit itself to Tennyson's lengthy and subtle use of Merlin as a poet figure, a pattern that established itself early in his poetry and resolved itself only at the end of his long career.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Voice Speaking in the Wind

The importance of mysticism, trances, seers and bards in both Tennyson's life and work, as well as his close linking of these to art and the artistic process, indicate a fundamental belief in the poet as prophet. It is only natural, then, that Tennyson's early poetry reflects the prophetic character, voice and tone of his fascination. The suffusion of cabalistic elements in Tennyson's Juvenilia is a result of his direct experience of mysticism. As a child Tennyson claimed to have run through the fields on stormy days and shouted, "I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind," and to have induced a "kind of waking trance" by "repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently."<sup>1</sup> The experience of self-induced trances arose "out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality":

the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility.<sup>2</sup>

Such trances often function as a protective, restorative or purgatorial force in his work.

In The Princess the "weird seizures" of the Prince are both a curse and a blessing. On one level, his inherited attacks are a manifestation of weakness

and debility. On another level, however, the curse is a purely protective -- and curiously positive -- condition. It allows the Prince to separate himself from the harsh surface reality that encumbers art; the curse, therefore, "may stand as correlative to the isolating poetic sensibility by which the artist achieves aesthetic distance from his materials."<sup>3</sup> The Prince's "strange seizure" is a precursor to a higher awareness, a clarity of vision not at all unlike the "waking trance" that allowed Tennyson the "clearest" possible vision. This clarity -- this heightened vision -- enables the Prince to see through the surface veneer of the Princess's "hollow show" to the reality beneath:

On a sudden my strange seizure came  
 Upon me, the weird vision of our house:  
 The Princess Ida seemed a hollow show,  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 And I myself the shadow of a dream,  
 For all things were and were not.

The reality that Tennyson reveals, however, is a typically ambiguous antithesis that appears throughout his poetry, from the out-of-body experience referred to in "The Mystic" to the questionable reality of The Princess and the perplexing description of Camelot provided by Merlin in "Gareth and Lynette": "the city is built / To music, therefore never built at all, / And therefore built for ever."

Most interesting about the use of trances that plunge the Prince into his "mystic middle state" is their connection with heightened vision. The connection is important since it, like the oxymoron death-in-life of "Merlin and Vivien," is a motif that is repeated insistently. The visionary trance is of especial interest when it reveals itself in connection with a mystic character.

In "the only blank verse poem of 1830,"<sup>4</sup> Tennyson explicitly links two of

the major motifs of his poetry: a mystic figure and death-in-life trances. In "The Mystic" the description of a mystic's "waking trance" is startlingly reminiscent of the trance described in the Memoir and in In Memoriam:

He often lying broad awake, and yet  
 Remaining from the body, and apart  
 In intellect and power and will, hath heard  
 Time flowing in the middle of the night.

The similarity between the tone of this passage and that of "Merlin and Vivien," suggests that Tennyson was drawing on a similar experience when he composed the separate poems.

If "The Mystic" is a weak poem, it is largely because, as Buckley suggests, "the efforts to objectify the deeply personal emotion by assigning it to a third person leads to an evasive diction and renders the poem unduly cautious and remote."<sup>5</sup> But the poem's implication that the trance is an essential prelude to vision is an important attestation to the metaphysical proclivity of Tennyson's poetry. Moreover, the positive association of trances with "vision" is notable because of the similar use of Merlin's trance -- his captivity -- as a positive factor in "Merlin and Vivien" twenty-six years later.<sup>6</sup>

In Maud the trance-like or mystical is presented in the form of madness. The persona's prophet-voice invokes an Old Testament voice first heard in the Juvenilia, one denouncing "evils, prophes[ying] social disaster, and often ur[ging] violent action to avert social catastrophe,"<sup>7</sup> but the visionary quality is specifically a product of the later Tennyson. The madman's voice reflects an ability to turn inward in order to heighten the outward vision of that which is prescribed by social conventions. Often, as in the case of the madman in Maud, the vision, the prophecy, or even the experience of the "sharper sense"

is impossible to share, and is completely misunderstood by the world at large.

If the trances represent an isolating condition, they often function as a restorative energy enabling the poet to cope effectively with life. Tennyson's recourse to trances, which he "frequently had up from boyhood,"<sup>8</sup> as a regenerative energy, is not more clearly seen or more beautifully expressed than in the passage of In Memoriam where the poet, after re-reading "[t]he noble letters of the dead," is momentarily "touched" by his friend:

So word by word, and line by line,  
The dead man touched me from the past,  
And all at once it seemed at last  
The living soul was flashed on mine.<sup>9</sup>

Tennyson knew from boyhood that the "spiritual" reflected quintessential and mysterious elements of man's nature, which could be stepping-stones to a higher awareness. He "came to value his mystical experience as evidence of man's intrinsic spirituality"<sup>10</sup> and as a poet recognized the importance of intuition and of the heightening of this awareness which his receptivity to mysticism opened up. But before he defined and rationalized his feelings, before he had come to terms fully with his own belief in mysticism, he responded to his intuition by creating prophetic personae who expressed his fascination with this mysterious aspect of experience. In later life the "mystic" would become an analogue for the "poet," and Tennyson would exploit the symbolic potential that this type of character made possible. But in the early work the personae represent the burgeoning of a poetic inclination and his symbolic usage is second to the romantic quality the personae afford.

In one of Tennyson's earliest extant works, The Devil and the Lady, which he wrote at fourteen, he evinces the effect of his sources as well as the

strength of his penchant for mystics. His first portrayal of a magician reveals the imprint of Malory. The "Necromancer" of The Devil and the Lady is a withered, aged, though appropriately awesome figure, an "antidote to love" as his cuckolding young wife secretly calls him. Magus is, in many ways, reminiscent of the Merlin who "fell into a dotage upon . . . Nymue."<sup>11</sup> Like his earlier counterpart, Magus is bewitched by the beauty of his fair Amoret, even referred to as a "dotard," and bears a love for her which "effervesceth of its own intensity, / And oftentimes mounts upward and boils over / Because of its own fervour."

Conscious of his wife's infidelity, Magus insists that he "will believe her true" despite his better judgement.<sup>12</sup> Amoret's response to her uxorious mystic -- her "most venerable necromancer" -- is also reminiscent of Malory's Nymue, who "was now weary of . . . [Merlyn] and wished to be delivered from him."<sup>13</sup> Magus's role in the drama is cursory, the emphasis being placed on the witty badinage that the Devil's confrontation with Amoret's suitors inspires, yet the seeds of the mystical character are evident, ready to be developed more fully in Poems By Two Brothers.

Tennyson's divergence from the pre-established characters and stories of Malory and other sources is evident from the delineation of Guinevere, Vivien, or even the Lady of Shalott, who bear little or no resemblance to their prototypes.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Tennyson experimented with the characterization of the mystic figures who fascinated him and were central to his vision. As a result, the first of his "necromancers" was in no way the constant that would determine his future characters. Instead, Tennyson temporarily dropped the magician figure and began, in 1827, to deal with what Christopher Ricks calls the "prophecies of woe."<sup>15</sup> In Poems By Two Brothers there appears a wide panoply

of prophet-like characters who vaticinate, implore, or threaten their "audiences" with a Biblical voice of doom. Catherine Barnes Stevenson calls these figures "Old Testament prophets, divine mouthpieces who pronounce an authoritative judgment on the evils of society and also prescribe the punishment for those evils."<sup>16</sup>

From an early date, therefore, Tennyson struggled with the social role of the poet, often associated with prophets and bards. The responsibility for social action, judgement, and guidance falls on these figures, as can be seen in "God's Denunciations against Pharaoh-Hophra," "The Fall of Jerusalem," "Babylon," or, in the earliest of these poems, "The Druid's Prophecies." Moreover, linked with the chastizing-teacher role is a visionary optimism which foreshadows the eventual reconstitution of society either in the "historical future," as Stevenson calls it, or in the "millennium."<sup>17</sup> These auspicious forecasts are precursors to Merlin's predictions of the return of the king and of the high ideal.

"The Druid's Prophecies" and "Lamentation of the Peruvians," which augur the restoration of a former order, "The Fall of Jerusalem," "The High-Priest to Alexander," "Babylon," "God's Denunciations against Pharaoh-Hophra," which foresee corrupt society's downfall, as well as "Armageddon," "The Coach of Death," "On Sublimity," "King Charles's Vision," and "Oh! ye wild winds, that roar and rave," all briefly refer to, or directly deal with, "prophecy," "[p]rophets old," bards; and visions or use epigrams that depict mystical influences as introductions to the poem.<sup>18</sup>

The period that separates Poems By Two Brothers from Tennyson's first independent release, the 1830 Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, marks yet another development in the type of poet figure Tennyson creates. The new figure is

quiet and reflective, his forecasts personal and restrained. He is closer to the poet and farther from the priest or Old Testament figure. While less denunciatory and apocalyptic, this evolving character still retains the impress of the traditional bards whom Tennyson has, up until this time, merely copied from his reading. Tennyson's new characters reveal a significant change, a close concern with art rather than with morality per se; yet, despite the alteration, the characters never completely lose their link to the earlier prototypes.

The 1830 figure who emerges is clearly a product of Tennyson's evolving ideology. Though the voice of the character still echoes the doomsday speakers of earlier works, there is a new dimension that is the result of deliberation rather than imitation. One such character is the speaker in "The Poet," who represents "the myth of the ideal singer, born 'in a golden clime' and blest with vision."<sup>19</sup> This Shelleyan concept of the poet as "seer" is consistent with both the earlier description of prophet-poets<sup>20</sup> and the insistent pattern of visionary artists that surfaces in his later poetry. Moreover, this figure reflects a uniquely Tennysonian notion that rejects blatant didacticism while acknowledging the didactic necessity of poetry.<sup>21</sup>

"The Poet" is significant for its youthful expression of a quintessential Tennysonian dilemma: a search for a common ground upon which public and private "art" can co-exist. In "The Poet," the artist's social role is made clear. The artist has the hallowed distinction of being the interpreter of the "open scroll." Tennyson's "poet" must communicate the divine truth to mankind. By walking "[t]he secretest walks of fame" and yet being inextricably a part of a social function, the poet is depicted as balancing himself on a tightrope.

In "The Poet's Mind" the theoretic duality is replaced by a firmer stance. No longer wavering between two contentious positions, the persona is an apologist

for an isolated art, removed from the destructive touch of man. This position is best seen in the 1830 version of the poem, which, though less powerful than the revised version of 1842, shows a poet more firmly committed to the necessity of defending art from a hostile world. Thus, when the persona defends the "crystal river" of aesthetic vision from the "shallow wit" of rationalism, the result is a clear statement commending art to sacred territory. "The poet's mind," the speaker comments glacially, "is holy ground."<sup>22</sup>

Among the experimentation Tennyson performed in the 1830 volume was the creation of several analogues for the poet. One of these, very different from prophets and bards, is the dying swan. This symbol of the artist/prophet arises from a less vitriolic poetry than that, say, of the *Juvenilia*. Buckley first suggested that the dying swan in Tennyson's poetry was a representation of an artist figure;<sup>23</sup> the tradition of associating the two has long existed. Catherine Barnes Stevenson, elaborating on Buckley's premise, contends that the dying swan is "yet another visionary poet introduced in the 1830 volume . . . and reintroduced at climactic moments in Tennyson's poems for the next thirty-nine years."<sup>24</sup> Stevenson traces the legendary and etymological tradition to which the swan belongs and reveals that the birds have long been associated with druidic customs, rites and folklore. Moreover, Stevenson establishes that Tennyson had access to many sources that reveal this association between swan and prophet. She further suggests that the prophet swan-song appears in such poems as the early "The Lady of Shalott," "The Morte d'Arthur," "The Passing of Arthur," and, of course, in "The Dying Swan."

What is important about the presence of the swan as an artist connected with the prophet voice is the literary tradition this connection derives from, as well as the similar "powers" each -- swan and prophet -- is associated with.

As Stevenson writes,

[i]n its mythological context, the swan is associated with notions of the religious origin and function of art and with images of the poet as priest-prophet. Thus the swan resembles the other early poet "types" because it possesses special insight and unique power.<sup>25</sup>

She believes that the swan figure surpasses the bard figure in that the symbol resolves the dilemma that useless, self-indulgent art poses by demonstrating that this type of art can accomplish a social good; that the solitary voice of private grief -- "the wild swan's death-hymn" -- can also be a universal voice uniting, rather than chastizing, those who hear it.

Elizabeth A. Francis believes that the "lament can in fact be viewed as a sub-genre of 'prophecy' or 'denunciation', for it recalls the 'shrieks of the fatherless' but generally from the standpoint of victim."<sup>26</sup> She describes this genre as one that "recounts a climactic event by joining apocalyptic themes to an historical moment."<sup>27</sup> The more elegiac poems, such as "The Dying Swan," as well as the more effusive poems, such as "The Druid's Prophecies," are two distinct examples of laments.

To this "dying swan" poetry must be added those poems that reflect a belief in the bardic voice as a pre-established authority in society. Tennyson often uses a particular phraseology that is an injunction to, or a calling upon, the bardic authority as a testimony to a fait accompli or to a future development. This highly traditional form of "evidencing," dating back to the druidic or bardic poetry of the Middle Ages, is seen in such poems as "Love [Almighty Love!]" and "The Coming of Arthur."

In the former poem, published in 1827, Tennyson celebrates the Hindu

deities that are described in Sir William Jones's translations.<sup>28</sup> In a characteristic rhetorical gesture the persona calls upon the "bards" in order to frame his argument. "O! whether thou, as bards have said," testifies to an authoritative, almost atemporal opinion which the persona accepts as a given fact. The assumption suggests that the unseen "bards" are part of a ubiquitous and timeless order on an equivalent plane with the deities celebrated.

In "The Coming of Arthur" the bards have a different function though a similar status to that of the earlier poem: they are a symbol of the perpetuity of legend or myth. In presenting her opinion of Arthur, Bellicent, Queen of Orkney, testifies to the authenticity of her "brother's" claim to the throne as well as the value of a liaison between a mere king's daughter and the Arthur that is to be. The crux of her argument is a subjective evaluation of her brother's goodness based on her own experience. But the Queen also legitimizes Arthur's merit and Leodogran's anticipated acquiescence by claiming that "great bards of him [Arthur] will sing / Hereafter." The singers' voices are linked with the mythopoeic aspects of prophecy, as is shown by Bellicent's subsequent words:

and dark sayings from of old  
Ranging and ringing through the minds of men,  
And echoed by old folk beside their fires  
For comfort after their wage-work is done,  
Speak of the King.

Tennyson deliberately mixes the "past" with a contemporary setting, placing the weight and transcendent value of the bardic voices in great relief. By blurring the time-scheme, he turns Bellicent's speech into both a prediction of the future and an already curiously pre-established fact. Tennyson here

achieves what Francis has stated about another poem: he "invokes historical sequences but counterbalances them with an apocalyptic denial of time."<sup>29</sup>

Although the denial of time is far from apocalyptic in "The Coming of Arthur," it does establish a pattern for dual movement, both backward and forward in time, and in so doing both confirms a "historical" framework and denies a "temporal" possibility. The association of myth with this atemporality is an indication of the importance and power of the bardic voice as a communicator of transcendent thought; furthermore, the bardic voice is essential to the existence and perpetuation of legend. It is this skill that Merlin, the greatest of Tennyson's bards, will most clearly represent when he appears in the Idylls of the King.<sup>30</sup>

Before Tennyson was to make use of Merlin as a major character, he still had a great deal of experimenting to perform. There were to be many attempts, and many false starts, in the laborious quest to create the consummate Merlin figure who would become a symbol of Tennyson himself.

Included in these attempts would be several early prose drafts of the Idylls of the King (the first extant appearance of Merlin in Tennyson's poetry), an early Arthurian poem in which Merlin was meant to figure prominently, but was instead mysteriously omitted, and finally, a gesture of self-identification with the mystic persona in three political poems of the 1850s.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Inheritors of the Lore

The many variations which the mystic personae assume in Tennyson's poetry are testimony to the lengthy evolution Merlin has undergone. It is possible to discover exactly how the Merlin of the Idylls is put together by studying his precursors, and by examining the characteristics of the earlier models, which Tennyson chose both to retain and to reject; the amalgam, in other words, can reveal the whole only through the study of its parts. Tennyson's struggle to impose a form on Merlin is perhaps best seen -- and understood -- in the light of the poet's first specific treatments of the character: in three early prose drafts of the future Idylls of the King from the early thirties, and in the poem "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere: A Fragment," published in 1842, but believed to be "partly if not wholly written in 1830."<sup>1</sup>

The three outlines of Arthurian literature that mention Merlin -- cited in the Memoir and in one of the Harvard Notebooks -- deal only sketchily with the sage, though they ascribe to him the traditional skills of prophecy, science and magic. In his first appearance in Tennyson's work -- in an allegorical interpretation of the Arthurian legends dated about 1833 -- Merlin is assigned the following role: "the enchanter. Science."<sup>2</sup> The association of "Merlin Emrys" to science is a reductive assignation, and any evidence of Merlin's future literary potential and of Tennyson's personal identification with this

figure, is markedly lacking, as are the specifically Tennysonian characteristics that will make Merlin one of the poet's most original characters.

A second draft, found in Harvard Notebook 16 and watermarked 1833,<sup>3</sup> does little to develop the mystic character. The four-page attempt to organize the figures from Malory's Morte into a workable form exhibits strongly the impress of the earlier source and reflects the traditional interpretation of Merlin's seduction:

Nineve.  
(one of the damoyseles  
of ye lake) who  
deceived Merlyn.<sup>4</sup>

Although Tennyson later rejects this simple interpretation,<sup>5</sup> his formative sketches emphasize his initial indebtedness to his sources, an indebtedness that surfaces in the third sketch as well.

The third draft, a five-act outline of a musical masque based on Arthurian legend, is interesting in that it demonstrates both how "undecided" Tennyson was "about the ultimate form for his Arthurian masterpiece,"<sup>6</sup> and the growing role Merlin was to play in this work:

#### THIRD ACT

Oak tomb of Merlin. The song of Nimue. Sir Mordred comes to consult Merlin. Coming away meets Arthur. Their fierce dialogue. Arthur consults Sir L. and Sir Bedivere. Arthur weeps over Merlin and is reproved by Nimue, who inveighs against Merlin. Arthur asks Merlin the issue of the battle. Merlin will not enlighten him. Nimue requests Arthur to question Merlin again. Merlin tells him he shall bear rule again, but that the Ladies of the Lake can return no more. Guinevere throws away the diamonds into the river. The Court and the dead Elaine.<sup>7</sup>

Here Merlin adds the dimension of advisor to his previous mantic skills.<sup>8</sup>

As the sketch shows, Tennyson conceived Merlin's part to be similar to that which he held in Malory. In the musical masque the magician's role is restricted to one act (in the same way that he is limited to one book in Malory), and he does not appear again or interrelate with any other character in the rest of the play.

A fourth sketch from 1833 might also be interesting to examine even though it does not directly refer to Merlin. First cited in the Memoir, this sketch, entitled "King Arthur," describes the magnificence of Camelot. The prophetic or bardic voice reveals itself as an important part of the glory of "King Arthur's hall" in the same way that it is integral to Bellicent's description of Arthur in "The Coming of Arthur."<sup>9</sup> The use of the prophetic voice, therefore, foreshadows Tennyson's later, and defter, use of this motif. In the "King Arthur" sketch the prophetic voice serves a dual purpose. First, it presages the eventual downfall of the city:

The Mount was the most beautiful in the world. . . . But all underneath it was hollow, and the mountain trembled, when the seas rushed bellowing through the porphyry caves; and there ran a prophecy that the mountain and the city on some wild morning would topple into the abyss and be no more.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the voice becomes the instrument by which a new order is heralded:

The King sat in his Hall. Beside him sat the sumptuous Guinevere and about him were all his lords and knights of the Table Round. There they feasted, and when the feast was over the Bards sang to the King's glory.<sup>11</sup>

The two roles of the prophetic voice, apparently antipodal in nature, are consistent with the "atemporal historicity" that Tennyson calls upon as a sub-structure in his later idylls, and characteristic of an inherent paradox that reveals itself whenever the bardic myths are used.

