"Snakes within the grass": The Fall of Camelot

A Study in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Merlin and Vivien"

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In his *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Walter Houghton says:

[that the Victorian age was an age of transition] is the basic and almost universal conception of the period. And it is peculiarly Victorian. For although all ages are ages of transition, never before men thought of their own time as an era of change *from* the past to the future. (1)

The *Victorian* mind, however, perceived change as a threat to its inherited centuries of tradition. (Timmerman 62)

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is an attempt to revive this legend in an effort to find a "model of kingship and political leadership which might be applicable to his age." (Timmerman 62-3) The *Idylls* exists as a spiritual search for the order of "political justice" in the life of men. (Timmerman 63) Joanna Richardson stresses the same fact in *The Pre-Eminent Victorian*:

The *Idylls* ... were one of Tennyson's most earnest, important attempts to deal with major contemporary problems. Through the Idylls he would affirm to his materialistic, doubting age, the ultimate reality of the spirit; he would show forth the kingship of the soul, and how only through that kingship the beast in man was subdued.... Man's true task, as Tennyson saw it, was to secure order and harmony in all phases of human activity: individual harmony, ordered by conscience; and social harmony expressed as a sense of justice, loyalty, duty, responsibility and love. (114)

Tennyson's intention in the *Idylls* was to show the "gradual growth of human beliefs and institutions, and the spiritual development of man" (*Memoir* 127) *represented* in Camelot, and the main struggle being that of "Sense and Soul, typified in individuals" (*Memoir* 150) with Arthur as the central figure.

***However*, this dream is not realized. Tennyson remarks on the scheme of *Idylls of the King*, saying that it is**

the dream of man coming into practical life, and ruined by one sin. Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the tableland of life, and its struggle and performances. It is not the history of one man or of one generation, but the whole cycle of generations. (*Memoir* 127)

The motif in the *Idylls* is generally, then, to display the thought of a noble idea formed, and to a certain extent carried out, but thwarted again and again by selfishness and sin, and closing in apparent failure, yet showing the seed of truth and purity through out the land. Arthur's object is to

establish law and order, civilization in the highest sense, a high standard of unselfish and noble life. The attempt fails: his knights were meant to set a noble example of manliness, devotion and purity; but the court teems with scandal, and finally evil and seditious elements are triumphant. The dominant note in the poem is of failure to realize great aims. (Benson 197)

The *final* collapse of the city-state is the inevitable result of many individual defections, for the tragedy of the Idylls is built cumulatively in the separate episodes. (Buckley 183)

In "Merlin and Vivien", age and wisdom fall victim to a heartless wanton. (Benson 197) Vivien, aware of the old man's inexplicable melancholy, plays with his emotions until, worn with fatigue, he tells her *the* charm and condemns himself forever.

The poem *begins* with the image that closes the poem. The narrative begins from the description of the storm, digressing to tell the story of Merlin and Vivien, and completes the sequence by telling what happens after the storm. From the begging, a sense of a sinister power at play is present. The description of the "hollow" oak (l. 3) tree foreshadows Merlin's description of the tower in which the man cursed with the charm Merlin knows is imprisoned, and of course, the sense of tragic irony prevails from the beginning.

The digression begins with Mark's court where a minstrel arrived telling them of Lancelot's love to Guinevere and how other knights followed his example. He describes Lancelot's purity as "naked knight-like purity" (l. 11), a description which puts Lancelot's integrity under questioning.

