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# The Lady of Shalott, Guinevere, and their Pre-Raphaelite afterlives

Master's thesis in English

Supervisor: Yuri Cowan

May 2021



Emma Florence Harrison, Poems of Tennyson, The Lady of Shalott



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## Abstract

The focus of this analysis is the reception of the mid-Victorian poems by Alfred Tennyson and William Morris. “The Lady of Shalott” and “Guinevere” by Tennyson, and “The Defence of Guenevere” by Morris related to the social confines of the period rather differently. Tennyson was conscious of the contemporary expectations and he attempted to meet these. Morris, however, related to the phenomenon in a more challenging and daring manner. This boldness from his side was partly due to the strong parallels between his poem’s narrative and his personal life. These differing attitudes of the poets were reflected in the critical reception of their works, accordingly.

This thesis examines the extent of influence of the zeitgeist and social expectations on literary- and art works. My position regarding this process on the stage of literature is that the writers and artists, in certain cases, conceded to the social requirements and anticipations (a factor referred to by Hans Robert Jauss as “the horizon of expectations”). At the same time, the personalities and personal traits behind the works simply could not be dispersed entirely. This opposition between *social* and *personal* created an exciting duality and tension within the poems. This very tension was reflected by Alfred Tennyson’s modifications implemented on his 1833 version of “The Lady of Shalott”, the result of which was published in 1842, and the two, rather opposing Guineveres depicted by William Morris and Tennyson. The Pre-Raphaelite “afterlife” of the poems give further colourings to this tension. The paintings and illustrations surrounding the source texts adhere to them in a rather varied manner. These visual representations can relate to the poems faithfully, challengingly or resonate with a reading of the source text that aimed to be hidden from the public, thus giving the poems further understandings.



## Acknowledgements

To my wonderful Tomi without whom I could not have done this master's course. And lots of other things. Exist, for instance.

I am grateful to my always helpful supervisor, Yuri, who gave me Virgilian guidance through the hell and purgatory of academic writing, paving my way with abundant feedback, wonderful, new ideas and concepts, never-ending encouragement, and funny anecdotes. Thank you, indeed.

I also would like to say thank you to my family Anya, Apa, and Kicsi for all the encouragement and love.

I would like to express my gratitude towards my friend, Ilcsi, who did not call me and did not answer my calls while I was in the progress of writing this thesis, as she knew very well my real, underlying intention was merely to procrastinate. Thank you for not talking to me.

Very special gratitude goes to my beloved Marit, Lissy, and Alison for their support and for bearing with me during my worst periods. Also for reminding me that I can, whenever I have thought that I cannot. And for the word count.

I also would like to say thank you to Caroline for her flexibility and support. It has meant a lot.

And finally, last but by no means least, also to everyone in this master's course. It has been great to listen to and think about your ideas, thoughts, and experience this more often than not exciting study adventure.

Thanks for all the help and kindness!





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## Introduction

Once, around the Christmas of 2020, a friend of mine and I engaged in a conversation about a shared childhood memory, an animated film, that due to its eerie atmosphere and ambiguous outcome left us with a long-lasting impression and several unanswered questions surrounding it. My friend and I were in sympathy regarding the magnitude and significance of this childhood film experience of ours, well-proven by the fact that more than 30 years later we would still be talking about it. However, the agreement between the two of us ended here; we simply could not come to consonance regarding the outcome of the narrative. My dear friend found the end-effect dark and resignedly sad, while I kept on arguing its moderately happy, comforting, and unambiguously heart-warming ending. In the end, we withdrew from the topic without a conclusion but this argument, just as the animated film that incited it 30 years ago, left me with something new to think about. I was fascinated by how a “source text” – or in this case maybe source narrative – can arouse not just differing but sharply opposing responses from “readers” or recipients. What made us think about the very same content so differently? Is it the historical embeddedness of this cultural product that results in different connotations? Or is that the differences in our personalities that directed us towards opposing conclusions? Since in 1987, when the short film was broadcast, we both were at kindergarten age, not bothered by concurrent historical events, I bend towards the second solution as a possible answer to my question. But is there more to scrutinise while discussing this phenomenon?