As the structure of the Idylls became clearer, however, Tennyson would alter and extend Merlin's part so that almost every poem and the entire cycle would be infused with the mystic's spirit. The Merlin of the masque is similar to the figure who was to have appeared in "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere: A Fragment." J.M. Kemble's letter to W.B. Donne, dated June 22, 1833, describes Tennyson's projected poem and offers an interesting glimpse of the intended Merlin:

A companion to The Lady of Shalott is in Progress, called the Ballad of Sir Lancelot; a most triumphant matter whereof I will give you a sketch; in the Spring, Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot ride through the forest green, fayre and amorous: And such a queen! such a knight! Merlin with spindle shanks, vast brows and beard and a forehead like a mundane egg, over a face wrinkled with ten thousand crow-feet meets them, and tells Sir L. that he's doing well for his fame to be riding about with a light o' love &c. Whereupon the knight, nowise backward in retort, tells him it is a shame such an old scandal to antiquity should be talking, since his own propensities are no secret, and since he very well knows what will become of him in the valley of Avilion some day. Merlin, who tropically is Worldly Prudence, is of course miserably floored. So are the representatives of Worldly Force, who in the shape of three knights, sheathed, Sir, in trap from toe to toe, run at Sir L. and are most unceremoniously shot from their saddles like stones from a sling. But the Garde Joyeuse is now in sight; the knight I confess is singing but a loose song, when his own son Sir Galahad (the type of Chastity) passes by; he knows his father but does not speak to him, blushes and rides on his way! Voila tout. Much of this is written and stupendous; I regret bitterly that I had not opportunity to take down what there is of it; as it is I can only offer you Sir L.'s song.<sup>12</sup>

The fragment itself, written in a similar stanza to that of "The Lady of Shalott," does

not mention Merlin. Moreover, the poem is riddled with inconsistencies, "a mixture of basic incongruities," which "suggest the poet's unending practice of ignoring or consciously violating the narrative time-scheme of Malory's stories in order to create a more dramatic or concentrated poetic plot."<sup>13</sup> One such incongruity is the meeting between Merlin, Launcelot and Guinevere: "Malory's Merlin is permanently enchained by Nynyve shortly after Guinevere's arrival in Camelot and before Lancelot's arrival. Thus no encounter of the trio is possible."<sup>14</sup>

"Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere: A Fragment" is interesting more for what it does not show than for what it reveals. From Kemble's synopsis of the poem it is possible to anticipate the stereotypical -- perhaps even glib -- rendition of the "Mage at Arthur's court." The portrait would seem to vitiate Tennyson's "practice of ignoring or consciously violating" the prototypes established by his sources, since the Merlin of this fragment resembles, in many ways, the earlier Merlyn of Le Morte Darthur. Added to the "pre-established" character of the mystic is an irreverent, half-absurd, comic quality which lowers him to a level that, if Merlin's absence from the "Fragment" is any indication, Tennyson himself rejected.

The fact that Tennyson decided not to complete the intended delineation suggests that, possibly, he could not accept such characterization. It was not, after all, as though he lacked the time to write the Merlin section, or that he merely lost interest in the project; rather, the passage was written,<sup>15</sup> and is in accordance with the details given by Kemble:

They came on one that rode alone,  
 Astride upon a lob-eared roan,  
 Wherefrom stood out the staring bone,  
           The wizard Merlin wise and gray.

His shanks were thin as legs of pies,  
 The bloom that on an apple dries  
 Burnt underneath his catlike eyes  
     That twinkled everyway

High brows above a little face  
 Had Merlin -- these in every place  
 Ten million lines did cross and lace;  
 Slow as the shadow was his pace,  
     The shade that creeps from dawn to dusk.  
 From cheek and mouth and throat a load  
 Of beard -- a hundred winters snowed  
 Upon the pommel as he road  
     Thin as a spider's husk.

He stopped full butt. "God's death, Sir Knight,  
 Your fame will flourish pure and bright.  
 You spare no pains. 'Tis your delight  
 To seek the Sangraal day and night;  
     It is no fable, by my troth;  
 We know you are the cream and pride  
 Of knighthood blazoned far and wide,  
 The talk of the whole countryside.  
     Good morrow to you both."

At last, mid lindentufts that smiled  
 In newest foliage, fresh and wild, --  
 With haughty towers turret-piled  
 To Heaven -- by one deep moat in-ised  
     Shone the white walls of Joyeuse Garde.  
 Then saw they three

They trampling through the woodland lone  
 In clanging armour flashed and shone  
 Like those three suns that flame alone  
 Chased in the airy giant's zone,  
     And burnished by the frosty dark;  
 And as the dogstar changes hue;  
 And bickers into green and blue,  
 Each glittered laved in lucid dew  
     That washed the grassy park.<sup>16</sup>

Tennyson most probably chose not to include the description of Merlin in the "Fragment," because he recognized its inferior quality. It is also possible, however, that he could not reconcile this delineation of Merlin with the nascent concept he was struggling toward (the radically different character of the Idylls), and so, never bothered to rewrite the passage.

In the 1840s and 1850s Tennyson furthered his knowledge of the mythology governing his mystical personae by delving into several well known treatises on the subject. Among these texts were Edward Davies' The Mythology and Rites of the British Druids, a book which Tennyson is said to have acquired in 1846, as well as Robert Southey's Madoc which contains extensive notes and glosses on druidic lore. One such gloss, certain to have made an impression on Tennyson, is a description of bards as "inheritors of the lore of the Druids and . . . preservers of 'the hidden wisdom of the years of old.'"<sup>17</sup> With assurances of this kind, he could not help but connect his modern mystics with a tradition that extended to the beginnings of literature.

It is certain, therefore, that Tennyson's use of prophet-bards as soothsayers, social critics, magicians, architects, poets and musicians was reinforced by his supplementary reading, and his concept of his own role in relation to these figures was immeasurably defined. The penultimate manifestation of this "coming to terms" with the bardic figure was, in 1852, Tennyson's use of the name "Merlin" and "Taliessin" to sign three political poems, which denounced Louis Napoleon's coup d'état and the attendant threat of his invasion of England.

On February 7, 1852, "The Third of February" and "Hands All Round!"<sup>18</sup> were published in The Examiner under the pseudonym "Merlin." According to the Memoir, John Forster suggested that a name be assigned to the poems, and James Spedding proposed "Merlin." In a letter to Tennyson Spedding wrote: "Forster wants a name for the poet, which I think very desirable; and no great matter what name is chosen so it be short and pronounceable, Alfred, Arthur, Merlin, Tyrtaeus, Edward Ball, Britannicus, Honved, Hylax, anything. Amyntor would sound well, is not hackneyed, and is good Greek for defender or protector."<sup>19</sup> While Spedding did suggest, in a roundabout way, the name "Merlin," it was

Tennyson who chose, among the "short and pronounceable" suggestions, the one most pertinent. His selection of Merlin demonstrates his conviction, unlike Spedding's, that the designation was important and reflects his awareness of the special role of this bard.

Recognizing the "serious menace to the peace of Europe"<sup>20</sup> represented by Napoleon III, Tennyson performed what he knew to be his duty as Poet Laureate and citizen: he alerted the populace to the danger posed by the "child of Hell." In "The Third of February," "Merlin" lashed out at the "honeyed whispers" of the House of Lords, which "seemed to condone Louis Napoleon's coup d'état in Dec. 1851, and rejected the Bill for the organization of the Militia when he was expected to attack England."<sup>21</sup> In "Hands All Round!" "Merlin" exhorts British and allies alike to "rise . . . / When war against our freedom springs!"<sup>22</sup>

On February 14, 1852, both poems were followed by a letter and another hortatory poem, "Suggested by Reading an Article in a Newspaper," this time signed "Taliessin."<sup>23</sup> The poem contained more than "amusing but candid self-praise";<sup>24</sup> it clearly placed into words Tennyson's recognition of the poet's role as castigator of social wrong. In praising "Merlin's" forceful directness, "Taliessin" exclaimed:

How much I love this writer's manly style!  
 By such men led, our press had ever been  
 The public conscience of our noble isle,  
 Severe and quick to feel a civic sin,  
 To raise the people and chastise the times  
 With such a heat as lives in great creative rhymes.

The use of "Taliessin" demonstrates Tennyson's deliberate attempt to associate himself with bardic figures. Just as he did in the earlier poem "Youth," where the Laureate identifies himself with this prophetic persona,<sup>25</sup> he chooses in

"Suggested by Reading an Article in a Newspaper" to link himself with the makers of "creative rhymes," figures who have existed throughout history as priests, bards, magicians and seers.

Tennyson could have discovered the name "Taliessin" from historical and mythological chronicles such as Davies' Mythology and Rites of the British Druids, or Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of The Mabinogion.<sup>26</sup> Stevenson suggests the influence of the Earl of Gray's Pindaric Ode "The Bard" on Tennyson's early prophet characters, and it is highly likely that he determined the spelling of the name from this poem, since the bard of druidic legend -- as is reported in Davies' book for example -- is spelled with only one "s" whereas Gray's is spelled with two.

Tennyson had already imitated the style of "The Bard" in his "The Druid's Prophecies" of 1827. As Stevenson notes, "Mona, is a direct descendant of Gray's bard, that larger-than-life thunderer whose stance, whose actions, and whose words became paradigmatic for the Romantic bard."<sup>27</sup> The Taliessin of Tennyson's political poem, however, only vaguely resembles Gray's character. The figure who emerges from "Suggested by Reading an Article in a Newspaper" is even more muted than the figure in "The Poet's Mind." He reflects a tempered and rational personality and an appealing tongue-in-cheek modesty. For example, "Taliessin" avers that he is not "as good" a poet as "Merlin" but, recognizing the importance of speaking out on the subject, can do no less himself: "Sir, -- I have read with much interest the poems by Merlin. The enclosed is longer than either of those, and certainly not so good; yet as I flatter myself that it has a smack of Merlin's style in it, and as I feel that it expresses forcibly enough some of the feelings of our time, perhaps you may be induced to admit it. Taliessin."<sup>28</sup> Stevenson suggests that this poetic act of warning,

of social consciousness, is consistent with the belief Tennyson had formed from druidic sources of the poet as social conscience. Tennyson's use of these cognomina -- and his explicit identification with prophetic figures -- is his earliest and most explicit self-identification with similar bards.

Tennyson's distinct and personal use of the variegated prophet-poet figures did not go unnoticed by the critics of his day. However, the attitude of critics toward these characters was decidedly negative. Edgar Finley Shannon Jr. explores the strong influence of critics on Tennyson and determines that the poet "would not have revised so thoroughly or been so selective in reprinting had he not been so severely censured."<sup>29</sup> Shannon argues persuasively that the harsh or even well-intentioned but critical commentary affected not only how Tennyson wrote but what he wrote, that he endeavoured, to a certain extent, "to write according to the suggestions of his critics."<sup>30</sup> It is significant, therefore, that, despite comments condemning Tennyson's proclivity to disport "himself amongst 'mystics' and flowing 'philosophers'," he never yielded to suggestions that he drop these figures. Any receptive reader would have seen how important these "mystics" were to the young poet's vision; instead, he was met with anger, indifference and, above all, reproach, and the important role of prophet-bards in his poetry went unseen by the critics of the day.

An excerpt from the Westminster Review is representative of the general attitude:

He has higher work to do than disporting himself amongst "mystics" and flowing "philosophers." . . . It is not for such men to sink into mere verse-makers for the amusement of themselves or others. They can influence the association of unnumbered minds; they can command the sympathies of unnumbered hearts; they can disseminate principles; they can give those principles power over men's imaginations;

they can incite in a good cause the sustained enthusiasm that is sure to conquer. . . .<sup>31</sup>

It is ironic that the conditions cited by the reviewer all reflect aspects of the bard figure, yet this character is considered redundant and trite.

Another commentor wrote in the Christian Examiner: "Dearly he loves to look at things . . . but then all he cares to see is their shadows in the magic mirror that hangs before him . . . he will not turn round and shake hands with the reality." He went on to ask, "Is he prophet eyed?"<sup>32</sup> The answer to this rhetorical question is "yes," but critics failed to comprehend the implications of the answer; when the Westminster Review stated "[h]e has higher work to do," it did not see that Tennyson was doing just this, and that his realization of his "role" was prompting him to strive for a means to "work his work." The means, as in his early poetry, continued to be his mystical philosophers, since they were the ideal vehicles to transmit his thoughts, criticisms, and fears for the future. Few individuals, including possibly the poet himself, however, anticipated the figure toward which he was striving. Four years after the publication of his hortatory poems, Tennyson would begin writing what would become the most thoroughly developed presentation of Merlin in all of his work, a figure at once grand and vulnerable, mysteriously symbolic yet flagrantly direct, the Sage at Arthur's court.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### That Spirit of Poetry

The poet/prophet, as he is eventually defined in Tennyson's poetry, is a curious combination of social counsellor and mystic recluse. This figure, who, in Tennyson's early poetry, vacillates between a public and a private role but never embodies both, incorporates both aspects of the polarity in "Merlin and Vivien": he is a figure desperately intent on saving society -- Camelot -- from itself, as well as a poet-like creator determined to rescue the ideal around which Camelot is built. Tennyson's use of Merlin as an embodiment of polar opposites is unquestionably connected to his Celtic reading, where "the bard himself is paradoxically both a solitary outsider and a man crucially involved in the fate of his society."<sup>1</sup> By following this pattern of "split personality," Tennyson establishes a duality in Merlin that has as its root his own uncertainty over what the poet's role should be.

On the one hand, Merlin must contend with his social duty. He is highly respected and depended upon, and he realizes he must play an active role in the ceremony of civilization. On the other hand, he also recognizes that all cycles have their nadirs and that certain movements cannot be arrested, as is evidenced by the decay of Camelot and Arthur's golden order. Merlin has the option, then, of rejecting society's plea for help in favour of retreat, realizing that it is only in a specific type of isolation that he -- as poet and visionary -- can

preserve the private vision, that high ideal which risks being destroyed by corrupt civilization. "Merlin and Vivien" represents a battlefield on which Merlin must decide his proper role. In the end, Merlin, as Tennyson, chooses private vision over social duty, and, though many studies maintain that "Merlin and Vivien" signals the defeat of the artist by a stronger antithetical force, the choice of private vision does not constitute a defeat.

The conflict has traditionally been described as a struggle between soul and sense, intellect and sexuality, as the subconscious against the id, and always as a defeat of the artist -- of positive imagination -- by the stronger, negative imagination.<sup>2</sup> Merlin's incarceration in the hollow oak, however, is tantamount to a psychic escape from the destructive and debasing power of negative imagination, aptly epitomized by Vivien; further, in "losing" himself at the poem's close, Merlin can be understood as performing a courageous act, similar to Galahad's saintly gesture in "The Holy Grail."

If Merlin's apotheosis is marred by any single factor, it is Tennyson's wavering over whether or not private art is solipsistic. Regardless of the equivocation that exists, however, "Merlin and Vivien" represents the poet's most concerted argument for a positive idea of retreat.

"Merlin and Vivien" is, above all, an argument in favour of inhabiting the private landscape of the mind rather than the environment delimited by social duty. The resolution of the work is arrived at only through a lengthy debate over what exactly constitutes the poet's role. Linked to the tension between the public and private artist is a similar tension concerning art. In much of his work Tennyson explores separately both the destructiveness of isolation to art and the need to isolate poetry from society's destructive influence, only

occasionally dealing with both themes in the same work.

"The Lady of Shalott" and "The Palace of Art" are examples of Tennyson's treatises against solipsistic aesthetics. In "The Lady of Shalott," for example, the tragic figure of the dedicated artist is shown to wither away becoming "half sick of shadows," weaving functionless and, therefore, useless art in the darkness of her tower. Although the artist dies when exposed to life, indicating, as Buckley suggests, "the maladjustment of the aesthetic spirit to the conditions of ordinary living,"<sup>3</sup> the poem intimates that the artist escapes the futility and joylessness of a sequestered existence.

In "The Palace of Art," the "moral consequence of devotion to an isolated beauty"<sup>4</sup> is explored and the option rejected. In the prefatory poem "To --," Tennyson states that the "common clay taken from the common earth" was not "[m]oulded by God, and tempered with the tears / Of angels to the perfect shape of man," in order that man abandon his neighbour. Rather, the purpose of the artist -- as well as of his product, art -- is a social one. Although the aesthetic speaker at first thrives in her "great mansion," the "[d]eep dread and loathing of her solitude" finally overcomes her vicarious pleasures and incites her to throw "her royal robes away" and adopt the spartan surroundings of the "cottage in the vale." Although she exchanges one type of isolation for another, the introductory poem and the final two lines of "The Palace of Art" ("Perchance I may return with others there / When I have purged my guilt") suggest the importance of the poet's social responsibility and the wrong that can result from isolated, and, therefore, useless art.

In contradistinction to these poems, "The Poet's Mind" and "The Hesperides" offer Tennyson's defence for a pristine poetry unsoiled by man. In "The Poet's Mind," the "[d]ark-browed sophist" is warned: "come not anear." And in "The

Hesperides," the daughters of Hesperus entreat him to remain perpetually wary, to guard "the golden apple, the hallowed fruit, / Guard it well, guard it warily, / Watch it warily." The imminent threat that has caused the "sisters three" to sing this cautionary song is Hercules, here a symbol for unenlightened society.

Occasionally Tennyson argues for a level of both detachment and participation, as in "A Dream of Fair Women," where the speaker seems greatly removed from what he sees but at the same time is able to lift his arm "to hew down / A cavalier from off his saddle-bow, / That bore a lady from a leaguered town." According to Buckley, "The dream-vision itself has the dreamlike blend of participation and detachment that Tennyson still associated with the aesthetic act, the imaginative acceptance of diverse emotions and the careful maintenance of distance and necessary disinterest."<sup>5</sup>

This paradoxical state -- an ambivalence central to Tennyson's body of work -- finds its greatest expression in the figure of Merlin. With his link to mysticism, Merlin embodies Tennyson's theory of creativity; he is "in the centre fixt," both involved with and withdrawn from the world he creates. And because he is such a complex character, representing a complex creative dichotomy, Merlin proves to be difficult for the Laureate to define, a fact attested to by Merlin's changeability within the Idylls.

In what eventually becomes the first of the Round Table idylls,<sup>6</sup> however, Tennyson defines his belief in the viability of an isolated art that is unlike the highly subjective and useless art of "The Palace of Art." The Merlin of "Merlin and Vivien" symbolizes the struggle between both points of view, with the notion of private retreat ultimately emerging victorious. The importance of "Merlin and Vivien," both for the Laureate and for critics seeking to gain

an understanding of the poet's philosophy, is obvious since it is the natural culmination of a forty-seven-year fascination with mysticism as well as a nearly thirty-year attempt to find a form for Merlin. More importantly, however, it is one of the clearest examples of Tennyson's endorsement of isolated art.<sup>7</sup>

In "Merlin and Vivien" the mystic is torn between the belief that only isolation can preserve the purity of his creation and the knowledge that its value can be affirmed only through societal interaction. The poem focusses on the struggle as it manifests itself in Merlin. Tennyson, however, uses an interesting technique to present the struggle as a clear, polarized conflict. He imbues Merlin with the characteristics of the isolated artist, making him the spokesman for this point of view, and presents Vivien as an apologist for corrupt society. The two dimensions, then, are actually one and the same.

Several critics have advanced the theory that Merlin and Vivien are, in fact, antipodal elements of the same person; that Merlin represents "Tennyson himself," the positive imagination, and Vivien, "the negative side of creativity or the imagination, the dark and destructive force in the poetic whirlwind."<sup>8</sup> Tennyson describes Merlin as he

who knew the range of all their arts,  
Had built the King his havens, ships, and halls,  
Was also Bard, and knew the starry heavens.

The purpose of this, "the longest description . . . of Merlin's powers"<sup>9</sup> to appear in Tennyson's poetry, is to link Merlin with all the skills of the consummate poet figure.<sup>10</sup> His affiliation with positive imagination becomes incontrovertible.

Vivien, used to delineate a negative side of these powers, represents the dangers of an imagination corrupted by cynicism and worldliness; she is the poet who has yielded to the quest for "fame" and abandoned the high ideal. Like Merlin, she is a multi-disciplined artist: singer, story-teller, and interpreter; all her skills, however, are tainted by an immanent evil.

Merlin recognizes Vivien as one of the "base interpreters" who soils the "white blamelessness" of Arthur, and one of the "harlots [who] paint their talk as well as face." When Vivien first meets Guinevere, she rewrites truth and uses her poetry to deceive; in her story to the queen, "My father died in battle against the King" becomes "My father died in battle for thy King." And it is this same "poet" who offers to be Merlin's "expounder." Like a travelling bard, Vivien says, "[t]ake Vivien for expounder; she will call / That three-days-long presageful gloom of yours / No presage." Where truth is the goal of Merlin's art, deception is the goal of Vivien's. As Kaplan says, "[h]er weapons are rumor, falsehood, slander, and blackmail, abetted by instinctive cunning. . . . Like Merlin, she is an embodiment of the imagination, but of the perverse imagination, and a master of language, but of language that destroys rather than creates."<sup>11</sup>

The powerful symbolic conflict between Merlin and Vivien as positive and negative imagination trivializes the purely "physical" aspect of Vivien's threat. "[T]he old story of how even a wise man can be seduced by persistent sexual appeal"<sup>12</sup> figures only peripherally in the overall conflict. That Tennyson wished to de-emphasize the physical seduction is clear from his reinterpretation of his sources.

In tracing the influences and sources for this idyll, Gordon Haight concludes that Tennyson followed the Vulgate Merlin, which he probably read in

Southey's The Byrth, Lyf, and Actes of Kyng Arthur:

The version of the legend closest to Tennyson's idyll is found in the Vulgate Merlin . . . one of the prose continuations of Robert de Boron's poem. There is no need to assume that Tennyson read it in the Old French. For the edition of Malory published in 1817 . . . contains over a hundred large pages of notes in many of which the Vulgate Merlin is extensively translated by the editor, Robert Southey. <sup>13</sup>

In addition, Tennyson also read Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of The Mabinogion, <sup>14</sup> Malory, and many of the Welsh poems referred to earlier in this study.