Vivien's first sentence is a question whether other knights follow Lancelot or not. From the beginning, she reveals herself as being dependant on slander and seduction as her weapons. (Priestly 244) she is associated with the court of Mark, a court of active and irreconcilable evil. (Priestly 243-4) Mark directly recognizes the chance of making evil flourish in Arthur's court, his main catalyst in the process being Vivien:

Here are snakes within the grass;
And you methinks, O Vivien, save ye fear
The monkish manhood, and the mask of pure
Worn by this court, can stir them till they sting. (ll. 33-6)

Vivien answers that "Hate, if hate be perfect, casts out fear." (ll. 41) Her reasons for hating Arthur are:

My father died in battle against the king,
My mother on his corpse in open field;
She bore me then, for born from death was I … (ll. 42-4)

The imagery she uses associate her with destruction, battle, and with death. Mark is aware of an abiding weakness, a hidden seed of evil, that, if watered, will corrupt and destroy

Arthur's court. His image, "snakes within the grass", blends the sinister with the good: grass, the natural greenery, a form of life that might cover sinister elements, snakes, within. Curtis Dahl in his "The Victorian Wasteland" says that "Too intense, too unworldly idealism, too complete spirituality will turn ordinary life, … to dust." (Dahl 33) Vivien is also aware that she is attacking Arthur, who is right, while being herself living a life of evil and wrong. (Priestly 245-6) The imagery she uses indicates the type of morals she upholds and represents:

… was I
Among the dead and sown upon the wind—
And then on thee! And shown the truth betimes,
That old true filth, the bottom of the well,
Where truth is hidden. Grascious lessons thine
And maxims of the mud. (ll. 44-9)

Beside such associations with "filth", Vivien is also described by epithets appropriate to animals: she is "wily" (l. 147), and says that she will have "The hearts of all [Arthur's] Order" (l. 156) when she has "ferreted out their borrowings". When she goes to Arthur's court she is described as having gone "stealing": she is more of a fox or a serpent than a woman and the sinister element in her is continually emphasized.

When she entreats Guinevere, she appeals to the vainglorious side of her character, she describes her as "Woman of women", that hers is "the wealth of beauty" and "the crown of power", that she is "the balm of pity", and finalizing by "O Heaven's own white/ Earth-angel, stainless bride". (ll. 77-80)

The imagery here, that Guinevere is stainless, is clearly ironic, but being aware of this, Vivien indulges Guinevere's pride winning her eventually. Guinevere is also described as being "All glittering like May sunshine on May leaves/In green and gold, and plumed with green." (ll. 86-7) the fabulous aura around her only hides emptiness, like a bubble. (Priestley 245)

Guinevere goes out with Lancelot to try a falcon he gave her. The account of this as well as Vivien's comment provide a good parallel to the incidents in the poem. Vivien says that her "game" is, ironically, "Royaller". (ll. 106) She compares Guinevere and Lancelot's love to each other to the love-making of crickets, a base and low sensuality. She plans to ruin Lancelot's reputation that "Lancelot will be gracious to the rat." (ll. 110) She compares her work to that of the rat digging tunnels below cities whose inmates "dance-/ O dream- of thee they dream'd not." (ll. 112-3)

Lancelot's account of the falcon could be applied to Guinevere and would provide good illumination of her character, but not without ironic touches. He says, referring to the falcon, "She is too noble … to check at pies,/Nor will shake rake: there is no baseness in her." (ll. 124-

5) Guinevere, for that matter, could not resist Lancelot, himself a sort of "pie", though to be such would not free her from some "baseness" in her own nature. Their association with flowers, "Many a time/As once – of old – among flowers - they rode" (ll. 133-4), with sensual aspects of nature, sheds light on their sensuous nature. (Vivien says earlier, on observing them going together, "That glance of theirs, but for the street, had been/A clinging kiss." (ll. 104)) when Lancelot says " Let her be," (l. 127) referring to Vivien, he is unaware o what ills she will have upon Camelot:

But Vivien half-forgotten of the Queen
… sat, heard, watch'd,
And whisper'd: thro' the peaceful court she crept
And whisper'd: then as Arthur in the highest
Leaven'd the world, so Vivien in the lowest,
*** * ***
Leaven'd his hall. They heard and let her be. (ll. 135-44)

Like the falcon he sets free, she will "[bounce] her quarry and [slay] it." (l. 133)