With the mindset illustrated above, I would like to turn towards mid-Victorian England. This essay aims to provide a possible reading within the inter-disciplinary fields of poetry and art within the period. This focus, being too wide and general, will be narrowed down along concepts of reception theory applied to Pre-Raphaelite poetry and art, with a special emphasis on certain female figures. I will look at the reception of the poems “The Lady of Shalott”, and “Guinevere” by Alfred Tennyson and “The Defence of Guenevere” by William Morris. What I am interested in is how these poems related to the zeitgeist and the literary expectations of the age, later referred to, using Jauss’s concept, as the “horizon of expectations”. After having completed this task, I will observe the perception and afterlife of these literary works by looking at paintings and illustrations of Pre-Raphaelite artists, such as William Holman Hunt, Florence Harrison, and William Morris, surrounding the texts. My idea, that I would like to support in the following

pages, is that artist were conscious of the reading and critical public's expectations regarding literary works while creating their texts. Tennyson related to this standard of expectations harmoniously, as he was willing to recreate his first Lady of Shalott just to suit the Victorian standards, while Morris had a more challenging attitude towards the Victorian horizon of expectations. At the same time, while comparing the different Guinevere figures created by the two poets, we will find, that they ended up with different outcomes compared to what they had intended. After having looked at the poems with analytical eyes, I will include in my argument some of the Pre-Raphaelite artworks inspired by the poems, to see how the ideas worded in the poems were reflected and given further readings on the canvases of these artists. But before doing so, I would like to outline the theory that will provide the backbone of this thesis and after that outline a sketch of the social panorama of the age, which, due to the theoretical background of this essay, will be of key importance.

### **Ideas surrounding reception theory**

Within reception theory, the main guidelines of my reasoning are those phrased by Hans Robert Jauss in his work "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory." He emphasises the active role of readers within the mechanism of literary understanding. He states that "in the triangle of author, work and reading public the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience" (8). Jauss considers the readers not only as mere recipients within the lifecycle, or as he describes it a triangle, of written works but provides them with an active role in the birth and rebirth of literary products. He places this active role and its significance within, as he phrases it, the "horizon of expectations". Readers of a certain age have their expectations imposed on new literary texts and these expectations are strongly influenced by the zeitgeist and the historical and sociological particularities of the age. How writers related to this factor during their process of creation hugely influenced the possible success of their work. When a literary work remained on this particular horizon, fulfilling the textual, formal, or moral expectations of a reading public of a given period, the feeling of satisfaction was aroused in readers which most likely resulted in a public acknowledgement surrounding the writer and

his written product. Jauss explains this interdependence of writers and the reading public as follows:

A literary work, even if it seems new, does not appear as something absolutely new in an informal vacuum, but predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of the familiar, stirs particular emotions in the reader and with its “beginning” arouses expectations for the “middle and end,” which can then be continued intact, changed, re-oriented or even ironically fulfilled in the course of reading according to certain rules of the genre or type of text (12).

From the above extract, it turns out that writers could respond to the horizon of expectations in several ways, and this is where literary scrutiny around the topic becomes most exciting and rewarding. Some writers stepped outside the confines the horizon of expectations provided them with. Jauss relates the artistic attitude to the “nature and degree of [the writer’s work’s] effect on a given audience” (14). He unfolds this idea as he goes on and says:

if the “aesthetic distance” is considered as the distance between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception results in a “horizon change” because it negates familiar experience or articulates an experience for the first time, this aesthetic distance can be measured historically in the spectrum of the reaction of the audience and the judgement of criticism (14).

Some writers refused to please the horizon of expectations or relate to it harmoniously. In my thesis, this attitude will be illustrated through William Morris’s poem and his take on Guinevere. The distance between the mutinous literary works and the horizon of expectation was measured by an “aesthetic distance” and resulted in a “horizon change.” But change is almost always surrounded by difficulties and risks. The longer the “aesthetic distance” was from a given age’s readers’ expectations the bigger risk the writer took. At the same time, the bigger the risk, the bigger impact a given literary work can have on the ever-transforming, fluid horizon of expectations. Jauss explains this idea through Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* which as formal innovation introduced the tool of “impersonal telling”. This innovation of Flaubert was mocked by Barbey d’Auerilly, acclaimed French critic and novelist, when he attacked the work with the following comparison: if a story-telling machine could be made of English steel, it would

function the same as Monsieur Flaubert (Jauss 18). This public disapproval, climaxing in a trial for obscenity, was the result of Flaubert's reluctance to please the horizon of expectations of the era, which took delight in the personable tone of confession novels. This expectation was contradicted, or even ridiculed by Flaubert's innovation. But the resolution of this event within literature history does not arrive at this point, contemporary with Flaubert. The contextualisation of the book reaches beyond the historical moment of the appearance of *Madame Bovary* justifying or reflecting its real aesthetic value. "Madame Bovary, which was understood at first only by a small circle of knowledgeable readers and called a turning point in the history of the novel, became a worldwide success, [and] the group of readers who were formed by this book sanctioned the new canon of expectations (Jauss 18). Flaubert, by taking a huge risk and placing his work at a significant aesthetic distance from the contemporary horizon of expectations, in the long run, reformed this particular horizon and outlined a new one.