In many of the sources Merlin is depicted as irrevocably under Vivien's control. In Tennyson, however, Merlin's attitude to Vivien is unique: the mystic is aware not only of her wish to imprison him (as in Southey's version of Malory) but also of her true nature: "You seemed that wave about to break upon me." Tennyson subtly alters Merlin's response to Vivien so that the seduction is actually a confrontation, in which Vivien, as this study will attempt to make clear, fails to defeat the grey magician.

As Haight stresses, this Merlin is "far different from the too-eager wooer of the French sources"; rather, he is a man who "has no joy whatever in love."<sup>15</sup> Unlike his medieval counterparts, Tennyson's Merlin is followed by Vivien; he does not go "evermore with her wheresoever she went."<sup>16</sup> Since the sexual threat is vitiated so thoroughly by the poet, it is logical to assume that Merlin is menaced primarily in an artistic, not in a physical, sense. Time and again Tennyson demonstrates Merlin's "weakening" as a response to Vivien's antithetical artistic talent. She charms him at first with her talents of mimicry, clothing herself in his grey beard and calling herself a "gilded

summer fly." Later, when Merlin "half believe[s] her true," it is only because of Vivien's "tender" voice:

when you sang me that sweet rhyme,  
I felt as though you knew this cursèd charm,  
Were proving it on me, and that I lay  
And felt them slowly ebbing, name and fame.

In this declaration, Merlin is explicit about his intuition that the greatest threat Vivien poses is to his "name and fame," not his "use," which suggests that the "seduction scene" was intended less as a Victorian parable to denounce the evils of uselessness than as a dramatic statement in support of the private role, the solitary path.

The struggle for and against the poetic ideal provides the dramatic tension in the poem. Merlin is presented as the "blameless" poet, flattered and charmed by the "wily" product of a decadent, tarnished poetic principle. Vivien as a negative force, the eagle that Merlin "blotted out" on the young squire's escutcheon. At the close of the poem, it will be argued, Tennyson does not forsake the poetic ideal by allowing Vivien to defeat Merlin; rather, he decries the negative imagination and the evils it engenders, and shows Merlin choosing to relinquish Vivien and the failed poetic product of Camelot. Part of this interpretation will be based on the fact that Merlin never ceases to pursue the poetic ideal represented by the "ivied oak" and Arthur. His continued belief in what can be seen as his greatest creation, Arthur, demonstrates the inviolable strength of the poet-figure Merlin represents. Vivien's seduction, directed as it is toward the physical Merlin, never has a chance.

Though conceding that "Vivien's plan of seduction has scant success," Kaplan asserts:

The serious threat that Vivien is to offer to Merlin's existence as artist comes suddenly as a result of changed conditions within Merlin. Vivien's destructive potential becomes actualized only after and as a result of Merlin's loss of faith in himself and what he has built. . . . 17

This, however, implies that Merlin's greatest creation is Camelot, rather than Arthur -- that is, the form rather than the substance. On the contrary, Merlin does not lose faith either in himself or in Arthur. His belief in the high principle of poetry -- which he both represents and strives to figure forth -- never weakens. As Camelot crumbles, the central spirit and force of the ideal does not. Arthur, like Merlin, sustains the poetic vision by remaining unscathed and unblemished; and their passing, both equally grim and ambiguous in tone, promises the return of the life force, the "pure and high ideal."

There are several reasons for the belief critics have held about Merlin's so-called defeat. One is found in the initial pairing of "Merlin and Vivien" with the Enid idylls,<sup>18</sup> a position that fostered false or reductive assumptions concerning the former poem's internal symbols. Read only as a companion piece, "Merlin and Vivien" loses much of its subtlety and autonomy, and an unintended emphasis is placed on peripheral areas, such as the sexual elements of the work.

Another reason for the conventional readings stems, ironically, from the poem's final position in the completed structure of the Idylls.<sup>19</sup> Beginning with "Balin and Balan," the momentum of the work changes: the "spring of life," hope and regeneration yield to the "summer night" of arrested progress, which will eventually lead to the "yellowing autumntide" of "The Last Tournament" and the "mid-winter" bleakness of "The Passing of Arthur."<sup>20</sup> Such is the force of this

downward movement that "Merlin and Vivien" can be understood as merely swept along in its current; the presentation of the "seduction" is, unfortunately, allied with the overall despair, loss, and desolation that, at first glance, apparently characterize the Idylls. But the message of hope in "Merlin and Vivien," like that in the Idylls itself, must not be subsumed in the general aura of decay made manifest by the fall of Camelot.

In the Idylls the ultimate hope is suggested by Tennyson's emphasis on the ineluctably cyclical pattern of the work. Although the apothegm, "The old order changeth, yielding place to new," announces a return to a bestial, pre-Arthurian world, it also promises, as it does in "The Coming of Arthur," the return of a new, Camelot-like order, which will again succeed the chaos of "The Passing of Arthur." In "Merlin and Vivien," the hopefulness is suggested by similar indicators of the "ideal's" eternality, ranging from the "earnest in [Merlin's blood] of far springs to be," to the final shining forth of the "ivied oak" dispersing the gloom that has oppressed Merlin virtually throughout the poem.

But primary responsibility for the ambiguity, and thus the negative readings of the poem, may be traced to the interpretation of the symbols that recur throughout the poem, specifically those of the storm, the forest, and the oak. Contrary to Kaplan's belief that the "storm is a negative image of chaos and of the imagination out of control,"<sup>21</sup> the storm is an analogue for the creative life-force -- a pathetic fallacy that functions, in fact, as a talismanic power ridding the woods of the evil Vivien represents. The storm is a combination of the positive imagination together with a defence mechanism designed to protect this imagination. There is no reason to believe that this storm is essentially different in significance from the revitalizing storm of "Locksley Hall" which "clears away the brume," or the forceful, positive symbol it becomes in Maud,

since the storm, at the close of "Merlin and Vivien," brings peace and the possibility of purgation. A symbiotic relationship between prophets and storms appears early in Tennyson's work. Hallam Tennyson quotes a long passage of In Memoriam in which the following lines appear:

I roved at random thro' the town,  
And saw the tumult of the halls;  
  
And heard once more in College fanes  
The storm their high-built organs make,  
And thunder-music, rolling, shake  
The prophets blazon'd on the panes. 22

The image is especially appropriate since the "storm" is man-made -- musical -- thereby introducing a third and important parallel, that of the artist, to the images of storm and prophet (in this case saints painted on the windows by human artists). In an 1827 poem, "I wander in darkness and sorrow," Tennyson uses the storm as a concomitant force alongside, not against, the poem's speaker. The "poet" states emphatically:

I blame not the tempests of night;  
They are not the foes who have banished  
The visions of youthful delight.  
(*Italics mine*)

In his gloss to this poem Christopher Ricks states that

The idea of the storm as not the worst enemy seems to derive from King Lear III ii: "I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness" . . . indeed, it is a kind of solace: "This tempest will not give me leave to ponder/ On things would hurt me more." Tennyson's poem, too, turns on the idea of "one minded like the weather, most quietly. . . . 23

At the beginning of "Merlin and Vivien," the storm is imminent, and the still winds intimate the coming of the catalyst -- the artist in revolt. The storm is not the conflict but a reaction to it; it is the expression of the poet and the positive creative ideal which rejects the "maxims of the mud." Its link with the poet figure is suggested by its close tie with Merlin's inner emotions. The breaking of the storm is withheld for more than nine hundred lines as Merlin wavers between staying true to his concept of art or adopting Vivien's. Finally, the cathartic release, indicated by the exploding storm, establishes Merlin's victory. The poet, recognizing the futility of imagination such as Vivien represents, rejects it. This rejection is conveyed by the purgatorial storm which symbolically snaps the "rotten branch" from the venerable oak purifying it of the evil "born from death." Vivien is this evil incarnate. The woodland is ravaged, yet, like the oak, is cleansed and left "once more to peace."

The image of the oak being purged of its "rotten branch" in order to save it is not singular to "Merlin and Vivien." In "Hands All Round!" (fittingly, one of the poems signed by "Merlin"), Tennyson uses the image of the oak to represent freedom and suggests that, in order that the principle of freedom "for ever live," the "mouldered branch" must be chopped away:

May Freedom's oak for ever live  
 With stronger life from day to day;  
 The man's the true Conservative,  
 Who lops the mouldered branch away.

The association of the oak with positive values forms a relatively consistent pattern in Tennyson and discredits the negative connotations which have been assigned to it. In the Memoir, Hallam Tennyson published the "Fragments of

a Play," wherein appears the line "Methinks an oak-tree never should be planted/ But near the dwelling of some noble race,"<sup>24</sup> establishing early in the poet's work a connection between the oak and a noble heritage. This belief in the "Naked strength" of the oak is apparent in other poems, such as in "The Oak," and in "The Talking Oak," to which the poem's speaker "spoke without restraint,/ And with a larger faith appealed/ Than Papist unto Saint." In the poem "Memory [Memory! dear enchanter]" Tennyson compares himself to "some lone tower/ Of former days remaining . . . Like oak-tree old and grey,/ Whose trunk with age is failing," once again stressing the almost symbiotic connection between speaker (poet), and tree. This is also manifest in "The Dead Prophet" in which the poet, demeaned by Reverence, seems directly linked to the "barkless" image of a tree. The oak also figures symbolically in idylls other than "Merlin and Vivien." In "Balin and Balan," for example, Vivien's victory over the brothers is signaled by her leaping "her palfrey o'er the fallen oak," and in "The Last Tournament," the oak is described as "half-dead," a fitting image for the idyll of lost innocence. In both cases, the oak represents a fallen, though positive, ideal.

What is especially striking, however, is Tennyson's use of the oak in a specifically Biblical manner. Tennyson associates the oak with positive and noble ideas, and allies the tree with a prophetic personage; a similar relationship between the oaks and prophets is found in many books of the Old Testament, which Tennyson certainly knew well. In Judges 6:11, for example, the angel of the Lord appears before Gideon, beneath an oak, to call him to his "prophetic vocation." When faced with doubt in his own value as a prophet/poet, Merlin, like Gideon, is offered a sign beneath the tree: an oak shining through the gloom. In Joshua 24:26, the prophet places the book of the law of God "under an oak";

Merlin's book, it will be remembered, is not "handed down" to another magician (as was the hermit's), but is interned, it seems, with Merlin, beneath the oak. Tennyson borrows more than merely the positive, or tree/prophet, relationship from the Bible; he also reproduces the image of a "failing" tree as a positive symbol. Both in the Old Testament, and in the New (where there are no oaks, but a related kind of imagery, the vine), the plant is represented positively despite its need to have branches lopped off, and regardless of the context of decay in which it invariably appears. Finally, all of the Biblical prophets described above exist within a corrupt society, and most are, like Merlin, and like the oak tree which is a metaphor for Merlin, shown to be "failing." And yet, despite the condition of aging, or weakening, or of the corrupt society which surrounds the individual, the symbol itself remains a positive one, undiminished by the surrounding decay.<sup>25</sup>

In "Merlin and Vivien," many critics would have the reader understand the oak as a prison for the luckless Merlin; in fact, both the Forest of Broceliande and the "ivied oak" represent the poet's sanctum sanctorum. When Merlin is oppressed by his "great melancholy," he retreats to the "wild woods," abandoning not only the city of Camelot but England itself. As Arthur passes "from the great deep to the great deep," moving to an entirely different spatial and spiritual plane, so Merlin retreats from the physical landscape that geographically delimits his melancholy. Such is the severity of the affliction, however, that the spiritual conflict follows him "all the way, / Even to the wild woods of Broceliande."

Broceliande should not be confused with the "great tracts of wilderness" or the "wet woods" Arthur fells in "The Coming of Arthur." Merlin's retreat is associated with better days when the "hart with golden horns" still roamed

the woods and when dreams of "noble deeds" could still stir men to action. The importance of the forest as a retreat from the trappings of society is seen in Tennyson's own life, and the similarities between the "wild woods of Broceliande" and the New Forest, which Tennyson often visited and by which he eventually lived, are numerous.<sup>26</sup> Since Tennyson associated the two forests when he wrote the idyll, it is likely that Broceliande was conceived as a peaceful, positive retreat. This possibility is further strengthened by the fact that Merlin's happiest memories, at least within the "Merlin and Vivien" idyll, all seem to relate to a sylvan environment. It is in the context of the woods that Merlin remembers both the "fair young squire" whom he rebuked and who later became "a stalwart knight," and the young king's future knights before the "founding of a Table Round." The parallel between that noble, almost pre-lapsarian time and the present woods of Broceliande, coupled with Merlin's retreat to these woods to escape the cause of his greatest despondency, significantly weakens any negative association with the "wet-woods" and the savage wilderness of pre-Arthurian days.

The positive notion of retreat, which the forest suggests, is inextricably linked to the dominant symbol of the oak. Critical confusion in regard to the tree's role is the result of an association of the oak with the notion of the prison tower that predominates in Tennyson's poetry; rather, the oak ought to be seen as a place to which Merlin can retire to escape the pressures generated by Vivien and her society. Merlin's voluntary retreat to the oak, his obvious intellectual refusal to accept all that Vivien represents (signaled by Merlin's explicit, and intractable, support of Arthur and his tenets), coupled with blatantly positive symbols of poetic victory (such as the lopping off of the rotten branch), all suggest that the oak is emblematic of positive retreat, rather

than incarceration. Merlin's first, and in some ways most effective, response to Vivien is itself a form of retreat which foreshadows the move into the oak. Soon after he arrives in Broceliande, Merlin withdraws into his own thoughts and ignores Vivien entirely. He emerges from his silence after Vivien's successful cosseting but soon slips back into his private thoughts after Vivien's slanderous comments concerning Arthur and his court. It is only while he maintains this detachment that he is secure, for as soon as his thoughts find expression -- as when Vivien hears him speak the word "harlot" -- the predatory outside world is quick to take advantage and corrupt Merlin's "truth." The enchanter's words, so aptly defining his adversary, become weapons against which he is at first too weary to combat. Just as Merlin's earlier silence offers him protection against Vivien, so the epitome of silence, the hollow oak, represents a similar security. The oak is that place where Merlin can escape the temptations of Vivien's type of evil. The retreat, then, can be understood to be the spirit, as it is described, say, in In Memoriam: "But in my spirit will I dwell/ And dream my dream and hold it true"; or as a symbol for the condition of total tranquillity that Goethe stressed as necessary before the creation of any great, long work, a tranquillity Tennyson is said to have "achieved" by the time he began the Idylls.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the oak may be likened to the spires that rise above Camelot, which are "pinnacles and turrets of human aspiration pricking upward through the mists of ignorance and uncertainty."<sup>28</sup>

If the prison tower idea is to be clung to, then the word "prison" must be redefined to mean that place where the poetic vision can reaffirm itself. Merlin is a figure not at all unlike the Lady of Shalott. In fact, on two occasions,<sup>29</sup> the charm is specifically described as creating a confined place akin to the

"four gray walls" of Shalott. Merlin's retreat to the confines of the oak, rather than a problematic contradiction of the comparison, is in fact a logical inversion of the earlier poem. Tennyson has simply reversed the images: in "The Lady of Shalott," the negative values are within the enclosure; in "Merlin and Vivien," they are without. But in both cases, the question of choice is central: both figures must choose to leave their tainted environments; their decision to do so is what ennobles and makes sense of the ambiguous aftermath. Although the Lady dies after her departure, few would consider her fate tragic. So with Merlin; although he is described as lost to use and name and fame, he is also represented, through his voluntary retreat into the oak, as choosing his fate, and this display of autonomy is a crucial indicator of Tennyson's intended definition of imprisonment. It is important, therefore, not to ignore Tennyson's qualification of the magician's "condition": "he lay as dead." Kaplan himself admits that

Merlin is never persuaded to give [Vivien] the charm. He is simply outlasted and 'overworn'. Vivien's attacks upon the 'Table Round' and Camelot, despite Merlin's knowledge of the beginnings of corruption and the ruin that is to come, do not undermine his confidence in the essential goodness and nobility of his and Arthur's creations. . . . 30

It seems possible, moreover, to describe Arthur himself as Merlin's creation. In "The Coming of Arthur" Merlin brings forth the king from the magical wave in much the same way that he erects Camelot to music in "Gareth and Lynette." Since Tennyson makes explicit the fact that Merlin yields physically, not intellectually, and since Arthur is himself part of the intellectual Merlin, then the poet's most priceless gift, his creative idea (and so, by extension, the poet himself), is never defeated. As Kaplan points out, though to different purpose:

Tennyson has Merlin himself make absolutely clear that he has not been deceived or persuaded by Vivien's vilification. In lines 807-836 Merlin condemns Vivien as 'plotter', 'harlot', 'flatterer', and concludes that 'I am weary of her'. . . . 31

The poem's emphasis on Arthur's unblemished virtue, the mention of cyclical ideas such as the "spring" in Merlin's blood, and the powerful symbol of the cleansing storm, together with the evidence of Merlin's intellectual chastity, all suggest that a positive idea underscores the notion of retreat. Whatever meaning is affixed to the oak, it is clear that Merlin's movement to the "speaking walls" of its interior is a movement away from the despair of a crumbling society, toward a reaffirmation of the poetic ideal.

The first indication that Tennyson meant the oak as a positive symbol was his substitution, in 1886, of the word "ivied" for the word "ruin'd." The bleak finality of the evoked image is cast off by the substitution, giving the oak, with its link to the "time when first the question rose/ About the founding of a Table Round," a certain venerability similar to that of Merlin and the values he represents.

Secondly, the purgatorial storm is expressly shown to fuse with its sister image of the oak, and, if the former is accepted as a positive symbol, then the latter, too, must be viewed as positive. Just as the raging tempest rids the hollow oak of its rotten branch, so it furrows a nearby oak tree:

when out of heaven a bolt  
 (For now the storm was close above them) struck,  
 Furrowing a giant oak, and javelining  
 With darted spikes and splinters of the wood  
 The dark earth round. He raised his eyes and saw  
 The tree that shone white-listed through the gloom.

The manner in which the giant oak is "furrowed" prior to Merlin's internment invites comparisons to be drawn between the newly bored tree and the original hollow oak. The connection, linked as it is to the divine ("out of heaven a bolt"), suggests that Tennyson's Biblical concept of oak and prophet is very much at work in the shaping of the scene. The wording of the passage, for example, invokes a Biblical notion of revelation: Merlin raises his eyes and suddenly sees the tree, like a truth, shining "through the gloom." The wording invites a further connection with at least one other pattern in the Idylls. Just as Arthur's vision "[w]as all so clear about him" at the time of his greatest promise, Merlin's vision is suddenly equally sharp and focussed at his moment of salvation. And lest the analogy be considered too strained, it should be remembered that Vivien is described by Merlin as part of the "mind-mist" that oppressed him earlier in the poem. The "giant oak," seemingly created by the heavenly bolt, appears as almost a divine response to Vivien's injunction: "May you just heaven, . . . send/ One flash . . . if I lie." This central image of the "white-listed" oak, then (one which unites all the major symbols of the poem into one and allies them, it seems, with Merlin), specifically dispels, rather than intensifies, the gloom which has been shown, both in "Merlin and Vivien" and in the Idylls, as a negative factor. It does not seem strained, therefore, to suggest that a poet determined to portray a defeat would not dispel the symbolic gloom marking his character's defeat, but would do the opposite; that Tennyson chose to "enlighten" Merlin at the end of the poem, signals a positive end, or, at the very least, renders questionable the absolute interpretations that have been traditionally ascribed to the work.

A third indication of the oak's positive value is made plain through Tennyson's deviation from the pre-established pattern of his sources. That he was aware of

the finality his predecessors ascribed to Merlin's incarceration is evidenced by the fact that he retained the "prison" motif in the early draft of his Arthurian "musical masque." But when he wrote "Merlin and Vivien," he rejected this notion of unwilling, or unavoidable, captivity. In the poem there is no struggle on Merlin's part, only a seemingly quiescent relinquishment. In Malory, Merlin is tricked into going "under [the] stone" that will serve as his prison, and Vivien ensures that "he came never out, for all the craft that he could do."<sup>32</sup> Tennyson's Merlin, however, invites Vivien into the hollow oak, and what ensues is an almost ritualistic preparation, on Merlin's part, to release the "Vivien" aspect of his imagination.<sup>33</sup> The "change of glare and gloom" and the bellowing tempest take on a mythopoetic significance, and, cloaked in strongly sexual imagery, denote the final struggle between the opposing forces of positive and negative imagination.