Vivien had planted "Death in the living waters" (l. 146) and would be able to work on a new thing. She attempted to seduce Arthur, but failed. Whereupon she turned to Merlin:

She play'd about with slight and sprightly talk,
And vivid smiles, and faintly venom'd points,
Of slander, glancing here and gazing there;
And yielding to his kindlier moods …
… he grew
Tolerant of what he half disdain'd …
Though doubtful, felt the flattery, and at times
Would flatter his own wish in age for love,
And believe her true: …
… and so the seasons went. (ll. 135-86)

Up to this point, she has not achieved anything tangible. But Merlin goes to Broceliande wood, where she manages to overthrow him. She would not have succeeded had not there been a weakness within him. (Priestley 244) His defeat is not only the defeat of reason by passion, but also the defeat of wisdom by the senses. Priestley argues that

Reason has been reduced to "empirical verification"; and "closed in the four walls of a hollow tower, From which was no escape for evermore." The overthrow of Merlin means the rejection of the faculty which perceives the ideal, the faculty of the poet and seer. (245)

Had he interpreted his "melancholy", his sense of closing evil, had he activated his seer-like power, he would have prevented his own doom which will be one cause for Camelot's fall. (Cf. Priestley 245)

Merlin is a seer whose faculty of vision is corrupted by passion. "Merlin tells [Vivien]," writes J. Philip Eggers, the story of "A maid so smooth, so white, so wonderful,/ They said a light came from her

when she moved' (ll. 564-5). Such, he allows himself to see in Vivien, as she glitters like a serpent in the 'glare and gloom' of the storm (l. 967). Merlin's failure of vision is the turning point of the Idylls."[1] (p. 189) Merlin is a sage and a bard, who nevertheless diverges tragically from wisdom because of a failure of reason: "And the dark wood grew darker toward the storm/ In silence, while his anger slowly died/ Within him, till he let his wisdom go" (ll. 888-90). A. Dwight Culler discusses the "'glorious roundel'" (l. 424) that Merlin describes to Vivien:

With such a "noble song" to offer, why does not Merlin win the song contest? The answer surely is that he does not sing it. Had he sung it, in all its original fire and glory, Vivien would have slunk off through the woods and Merlin, reinspired, would have returned straight to Camelot to reinspirit the king. But only Vivien actually sang her song.[2]

The imagery Tennyson uses in Merlin's vision are all foreboding of downfall: the "dome ever poised itself to fall" (l. 189) is Arthur's court; the battle in the mist could be given various interpretations of which are the struggle between sense and reason, evil and purity, corruption and goodness as well as the final battle in which Arthur receives his mortal wound; the "Death in life and lying in all love" is a clear reference to Lancelot's illegal love to Guinevere which led to Camelot's fall; "the meanest having power upon the highest,/ And the high purpose broken by the worm" (ll. 193-4) could be taken as a reference to Merlin's defeat by Vivien, sense having overthrown reason; "the worm", traditionally in poetry, refers to the serpent which tempted Eve; in other words, the evil powers that are sown within man's breast and sprouting to destroy him from within, as is the cause of the downfall of Camelot which lies within Camelot itself.

The description of the charmed man who is "Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower" brings to mind Merlin at the beginning of the poem inside the hollow oak with "wily" Vivien at his feet.

Vivien is described as being clad in green, a colour which leads to a number of associations with evil; later on she is openly described as being similar to a snake:

And lissome Vivien, holding by the heel,
Writhed towards him, sided up his knee and sat,
Behind his ankle twined her hollow feet
Together, curved an arm about his neck,
Clung like a snake; … (ll. 236-40)

She ironically calls him a "spider" and herself a "gilded summer fly/Caught in [his] web." (ll. 377-8) The truth is that she is the spider and he is the fly.

Merlin likens her to a sea-wave ready to fall upon him, but her tricks make him abandon the idea. He even grants her the favour of asking a

[1] Qtd. by Lovelace 153.
[2] Qtd. in Lovelace 154.