Jauss deals with another way of relating to the horizon of expectation, which is worth mentioning, that of Cervantes while writing *Don Quixote*. This novel lured a significant contemporary audience by seemingly adhering to their horizon of expectations by composing a tale of knighthood, just to parody them seriously (13). The attitude of Cervantes reflects a rather conscious approach towards the horizon of expectations from the side of the writer, taking the social requirements and particularities into consideration and utilise them to his and his books advantage. By seemingly creating a tale of knighthood, that at the time resided on the horizon of expectation and thus promising a "culinary" or light reading to his readers, he ensured that his book attained a wide audience. It is also interesting to see that as the sociological and historical context changes, transforming the horizon of expectations, literary works of the canon will be referred to differently. Don Quixote was thought of as a comic novel in the 17th century. During the two centuries to follow, by the nineteenth century, this label transformed along with the readers' horizon into social commentary. This transformation reflects how the periodically changing audience thought of the content of this literary work in a more and more serious manner.

There is one more idea within Jauss's essay that I would like to include in this introduction, as it is of central importance within my reasoning. It is the historical embeddedness of different horizon of expectations, and how historical and sociological changes influence and

form them. But it would be an error on my part to leave the description this way, sketching a seemingly unilateral connection between the periodical horizons of expectations and historical eras. Jauss argued the dynamics between literature and history as

The chasm between literature and history, between aesthetic and historical knowledge, can be bridged if literary history does not simply once again describe literary works as a reflection of the process of general history, but rather discovers in the course of “literary evolution” that truly socially formative function which belongs to literature as it competes with other arts and social forces in the emancipation of man from his natural, religious, and social ties (37).

These lines outline an interacting, mutual and dynamic relationship between literature and history. Of course, history and the social trends and particularities were of forming force regarding the horizon of expectations of certain periods but literary texts also influenced, formed or even reformed the contemporaries’ way of thinking, perception of reality, and aesthetic judgements within a given period. In my scrutiny, I aim to outline this particularity of the literary works, as well.

And finally, returning to the little anecdote at the beginning of this chapter, I would like to emphasize the importance of the receiving individual while understanding literary contents. My conclusion of the situation, described above, was that most likely my friend and I arrived at conclusions of polar opposites regarding our shared experience because as personalities we differ from each other significantly. The individual and personal traits of a reader play a huge role during the evaluation, understanding, and interpretation of a text. Andrei Tarkovsky returns to this idea in his work *Sculpting in Time*, strikingly summarising the concept as “a book read by a thousand different people is a thousand different books” (177). Georges Poulet arrives at the same conclusion, including the writer and the writer’s personality in the process, as he writes

It is true that there is an analogy between the works of an author and the experiences of his life. The works may be seen as an incomplete translation of the life. And further, there is an even more significant analogy among all the works of a single author. Each of the works, however, while I am reading it, lives in me its own life (309).

Summarising the theory background I described above, my aim in the following pages is to introduce Alfred Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott", William Morris's "Guenevere", and Tennyson's "Guinevere" in light of reception theory. I would like to observe how these poems related to the horizon of expectations of mid-Victorian England, whether they aimed to satisfy it, and if so, by what means? Considering this, looking at Tennyson's poems will be rather exciting as he was the poet laureate of the era, the title which bore huge sociological significance and responsibility. After having discussed the poems, giving my essay an inter-disciplinary twist I am will look at how different Pre-Raphaelite artists re-read the texts and provided their own interpretations of them. What I am interested in, still following the guidelines of reception theory, is whether these artists remained faithful to the source texts, or allowed their personalities, personal perceptions of reality to saturate their pieces of art, thus widening the scope of interpretations around the poems. I would like to see and introduce to what extent transformed the source text, and texts and if the artists of different ideological and personal background managed to add to the meaning and complexity of them. I am will attempt to decipher the hidden aims and messages of the paintings, and illustrations by interpreting the overt and covert visual representations of ideas within them. While completing these tasks, I will be offering my understanding of the source texts and their reinterpretations, thus becoming part of the reception process. But before I would embark on close reading the poems, it is crucial to provide a brief and general introduction of the historical and social confines of the era, as it is in such a heavily intertwined relationship with the Victorian horizon of expectations. What I aim to outline in the following paragraph, might seem like faulty generalizing. The era I am discussing is much more diverse and colourful than what I will describe in the following paragraph, but for the sake of this thesis, I will only outline the frame of the complex social background, to provide a point of reference. The importance of this point of reference is underlined by Kathleen McCormick while recalling

Terry Eagleton, Pierre Macherey, and Frederic Jameson [who] insist on the importance of exploring the historical formation in which the text was produced not only to understand the contexts to which it explicitly refers, but also to read *symptomatically*, that is, for symptoms of the tensions or contradictions of the social formation within which the text was produced and which are then reproduced, often unconsciously, within the text (320).