In view of the "positive" quality of the major symbols, it would seem that Vivien is cast out of the poet's inner sanctum, and from the immediate vicinity of the forest. The ridiculousness of Vivien's belief that "I have made his glory mine" is foreshadowed six hundred lines earlier:

And Vivien ever sought to work the charm  
 Upon the great Enchanter of the Time,  
 As *fancying* that her glory would be great  
 According to his greatness whom she quenched.  
 (Italics mine)

The authorial tone makes clear that Vivien's dream is pure, unattainable fancy. In this light, the closing lines take on new significance:

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

It is not Vivien who shuts Merlin away, but the forest which closes the "harlot" out; the echoing of "fool" is intended not for the great sage, but for Vivien, who actually believes that she has succeeded in stealing the fame of her "lord and liege."<sup>34</sup>

The reading that this chapter sets forth inevitably contains certain failings; and yet, all the interpretations of "Merlin and Vivien" which adhere to either the defeated artist, the sense/soul, or the purely sexual conflict theory, offer similar discrepancies. In one case, for example, the difficulty of making the storm conform to a "negative" reading ~~has been~~ accounted for with the insufficient label of irony brought in to mask the discrepancy. No study has treated the "positive" implications of the poem at any length, and all have chosen, instead, to focus on the more traditional elements of the Merlin story. The poem's troubling contradictions suggest that the discrepancies are a result of the author's, rather than critics's, confusion over what direction the poem is moving in. This confusion reflects Tennyson's inability to decide clearly whether or not retreat is a positive, or a solipsistic, solution. His hesitancy to commit himself fully to one position or another has created troubling contradictions in the poem, such as the authorial voice claiming that Merlin "let his wisdom go," and a concurrent contradictory intimation that Merlin uses the charm, in Kaplan's words, "through Vivien upon himself."<sup>35</sup> The final "self-incarceration" can be explained through the argument that Merlin is an

artist figure in the Romantic tradition, who, utterly depressed with his inability to sustain the quality of his art, abandons the fight; thus, Merlin's "self-incarceration" is a form of artistic suicide. But this seemingly plausible exegesis falters when one remembers that Merlin never yields intellectually, and more importantly, never abandons his belief in the principle upon which Camelot is based. Perhaps all that can actually be said is that, because of his own hesitancy over how to handle the tale, Tennyson provided, either consciously or unconsciously, a two-tiered narrative framework. On the first level can be found the traditional tale replete with its conventional characteristics: a doddering, impassioned mage, a sultry temptress, and even an ambiguous finale that allowed for a standard reading necessary to keep the tale consistent with an Arthurian framework. On the second level, however, can be found a more complex and original description of a tortured artist retreating from a lowly world. While the authorial voice expounds a traditional tale in one voice, the symbols used, much of the poem's language, and the work's inner logic intimate, sotto voce, that the story is meant to deviate from its traditional format.

The final question, then, is this: does the theory of the retreat necessitate belief in a defeat? and is it linked to the prison imagery of the tower? To a certain extent, Merlin's retreat does suggest a failing. Tennyson, like his fictional character, was obsessed with the "high ideal" and strove, throughout his work, to be a spokesman for his age. The Idylls communicates the despair of a certain failure, of art deteriorating and escaping the artist's control. The enormous responsibility of the artist is powerfully conveyed by Merlin's "great melancholy" which becomes an emblem for Victorian responsibility. The poet's attempt to sustain creativity in the face of societal changes dramatizes the

difficulties facing the poet, that is, the feelings of impotence to which he is inevitably susceptible. On one level, then, Merlin's retreat must be seen as an unqualified defeat, representing as it does the artist's inability to sustain the creative imagination. If, in the context of the Victorian fear of "useless" art, Merlin's retreat is a failing, then defeat is undeniable, for it demonstrates a recognition that art, no matter how well intentioned, can be essentially destructive if it is untimely; the noble song chases away the golden-horned hart. But that the ideal survives the social decay, and in this case the ideal must be seen as Arthur himself, is a victory all the greater. For, on another level, Merlin transmutes the grief for the actual demise of the social ideal into a victory for the ideal itself -- that is, Merlin's internment represents the overt failing of the public artist, but the inner triumphing of the individual, the private poet. However one evaluates defeat or victory, one must concede that in "Merlin and Vivien" it is society, and not the poet, which is incapable of sustaining the poetic vision.

Tennyson's disenchantment with the poet's social value is undeniable; what characterizes his own internal battle, however, is not the absence of hope, but the gradual strengthening of his belief in himself, so evident in In Memoriam and stronger still in "Merlin and Vivien." Merlin represents this belief, this confidence in literature as "the highest expression of human life."<sup>36</sup> If what is understood by "art" is that which enriches and uplifts man, then it is not unrealistic to conclude that Camelot in decay has become the tower -- the stifling, distorted realm of sensual values embodied by Vivien. The enchanter's retreat represents a movement out of the world of distorted images and the "region of shadows" of the Lady of Shalott's tower.<sup>37</sup> Merlin's move into the oak, like the Lady of Shalott's final boat ride along the "broad stream," Galahad's

crossing of the bridge of fire, or the ancient sage's "one last year among the hills," frees him from the corrupted ideals and lifts him closer to the "Nameless" power.

In a sense, the poet's traditional role has always been a reclusive one, and Merlin, as a visionary poet, merely exhibits a conventional need for solitude. As Dwight Kalita notes, "a mystic is one who is in the process of gaining an apprehension of a divine spiritual Reality which he discovers in a silent, ecstatic, contemplative state of mind. In as much as the mystic always remains silent during his ecstatic vision of Reality, there has developed a strong association of secrecy and/or mystery with visionary philosophies."<sup>38</sup> Tennyson employed this association and "regarded isolation not merely as the source of despondency but also on occasion as the prelude to vision."<sup>39</sup> In "Merlin and Vivien" the connection between vision and isolation is developed several times. Merlin's "dreams and darkness" prompt him to seek privacy in the Forest of Broceliande, and when, instead, he is badgered by Vivien, he retreats still further to the safety of his inner thoughts. In his silence, which is powerfully linked to the storm through the lines "the dark wood grew darker toward the storm/ In silence," Merlin is, in fact, retreating to "the innermost sanctuary of his being"<sup>40</sup> away from "'the goodly show' of the visible world" and actively in search of a "deeper vision."<sup>41</sup> Merlin's apotheosis is reached, as Kalita says of another character, Percivale, "[o]nly by silent contemplation (i.e., by going into the 'inner temple' of vision)." It is solely by doing this that "a man [can] come to the full, conscious realization of the ecstatic vision of Spirit."<sup>42</sup> The images of isolation and retreat, therefore, do not necessarily imply irresponsibility or cowardice, but may suggest a strength of character and a belief in one's private vision. Moreover, in spite of Tennyson's own need for

privacy and despite his fear of the corrupting influences of society on poetry, the retreat he proposes never becomes an endorsement of total social disengagement. On the contrary, retreat is depicted as withdrawing into "the Temple-cave of thine own self," as the ancient sage phrases it, in order to "haply learn the Nameless hath a voice."

One tale within the framework of "Merlin and Vivien" works as an analogue describing in microcosm the dangers both of solipsism and of worldliness. In recounting to Vivien the legend of the charm, Merlin describes a wondrous tale of a powerful hermit and a bewitched Queen. The former, according to Merlin, is inveigled upon to teach the charm of entrapment to the Queen's husband so that her charms may be kept hidden from all the kingdom. Merlin states that the hermit is "not like me"; rather, the hermit is an example of isolated art, and the power of such art is represented as destructive, even self-destructive. The "one book" the hermit is "ever reading" causes him to waste away, to be

So grated down and filed away with thought,  
So lean his eyes were monstrous; while the skin  
Clung but to crate and basket, ribs and spine.

The hermit's extreme sacrifices ("he kept his mind on one sole aim,/ Nor ever touched fierce wine, nor tasted flesh,/ Nor owned a sensual wish") bring him heightened vision but are in fact useless since they benefit no one. The "little glassy-headed hairless man" merely wastes away, is wizened and monstrous, the epitome of solipsistic knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

The king and his court, quick to kill for what they selfishly desire, are symbolic of Camelot in decay. By bringing the hermit into the framework of this

corrupt society, Tennyson brilliantly foreshadows the destruction that would follow if Merlin were to yield his "art" for corrupt purposes. Conveniently, Tennyson does not have to sacrifice his mystic to make the point. When the hermit is made "by force" to teach "the King to charm the Queen," he goes back to his "old wild" and loses his function as a magician; his book, symbol of his magical power, is passed down to Merlin. To give in to base pressures, in other words, is anathema to "use and name and fame."

The Queen's power can be likened to the hermit's, for it is described in blatantly mystical terms. Her "charm/ Of nature" is expressly depicted as of a kind which overpowers that of other mystics. Her role in the tale is to represent hoarded, and, therefore, purposeless art, one that is ultimately directionless as it cannot be controlled; moreover, her power is divorced further from usefulness by the hermit's charm which removes her from any social context. Her beauty is as irrelevant as that of the statues in the palace of art -- utterly useless in its confined space where it is the subject of the King's admiration alone.

The Queen's trance has often been compared to Merlin's final state, but the similarities are superficial. To begin with, although Merlin is eventually incarcerated through the same "charm," he, as it has been suggested, is responsible for his own imprisonment; the Queen, on the other hand, is an outright victim. Furthermore, the legend is a creation of Merlin's for the purpose of explaining the charm, and its uses, to Vivien. Merlin, therefore, is a storyteller in full control of the information he is providing, potentially for dramatic effect. Finally, the Queen, if seen as a comparable artist figure, can only be said to have left an ephemeral product behind: the disarray caused by her "charms"; she does not create a figure such as Arthur who lives on after her "departure."

The Queen, in Merlin's words, loses "all use of life" (italics mine). In a passage cited earlier, however, Merlin describes his future "condition" as a loss of "name and fame," not "use," for he realizes that his own retreat is of a different nature. His reasons for retreating, it would seem, are anything but selfish or solipsistic. Merlin's powers, at their zenith when they serve a social purpose, are now fading through corruption of the ideal; all that remains for him to do, therefore, is to retreat until the time is right for him to reappear and once more "work his work." Unlike the hermit, Merlin never yields to compromise or force.

Tennyson himself, at one point in his career, found it necessary to retreat from the public forefront and reassess his role as poet. His son stated that, as a result of the "'croak of the raven', the harsh voice of those who were unsympathetic":

The light retreated  
The landskip darken'd,  
The melody deaden'd. . . .

Still the inward voice told him not to be faint-hearted  
but to follow his ideal. And by . . . the harmonies of nature,  
. . . the inspiration of the poet was renewed.<sup>44</sup>

Buckley describes the "hushed moments of withdrawal from . . . society" as a "state [which] always brought with it a greatly heightened consciousness of individuality and then a sudden release, a dissolving of the limits of selfhood until the infinite alone seemed real,"<sup>45</sup> a condition that Tennyson himself described as "the only true life."<sup>46</sup>

Retreat, then, is neither negative nor final. Tennyson had been "defeated" by the "harsh voice" of the unsympathetic, but his withdrawal was only temporary until he could return again ~~more~~ strongly. Fittingly, his return eventually led to "the chief work of his manhood,"<sup>47</sup> the Idylls of the King. Though Camelot may appear to have failed, the true artistic vision, Arthur, is elevated and perpetuated by Merlin's apotheosis.

In Tennyson's Camelot, David Staines suggests that the "central character, on whom he [Tennyson] structured his Arthurian world" is Guinevere.<sup>48</sup> But if Tennyson's structural signifier is the troubled queen of Camelot, the ideological cornerstone is Merlin. More than simply a reflection of the mystic qualities of life, more than a mere analogue for sense, or soul, or intellect, Merlin is a personification of Tennyson's aesthetic theory, a crucial embodiment of the conflict that arises when a poet is forced into the position of evaluating, and determining, his artistic direction. Merlin -- trapped within and embodying this dilemma -- is one of the frankest, most engaging pictures ever painted, of the struggle that is a writer's: choosing whether to prostitute, compromise, sacrifice, or maintain the high ideal that is the ostensible target of all art. And Merlin's victory over the spurious panacea offered by compromise is perhaps the most surprising and grandest of victories in all of the Idylls, and, one could perhaps add, in Victorian literature in general. One tends to believe that Merlin, like Tennyson, will emerge from the "[c]louds and darkness" which have "[c]losed upon Camelot" and "come out victorious to find 'a stronger faith his own', and a hope for himself, for all those in sorrow and for universal humankind."<sup>49</sup>

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A City of Enchanters

Tennyson spent almost seventy years imagining, designing and completing the Idylls of the King, yet despite the enormous time differential, the work is remarkably homogeneous and consistent.<sup>1</sup> The unity of imagery, theme and symbolism extends to a similar consistency regarding the characterization of the figures who inhabit the Idylls. Those who change, such as Guinevere and Pelleas, do so as a result of legitimate causal developments.

In view of this consistency, it is strange to find one figure whose character and acts are neither clear nor consistent. Merlin, more than any other figure among the Idylls' *dramatis personae*, exhibits a puzzling mutability that is, at first glance, inexplicable. He is the cryptic, off-scene enigma of "The Coming of Arthur," the mischievous, energetic riddler of "Gareth and Lynette," the disconsolate poet of "Merlin and Vivien," the mysterious, unseen influence in "The Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettarre," and "The Last Tournament," and, finally, the wistfully invoked figure of "The Passing of Arthur."

More than simply inconsistent, Merlin appears as two distinctly different characters in the Idylls: the poet-figure of "Merlin and Vivien," and the teacher-figure of the later *idylls*. The mystic's changeability, compounded by the inherent binarism of the two Merlins, creates a perplexing contradiction in the work. The situation, however, does not reflect an unresolvable dilemma for, beyond the initial "tension" created by the Merlin enigma, lies a tightly

organized framework that explains the seeming inconsistencies and justifies the duality.

Merlin's protean qualities, at first diffuse and ambiguous, coincide with a parallel deterioration in the positive thematic elements in the poem. Merlin is at his zenith as a teacher and poet when Camelot is at the zenith of its glory. Moreover, he knows a similar decline as the seasons change and the various idylls move toward a grey, hibernal close. Mage Merlin, then, is the product of a deliberate and carefully crafted "inconsistency" and necessarily depends on this variability to "work his work."

Part of the mage's work in all but the "Merlin and Vivien" idyll is to mirror the decay of the social ideal and the decline of civilization. He is, therefore, a changeling by design; because of his specific course through the idylls, however, his inconsistency is anything but haphazard.

The duality that arises between the enchanter of "Merlin and Vivien" and the enchanter of the later idylls can also be explained in relation to the latter's function as a mirror of society's decline. Since it is Tennyson's purpose to model his character along the design of the Idylls as well as to explore the effects of this decline on a solitary artist figure -- a task that necessitates separate poet figures -- it is necessary for him to create separate analogues of each. "Merlin and Vivien," therefore, is an internal reflection of the artist's struggle with the private artistic vision, and the second Merlin is an external reflection of the poet's role in society. There are two Merlins in the Idylls of the King, therefore, and two inherent structural currents, which, although apparently arbitrary and contradictory, articulate with great precision and coherence the duality of the artistic role: its inherent contradictions and its dramatic similarities.

As an introspective artist, Tennyson was mainly preoccupied with the private role of the poet. It is fitting, then, that he began what would eventually become the "chief work of his manhood" with the singular "Merlin and Vivien" poem. Unlike its companion idylls, "Merlin and Vivien" stands alone as a portrait of an artist no longer preoccupied with duty, but intent, instead, on self-preservation. Merlin, as he appears in this poem, is a complex and psychologically revealing poet-figure, beset by doubts and temptations, a seer whose outlook and beliefs reflect a strong Victorian temperament (a concern for private vision and social responsibility), who no longer believes in the ability of his public to comprehend or benefit from poetry's enlightening qualities.

The "Merlin and Vivien" character (unlike his later counterpart who still believes in poetry's instructive role), is unconcerned with teaching. Although he does attempt briefly to instruct Vivien in the proper application of her talent, the emphasis of the poem is on a greater concern, one already beyond the problems of education. The early Merlin character has abandoned his social role in an attempt to salvage the private vision. Faced with an audience tragically incapable of learning, Merlin must preserve the ideal for the future in the hope that some day a receptive audience will re-emerge.

Of the 1859 quartet of poems first published as the Idylls of the King,<sup>2</sup> only "Merlin and Vivien" deals in any way with Merlin. In contradistinction to the figure delineated in 1859, the Merlin of the 1869 and later idylls marks a return to the prophet figures who peopled Tennyson's early poetry, and also reflects a more precise control over the figure as "device" which is the result of a maturer mind and increased technical skills. Recalling a bardo-druidic impress that is the root of the Laureate's concept of sages, the Merlin of "The Coming of Arthur" or "Gareth and Lynette," for example, reflects a closer

connection with the "public" and is more closely affiliated with the learning/teaching dialectic developed in Tennyson's early pre-Idylls poetry.

In many ways, then, the later Merlin is a regressive as well as more naïve figure, a character who still believes in the possibility of the social role. Concerned with functionalism in didactic art, the Merlin of 1869 is blind to the "coming wave," to the possibility of an unreceptive audience. As he progresses from "The Coming of Arthur" through to "The Passing of Arthur," the reader is shown the effects of society's decline on the poet's art, not necessarily on the poet himself.<sup>3</sup>

In "The Coming of Arthur," Tennyson introduces the creator of art; in "Gareth and Lynette," the self-confident and cocky young artist; in "The Holy Grail," the lost artist whose "art" remains to influence the receptive few; in the grimmer "Pelleas and Ettarre" and "The Last Tournament" idylls, the dream gone sour, the deterioration complete. In one measure, the Idylls is a picture of the defeat of the poetic ideal; in a larger and more relevant context, a picture of the loss of the "audience's" ability to appreciate the poetic product. In "The Passing of Arthur," the King can only call on Merlin's prophecy (and doubtfully at that), the "art" no longer a comfort except in its wider implication -- in its promise of the return of a new art, and more importantly, of a new audience.

Merlin's function, in all the idylls but "Merlin and Vivien," is as a teacher. His belief in the need to educate, and his methods of teaching, stem from various sources. On the one hand, Merlin reveals Tennyson's Victorian belief in the poet's social role and teaches as part of that function; on the other hand, the sage reflects a much older notion of pedagogy dating back to

ancient Welsh practices, and his method of teaching, a puzzling triplet non-answer, derives directly from this latter influence:

Merlin's verses in these idylls take the form of the "tribanan" or triplet of the ancient Welsh bard. . . . These poems, in which each of three lines presents a discrete thought, were used by the Druids as teaching devices to inculcate moral precepts in their hearers.<sup>4</sup>

In "The Coming of Arthur" this approach to teaching is first used by Merlin to answer Bellicent's query concerning Arthur's birth. Bellicent's question, however, emerges at the close of a puzzling series of expositional manoeuvres that need to be closely examined since they reveal Tennyson's complex, and seemingly unnecessary, use of interdependent narrative devices as carefully thought out procedures.

In elucidating Arthur's past, Tennyson deftly created a corollary "history of Merlin." From the beginning of the Idylls, Merlin and Arthur are closely linked, almost as artist and artwork. In offering information concerning one, Tennyson automatically reveals the other. The Laureate's approach, however, is confusing since he places the expositional responsibility in the mouths of three separate and apparently unreliable speakers.

Leodogran, uncertain of Arthur's heritage, asks his chamberlain for information. The old man tells him: "there be but two old men that know:/ And each is twice as old as I; and one / Is Merlin, the wise man." Rather than elucidate Leodogran, the chamberlain goes on to say that the future alone will reveal the facts behind Arthur's birth. The second voice, Bedivere's, relies on a series of "facts" to convince Leodogran that Arthur is a true king. He explains, without ceremony, how Arthur was conceived by Ygerne, and delivered to Merlin,

who later crowned him king.

Bellicent's testimony, the most personal of all, relates her belief that Arthur is King, since, when they were children, he always behaved in a regal manner, and always treated her attentively. She then substantiates this feeling with a coda, Bleys' account of Arthur's birth. Bellicent, in directly seeking confirmation of this story from Merlin himself, is answered with "riddling triplets":

Rain, rain, and sun! a rainbow in the sky!  
 A young man will be wiser by and by;  
 An old man's wit may wander ere he die.  
 Rain, rain, and sun! a rainbow on the lea!  
 And truth is this to me, and that to thee;  
 And truth or clothed or naked let it be.  
 Rain, sun, and rain! and the free blossom blows:  
 Sun, rain, and sun! and where is he who knows?  
 From the great deep to the great deep he goes.<sup>5</sup>

As Stevenson suggests, these lines "offer in veiled form an indirect prophecy of the course of Arthur's kingdom and the pattern of all life."<sup>6</sup> More importantly, they serve as "pedagogical tools" designed to "lead the mind from empirical observations of life or history to a recognition of a larger and more complex pattern of meaning in the universe than can be deduced from individual experience."<sup>7</sup>

Tennyson's seemingly confusing, or indirect, approach to the giving of information can be explained along similar lines. Like his mystic persona, he offers information in the form of a prose "tribānan." The three progressively more involved pictures lead the reader (in this case, Leodogran) to an entirely different level of knowledge, to a wider perspective than he would normally have access to. This technique explains, in part, Leodogran's jarring unjustified

leap from doubt to belief. Still musing whether to answer "yea or nay," the old king forestalls his decision through sleep. Rather than escape his dilemma, the old king "[d]oubted, and drowsed, nodded and slept, and saw"; his mind, in sleep, is clearly actively responding to Merlin's indirect stimulus; he awakens with broadened awareness. Merlin, "like an oracle, uses riddles to suggest verities that are difficult for the human mind to grasp; his perplexing and elusive utterances force the individual hearer to evolve the truth of them for himself."<sup>8</sup> Rather than the result of an unjustified leap, Leodogran's unequivocal certainty of Arthur's worth evolves partially through stages. In his sleep, he has taken the necessary steps for learning.