"boon". She directly asks him to teach her the charm stressing the fact that her intention is as clean as the "blood of babes, as white as milk" (l. 342), and she denies having thought of treachery even in "the jumbles rubbish of a dream" (l. 345). Her images however reflect her true intention. The reference to blood and to "nadir hell" (l. 347) brings about a sense of evil. Merlin refuses but his speech foretells his doom:

… the gnat
That settles, beaten back, and beaten back
Settles, till one could yield for weariness … (ll. 368-70)

He will eventually yields "for weariness", mental and physical. Though he feels that she is a threat to him, and that he feels that his name and fame ebb because of her, he falls.

Merlin begins to tell Vivien the story of the charm. His description of the old wizard who saw through people and walls is an epitome of wisdom that enables men to see through other men's deeds and discover their intentions. Had Merlin used his powers, he would not have ended so. Merlin represents Reason, or what Tennyson would call wisdom. His intuition is like that of the wizard who gave him the book. However, this reason, this wisdom, has been usurped by the senses. "The overthrow of Merlin means the rejection of that faculty which preserves the ideal, the faculty of the poet and seer." (Priestly 245) Towards the end of the poem, as the storm approaches its fiercest stage, Merlin begins to yield and like the splintered tree, he is overthrown. The raging storm parallels the conflicting feelings which lead to his destruction. The poem ends with the storm having spent "its burst of passion" (l. 959), like Merlin himself.

Although Merlin understands Vivien to be a malevolent force, he underestimates the power of her physical and mental seductiveness. Because his despair has distracted him and that he knows nothing about women (he is the only one among Arthur's followers who is not a knight beside Arthur's fool), Vivien is able to make him tell her the powerful charm. (Lambdin & Lambdin 31) As he allows himself to be deceived and to have his intellect corrupted by sensuality, he gets his just reward. (Lambdin & Lambdin, pp.31-2) Hence the Last line in the poem: "and the forest echo'd 'fool'." (l. 972)

With his removal, for Merlin has been the chief support of Arthur's system and the chief witness to his kingship. After Merlin is gone, everything falls under questioning and disbelief, i.e., disintegration. (Priestly 245)

The Prince Consort expressed the general sentiment when he wrote Tennyson on May 17th, 1860: "quite rekindle the feeling with which the legends of King Arthur must have inspired the chivalry of old, whilst the grace of form in which they are presented blends those feelings with softer tone of our age."[3] From a

[3] Qtd. in Marshall 139.

comprehensive view, the work is about the decline of a community from an original ideal state. Most of the corruption is caused by human sexuality. (Lambdin & Lambdin 14)

Lambdin and Lambdin argue that

it is a work that mirrors contemporary problems caused by the juxtaposition of Victorian self-confidence with the equally powerful Victorian deep despair: the feeling that this was a golden, ideal time was undercut by the knowledge that it could suddenly end. The age was complex and paradoxical, sometimes optimistic and sometimes melancholy, and Tennyson Idylls [sic.] reflects this perfectly. (14-5)

Tennyson alters the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table to speak to his era.[4]

Priestly says that Tennyson is asserting in the *Idylls* that Christianity is not a set of facts to be argued about but a system of principles to be lived by. Tennyson wants to make the reader understand how these principles become neglected and what must happen to individuals, with Merlin as an example here, and societies who neglect them. (254-5) Priestly continues saying that Tennyson is consistently opposing the revival of Lucretian philosophy which is to him a philosophy of pessimism and despair, of defeat and social destruction. He upholds against it the Virgilian philosophy, a philosophy of restless effort and activity. "The last line of Tennyson's 'Lucretius' presents acutely the implications of the Lucretian philosophy: 'Thy duty? What is duty?' The man or society who can find no answer must perish." (255)

[4] Qtd. in Lambdin and Lambdin 15.

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