Based on this reasoning, while trying to obtain a full understanding of literary texts, it is essential to observe the historical and social particularities of the age the texts in question are embedded in. Further on, as the theoretical focus of my thesis zooms on the reception of literary works, the task of mapping the historical formations of the age is a crucial part of this argument.

### **Historical and social background – A glimpse at the Victorian scene of ideas**

The moment the texts by Tennyson and Morris and their visual “translations” (Helsing x) were produced was during the reign of Queen Victoria who became heir to the English throne in 1837 and possessed it until her death in 1901. This era and its political and social particularities are popularly referred to as Victorian England. It is important to mention her because she as a personality and her actions as a ruler deeply influenced the era and the people, including artists and authors living in it. This age was saturated with enormous transformations both politically, socially, and scientifically. As a result, society experienced an uncertainty regarding the surrounding world, which led to a stubborn insistence on the known and traditional and disapproval of the new and radical. I find it important to mention these particularities of the age, even though they might seem distant from the focus of my argument, because the historical particularities strongly influenced the Victorian reading public’s way of thinking and scope of expectations regarding literature and fine arts.

The world for the Victorian people was expanding to an almost incomprehensible measure, due to the imperialist politics typical of the time. By 1900 Britain ruled almost a quarter of the world, in both land and population. This means, England became the biggest empire the world had ever seen, and it was said that the sun never set on the British Empire. This seemingly victorious situation resulted in confusion and the re-evaluation of measures and values in Victorian minds. This confusion was further strengthened by the different scientific discoveries and the rapid development of technology that resulted in the Industrial Revolution. Science questioned the institutions that people’s belief and their view of the surrounding world was based on. Technology slowly but steadily replaced manpower, resulting in less optimal and more limited working conditions for lower classes. In 1859 Charles Darwin published his groundbreaking work, *On the Origin of Species*; a piece of scientific literature that questioned and contradicted the theoretical pillars and teachings of the Church. Man as a creation of God did

not seem unambiguous anymore, and the public reacted to the work at the time reflecting their confusion. . As Thomas Henry Huxley, contemporary and supporter of Darwin, recalls it “years had to pass away before misrepresentation, ridicule, and denunciation, ceased to be the most notable constituents of the majority of the multitudinous criticisms of [Darwin’s] work which poured from the press” (no pag). The reception of Darwin’s ideas was far from what could be called a steady success. Many felt threatened by the new ideas Darwin had brought onto their horizon of ideologies and this fear resulted in a public disdain and excluding attitude. The researches and finds of pioneering nature within the field of geology were a pillar stone of Darwin’s discoveries. The hostile attitude that this new scientific direction had to face at the time is reflected and summed up most picturesquely by John Ruskin, as he concisely articulates in a letter to Henry Ackland “if only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses” (115). This very sentence mirrors how thinkers and advocates of the “old world”, even the most intellectually acclaimed ones, refused and disregarded the new ideas and directions which seemingly aimed to deconstruct the basis their beliefs and views of the surrounding world were built upon. Still, the new ideas were born, they were present, irrespectively of the disregarding attempts.

At the same time, the colonizing and oppressing attitude of England did not confine within the field of politics. Society was also saturated with this very attitude. An ironic lineament of the age was that even though the ruler of the empire was a woman, women, in general, were regarded as secondary members of society compared to men. Their ultimate aim, appointed by society, was to find someone they could marry and give birth to children. Women’s education was moulded according to these aims, as well. Once, women fulfilled what the Victorian society, convinced of the righteousness of imperial and oppressive attitudes, expected them to do and entered a marriage which was more often than not arranged, their limitations reached a new dimension. Gilmour explains this particularity of the time when he says

Until 1882 a woman’s money and property passed into the control of her husband when she married unless a prior settlement had been made. The justification was that a woman could have no interest separate from that of her husband; they were, in the words of that legal Bible, Blackstone’s Commentaries, ‘one person in law’, and ‘the very being or legal

existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband'. Women's political emancipation could not proceed before their legal emancipation, since, if they were married, the law effectively denied them independent action outside the home (189).

Once entering marriage, women ceased to function as independent personalities. In marriage, they became parts of their husbands both in person and property.

This social conviction was also reflected and justified in contemporary literature, in Coventry Patmore's famous and widely acclaimed poem "The Angel in the House" written in 1853. This poem was inspired by Patmore's wife Emily and gives a detailed description of the perfect Victorian wife. The main character of the poem had provided such a provocative ground for feminist argument that Virginia Woolf in a paper called "Professions for Women," read to the Women's Service League in 1931, said "killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Showalter 207). The following extract will explain why Woolf almost a century later still regarded "the Angel in the House" as the ultimate threat imposed on the creative and active freedom of women.

Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself.  
How often flings for nought, and yokes  
Her heart to an icicle or whim,  
Whose each impatient word provokes  
Another, not from her, but him;  
While she, too gentle even to force  
His penitence by kind replies,  
Waits by, expecting his remorse,  
With pardon in her pitying eyes;  
And if he once, by shame oppress'd,

A comfortable word confers,  
She leans and weeps against his breast,  
And seems to think the sin was hers;  
Or any eye to see her charms,  
At any time, she's still his wife,  
Dearly devoted to his arms;  
She loves with love that cannot tire;  
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,  
Through passionate duty love springs higher,  
As grass grows taller round a stone. (75-76)

This poem is worth quoting at length because these lines outline the rigid guidelines regarding the anticipated attitude of the ideal Victorian woman. According to Patmore, the only calling of the ideal woman shall be to please her man, to provide a safe background where he can return from the troubles of daily life. In the poem, all the visual and physical traits, such as breast, and arms, are assigned to the man, while the woman is only presented as an ethereal presence, dutifully surrounding the dominating validity of the male significance. Words are also denied from her, reserved to him only. In this poem, just like in “The Lady of Shalott”, the idea of women being the object of seeing is prevailing.

These expectations were just as palpably present in Victorian society as within the lines of “The Angel in the House”. Differing from the requirements provided was a rather dangerous venture, as Victorian women could fit only two categories creating polar opposites.

There is no halfway; woman must be either Madonna or Magdalena, virgin or whore, wife or witch. Both sides of the polarisation are men’s simplified categories for classifying women, and thus depriving them of more various individual identities. Accordingly both extremes deny self-determination to the woman. Either she is imprisoned in a straitjacket of dutiful behaviour, or else she is a doomed to suffer destitution and misery, the bad woman’s fate in countless Victorian novels and illustrations (Prettejohn 208).

Prettejohn's reasoning above bears the fault of simplifying or generalizing, although being of valid nature. Some women could set foot on the middle ground between the realms of "Madonna" or "Magdalena". Focusing on the field of art and literature, several rather significant female names freckle this period, such as the Brontë sisters, Beatrix Potter, or Elizabeth Siddal. However, reaching acclaim as a woman writer or artist was a challenge. The frequent use of male pseudonyms verifies this particularity of the time and gives validity to Prettejohn's reasoning, even if simplifying and generalization can be misleading, and unfortunate while conducting a research.

As we connect Prettejohn's reasoning to Jauss's idea on the horizon of expectations, we can conclude that in Victorian England the literary and artistic scene accepted and included only two female protagonists: the ideal and the fallen woman. Each of them strengthened the particularities of the other by providing a harsh contrast. Taking this into consideration, it will be a rather exciting undertaking to examine how the poets and artists of the era related to this rather simplifying way of depicting female characters. Before I would embark on discovering Tennyson and Morris's female protagonists, I would like to insert a paragraph explaining why I thought including art could be beneficial while arguing a topic mostly residing within the merits of literature and history.

### **Art reflecting the historical and sociological context**

I like to think of pieces of artwork as chroniclers of a given period, and the art of the Victorian era is no exception to that. Particularities of a given period can be discovered in paintings in two ways: overtly and covertly. By overtly I mean, when a certain artwork discusses a current social phenomenon and provides the viewers with a judgement or moral regarding that. The method of reflection is a bit more complex when the artwork reflects timely particularities in a covert way when the artwork did not mean to bring up certain issues, still, those affected them significantly and by doing so went down in history within the frame of the artwork. I would like to bring two examples to explain my reasoning: William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (figure 1) and John Everett Millais's *The Knight Errant* (figure 2). The first one reflects on a social issue by its choice of topic, while from the second one we can find out more about the particularities of the era by researching its background story.

In *The Awakening Conscience* Holman Hunt portrayed a woman and a man in an obvious situation. The woman rises from the man's lap, who is sitting by a piano; she raises her big brown eyes to the garden that can be seen in the mirror, behind the protagonists of the picture. The scene is clear: the master of the house and the kept mistress, a rather common circumstance of a woman's fall at that time. The master wants to get nearer to the mistress, camouflaging his aim by giving a piano lesson to the girl. We get into the scene at the moment the girl's conscience is awakening and she gets out from her master's lap. On the left of the picture, we can see a cat, below the man's head. Like the other Pre-Raphaelites, Hunt liked to add depths to his pictures in the form of symbols. The cat, residing on the man's side in the picture, represents the master's falsity, the cat being a symbol of that feature. With this picture, Hunt leaves no doubt in the public that the fall of this maid obviously would have been the fault of the man, but the girl is conscious enough to resist. On the picture's frame, Hunt placed a motto from the Book of Proverbs: "As he who taketh away a garment in cold weather, so is he who singeth songs unto a heavy heart." By framing the scene with these words of huge significance, Hunt judges the heartless seducer and finds him at fault. These words comment not on the woman, but on her indifferent seducer, who remains unaware how his words have oppressed her conscience and yet done her good. Unusually this picture is not placed in an ancient or medieval environment; the clothes of the portrayed persons and the furniture are Victorian. This way the painting became an overt criticism of contemporary society enmeshed by hypocrisy and prejudices.