The Welsh triplets teach by moving the hearer from empirical to universal truth. Although Tennyson's three prose models appear to be in the inverse of the prescribed order, moving as they do from the highly subjective to the objective, on closer examination they are found to concur exactly with the prescribed progression.

In his inability to elucidate his king as to Arthur's lineage, the "hoary" chamberlain can rely only on one form of answer: a general truth. When he states "there be but two old men that know," the chamberlain is identifying age -- experience -- as a basic wisdom.<sup>9</sup> Thus, all the adjectives recall a temporal sagacity but imply, as well, an atemporal and ubiquitous level of unchanging truth. Age, associated with wisdom, is the only basis for evidence offered: "two old men"; "twice as old"; "the wise man." Unconsciously recognizing the limitations of such empirical information, Leodogran seeks more definite evidence.

Bedivere provides what becomes a two-tiered answer, deceiving in its form, but clearly in accordance with Tennyson's approach. When Bedivere, "the first of all [Arthur's] knights," begins his account of the king's birth, he uses a series of empirical facts. He explains how Arthur was begotten and "[d]elivered . . .

[t]o Merlin." The knight's account loses its "factual" quality, however, and assumes a mystical tone hinting at a higher level of experience by linking Merlin with a different type of mysticism, that represented by the Lady of the Lake. She who "knows a subtler magic" than Merlin himself moves the biography beyond the realm of empirical data and hints at a greater, and more complex, level of experience.

In the third testimony, Tennyson reveals an even greater paradox, distorting the parameters of phenomenal logic by turning the most "reliable" account (Bellicent's narration of personal experience), into the least "accessible" (Arthur's fantastic birth on the magical ninth wave). When Bellicent seeks from Merlin a straightforward explanation to Bleys' account, Merlin disregards her simplistic approach and answers her with what is potentially a consciousness-raising riddle. The teaching aid's success is reflected in Bellicent's implicit understanding of the promise of Arthur ("so great bards of him will sing / Hereafter") and in Leodogran's acceptance of Arthur's heritage after hearing the rhyme ("And Leodogran awoke . . . answering yea").

Merlin is most fervent in his attempts to educate society when he is at his zenith as poet and teacher. Naturally, his success as a teacher occurs during the most positive idylls, that is, those reflecting both Camelot and Merlin at their harmonious peaks. In "Gareth and Lynette" Merlin uses a similar teaching implement to the triads, this time to inculcate moral values in the youthful Gareth. Queen Bellicent's naive but well-meaning son, desiring literal truth, approaches the "city of Enchanters" undaunted by his companions' fears that the "King is not the King, / But only changeling out of Fairyland." Gareth refuses to heed his companions' superstitious fears that all the good of Camelot has been wrought by "Merlin's glamour" and therefore does not exist.

There is a marked difference between superstition and "vision," and Gareth is sadly unable to rise above the phenomenological to the spiritual, even though he has defeated the superstitious. Gareth's bravado -- his belief that he can "plunge old Merlin in the Arabian sea" -- actually masks an inherent blindness, not to the power of the sage, but to the implications of a greater sphere of experience, to what F.E.L. Priestley has called "the primacy of the Unseen, the ultimate reality of the Spiritual."<sup>10</sup> When Gareth is met by an "ancient man, / Long-bearded," he seeks to allay his companions' fears and requests of Merlin an unequivocal explanation for what his intuition fails to comprehend. Merlin's lengthy veiled response makes it clear that there is no such certainty, that intuition is in fact the only truth:

Then that old Seer made answer playing on him  
 And saying, 'Son, I have seen the good ship sail  
 Keel upward, and mast downward, in the heavens,  
 And solid turrets topsy-turvy in air:  
 And here is truth; but an it please thee not,  
 Take thou the truth as thou hast told it me.  
 For truly as thou sayest, a Fairy King  
 And Fairy Queens have built the city, son;  
 They came from out a sacred mountain-cleft  
 Toward the sunrise, each with harp in hand,  
 And built it to the music of their harps.  
 And, as thou sayest, it is enchanted, son,  
 For there is nothing in it as it seems  
 Saving the King; though some there be that hold  
 The King a shadow, and the city real:  
 Yet take thou heed of him, for, so thou pass  
 Beneath this archway, then wilt thou become  
 A thrall to his enchantments, for the King  
 Will bind thee by such vows, as is a shame  
 A man should not be bound by, yet the which  
 No man can keep; but, so thou dread to swear,  
 Pass not beneath this gateway, but abide  
 Without, among the cattle of the field.  
 For an ye heard the music, like enow  
 They are building still, seeing the city is built  
 To music, therefore never built at all.  
 And therefore built for ever.'

In his confusing riddle Merlin states expressly that of all "magic" the strongest is that which derives from the power of belief, or faith. Thus, Merlin equates the enchantments that built the city with the power of the King's belief, a power that can enslave a man: "then wilt thou become / A thrall to his enchantments."

Enraged by Merlin's "mockery," Gareth reproaches the mystic for his irreverence, and, like his mother before him, is consciously unaware of the possibility for learning. The Seer, however, condescends to reveal his approach, then riddles once more:

Know ye not then the Riddling of the Bards?  
 "Confusion, and illusion, and relation,  
 Elusion, and occasion, and evasion"?  
 I mock thee not but as thou mockest me,  
 And all that see thee, for thou art not who  
 Thou seemest, but I know thee who thou art.

This time, aided in a circuitous way by Merlin, Gareth understands, if not the entire surface meaning, at least the essential meaning beneath the surface.

Stevenson believes the first part of the rhyme suggests the "unreliability" of appearances, of "the surface of reality," whereas the second part shows "the problem of making connections, of establishing logical or causal relationships."<sup>11</sup>

Together with the earlier "Rain, rain, and sun" triplet, the rhyming passages do more than represent the inherent unreliability of surface truths. They also portray Merlin the teacher in his highest, richest, and most confident period.

In "The Holy Grail" Merlin appears as a completely different figure from in the earlier idylls. His "art," no longer described in the present tense, is removed from the present active and subsumed to the past active. Merlin is no longer a poet who creates rhymes; rather, he is a poet who has created. The first

reference to Merlin in this idyll, therefore, is to his "vacant chair, / Fashioned by Merlin ere he past away." Merlin's "spiritual imagination,"<sup>12</sup> symbolized by the Siege Perilous, is shown to have claimed the lives of both the creator as well as the most worthy listener, Galahad. Rather than a completely destructive analogue, Tennyson himself reveals that the siege is "Perilous for good and ill." As in the "Merlin and Vivien" poem, the disappearance of Merlin is once again described in terms that blur distinctions. Although no longer actively created, Merlin's power and use as a teacher remain powerful enough to influence the worthy few. Galahad, seated in "Merlin's chair," is given the strength of will to seek the Grail.

Arthur immediately recognizes the rarity and selectivity of "vision." Addressing himself to Galahad, he says: "for such / As thou art is the vision, not for these." The "ill" side of the perilous seat reveals itself in the failure of the King's knights both to recognize their own limitations and to "lose" themselves. In expressing the sad tragedy of their new ill-founded vows, Arthur uses an interesting analogy. He compares Galahad to the "greatest of the ancient Welsh bards":<sup>13</sup> "Taliessin is our fullest throat of song, / And one hath sung and all the dumb will sing." Such a comparison emphasizes Tennyson's equation of chosen, visionary individuals with poet figures.

The remaining knights, precipitating the fall of Camelot by their "dumb" imitation of Galahad, are clearly shown to be blindly as well as dumbly treading where they have no place.<sup>14</sup> Tennyson's belief that the defeat is societal rather than personal is seen in the existence of Merlin's hall. A monument to past, present and future, to what was, is and will be, the "mighty hall, / [w]hich Merlin built for Arthur long ago!" typifies the degree to which the pedagogical has changed. No longer an actively created art, it is that which

was created "long ago." Nevertheless, its potential for teaching, though diminished, is not eliminated, despite the King's fear that "the work by Merlin wrought, / Dreamlike, should on the sudden vanish." The old teaching rhymes still exist in the form of the "four great zones of sculpture," and of the allegorical "message" the statues represent.

Although Merlin is no longer present to apply actively his lessons, his static rhymes are still instructive to those who can interpret them, characters such as Galahad or Arthur. Stevenson suggests that these sculptures work in a similar way to the triads, leading the mind from one level of knowledge to another:

And four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt  
 With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall:  
 And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,  
 And in the second men are slaying beasts,  
 And on the third are warriors, perfect men,  
 And on the fourth are men with growing wings,  
 And over all one statue in the mould  
 Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown,  
 And peaked wings pointed to the Northern Star.

The final image of a crowned Arthur reminds all those who see the statues of the inevitable result of spiritual goodness. Unfortunately, unlike the triads, the statues do not have the same communicability; they do not have a similar power to enlighten. The "art," therefore, is here weaker than in the first two idylls, for, where Merlin's rhymes could not be avoided (since they were directed at an intended listener), the sculptures can easily be ignored by the receptive though unformed mind.

The stained glass windows, unlike the sculptures, have a temporal form: "This realistic, historical art exists in time and thus can render only that

which has taken place in time, past and present events."<sup>15</sup> The windows depict the actual state of the kingdom, as opposed to the sculptures which show the possible direction the kingdom can take. The tentativeness of the promised "fourth zone" is made dramatically obvious at the close of the idyll by the "gale" that

shook this newer, stronger hall of ours,  
And from the statue Merlin moulded for us  
Half-wrenched a golden wing.

The winged statues; symbols of man's potential spiritual ascension, are suddenly pulled from their untouchable atemporal context and made subject to temporal decay. The ideal is no longer untouchable; the final window, it seems, will remain blank.

With the close of "The Holy Grail," Merlin all but disappears. As a positive symbol of growth, imagination and hope there is very little place for him. His final appearances, in "Pelleas and Ettarre," "The Last Tournament," and "The Passing of Arthur," therefore, constitute a sad deterioration of stature for the mystic, but more dramatically, for society.

In "Pelleas and Ettarre," Pelleas' final association with the former order -- Arthur's hall -- is symbolically "fired" by another member of the Round Table, Gawain: "The hall of Merlin, and the morning star / Reeled in the smoke, brake into flame, and fell." Merlin's creation, in falling, precipitates Pelleas' fall. When next referred to, Merlin's hall is described as a "[b]lack nest of rats" built "too high." Heaven is no longer affiliated with divinity or dignity; rather, the sky, "[b]lackening," connotes death: "High up in heaven the hall that Merlin built, / Blackening against the dead-green stripes of even" (italics

mine). May, that season of brightness and rejuvenation and of the "spring of life" is replaced, significantly, by death and blackening of night, by the "summer night" of this idyll.

Tristram's reference to Merlin in "The Last Tournament" strongly emphasizes the mounting decay, and the magician's increasingly lower status. It is significant that Tristram, in condemning "Merlin's mystic babble," attacks exactly that which was most representative of growth in the Idylls. The "mystic babble" refers in part to "that weird legend of [Arthur's] birth," but also, indirectly, to the rhyming technique presented in that same passage. Society's decline is placed into radical perspective by emphasizing the inability of its people to decipher or intuit the meaning of the babble.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in "The Passing of Arthur," society's low point is poignantly emphasized by a parallel questioning of the value of Merlin's word. That it is Arthur who questions underscores the tragedy and the extent of the decline. Arthur's doubt in the cyclicity of time, despite Merlin's guarantee of the return of a new order, marks the nadir of the Idylls' movement:

I think that we  
Shall never more, at any future time,  
Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,  
Walking about the gardens and the halls  
Of Camelot, as in the days that were.  
I perish by this people which I made, --  
Though Merlin sware that I should come again  
To rule once more.

Ironically, the message of hope, while undercut through doubt in Merlin's words, is also reinforced by belief in them. In the opening of "The Last Tournament," "the strange rhyme / Of bygone Merlin" runs "across . . . [Guinevere's] memory." As Stevenson states, "Merlin's gnomic statement . . . acquires the status of eternal,

indisputable truth."<sup>17</sup> Bedivere's recollection seems to catalyze him into action:

he ascends the crag 'even to the highest he could climb' in order to catch a further glimpse of Arthur. The words of the bard cannot 'shake society' and change the course of history as they did in 1830, but they can at least offer consolation to the despairing individual and keep alive the hope that the future may bring with it a revivication of the ideal.<sup>18</sup>

Merlin's rhyme, then, becomes a link with those who can dream. In a skilful way, Tennyson has represented the paradoxical effects of language -- specifically poetic language -- on society by demonstrating how language measures society's deterioration as well as how it epitomizes its salvation.

F.E.L. Priestley divided the Idylls into three groups "corresponding closely to the three acts of modern drama."<sup>19</sup> His division saw the Idylls split into groups of four with "The Coming of Arthur," "Gareth and Lynette," "The Marriage of Geraint," and "Geraint and Enid" representing an optimistic period in Camelot's history; "Balin and Balan," "Merlin and Vivien," "Lancelot and Elaine," and "The Holy Grail" a second and less optimistic period; finally, "Pelleas and Ettarre," "The Last Tournament," "Guinevere," and "The Passing of Arthur" forming the last and bleakest period.

Priestley's division corresponds exactly with the levels of deterioration Merlin undergoes. Merlin's peak as social instructor occurs in the first "act"; here he exhibits all the teacher characteristics admired by Tennyson (and his Victorian audience). He is a vigorous and enthusiastic figure, actively creating art and attempting to effect substantial and uplifting changes in society. In the second "act," Merlin has disappeared, the productivity replaced by stagnation

and already-formed art pieces. No longer influential, the bard can inspire only those that seek him out, as Galahad did by deliberately sitting in the "Perilous" chair. In the third ~~act~~, Merlin's art is a mirror of the social climate. No longer simply passive, his art but echoes its once active potential, and the pre-created art, such as the statues, is revealed to be in a state of violent decay.

Tennyson's precise manipulation of Merlin's role throughout the Idylls establishes beyond doubt the extent to which he linked Merlin to the work's thematic decline. The second Merlin of the work, designed and incorporated into the Idylls well after the first Merlin of "Merlin and Vivien" was conceived, is used to reflect, and to emphasize, the Idylls' progressive decay. Merlin's function, then, is twofold: first, to reflect the conflicts, fears and alternatives open to the artist, and, second, to mirror the regressive movement (towards the bestial) of the Idylls, and so, to expose the societal frailty at the heart of this reversal.

Together the two enchanters complete a picture that would otherwise be only partially complete. Interestingly, despite the apparent dissimilarity of the characters, both depictions of Merlin suggest that Tennyson believed in the superior nature of private vision. In the first instance, the mage of "Merlin and Vivien" must retreat to the safety of the oak in order to survive; in the second instance, the decay of society made manifest throughout the Idylls seems to indicate that hope for the artist lies principally in individual isolation. The scale, therefore, tips in favour of the solitary artist. Tennyson's belief in the salvation of his most closely self-reflective character, the Merlin of "Merlin and Vivien," is reinforced by the second, or later, Merlin. In the end, Tennyson seems to suggest that only specific individuals -- a Merlin, an Arthur,

a Galahad -- are destined to achieve a spiritual apotheosis.

It is exactly this inclination on Tennyson's part to choose to support one side of the question over the other that is resolved in his last volumes of poetry. Where the binarism and doubt created in the Idylls is resolved by the fusion of the two Merlins into a solitary artist figure, in his remaining volumes of poetry the mystic antinomies are consolidated, but in the middle, rather than at either end of the dilemma. Moreover, the mystics are imbued with the hint of a complex power, an ability to influence and teach from beyond the material world.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Nameless Power

Age never impeded Tennyson's creativity. Even in his later years he continued to be a prolific and inventive writer, experimenting with various poetic forms and ideas, including drama, a genre he had not used since writing The Devil and the Lady in his youth. Unhappy with the reception of his dramatic works,<sup>1</sup> he returned to poetry, publishing four more volumes before his death in 1892. From two of these volumes, Tiresias and Other Poems and Demeter, Akbar's Dream, and Other Poems, emerges a new type of poet/prophet figure who is, in many ways, the natural resolution to the poet's earlier mantic characters.

The most significant alteration made to the mystic character of Tennyson's poetry is seen in the 1885 volume, Tiresias, where two separate poems, "Tiresias" and "The Ancient Sage," resolve a conflict that existed throughout Tennyson's work. All his early mantic figures present one of two positions: either bitterness and defeat, followed often by a vocal condemnation of the cause of this negativity (i.e., society), or equanimity and success over the oppressor followed by an enjoinder to others to forgive or to assist.

The two Merlins of the Idylls provide an excellent example of the bilateral tension in Tennyson's work: two figures so diametrically opposed that the poet believed he must create two separate "losses" for them -- that of the "furrowed oak," and that of the "Siege perilous." Prior to the Tiresias volume the poet makes no attempt to bring together the two factions, sensing his own inability to

reconcile that which he has not worked out for himself. In Tiresias, and again in Demeter, Tennyson is able to merge the two poles, resolving a six-decade-long conflict. The two Merlins of the Idylls re-emerge in the figure of Tiresias, in the philosophical dialectic of "The Ancient Sage," and, finally, in the ultimate picture of reconciliation found in "Merlin and the Gleam" which the poet intended as autobiography.<sup>2</sup>

Toward the end of his life, when his fame was well-established and becoming increasingly encumbering, Tennyson withdrew more than ever from centre stage. Different from his earlier retreat due to "harsh" critical reviews, Tennyson's withdrawal signaled a contentment in his own creative powers and a weariness with popularity. Accordingly, his later poetry reflects this withdrawal revealing "the voice of a man who like the ancient sage has already moved beyond life itself."<sup>3</sup> Although Tennyson was disgruntled by the movement society had taken, the "social lies that warp us from the living truth!" his poetry described not only the bitterness he felt towards this deterioration, but also a contradictory optimism in the "personal," in the "Passion of the Past," and in the power of these to transform, at least in part, the disintegration of the present. In Ballads and Other Poems, "Columbus" and "The Voyage of Maeldune" typify this polarity -- the tension between the bitter and the accepting poet.

"Columbus" depicts a visionary's reluctance to accept defeat at the hands of society. In his description of "Christopher Collon" Tennyson emphasizes the spiritual grandeur of the "Admiral of the Ocean" as well as his visionary qualities. Columbus is a man bitterly decrying the society he enriched and its subsequent betrayal of him. What is interesting in this historical monologue is that the accomplishments of the man are shown to have evolved from his

visionary abilities, affirming that man can act on his ideas. His knowledge of the land beyond "the zone of heat" is "[n]o guess-work! I was certain of my goal." Able to see beyond the horizon delimited by ignorance, fear, and a widespread cultural myopia, Columbus literally opens the world to his society:

chains  
 For him who gave a new heaven, a new earth,  
 As holy John had prophesied of me,  
 Gave glory and more empire to the kings  
 Of Spain than all their battles! chains for him  
 Who pushed his prows into the setting sun,  
 And made West East, and sailed the Dragon's mouth,  
 And came upon the Mountain of the World,  
 And saw the rivers roll from Paradise!

Like a true prophet, Columbus sees beyond his own sphere of existence to an emblematic "other" world. His fate, similar to that of all great prophets, however, is to know resentment, and worse, to watch his "creation," or less metaphorically, his discovery, be misused. The bitterness suffusing the poem has been likened to "the poet's own mistrust of fame and his sympathy with an aged lonely spirit, fiercely independent but aware of isolation and difference";<sup>4</sup> the poem, however, is interesting mainly for the manner in which Tennyson uses the discovery of other lands as a metaphor for vision, enlightenment, and the courage to believe in one's own personal goal. Columbus's bitterness is doubtlessly impelled by his own knowledge of the importance of his discovery, a knowledge that seems not to be shared by his society (though it is cognizant of the materialistic value of the discovery, society seems blind to its wider promise):

Eighteen long years of waste, seven in your Spain,  
 Lost, showing courts and kings a truth the babe

Will suck in with his milk hereafter -- earth  
A sphere.

The implications of a broadened horizon, difficult to inculcate in the insular minds of the "court," will "hereafter" be -- as Columbus rightly points out -- a part of an innate knowledge, a transcendent truth, conveyed not through the process of oral diffusion, but by a more complex though spontaneous inbred system of communication. Despite Tennyson's attempt to create a historical figure, Columbus emerges as a prophet-figure of the highest and most tragic order, depicting the poet's by now almost clichéd doctrine of the inspiring power and fundamental importance of the private vision, as well as of society's concurrent inability to grasp or sustain this truth.

Unlike Columbus, the prophet figure of "The Voyage of Maeldune" appears weak and secondary. The Saint who chastizes Maeldune for seeking trivial revenge rather than inner peace, however, represents an antipodal figure who has learned to transform his bitterness into a better-used or more efficient energy. The three-hundred-year-old holy man enjoins Maeldune to renege on his quest, leaving vengeance to the Lord. Once again Tennyson uses age and experience as an adjunct of wisdom, and, by extension, as a link to the Divine. As Maeldune recounts:

we came to the Isle of a Saint who  
had sailed with St Brendan of yore,  
He had lived ever since on the Isle and his  
winters were fifteen score,  
And his voice was low as from other worlds (italics mine).