John Everett Millais's painting titled *The Knight Errant* also reflects on the above-mentioned particularities of the era, hypocrisy and false prejudices, but not by visually introducing the topic. Its ill reception by the Victorian audience and the changes Millais had to make on it tell us more about the hypocrisy of Victorian England than any of the telltale Pre-Raphaelite pictures of contemporary subjects. The story in the background of *The Knight Errant* adds to the prudery of Victorian society the tone of ridiculousness. Millais had to repaint this picture because it was too much for the Victorian moralising eyes in its original form. It must be the biggest sorrow for a painter to be forced to change something in his beloved painting because of social pressure and censorship, but Millais had no other choice as the public rejection of the original piece was overwhelming. First, we need to get to know the details of the work to find out what shocked the public so deeply. The scene captured in the picture is pleasingly chivalric and typically Pre-Raphaelite, set in a medieval environment. The man in the picture is a knight

errant, dressed in armour, holding a sword. He has just found a woman tied to a tree, left on her own and he is severing the woman's bonds. The woman turns her head outwards from the picture so we cannot see only guess her expression. She has long, blonde, curly hair but this trait of appearance only adds to the romantic atmosphere of the scene, as it leaves her entirely naked body wholly uncovered. At this point, we might approximate the objection of the Victorian public sympathetically, since the vision of a naked woman understandably hurts well-mannered, religious and virtuous eyes, but what I have just described is the already repainted piece. Let me uncover the original painting. It looks exactly like the repainted one with one significant difference: the woman looks into the knight's eyes. Millais's original woman was a brave, sensual and emotional main character present in the moment of her rescue. But due to how contemporaries preferred to regard women, Millais had to deprive his heroine of the act of looking confining her in the position of the object of a look; the position that was provided to women within the Victorian horizon of expectations. The Victorian audience found the scene in its original form way too erotic and intimate, so the poor, bound woman had to turn her face away from his saviour, gazing into the distance, thus becoming a passive participant of the event portrayed. This little background anecdote also casts light on how easy turning into an ideal woman from a fallen one was as it only took a move of the head. But at least Millais did not have to dress up his female character.

The driving force of a man in a woman's fate, and women confined within the object position of a look, forbidden from becoming the subject of the act; these are the most important ideas, and guidelines along which I would like to discover and comprehend Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott", William Morris's "Guenevere", and Tennyson's take on the same character, but with a twist in the spelling "Guinevere". After having analysed the poems and located their position compared to the horizon of expectation I will turn towards their translations within Victorian art, thus including further representations and readings of the texts. What I am interested in is whether the artists I am to discuss aimed to stay faithful to contemporary expectations and provide their audience with a feeling of satisfaction, thus securing the success of their works, or they were daring enough to reject these expectations and introduce their own understanding and judgements of the narratives. The narratives, which even though were taken from the Arthurian cycle, bear significant contemporary connotations.

Following Tarkovsky's "thousand different people, thousand books" theory, I also aim to highlight the personalities behind certain works to see how personal stories or biographies provided different filters to the same narrative. This undertaking of my thesis will be of profound significance while discussing William Morris's painting of Guenevere since the resemblance between the source text and Morris's personal narrative is astonishing. The Guinevere portrayed by him is not only the Queen of Camelot but also that of Morris's heart. What I am curious about is to what extent the artist uses this particularity of the source text to reflect on and process his reality, his personal narrative. Does he manage to remain faithful to his private impressions and experiences or does he allow the horizon of expectations to affect his work to satisfy contemporary audiences?