Following the Saint's rebuke, Maeldune rises above the insipidness of his hatred and discovers the up-lifting power of forgiveness. The poem echoes a prevalent theme in Tennyson, "the arrival through the pain and tribulation of the

life journey at an ultimate recognition of moral truth."<sup>5</sup> The twelve sections of "Maeldune" focus on a gradually evolving sense of learning very much the idea behind In Memoriam. In the latter poem, the speaker slowly grows to accept the pain of separation from Arthur Hallam over a long period of time, the speaker's attitude changing from one of bitterness and anger to one of renewed faith in the transmuting power of belief. In "Maeldune" the pattern is simpler, the "learning process" more clearly illustrated, but the "strategy" of discovery is an old one. Maeldune gradually progresses by trial and error from ignorance to insight, aided by experience and the voice of reason. In the end he becomes a worthy disciple of the hoary Saint.

The holy man's age, emphasized by "his white hair [which] sank to his heels and his white beard [which] fell to his feet," together with his contemplative way of life, makes him an appropriate counterpart of the Columbus figure. Together they suggest a composite figure, a resolution of differences, intimating the greater hidden figure towards which Tennyson's poetry is moving.

The composite, or "synthesized," figure appears in the Tiresias and Demeter volumes. "Tiresias," "The Ancient Sage," and "Merlin and the Gleam" set forth a character who resolves the long-standing tension evinced in "Columbus" and "The Voyage of Maeldune"; since the "tension" has most often been expressed through similar mystical figures, it is fitting that the three "consolidating" poems feature mantic characters.

Written in large part in 1833 (at the same time as "Ulysses" and "Tithonus"), "Tiresias" was not published until 1885 when, as the introductory poem "To E. Fitzgerald" relates, "my son, who dipt / In some forgotten book of mine / With sallow scraps of manuscript, / And dating many a year ago," discovered it and encouraged his father to publish it. Although "Tiresias" was written almost

five decades before its publication, important revisions and additions make the poem a reliable study of the Laureate in the 1880s.

The poem focusses on Tiresias, a man who early in life yearned "[f]or larger glimpses of that more than man / Which rolls the heavens." In his quest for heightened knowledge and a glimpse or "hope to see the nearer God," he accidentally discovers Pallas Athene in her "secret olive-glade." The vision of the naked goddess, like a light too bright for mortal eyes to endure, strikes him blind. In inflicting the ultimate punishment on Tiresias for seeing her naked, the "Goddess of Wisdom" imposes a cruel curse: he is made privy to knowledge that can save society and significantly alter the condition of life for the better, but is rendered incapable of communicating it. To this story is added Menoeceus' plight. Tiresias must somehow convey to Menoeceus that only the latter's death can appease Arēs for the slaying of the dragon by Cadmus. To save Thebes, Menoeceus must sacrifice himself.

"Tiresias" reflects many of the social fears Tennyson increasingly held concerning his country, his people, and their acts. The parallel to Tennyson himself is discussed by Sir Charles Tennyson, who refers to an unpublished extract of the poem that reveals Tennyson's specific and conscious linking of himself to the blind prophet:

The poet was no doubt drawn to the old legend by the feeling that he was very much in the position of its hero. He could see so plainly where materialism and lack of faith were hurrying the world, yet he was beginning to feel that all his warnings were in vain. These apprehensions are clearly expressed in an unpublished version of the dedication

Ah! If I  
Should play Tiresias to the times,  
I fear I might but prophecy  
Of faded faiths and civic crimes,

And fierce transition's blood-red morn,  
     And years with lawless voices loud,  
 Old vessels from their moorings torn  
     And cataclysm and thundercloud,  
 And one lean hope, that at the last  
     Perchance -- if this small world endures --  
 Our heirs may find the stormy past  
     Has left their present purer. . . . . 6

If the similarities between Tennyson and Tiresias are significant, the parallels between the Merlins of the Idylls and Tiresias are equally striking. Although he has the "power of prophesying," Tiresias is unable to effect change, to help society save itself. His curse, to "speak the truth that no man may believe," is similar to Merlin's inability to reach and uphold his society. Interestingly, this aspect of Tiresias's curse exists in none of Tennyson's sources. As Dwight Culler points out, "the condition that Tiresias's prophecies shall not be believed was not a part of any classical version of the myth but was added by Tennyson, presumably from the story of Cassandra. It is obvious that Tennyson wants to make this point the central theme of the poem."<sup>7</sup>

The Merlins of the Idylls and Tiresias seek escape from the futility of their visions, the Merlins through the hollowed oak or the Siege perilous, Tiresias in that place where mingle "the famous kings of old," the "one far height in one far-shining fire." The most important connection between these figures is their limited ability to "reach" worthy individuals in society, to select and uplift the few who can be saved. In the Idylls, Merlin influences both Arthur and Galahad. Similarly, Tiresias succeeds in persuading Menoeceus to perform a self-sacrifice comparable to Galahad's. In losing himself to save Thebes, Menoeceus is raised to an almost divine level, echoing Galahad's selfless act and subsequent near-deification. Interestingly, in both the Idylls and in "Tiresias," it is society which is responsible for the decay of truth and vision. As James R.

Kinkaid points out, "Tiresias does see, though he can do very little about, the ineffectiveness of truth itself. But he blames this not so much on the gods, on the very nature of things, as on the people."<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately "Tiresias" is important as an example of Tennyson's synthesizing point of view. The Laureate's use of polar opposites -- social and private, defeated and victorious, bitter and reconciled -- yields to a combined concept. In one sense, Tiresias shares characteristics of both Columbus and the Saint, or, to cite a more cogent analogy, reflects both Merlins of the Idylls. Bitter that "the wise man's word . . . [is] trampled by the populace underfoot," Tiresias suffers under a "great melancholy." Beholding society's inaccessibility only makes him long for retreat. Like the Merlins of the Idylls, however, Tiresias also recognizes his social duty, his pedagogical role, and successfully teaches Menoeceus to fulfil his responsibility. Both Merlins, social and private, bitter and at peace, are at last consolidated in the consummate figure of the blind seer.

"The Ancient Sage," also a study in polarities, argues convincingly for the essentiality of opposites, and by extension, for their synthesis. Presumably a poem about Lao-Tze, this "very personal" poem, as Tennyson termed it, focusses on an old sage -- "obviously a figure of Tennyson himself"<sup>9</sup> -- addressing a young sensualist in an attempt to inculcate a positive belief in a power above the tactile and above the self. The poem is a monologue reminiscent of the early poem "The Two Voices" in its use of dialectical argumentation. In this later poem, however, the bitterness is entirely lacking, replaced instead by a surety of purpose and belief.

The conflict between the perceptions of the young, atheistic poet "worn /

From wasteful living" and those of the aged seer is an example of Tennyson's amalgamative approach in his final years. Both characteristics of the polarity, as revealed in the early bardic figures, are, as in "Tiresias," resolutely united: the Sage is both pedagogue as well as potential recluse. The aged seer has attempted to edify society but, like the enchanter of "Merlin and Vivien," has been "overworn" by his task. "I am wearied of our city, son," he tells the young sceptic and, again like the earlier Merlin, longs for seclusion from society, seeks to "spend [his] . . . one last year among the hills."<sup>10</sup> The combination of private, quiescent belief in "The Nameless power," and of social, pedagogical motivation does not create an imbalance. In "The Ancient Sage," as in "Tiresias," the polarity is equipoised and interconnected.

In his study of "The Ancient Sage" as an example of objective, as opposed to subjective, argumentation, Howard W. Fulweiler argues that Tennyson's poem is an intellectual handling of the questions of belief using a rigorous objective approach to explicate the non-empirical, or noumenal, values the poet believes in.<sup>11</sup> According to Fulweiler, Tennyson is not an "emotional subjectivist"; rather, his "religious views demonstrate an objective intellectual foundation," a fact that many of Tennyson's contemporaries were quick to recognize, but that modern critics often fail to see.<sup>12</sup> Fulweiler's article is relevant to this study in its astute recognition of the many-levelled dualities inherent in this poem: "'The Ancient Sage', with its two voices, its past and present, its age and youth, its characteristic Tennysonian strengths and weaknesses, is probably as typical a work of the Victorian Laureate as we are likely to find."<sup>13</sup> The dialectic, more than a mere display of contending points of view, is part of the infrastructure of the poem and fundamental to the final information and declarations it conveys, the conclusions it inevitably reaches: "The poem makes

its discoveries dialectically, proceeding by opposites in the manner of a formal argument."<sup>14</sup> In describing the "religious" aspects of the poem, as well as Tennyson's method of argument, Fulweiler identifies one of the reasons Tennyson employs "polar opposites" -- to "attempt to unite different aspects of the human personality."<sup>15</sup>

This notion of "aspects of a personality" coincides well with Tennyson's bardic figures. There is, after all, no question that Tennyson's mantic characters reflect aspects of his personality. The question is, however, how much of the poet's conflicting emotions they share. As has earlier been shown, the balance shifts noticeably between a bitterness at the "social lies" and failure and an acceptance of the inevitability of a private retreat. Apart from the later ~~mystics~~, the "opposites" are never combined. Like "Tiresias," "The Ancient Sage" is a touchstone in the career of the poet, for it brings to wholeness what can only be termed the bardic split personality of Tennyson's past work.

Just as the opposites in "The Ancient Sage" supplement each other, so too are the binary roles of Tennyson's prophets inter-supportive. In his article, Fulweiler cites two texts that explicate the self-sustaining necessity of opposites, one written by Coleridge to explain "the unifying principle that makes time intelligible,"<sup>16</sup> the other by Owen Barfield, elaborating on Coleridge's view. Both statements, describing man's sense of time, are adapted by Fulweiler to reflect on Tennyson's use of objective argument and personal experience as co-supportive forces in "The Ancient Sage":

The sense of Before and After becomes both intelligible and intellectual when, and only when, we contemplate the succession in the relations of Cause and Effect, which, like the two poles

of the magnet manifest the being and unity of the one power by relative opposites, and give, as it were, a substratum of permanence, of identity, and therefore of reality, to the shadowy flux of Time.<sup>17</sup>

Barfield elaborates on this view: "Where logical opposites are contradictory, polar opposites are generative of each other -- and together generative of a new product. Polar opposites exist by virtue of each other as well as at the expense of each other."<sup>18</sup> Coleridge's theory of co-supportive opposites is useful and relevant in explicating the "polar harmony" of Tennyson's bardic figures. Tennyson's contradictory bards function in a generative way, exhibiting throughout the different poems separate and antagonistic characteristics which ultimately reflect on each other and which serve to define them more clearly. As Barfield says, these polarities exist because of, and through, each other; moreover, they also hint at, and, in the long term, "generate" a new product that is revealed, at long last, in "Merlin and the Gleam."

More than any other poem, "Merlin and the Gleam" stands as a thematic capstone to Tennyson's canon, because it places one of his central ambivalences into clear perspective. The poem, in its recollection of former days, retraces the past as a justification of the future. A recapitulation of Tennyson's life, "Merlin and the Gleam" describes, in more or less chronological order, the important phases of his career: the writing of his early volumes of poetry; his "Ten Year's Silence" due to harsh criticism; the rekindled poetic inspiration and his focus on lesser products of "the early imagination";<sup>19</sup> the beginning of his Arthurian interests; the death of Arthur Hallam and the "slowly brightening . . . melody" following this loss; the renewed faith in the power of poetry.<sup>20</sup>

It is this "renewed faith" in poetry, and, of course, in the value of the poet's role, which makes "Merlin and the Gleam" an important work. If "Tiresias"

and "The Ancient Sage" demonstrate the process by which the polarities of the poet are allied, "Merlin and the Gleam" celebrates the final amalgam: a poet figure with a new strength and importance. The "grey Magician" of "Merlin and the Gleam" is a poet who has reconciled the purely "social" aspect of his role -- the poet as pedagogue -- with the uniquely personal -- the poet as solitary thinker.

Just as Coleridge's polar opposites "generate" a new product, Merlin's synthesis also creates a different mystic, a figure best understood in the light of one of Tennyson's earlier similies. In "The Ancient Sage" the visionary uses "Plato's Cave" as a simile for learning. The "cavern whence an affluent fountain poured / From darkness into daylight" is used to illustrate the levels of learning through which man moves, a movement from illusion through to true thought. As the gloss to Plato's simile makes clear, however, the true philosopher, the true artist, must also take a final step if he is to realize his full value and potential:

We are shown the ascent of the mind from illusion to pure philosophy, and the difficulties which accompany its progress. And the philosopher, when he has achieved the supreme vision, is required to return to the cave and serve his fellows.<sup>21</sup>

The "new product" of Merlin's consolidation, then, is a figure who has resolved not only the tension concerning the public/private dialectic, but also one who has learned that he must return to teach.

This "new" figure is not merely a consummate "teacher" figure, for he has incorporated into his public role the essential characteristics of the private, and has added a new dimension, that of potent spiritual vision. The poet figure, transformed and enlightened, can transmute the sensual Vivien of "Merlin and

Vivien" -- that force he once feared and believed he must exercise -- into a grand, uncompromisingly positive force, the power of the Gleam (Tennyson had earlier associated Vivien with "the higher poetic imagination");<sup>22</sup> moreover, the poet is one who can re-animate the Merlin dormant in the oak. The new order and better time, over by the Idylls' close, has renewed itself once again.

In "Merlin and the Gleam" Merlin is the epitome of the teacher. His role throughout the poem is to edify the young Mariner. Merlin's role as a teacher, however, is qualified, in part, by the mystic's knowledge that he will soon have rest and will cross the "boundless Ocean" having found "the ideal light, the mother-passion of all the supreme artists of the world":<sup>23</sup>

And so to the land's  
Last limit I came --  
And can no longer,  
But die rejoicing,  
For through the Magic  
Of Him the Mighty,  
Who taught me in childhood,  
There on the border  
Of boundless Ocean,  
And all but in Heaven  
Hovers The Gleam.<sup>24</sup>

The boundless ocean, like the boundless deep, represents perhaps the most extreme retreat possible, and appears as an important dimension of Merlin's ability to teach. Where in "The Passing of Arthur" the interconnection is merely implied, a "last echo of a great cry" intimating the eventual return of a salvation-giving power (another Arthur or Merlin to lead society to the "Force . . . from the heights"), it is, in "Merlin and the Gleam," an active, connected force.

Added to this combination is a new dimension to the mystic's power, an ability to return from the beyond. Merlin's exhortation to the young Mariner

is like a voice from beyond "the margin," no longer merely a slight reverberation. If Arthur's "last echo" in the Idylls can, as Stevenson suggests, "catalyze . . . [Bedivere] into action,"<sup>25</sup> then the full, direct voice of inspiration -- joined at last to the other world whence inspiration springs -- promises to reach more people, and so, potentially, to change society. The closing of "Merlin and the Gleam" is Tennyson's statement that both the private and the public roles can successfully co-exist; more importantly, it implies that their unification will produce an even greater force.

If Tennyson is unequivocally associated with Merlin, then it ought to be possible to identify the Mariner to whom Merlin speaks. Haight suggests that perhaps he is a young sailor who assisted Tennyson when the poet fell ill in the autumn of 1888, "one of the village lads whom Tennyson had often seen, gazing with awe at the now prostrate Laureate, whom he was helping to carry." Haight concludes: "in the following August, when he [Tennyson] began to write the poem, the young Mariner's inquiring look may have won him immortality as Merlin's confidant."<sup>26</sup> Whether the young lad was a prototype or not is impossible to determine, yet it seems that, if any parallel is to be drawn, the connection ought to be made to Bedivere standing on the "iron crag . . . [s]training his eyes beneath an arch of hand" to see his king who has finally "crost the bar." In "Merlin and the Gleam" Tennyson, the self-proclaimed Merlin of the poem, has become, and even surpassed, the Arthur of his poetic kingdom, his words bridging the polarities of private and public.

Stevenson writes that the "prophet's sphere of influence has narrowed from the whole society to the individual and his message has become almost exclusively moral and spiritual as the 'chair' of the bard has been replaced by the podium of the teacher."<sup>27</sup> Quite the contrary, the optimism, the renewed belief in the

private faith and the pedagogical potentiality -- and more importantly the co-existence of each -- seems to be a broadening of perspective and an extension of the powers of the bard, for Merlin specifically requests that the Young Mariner direct his attention toward society:

Call your companions,  
Launch your vessel,  
And crowd your canvas,  
And, ere it vanishes  
Over the margin,  
After it, follow it,  
Follow The Gleam.

With this new power Tennyson recognizes as his own, the Laureate can at last proclaim himself one with the magician:

*I* am Merlin,  
And *I* am dying,  
*I* am Merlin  
Who follow The Gleam.

As Elizabeth Francis writes:

The significance of the italics becomes most clear when we remember Tennyson's difficulty with naming in his early work (cf. Armageddon, Eleanore, and others), and his struggle for a compelling outer voice in In Memoriam and Maud. The mage became a character in The Devil and the Lady, a pseudonym in 1852, a power in the Idylls. Now the name is freely confessed, its bearer a gray, winter soul attempting a new elevation. It represents a clear sense of the poetic self in a physical shape recognized as the reality, not the mask, of age.<sup>28</sup>

In a sense Tennyson's first Magician -- Magus from The Devil and the Lady -- and his last mantic creation -- Merlin in "Merlin and the Gleam" -- are drawn

together in a poetic finale, the failed journey of the first completed by the successful journey of the last.

## Conclusion

Tennyson's death on 6 October 1892 marked the end of an unusually long and productive life. The man who, as a child, had wanted to be "a popular poet," died one of literature's most celebrated figures. It is difficult to determine to what extent the "prophetic" Tennyson played a part in the achievement of this critical and popular acclaim. It has been suggested that the "prophetic" Tennyson is of secondary importance since it is the one subsequent ages found most dispensable. To judge by what is discarded in following ages, however, does not always provide the most reliable measure of what is best or worse in a writer's output. This seems especially true of the Laureate's work. The Idylls of the King, for example, was considered one of Tennyson's failures, and, like his prophetic work, was discarded and ignored. Largely because of critics such as T.S. Eliot and Harold Nicolson, the Idylls was relegated to postscripts and cursory studies, and has only recently been restored to its central place beside poems such as In Memoriam, "The Palace of Art," "Ulysses," and "Locksley Hall."

One must also remember that the fact that the poet's inclination towards the prophetic or mystical has been found to be of secondary interest by certain audiences does not diminish its importance for the Laureate himself. Since the spiritual figures so prominently in Tennyson's work, the spiritual must be considered in any critical analysis of his work. His lifelong struggle to discover where the poet's responsibility lay -- in the inner world of the individual poet, or the outer world of the bardic figure -- is a central concern in most of his poetry. Since the un-

certainty is almost consistently a part of the mantic poetry, then, de facto, an examination of the prophetic works is crucial to an understanding of the poet's work. It is impossible, therefore, to dispense entirely with the prophetic and mystical without seriously misinterpreting many of Tennyson's conventionally highly regarded poems. In Memoriam, for example, describes a lengthy coming to terms not only with the difficulty of coping with loss and grief, but also with the discovery of the spiritual interrelationship of beings. In many ways the resolution of the dilemma is impossible without the "mystical" communion between Arthur Hallam and Tennyson, and the more important union of man with God which Tennyson intended the earlier relationship to prefigure and suggest.

One of the most important questions to be considered is whether or not the mantic poetry ought to be afforded a major place in the poet's canon, and, therefore, whether or not it merits extensive investigation. To begin with, the poems are important on a quantitative basis. Tennyson wrote so many of them that their raison d'être requires investigation. Written almost exclusively as vehicles in which to question the poet's role, they may be studied in terms of the quest for a valid poetry, rather than simply as set pieces. Their nature is almost exclusively didactic and reveals explicitly and through a common vocabulary a tension and preoccupation that are only implicitly and separately revealed in his non-mantic works. The relationship between the mantic poetry and the "secular" is, then, complementary, the former shedding light on the tensions explored, less didactically, in the latter.

Another reason for investigating the mantic poetry is that it reveals the inner working of the poet's mind which, in turn, further clarifies the main body of his poetry. The mantic poems articulate with great precision conflicts that pervade the majority of his other works, and the resolutions Tennyson reaches in

"The Ancient Sage" or "Merlin and the Gleam," for example, help clarify ambiguities latent in non-mantic poetry. Again, in "The Lady of Shalott," a poem which employs a supernatural framework without a magician-like figure, Tennyson creates a puzzling dichotomy that he leaves unresolved; the poet figure is both punished and rewarded for escaping her tower. This raises the question, does the poet endorse seclusion, or escape from isolation, or is he ambivalent about both? As this study has attempted to suggest, Tennyson himself probably did not know. And although the resolution of later years can in no way affect the inherent conflict of the poem, nor its poetic embodiment there, it can enable the reader to understand the terms of the conflict more precisely, and in that sense, it broadens the reader's awareness of the context in which "The Lady of Shalott" was written.