My thesis statement regarding these questions is, that the horizon of expectations of the age provided the artists with a point of reference, compared to which they could find their way to public approval and success. Tennyson, while revisiting his 1833 version of "The Lady of Shalott" was clearly trying to return to "the Angel of the House" take of female virtue, thus depriving his titular character of her most exciting tones and dimensions. These efforts of his helped him to guide his Lady of Shalott back on the contemporary horizon of expectations, surrounded by public acclaim. William Holman Hunt's illustration of the poem, and the modifications he applied on it seven years later, related to the source texts in an inverse manner, thus proving that the colours Tennyson aimed to tone down were still pulsing within the lines of his 1842 "The Lady of Shalott". William Morris by creating his take on Guinevere was clearly ignoring the expectations of the age, which resulted in harsh criticism and disdain surrounding his 1858 poem. Tennyson, at the same time, while still trying to adhere to the expectations of the Victorian public, managed to create a Guinevere, even more exciting than that of Morris's. He created a female character capable of self-reflection and personal development, in a time when responsibility belonged to the public sphere mostly inhabited by men. Morris's painting of Queen Guinevere, just as his poem, reflects the artist's biased attitude towards the titular fictional character and the actual woman behind the work, Jane Morris. Florence Harrison's illustration of Guinevere, suiting the approach of a woman artist, emphasises the male dominance in the titular character's fate. An exciting collision and merging of the public and the personal, manifested in works of literature and art; this is what I would like to discover and understand in the following



pages. Upon embarking on this task, first, I would like to turn to Arthur Tennyson and his handling of the Lady of Shalott.

## Chapter one: The Lady of Shalott

Edgar Allen Poe declares in his 1846 essay “The Philosophy of Composition” that “the death [...] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (122). The strength of the two ideas “beauty” and “death” joined in a literary work resides within their contradicting traits. Beauty is connected with youth and life, whereas death, more often than not, is associated with old age and unsightly physical traits. These two, opposing ideas assembled side-by-side always raises interest in readers or recipients of literary and artworks. This might be the reason why artists and writers so eagerly reached out to these seemingly opposing ideas in the Victorian period.

Edgar Allen Poe’s reasoning resonates really well with Alfred Tennyson’s ballad “The Lady of Shalott”. Tennyson’s poem is about the isolated life of a nameless lady, who spends her nights and days waving reflections of the outside world, a territory she is forbidden to look at due to a curse of unknown origin. The reflections she sees through a magic mirror that one day presents her Sir Lancelot on his way to Camelot. This picture flashing in the mirror makes the Lady step away from her loom and look out from her tower to the outside world and the Knight. This act of hers brings the curse upon her. She leaves the Island of Shalott to sit in a boat and float down to Camelot. On her way to the city she sings her final song and by the time she reaches Camelot, she is already dead. The citizens of Camelot are puzzled by her arrival as they gather around the boat that carries the corpse of an unknown, dead beauty. Along with the residents of the city arrives Lancelot, ignorant of his role in the Lady’s fate, and seals the course of events, the narrative about the death of a beautiful lady, as “She has a lovely face;/God in his mercy lent her grace;/The Lady of Shalott.” (ll 169-171 1842)

As Lancelot is present in the poem, the readers might rightfully assume that Tennyson was inspired by Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*, as several other Victorian poems of medieval origin, but this conclusion would be wrong. According to Naomi Levine

early in 1868, two critics were speculating about the origin of Alfred Tennyson’s already classic “The Lady of Shalott.” Here is Frederick James Furnivall writing to William Michael Rossetti with an answer from the horse’s mouth: “As you kindly took trouble about the Lady of Shalott for me, you are entitled to a copy of Tennyson’s own

account:—‘I met the story first in some Italian novella: but the web, mirror, island, etc., were my own.’ A notebook from Tennyson’s days at Trinity College records, “Legends. /The Lady of Scalot. Novelle Antiche,” apparently confirming that he had found inspiration in a thirteenth-century collection of tales called *Cento novelle antiche* (One hundred ancient tales). The collection was known in the nineteenth century for having inspired many of the stories in Boccaccio’s 1353 *Decameron*. Among the hundred ancient tales is, indeed, a brief novella about a “damigella di Scalot” who died for love of Lancelot” (439).

Based on the above excerpt, the story of the “damigella di Scalot” was the one that grabbed Tennyson’s imagination strong enough to make him turn this source text into the well-known narrative of “The Lady of Shalott”. However, Isobel Armstrong in her argument about Victorian poetry goes as far as addressing the work as a poem “which has no source and is in fact the conflation of a number of mythic structures” (81). Considering this confusion around the source text of the poem, instead of looking at Tennyson’s reception of the original narrative, I would like to put parallel the two versions of the same poem, divided by the period in Tennyson’s life that is often referred to by scholars as the “Ten Year’s Silence.”