Poems such as "Merlin and Vivien," "Tiresias," and "The Ancient Sage" are fully realized poems concerned with questions central to the canon, and the answers they provide are uniquely found here. Nevertheless, most of the mantic works are important as adjuncts to non-mantic works, and perhaps, in the final analysis, the quest to resolve the conflict attending the role of the poet, which they both suggest and incorporate, does not allow of a poetical solution in Tennyson. All indications are that, had Tennyson not been troubled by the question, he would not have written his best poetry. The tension that emerges through the mantic works can be said to represent the life force of his poetry, and its resolution, had it occurred earlier, perhaps the death of some of his best works. Had Tennyson resolved the question of the poet's role -- had he written and believed in the message of "Merlin and the Gleam" early in his career -- this would have precluded any need to write many of his better poems whose energy and intensity arose from tensions to which, as yet, he had no answers.

Throughout Tennyson's poetry, Merlin has, like the prisoners of Plato's cave, moved from a world of illusion through to true thought, and from the latter to a recognition of the duty of visionaries to return as teachers. The necromancer of The Devil and the Lady, and the social castigators naively decrying petty fears and shadows in the Juvenilia, echo the first state depicted by Plato: man learning to deal with shadows. The Merlins of the Idylls depict the ascent of the mind to another level of knowledge: the Merlin of "Merlin and Vivien" discovering true philosophy by retreating higher into the "mind-cave" of his thoughts; the Merlin of the remaining idylls discovering the existence of the shadow world, as portrayed by Vivien and other "surface flatterers." In later years, the prophet figures of "The Ancient Sage," "Tiresias," and "Merlin and the Gleam" take the final steps toward self-fulfilment, and recognize that they must influence and teach, move equally toward the "margin," and impel individuals to action.

Merlin's central position in Tennyson's thought is a curiosity. Of the many literary characters to whom he was exposed, why did Tennyson choose an aged, greying magus as his literary Doppelgänger? Merlin represented a romantic concept that Tennyson doubtlessly was attracted to. The romantic subjectivist part of Tennyson (he was closely attuned to his instinctive side and given to retreating into himself), perhaps saw the solitary, yet powerful, seer, gifted yet cursed with enormous skills, and so with enormous responsibility, as a kindred spirit. Tennyson was perhaps also attracted to something more complicated than the temperament and skills he felt he shared with Merlin. As this study has attempted to suggest, Tennyson's notion of mysticism was vague, his sense of the "spiritual" intuitive and unrefined. Merlin, it seems, was a symbol who incorporated all of Tennyson's uncertainties, whose traditional literary representations epitomized

the ambivalences which were so much a part of Tennyson's thoughts regarding his own vocation. As a symbol of the artist, Merlin was not only a vehicle for expressing the dilemma troubling Tennyson, but was also a convenient foil masking the extent of the poet's own uncertainty over what he actually was. Tennyson constantly reconsidered his role as a poet, and, perhaps, as a seer, and Merlin came to represent explicitly the struggle for an understanding of the role of poetry, and implicitly the level of Tennyson's ambivalence over what his role must be. Merlin, the graying, lonely outcast, must have seemed to contain within himself all the mysteries Tennyson could not fathom fully, all the questions he could not answer. The magus's legend, in some ways as hazy as Tennyson's knowledge of himself, is a logical mask for Tennyson to assume. Merlin, then, came to represent not only the struggle which is a poet's, but also the impotence which is Tennyson's, the inability to answer certain questions that preoccupied him continually. In many ways, it is largely as a result of the cogent symbol of Merlin, a symbol that enabled him to phrase conveniently his questions, that Tennyson was capable of reaching a personal, if not a poetical, resolution to questions which haunted him throughout his career.

## NOTES

### Introduction

1 Jerome H. Buckley, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960) 14.

2 Hallam Lord Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1897) II: 90.

3 Ibid.

4 Buckley, 15.

5 Memoir, I: 251.

6 Ibid., I: xii.

7 Ibid.

8 T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays (1932; London: Faber and Faber, 1969) 334.

9 Haight, Studies in Philology 44 (1947): 549-66.

10 Kaplan, Victorian Poetry 7 (1969): 285-98.

11 Ibid., 286.

12 Stevenson, Victorian Newsletter 57 (1980): 14-23.

13 Eliot, 337-38.

14 Ibid., 338.

## NOTES

### Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> Memoir, II: 125.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Tillotson and Geoffrey Tillotson, "Tennyson's Serial Poem," Mid-Victorian Studies (London: The Athlone Press, 1965): 85. In 1842 Tennyson published a revised version of "The Lady of Shalott," and "The Morte d'Arthur," as well as two short poems entitled "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere" and "Sir Galahad."

<sup>3</sup> John Sterling's review of Poems, 1842, Quarterly Review, 70 (Sept. 1842): 385-416. Rpt. in Tennyson: The Critical Heritage, ed. John D. Jump (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967) 119. Sterling was not the only person to think lightly of the contemporary relevance of medievalism in poetry, as Carlyle's comment shows (Memoir, I: 340). Among other detractors were the Brownings, Ruskin, and many critics of the major reviews of the day such as William Fox and J.W. Croker. To be fair, Tennyson also had his share of admirers. Carlyle, for example, is said to have withdrawn his "utterance" when confronted by the Laureate and his son years later (see Memoir, I: 340). Moreover, the major novelists of the period, such as Dickens, Eliot and Thackeray, were apparently enthralled by the Idylls. J. Phillip Eggers suggests that the reason the Victorian novelists "responded far more favorably to the Idylls than did the poets" is that "all of the ten poems that comprise the Round Table series relate events that reflect modern relationships between men and women," the area that interested the novelists. King Arthur's Laureate: A Study of Tennyson's Idylls of the King (New York: New York University Press, 1971) 144.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, The Return of King Arthur: British and American Literature since 1800 (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: St Edmundsbury Press, 1983): "The resurrection of Malory, and of Arthurian legend in general, may be largely credited to the work of such antiquarians as Richard Hurd, Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton, George Ellis, Sir Walter Scott, and the more scholarly Joseph Ritson," 16, passim.

<sup>5</sup> Tennyson's successful resuscitation of Arthuriana is particularly surprising in view of the failure of other major writers to do the same. Indeed, the efforts of some of the most important writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries failed to generate the interest Tennyson later elicited with the Idylls. Both Scott and Wordsworth tried their hand at writing Arthurian romances but failed to produce anything of quality or importance.

Scott's interest in medieval literature extended to a desire to edit Malory's Le Morte Darthur but he yielded to Southey; see Taylor and Brewer, 44.

6 Hallam Tennyson [Great-grandson of the poet], Tennyson for the 1970's: An Address to the Tennyson Society in Somersby Church, Lincolnshire (N.p.: The Tennyson Memorial Society, 1971) 1.

7 Ibid.

8 For a summary of the work of Thelwall and Freere see Taylor and Brewer, 39-41 and 49-53 respectively.

9 Taylor and Brewer, 18.

10 Ibid., 17.

11 Tillotson, 82.

12 Nennius, History of the Britons, Six Old English Chronicles, ed. J.A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848) 402 - 03. For an interesting account of the sacrificial practice of killing a youth for his blood, as the elders proposed for Ambrosius, see W.D. Nash, "Merlin the Enchanter, And Merlin the Bard," Merlin, or the Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance, 2 vols., ed. Henry B. Wheatley (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1899) I: vi.

13 A.O.H. Jarman, "The Welsh Myrddin Poems," Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) 20-21.

14 Ibid., 21 - 22. Gordon Haight writes that this poem, signed Merlin Sylvestris, is included in William F. Skene's The Four Ancient Books of Wales, "a work that Tennyson could hardly have been ignorant of," 558.

15 Jarman, 21.

16 John Jay Parry and Robert A. Caldwell write in a footnote that "[w]hen a scholar like Sir Ifor Williams, who has devoted his life to the study of the subject, says in his Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry (Dublin, 1944), p. 54; 'I think we can date Armes Prydein circa 930, without any hesitation whatsoever', we need not take too seriously the intuition of non-Celtists like Bruce, Faral, and Zumthor that Merlin is practically the creation of Geoffrey," "Geoffrey of Monmouth," in Loomis (see n. 13 above), 76, n. 6. While it is true that Geoffrey "borrows" much of his material on Merlin, and that, by consequence, he is not the "creator" of Merlin, few would deny that Geoffrey's accomplishment in unifying and popularizing the bard is notable; moreover, the way he has assembled the heterogeneous legends into the final form is definitely sui generis. When I refer to Geoffrey as the person "most responsible" for the figure of Merlin known today, I do not disregard the evidence of earlier influence; I merely recognize the result of later achievement.

17 William Blackburn, "Spenser's Merlin," Renaissance and Reformation ns IV (1980): "Geoffrey creates the Merlin of Romance at

one bold stroke, by identifying Nennius' Ambrosius with the Myrddin of Celtic folklore," 180.

18 Howard Maynadier, The Arthur of the English Poets (New York: Haskell House, 1966) 50.

19 Lucy Allen Paton, introduction, History of the Kings of Britain, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, trans. Sebastian Evans, rev. Charles W. Dunn (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958): "This Libellus Merlini has come down to us only through Geoffrey's Historia, into which he incorporated it, letting the prophecies with the dedicatory epistle form his Seventh Book," xvi. The Libellus is now more commonly referred to as the Prophetiae Merlini.

20 Roger Sherman Loomis, prologue, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, xv.

21 Charles Foulon, "Wace," Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, 101.

22 Robert Wace, Roman De Brut, Arthurian Chronicles, trans. Eugene Mason (London: Everyman's Library, 1962) 19.

23 Ibid., 114.

24 Layamon, Brut, Arthurian Chronicles (see n. 22) 212.

25 Maynadier, 79.

26 Gordon Haight points out that while Tennyson may not have read this text in the original Old French, the edition of Malory which he possessed (edited by Robert Southey) contained "over a hundred large pages of notes in many of which the Vulgate Merlin is extensively translated by the editor," 551.

27 "Tennyson as Narrative Poet," Six Tennyson Essays (London: Cassell, 1954) 186.

28 Dr. Sommer, as quoted by Richard Jones, The Growth of the Idylls of the King (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1895) 30.

29 Blackburn, 183.

30 Maynadier, 254.

31 Taylor and Brewer, 34.

32 For a more thorough treatment of Merlin in these works see William Blackburn's article cited above.

33 The play was probably completed prior to Charles II's death in 1685. Unfortunately the play was not performed before the monarch's death and had to be suppressed during the revolution which dethroned Charles II's successor, James II. It was only performed, therefore, in 1691. See Maynadier, 297.

- 34 Taylor and Brewer, 34.
- 35 Ibid., 35.
- 36 Maynadier, 302.
- 37 W.E. Mead, Merlin, or the Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance, II: lxxvii.
- 38 Maynadier, 305.
- 39 James Douglas Merriman, The Flower of Kings (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1973) 78. As any study of the period will show, Merlin's popularity, while noticeably greater than his medieval brethren, existed mainly because of the lower class credulity in prophecy, and did not, as in other periods, manifest itself in "quality" literature at this time. Merriman writes, "little more could be expected, opposed as the period officially was to the supernatural, to mythology and legend, and to the 'Popish' superstition of the Middle Ages with all their rude emotionalism, their richly instinctual life, and their 'barbarism,'" 80. See also Maynadier, 302 ff.
- 40 Taylor and Brewer, 16.
- 41 John Keats, "The Eve of Saint Agnes," The Poetical Works of John Keats, rev. by Paul D. Sheats (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) 130. Taylor has suggested that the poem itself refers to "Merlin's infatuation," 37.
- 42 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Coleridge: Poetical Works, ed. Ernest H. Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) 458.
- 43 This single reference is interesting since there exists an earlier fragment of the poem (possibly written as much as ten years before) which refers to the "magic glass" of Spenser's poem but not to Merlin, suggesting that the inclusion of the latter was, if not an afterthought, at least the result of the poet's further reading and general tightening of the allegorical drift. Ibid., 457n.
- 44 Percy Bysshe Shelley, Shelley's Poetical Works (New York: The Co-operative Publication Society, 1887) 2: 778.
- 45 Taylor and Brewer, 37.
- 46 Although this is Scott's only Arthurian piece, Taylor rightly points out that in other works such as his metrical romance Marmion, he alludes "to Arthurian incidents and in notes provided long extracts from Malory to acquaint his readers with the story of the Chapel Perilous and Lancelot's quest for the Grail." Taylor further notes that Scott's passion for the medieval tales continued all his life; as he himself said, he wanted to "Essay to break a feeble lance, / In the fair fields of old romance," (introduction to Canto I), Taylor and Brewer, 44. Unfortunately, Scott's efforts were about as successful as Wordsworth's.
- 47 Wordsworth, "The Egyptian Maid," Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. Thomas

Hutchinson, rev. Ernest De Selincourt (1906; London: Oxford University Press, 1960) 291. The "History" refers to an 1816 edition of Le Morte Darthur edited by Walker and Edwards; the "apology" to his rather loose adaptation of motifs in Malory: the ambiguously evil Merlin, and the Maid of Astolat's approach to Camelot by sea.

48 Merlin also appears in "Artegail and Elidure" and The Prelude. Although these are not Arthurian poems per se, they do refer to various Arthurian personages as do other poems not listed here. Excluding the two given here, "The Egyptian Maid" is Wordsworth's only Arthurian poem.

49 This is true of all the examples given here except Wordsworth's which was published in 1835, approximately three years after the publication of "The Lady of Shalott."

50 Perhaps the only addition that should be made to the list of authors is Thomas Love Peacock who was a fairly learned Celticist. His works demonstrate the extent of his knowledge. Although he did not write about Merlin, one character who is prominent in the satire, The Misfortunes of Elphin, is named Taliesin, a Merlin-like figure who also appears in some of Tennyson's poetry. See chapter three.

51 Eggers, 131.

52 Matthew Arnold, "Tristram and Iseult," The Poems and Criticism of Matthew Arnold, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961) 103, l. 75.

53 Arnold, 104, ll. 119-22. As stated in the introduction, the majority of interpretations of Tennyson's "Merlin and Vivien" describe a defeated magician. My position is diametrically different; see chapter four and five for a fuller account of this interpretation.

54 David Staines, Tennyson's Camelot: The Idylls of the King and its Medieval Sources (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983) 158.

55 For a list of their Arthurian paintings, see Staines, 157 n.4, and 159 nn. 9 and 10.

56 D.G. Rossetti planned to paint the walls of the Debating-room in the Oxford Union. Although several paintings were executed, including Burne-Jones' "Death of Merlin," none of the painters understood the principles of wall-painting, and after a time the works began to fade. The works were lost.

## NOTES

### Chapter Two

1 Memoir, I: 11 and 320 respectively.

2 Ibid., I: 320.

3 Buckley, 100.

4 Alfred Lord Tennyson, The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, Green, 1969) 229. Hereafter referred to as Ricks.

5 Buckley, 16.

6 See chapter four.

7 Stevenson, "Druids," 18.

8 Memoir, I: 320.

9 Ricks, 11. 24 and 33-36 respectively. Other examples of trances occur in sections XCV, CXXII, and CXXIV.

10 Buckley, 18.

11 Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur, ed. R.M. Lumiansky (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982) 80. For the sake of convenience I have used this edition rather than the Walker and Edwards' edition which Tennyson used; the examples do not warrant a specific line by line comparison.

12 Like Merlin, Magus is not as much of a dotard as he is painted. Unlike his later counterpart, however, Magus craftily arranges a safeguard for his trust -- a devil to guard his wife and keep her chaste. Merlin, like his early precursor, also comes to "half believe" his paramour true; in the notes to Southey's Malory, Merlin tells his master, Blaise, that he is "so taken with her love" that he will not "forbear going" to her (Ricks, 1594). I have quoted Ricks since I do not have access to Southey's edition of Malory). Although several sources have been identified as the inspiration for this tale (for example, W.D. Paden, Journal of American Folklore, lviii, 1945, 35-47), none, I believe, have pointed out the striking parallel between Magus and Merlin, and therefore, logically, to Malory.

13 Malory, IV: 80.

14 For the differences between Malory's Vivien and Tennyson's see J.M. Gray's "Two Transcendental Ladies of Tennyson's Idylls: The Lady of the Lake and Vivien," Tennyson Research Bulletin 1 (1970):104-05. That the characters are different, however, is easy to determine. If one compares the two it is immediately clear that Malory's Vivien -- she who armed Arthur, guarded Sir Pelleas, and beguiled Merlin -- is too multifaceted to be confused with Tennyson's skilled, though unvarying, anti-poet. For the changes to Guinevere and the Lady of Shalott see David Staines, Tennyson's Camelot.

15 Ricks, 122.

16 Stevenson, "Druids," 15.

17 Ibid.

18 Of "Armageddon," Buckley states that it "is more explicit in its 'mystical' detail and correspondingly more convincing," than even "The Mystic," 16. The first surviving word of the Armageddon poem is "Prophecy." The moody "Coach of Death" is highly "mystical" as well and places "Saints and Prophets old" on equal footing, walking "Heaven's gardens." Tennyson suggests a similar "divine" connection in "On Sublimity": "Blest be the bard, whose willing feet rejoice / To tread the emerald green of Fancy's vales, / Who hears the music of her heavenly voice." "King Charles's Vision," perhaps the most "mystical" of all, deals not only with prophecy, but ghostly spectres as well. Finally, the epigram introducing "Oh! ye wild winds," is from the Song of the Five Bards in Ossian.

19 Buckley, 34.

20 As Buckley points out, this concept of the poet as seer "had ample precedent in the classical aesthetic theories he [Tennyson] had already learned to respect," 34.

21 Buckley, "[Tennyson] himself made a sharper distinction than the Apostles Trench and Alford between poetic teaching and didacticism in verse," 34.

22 Ricks, 224. The 1842 edition was emended to read "All the place is holy ground." "[C]rystal river," and "shallow wit," however, appear in both the 1830 and 1842 versions.

23 Buckley, 38.

24 Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "Tennyson's Dying Swans: Mythology and the Definition of the Poet's Role," Studies in English Literature: 1500 - 1900 20 (1980):621. I include dying swans within the bard motif based on the work of Buckley, Stevenson, and Elizabeth A. Francis' "Tennyson's Political Poetry, 1852-1855," Victorian Poetry 14 (1976): 113-23. Stevenson argues that the swans are prototypes of sacerdotal bards arising, possibly, from the use druidic bards made of these creatures during sacred rites, where their roles, at one point, became interchangeable. In tracing the

historical-mythological evolution of the dying swan myth from its Helio-Arkite origins, George Faber shows that the tie of this myth to Arthur is a further reinforcement of the possible connection between the two.

25 Stevenson, "Swans," 622.

26 Francis, 120.

27 Ibid.

28 Ricks, 144.

29 Francis, 119.

30 In resorting to such a grand-scale notion of time, Tennyson anchors his opinions, and his poetry, in very firm ground. Part of this mystical work, then, becomes a purely practical approach to writing poetry. He establishes as credible a substratum for his statements as possible by applying an indestructible and ubiquitous authority to his work. As Arthur J. Carr writes in "Tennyson as Modern Poet," University of Toronto Quarterly 19 (1950): "Tennyson had learned to embody a problem in a mood and the mood in evocative, concrete, and disturbed imagery. To this ability he would soon add the use of myth and legend that made a hard and brilliant surface of traditional substance under which the private sensibility moved as if through water," 370. Tennyson uses the "they say" as a witnessing, or validating force, similar to a calling upon of God to justify a faith. Neither God, nor the statements which call on a historical proof, can be reinforced by phenomenal proof. Faith alone must act as evidence. When Tennyson uses the phrase "they say" in a sense other than to validate a basically unprovable idea, he uses a disclaimer, as in the poem, "To Professor Jebb": "and they say / That here the torpid mummy wheat / Of Egypt bore a grain as sweet. . . ." Tennyson's 1889 gloss to this line reads, "They say, for the fact is doubtful" (Ricks, 1372n. ). This is the only instance that Tennyson has felt a disclaimer necessary when using the phrase; ordinarily it is used deliberately as a device, not an imprecision. See chapter two.

## NOTES

### Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> Memoir, II: 122. As Christopher Ricks points out, there is sufficient evidence to establish that Tennyson was still writing the fragment in 1883. Ricks, 502-03.

<sup>2</sup> Memoir, II: 123.

<sup>3</sup> Harvard Notebook Number 16. Staines, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Staines, 7.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter four.

<sup>6</sup> Staines, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Memoir, II: 124.

<sup>8</sup> This is a role that Merlin assumes under Geoffrey of Monmouth and, later, Malory.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>10</sup> Memoir, II: 122-23. Italics mine.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ricks, 502-03.

<sup>13</sup> Staines, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. For a more detailed account of these incongruities see Staines, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Trinity Notebook 15. Staines, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 13-14. reprinted from Tennyson's Camelot.

<sup>17</sup> Stevenson, "Druids," 17. As Stevenson notes, other influences were "Shelley in 'A Defence of Poetry' (published 1939-40), and Carlyle in 'The Hero as Poet. Dante; Shakespeare' (1841)," 16-17.

- 18 Ricks, 1000 and 1002 respectively.
- 19 Memoir, I: 343.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Hallam Tennyson as quoted by Ricks, 1000.
- 22 See Elizabeth Francis for a treatment of the "political" nature of Tennyson's poems as well as F.J. Sypher, "Politics in the Poetry of Tennyson," Victorian Poetry 14 (1976):101-12.
- 23 In "Merlin the Enchanter, Merlin the Bard," W.D. Nash writes that "[i]n the Welsh legendary history no name is so famous as that of Merlin, with one exception perhaps, that of Taliesin," i.
- 24 Francis, 14.
- 25 Stevenson, "Druids": "For example, in the autobiographical 'Youth', not published during Tennyson's lifetime, the speaker reviews his early days: 'The months, ere they began to rise, / Sent through my blood a prophét voice'," 15. Stevenson also refers to Francis' article which states "Tennyson's public voice, early and late, is one of declaration, exclamation, and authority through which the poet celebrates himself, vicariously, in celebrating or deploring a cause," 119.
- 26 The closing section of Guest's translation is entitled "Taliesin," who is said to be "chief of bards / With a sapient Druid's words," 272. According to the Rev. R. Williams, "The romance of Taliesin is so fragmentary as hardly to deserve to be called a story. The hero was in all probability a real sixth-century bard and a contemporary of Arthur," 3, introduction, The Mabinogion. Tennyson may also have been familiar with Mrs. Felicia Hemans' "Taliessin's Prophecy" (spelled with two s's) published in 1822. Mrs. Hemans also refers to Merlin in one of her other poems; see The Complete Works of Mrs. Hemans, ed. by her sister (New York, 1847).
- 27 Stevenson, 16.
- 28 Ricks, 1004.. The name Taliessin appears only one other time in Tennyson's poetry along with the names of several other prophets including "Aneurin," whom a gloss refers to as a sixth-century bard. The poem is "Harp, harp, the voice of Cymry."
- 29 Edgar Finley Shannon, Jr., "Tennyson and the Reviewers, 1830-1842," PMLA 58 (1943):194.
- 30 Ibid., 191.
- 31 Westminster Review, 14 (January 1831): 223-24, rpt. in Shannon, 192.
- 32 Christian Examiner, 23 (January 1838): 327, rpt. in Shannon, 193.

## NOTES

### Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, "Druids," 17.

<sup>2</sup> Claude de L. Ryals, From the Great Deep: Essays on Idylls of the King (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1967), describes the tension between Merlin and Vivien as a "conflict between service and passion," 139; Buckley writes, "Merlin's yielding to the seductive wiles of Vivien is merely the grossest example of the abject surrender of the intellect to the flesh," 181 - 82; John D. Rosenberg, A Study of Tennyson's Idylls of the King (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1973), says, "In place of Malory's doting magician and innocent damsel, Tennyson creates the great figure of the harlot-enchantress. . . . The result is that Merlin is doomed but not degraded by Vivien," 111; Fred Kaplan subscribes to the idea of negative and positive imagination, 286; Eggers believes that Vivien's "capture of Merlin's charm marks the passing of intellectual persuasion from the forces of truth to the voices of slander," 151- 52; Elizabeth Brewer refers to Merlin as the Id and Arthur as the Super-ego, stating that the former's imprisonment can be seen as an image for the taming of the unbridled power of the subconscious, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Buckley, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. , 50.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 55. The same, perhaps, can be said concerning "The Lady of Shalott." As Lawrence Poston III has said in "The Two Provinces of Tennyson's 'Idylls'," "Tennyson had reworked the old story in a delicately ambiguous fashion to imply that the involvement of the poet in the world was both necessary and disastrous," 374.

<sup>6</sup> According to the Memoir, Tennyson began "Merlin and Vivien" in February 1856 and completed it "by March 31st " (I :414). This was the first section of what would later become the Round Table idylls, that is, the ten sections framed by "The Coming of Arthur" and "The Passing of Arthur." Originally entitled "Nimue" the poem was published for the first time as a trial edition in 1857 together with "Enid." The six copies, published by Edward Moxon, were entitled Enid and Nimue: The True and the False, all of which Tennyson recalled from the printers because of adverse comments concerning the poems. The sole survivor of this trial edition can be found in the Library of the British Museum. The title of "Nimue" was later expanded to "Merlin and Nimue" and then (in 1859) to Vivien. According to John Pfordresher, A Variorum Edition of the Idylls of the King,

(New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), there are "five different states of printer's proofs for 'Nimue'--'Vivien', the first four employed the name 'Nimue'. . . . In the fifth state the name is finally altered to 'Vivien'," 25 - 26. The final title was established in 1870 (Ricks, 1593). "Merlin and Vivien" was one of the poems to which Tennyson made the most changes. Between 1872-74 alone, Tennyson made substantial alterations and added 140 new lines. For a fuller account of these changes see Richard Jones, The Growth of the Idylls, chapter ii, and Pfordresher, introduction.

<sup>7</sup> I would argue that there is a distinct difference between the isolated, hedonistic art discussed in, say, "The Palace of Art," and that represented by the private retreat in "Merlin and Vivien." When I refer to isolated art I mean one more personal and pure, which is in no way solipsistic since its participation in society would be both destructive and self-destructive rather than beneficial. Tennyson, it seems, was struggling to determine at which point the artist, in attempting self-preservation, could escape the label of solipsist.

<sup>8</sup> Kaplan, 286.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Barnes Stevenson states that Merlin's role in the 1856 idyll is representative of the Druidic bard described by such people as Edward Davies, where the emphasis is placed on "their social importance, their architectural skills, and their visionary powers," "Druids," 17. The qualities of the consummate poet, therefore, are slightly different in this idyll to those of the future idylls, a difference that will be more fully explored in chapter five.

<sup>11</sup> Kaplan, 289.

<sup>12</sup> G.O. Marshall, Jr., A Tennyson Handbook (New York: Twayne, 1963) 141.

<sup>13</sup> Haight, 551. For a brief account of the Vulgate Merlin as well as Robert de Boron's poem, see chapter one.

<sup>14</sup> See George D. Meinhold's, "The Idylls of the King and the Mabinogion," Tennyson Research Bulletin 1 (1969): "I believe that there is no reason to look further than . . . [Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the] Mabinogion for the source of "Merlin and Vivien." Despite Meinhold's comment that "the Mabinogion as a source for parts of the Idylls . . . has largely been ignored," 61, both Hallam Tennyson (Memoir, I: 416), and Sir Charles Tennyson (296), mention Guest's book as a general influence on Tennyson's work.

<sup>15</sup> Haight, 551.

<sup>16</sup> Hallam Tennyson's bowdlerized version in Ricks, 1594.

<sup>17</sup> Kaplan, 291.

<sup>18</sup> Originally published as Enid and Nimue: The True and the False. See footnote six.

19 Although "Merlin and Vivien" should not be divorced from its role in the overall work, it should be remembered that the poem works on an independent level; moreover, its position in the Idylls, as well as its function as an autonomous unit, actually coincides with Tennyson's "master plan." This design is treated more fully in chapter five.

20 Memoir, II: 131-33.

21 Kaplan, 298. To be fair, Kaplan's view is widely shared. Cf., for example, Ryals's comment: "the rainstorm at the close of the idyll does not refresh the old man and help him to triumph over the insidious evil which Vivien represents, as first it seemed it was to do; on the contrary, the rain drives Merlin to accept Vivien into his embrace and consequently leads to his ruin," 62.

22 Memoir, I: 33.

23 Reprinted from Ricks, 92-94. It is not unlikely that this approach to the storm was adopted by Tennyson when he wrote "Merlin and Vivien," though there is no conclusive proof that King Lear was a specific model. It is interesting to note, however, that Shakespeare mentions Merlin in the above-cited scene, the only reference to Merlin in all his work. It seems likely that Tennyson, in planning the original idyll, would have consulted the most famous storm scene in literature, and established a similar motif of storm.

24 Memoir, I: 24.

25 For those who maintain that Tennyson more strongly, or exclusively, clung to druidic symbolism, it is important to note that the oak held an equal importance in pagan literature. In "The Old Irish Tree-List," Celtica 11 (1976): 107-24, Fergus Kelly relates that the oak was among the first of the airig fedo (the nobles of the wood).

26 As is shown in the Memoir, the writing of "Merlin and Vivien" corresponded with visits to Farringford and the nearby New Forest where Tennyson moved to escape society. In explaining his father's reasons for moving, Hallam cited Lady Taylor and added a postscript to her observations: "'If society were what it is not . . . it might be well to give up something for it'. Society being what it is, he determined to quit Twickenham and to live a country life" (I:365). Later in the biography, Hallam mentions the writing of "Merlin and Vivien" and concludes, "in the 'Forest of Broceliande' are many reminiscences of what was now the near scenery of the New Forest" (I: 414). Buckley also stresses the connection and indicates that "Farringford . . . was to afford him both the seclusion he required as artist and the peace he sought as a family man," 148. Finally, Lady Thackeray Ritchie's description of the "house at Farringford" as a place which "seemed like a charmed palace, with green walls without, and speaking walls within" (Memoir, I: 366) is curiously, and, in some ways, appropriately close to Tennyson's description of the "ivied oak."

27 Alfred Tennyson, 297. "Perhaps Goethe's words of warning to Eckermann may also have had some influence . . . [Tennyson] had achieved that tranquillity which Goethe thought so essential," *ibid.*

28 Alfred Lord Tennyson, The Idylls of the King and The Princess, ed. Sir Charles Tennyson (London: n.p., 1956), 45n.

29 See lines 207 and 541.

30 Kaplan, 296.

31 Ibid., 297.

32 Reprinted from Ricks, 1594. Italics mine.

33 The word "ritual" is used intentionally to allude to a druidic practice of releasing the life of a god (or a symbol of such) prior to a transmigrational revival of that which is released. In tracing the possible sources for Tennyson's dying swans, Catherine B. Stevenson identifies George Faber, The Origin of Pagan Idolatry Ascertained from Historical Testimony and Circumstantial Evidence, 3 vols. (London: A.J. Valpy, 1816), as an influence, specifically over the sacerdotal swan figure discussed earlier in this study. According to Faber, priests often disguised themselves as swans and sang dirges that became associated with the dying swans's songs. This type of ritualistic practice was often performed in secret and signaled the transmutation of life into death. Tennyson very possibly read Faber (Ricks, 585), and had this same ritual in mind when writing of the exorcism of Vivien. Merlin's call to Vivien (who is described as a singer), to enter the temple, is a form of exorcism marking the possibility of the mystic's regeneration.

34 It is possible that the last of the Idylls to be written, "Balin and Balan," can further illuminate this point. When Vivien defeats the two brothers she returns stronger than ever in the following idyll, "Merlin and Vivien." It seems logical, then, that had Vivien defeated Merlin, she would have continued on into the following idylls with a similar renewed vigour. Instead, she virtually disappears; although she does appear in a few brief scenes, some of them crucial, her appearances constitute a merely symbolic, or balancing, presence that could easily have been supplied by any embodiment of evil. She appears in "The Last Tournament," ll. 216-17, and in "Guinevere," ll. 28, 97-98. Merlin's presence, on the other hand, suffuses the poem, and his importance never diminishes. See chapter five for a fuller discussion of Merlin's role in the Idylls.

35 Kaplan, 296.

36 Buckley, 248. This growing faith is manifest throughout the Idylls. The weight of Arthur's doubt in Merlin's prophecy -- that he "should come again/ To rule once more" -- is negated by the insistence Tennyson places on the cyclic nature of life, and, by extension, on the eternality of the creative vision, an eternality that precludes the defeat of the artist. As Rosenberg points out, "The Idylls not only retells Arthurian legend but recreates the process by which myths are made," 142. Rosenberg points to Arthur's speech at Almesbury where he makes Guinevere responsible for destroying the Order of the Table Round: "the flower of men,/ To serve as a model for the mighty world" ("Guinevere," ll. 461-62). In "The Passing of Arthur," Bedivere echoes these words: "the whole Round Table is dissolved/ Which was an image of the mighty world" (ll. 402-03). A more cogent example of this "echoing" is also revealed through Merlin's mysterious rhyme "where is he who knows?/ From the great deep to the great deep he goes" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 404-05), which is repeated, first by Guinevere, "Then ran across her memory the strange rhyme/ Of bygone Merlin, 'Where is he who knows?/ From the great deep to the great deep he goes'" ("The Last Tournament," ll. 131-

33), and then by Bedivere, "'The King is gone',/ And therewithal came on him the weird rhyme,/ 'From the great deep to the great deep he goes'," ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 443-45). Of the Idylls Hallam Tennyson wrote: "Throughout the poem runs my father's belief in one strong argument of hope, the marvellously transmuting power of repentance in all men, however great their sin," Memoir, II: 131. It is this same hope that Arthur expresses when he tells Balin that he must be the wiser for falling.

37 In fact, The Lady of Shalott is identified as a visionary only after her escape from the tower and her subsequent demise. The line "like a bold seer in a trance" is significant in that vision becomes linked to trances only as a result of the poet's carefully reworked ideas. The original line read "With a steady, stony glance" (Ricks, 359). The subsequent line "Seeing all his own mischance" was also changed from the original "Beholding." The stress on seers and seeing, then, is clearly a calculated one.

38 Dwight Kalita, "Life as Spirit: A Phenomenology of Mystic Poetry," Christianity and Literature 23 (1973): 7.

39 Buckley, 17.

40 Memoir, I: xi.

41 Buckley, 15.

42 Kalita, 21.

43 Cf. Galahad's self-sacrifice. Although he too abandoned "physical" pleasures, he accomplished more good than did the hermit, for his influence "lingered" and actually spurred people to action. His acts were never selfish and he could thus reach the Holy Grail when others, such as Lancelot and Percivale, succeeded only partially, and with great difficulty.

44 Memoir, I: xiii.

45 Buckley, 15.

46 Memoir, I: 320. Italics mine.

47 Ibid., I: xiii-xiv.

48 Staines, xv.

49 Memoir, I: xiv.

## NOTES

### Chapter Five

<sup>1</sup> The label of ununified or discordant has been attacked by critics on the ground that there are many linking threads, images or leitmotifs that pull the Idylls together. Philip L. Elliot, in "Imagery and Unity in the Idylls of the King," Furman Studies 15 (1968):22-28 gives a general account of the unity in the Idylls, citing in particular the seasonal unity of the poem, an aspect which Hallam Tennyson himself referred to, paraphrasing his father, in the Memoir, II: 133-34. Both Jerome Buckley (173-75), and John D. Rosenberg (40), deal with either seasonal, musical, temporal or imagistic patterns in the work; the beast imagery has been treated by Edward Engelberg, "The Beast Imagery in Tennyson's Idylls of the King," ELH, 22 (1955):287 - 92, and in Boyd Litzinger's "The Structure of Tennyson's 'The Last Tournament'," Victorian Poetry 1 (1963):53 - 60. For detractors, see Paul F. Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948) and Basil Willey, More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956) 80:

<sup>2</sup> Originally, the first four were Vivien, Enid, Elaine and Guinevere. These later became "Merlin and Vivien," "The Marriage of Geraint," "Geraint and Enid," "Lancelot and Elaine," and "Guinevere."

<sup>3</sup> In the following discussion of Merlin's evolution the term "earlier" will refer to the final order of the idylls rather than to the date of their being written. "Gareth and Lynette," for example, will hereafter be referred to as preceding "Merlin and Vivien" even though it was composed much later.

<sup>4</sup> Stevenson, "Druids," 21.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent detailed interpretation of these lines see Stevenson, 21, and Lawrence Poston III, 281.

<sup>6</sup> Stevenson, "Druids," 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For Tennyson, as for many writers, age is the voice of experience. This explains, in part, Tennyson's proclivity to use what W.D. Paden termed "the mask of age" in so many of his poems.

10 F.E.L. Priestley, "Tennyson's Idylls," University of Toronto Quarterly 19 (1949): 46.

11 Stevenson, "Druids," 22.

12 Ricks, 1666n. Tennyson wrote, "[t]he perilous seat . . . stands for the spiritual imagination."

13 Ricks, 1671n.

14 Stevenson believes that the "effect of Merlin's creation on Galahad and the rest of the Round Table is, then, instructive. . . . By his [Galahad's] example, the less worthy knights also seek personal spiritual exaltation and thus precipitate the decline of Arthur's realm." See "Druids," 20. While I do agree that Merlin's device is instructive, there is a veiled message in the passage in question that makes clear that not all people are destined for "visionary" roles. To imply that Galahad's example is beneficial to the other knights is decidedly not so, for, if anything, it is his example and the knights' inability to recognize their own limitations which precipitate the realm's decline.

15 Stevenson, "Druids," 20.

16 In Dagonet's argument with Tristram, Tennyson uses this same word "babble" to identify the superficiality of the knights and their proclivity to ridicule rather than defend the King. Tristram's use of the word signals an ironic, though marked, level of deterioration in the quality of the Idylls' poetic language.

17 Stevenson, "Druids," 22. The riddle is suggestive of a cyclic form of truth; Rosenberg suggests a similar interpretation in his work.

18 Stevenson, "Druids," 22.

19 Priestley, 47.

## NOTES

### Chapter Six

<sup>1</sup> Tired of writing poetry and seeking new avenues to explore, Tennyson decided to write historical plays and, in characteristic fashion, threw himself a corps perdu into research and writing. He settled on Mary Tudor as the first subject for his work, writing Queen Mary in 1875. His second play, Harold, although more "reasonably" designed for theatre than was Mary Tudor, was not performed for over fifty years. Similarly, his third play, Beckett, not immediately accepted for the stage, was performed in 1893, four months after the poet's death, and nine years after it was published. The Falcon, his fourth play, knew mild success in 1879-80. The Foresters--Robin Hood and Maid Marian, completed in 1881, was a huge success. Two tragedies, The Cup and The Promise of May, interesting mainly for their ideas, not in terms of their dramatic qualities, followed in 1880 and 1882 respectively. The latter was the least successful of his work, and his last dramatic effort.

<sup>2</sup> Memoir, I : xii.

<sup>3</sup> Buckley, 238.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 217...

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Charles Tennyson, 493. This fragment is now catalogued as Harvard Notebook 16. Buckley suggests that Sir Charles' version is perhaps slightly bowdlerized, 285, n. 16. The connection between Tennyson and Tiresias ("If I / Should play Tiresias"), is correct. Buckley also stresses the similarity between poet and seer: "The mistrust of anarchy as prelude to dictatorship parallels his [Tennyson's] dread of an aggressive, ill-educated democracy. Even the blindness of his protagonist [Tiresias] must have assumed a special poignancy at a time when he himself was troubled by fears of failing vision," 229.

<sup>7</sup> A. Dwight Culler, The Poetry of Tennyson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 88.

<sup>8</sup> James R. Kinkaid, Tennyson's Major Poems: The Comic and Ironic Patterns (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) 140. Italics Kinkaid's.

<sup>9</sup> Culler, 3.

10 It is ironic that the sage's intended retreat, so similar to Merlin's in "Merlin and Vivien," has not been met with a similar label of "defeated artist." The reason may be that Tennyson's tone in the later poem has made the nature of retreat -- its peacefulness and value as a positive symbol -- much clearer. Whatever the reason, the sage's self-imposed exile is, as with the earlier Merlin exile, a defeat neither of the "ideal" of poetry nor of the poet himself.

11 Howard W. Fulweiler, "The Argument of 'The Ancient Sage': Tennyson and the Christian Intellectual Tradition," Victorian Poetry 21 (1983): 203 - 16. Buckley interprets this poem as a subjective explication of private faith, 235-36.

12 Fulweiler, 204. Of Tennyson's contemporaries, Fulweiler asks, "What did they see that remains hidden from readers a century later?" 204. His article answers the question.

13 Ibid., 205.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid. Although I have quoted this from Fulweiler, it is out of context and adapted to a purpose other than the author's.

16 Ibid., 213.

17 Ibid., Fulweiler has reprinted this from Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, ed. J. Shawcross (N.p.: Oxford University Press, 1907) II :207.

18 Ibid., 214. From: What Coleridge Thought (N.p.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) 36.

19 Memoir, II :366.

20 For further information see Sir Charles Tennyson, 516 - 17; Gordon S. Haight, 549 - 66; Jerome H. Buckley, 241 - 42; and of course, what ought to be considered as the definitive source, Hallam Tennyson's paraphrasing of his father in the Memoir, I :xii-xv, and II :366.

21 Plato, The Republic, ed. Betty Radice, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd. ed. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1955) 316. Italics mine.

22 Memoir, II :366.

23 Stopford Brooke in a gloss to "Merlin and the Gleam," The Poetical Works of Tennyson, ed. G. Robert Strange (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 550.

24 With its unhesitating "boundless" faith in the ocean "over the margin," the poem recalls the various expressions of a similar faith from Tennyson's earlier poetry: the mysterious riddle of the "great deep" that courses through the Idylls and finally provides the closing image of hope in "The Passing of

Arthur"; the unifying and "for ever changing form" of "the boundless deep" in "The Ancient Sage"; the "deep" of "De Profundis" from which all life stems and to which all life inevitably returns; and finally, the "boundless deep" of "Crossing the Bar."

25 Stevenson, "Druids," 22.

26 Haight, 566.

27 Stevenson, "Druids," 23.

28 Elizabeth Francis, ed., "Late Poems," in Tennyson: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980) 202.

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