The topic Tennyson chose to elaborate on in the poem bore notable social significance embedded in a symbolic nexus. The Lady’s decision to leave her loom and her passive state, driven by the desire to become part of the active sphere, ruffled the feathers of Victorian readers since “the virginity of the Victorian Female before wedlock was a predictable obsession among the middle and upper classes [...] females of this time were depicted in art [and literature] behind high walls of feminine virtue – at a balcony, window or bower, or in the parlor or garden, all perimeters of their separate spheres of home” (Poulson 183). Depicting a female character contradicting these expectations and standards was a rather bold and risky undertaking from Tennyson, even if he placed the narrative at a safe distance from the contemporary; in a medieval setting. This distance did not prove to be long enough for the narrative to avoid public aversion. In this chapter, I would like to introduce how Tennyson attempted to direct his *Lady of Shalott* back to the warmth of public acceptance and approval. I will observe how the poet faded out the colours of his original, 1833 heroine and tuned down her complexity and personality, just to provide his readers with a satisfactory experience. After that, I will look at how William

Holman Hunt completed the opposite of Tennyson's intention, how he brought back in the form of developing his artwork, the Lady of Shalott that Tennyson had tried to hide from the public eye.

The first version of "The Lady of Shalott" was published in 1833 and was received with venomous criticism by J. W. Croker in *Quarterly Review*. The hostile reception, and matters of his private life, affected Tennyson in opposing ways. He withdrew from publicizing his works for ten years but at the same time, this devastating experience urged him to self-reflect and rewrite his poems to publish them in the first volume of the 1842's *Poems*. This later version of his works was received rather positively both by critics and the public, reflected an "assiduous artistic novitiate" (Green, p 662) and put him on the path that finally led him to be granted the title *poet laureate* in November of 1850.

Although the 1842 version of the poem introduces a less complex main character, "The Lady of Shalott" still has been a popular target of scrutiny among literary critics and scholars for centuries. Due to its several dimensions and the different approaches surrounding it, this poem has been read in numerous different ways. Glennis Byron summarizes some of the critical conclusions as

Many critics have seen this poem about art itself, and certainly with its insistent rhyme scheme and formal divisions, 'The Lady of Shalott' emphasizes its status as a work of art. Furthermore, the Lady herself is an artist, weaving pictures of the world. In this reading the relation between art and life is embodied in the worlds of Shalott and Camelot; life is seen as antipathetic to art: the artist must remain detached, not participating directly in life but viewing it through the mirror of the imagination. [...] Some critics consider the poem an expression of a conflict between a drive towards social commitment and a contrasting desire for autonomy, marked by scepticism about the viability of any social commitment in an unresponsive society. [...] Post-structuralist critics have read the poem as an example of the reading process itself; feminist critics have suggested it concerns the enforced passivity of women and the movement from private/feminine sphere to the public/masculine sphere; while Marxist critics have seen the poem to be about the estrangement of literary labour (16-17).

The readings invited by the poem, as Byron summarises, are many and rather different in certain cases, more likely than not, this is one of the reasons why this work has enjoyed such popularity both among academics and mere enjoyers or consumers of written words. From this variety of understandings, I would like to draw closer to the one formulated by feminist critics, as their approach focuses on the main character of the poem, The Lady. My assumption, preceding the comparison of the two versions of the poems, is that Tennyson managed to gain acclaim to the later version of his work by depriving his Lady of character, adhering to the Victorian expectations. An artistic attitude that is rather similar to that of Millais's while revisiting his female character in his 1870 painting *The Knight Errant*.

### **The Ladies of Shalott – The comparison of the 1832 and 1842 poems**

Although Tennyson implemented some minor formal changes in his later version of “The Lady of Shalott”, he remained faithful to arranging his stanzas into four parts, sectioning the narrative of the Lady's downfall. The first part introduces the Lady and her circumstances, the second one partly explains what the Lady does and why she is confined to her tower. The third one sets the titular character on the path leading to her unfortunate faith, while the final, fourth part of the poem describes the Lady's journey and finally her arrival to Camelot.

The first stanza of the first part is almost identical in the case of both versions: a beautiful, Tennysonian description of the setting with “fields of barley and of rye” (l 2 1833, 1842) but this identity vanishes from the sixth line on. The 1833 version goes on enriching the description of the pictorial scenery, while the rewritten poem urges to inhabit the scenery as

And up and down the people go,

Gazing where the lilies blow

Round an island there below,

The island of Shalott. (ll 6-9, 1842)

In the 1842 version, the scenery is given a sudden vividness by filling it with *people* who are *gazing* at the *lilies* around the island of Shalott. These particularities of the stanza give a sudden distraction from the idyllic description, even if rather delicately implied, and point towards the

dilemma of the narrative. The people or the citizens of Camelot represent the active, potent side of the dynamics between Shalott and Arthur's city. Already in the first stanza, the act of looking or gazing attains its significance within the narrative, and the natural flow or direction of the act, compared to which the later events of the poem can be estimated, is also appointed. It is the people of Camelot, who are gazing at the lilies surrounding Shalott, the passive bearer of their look. I also believe that the presence of the lilies is not of a happenstance role, being the symbols of chastity and purity; traits which were popularly attributed to and expected of women at the time. These heavily symbolized implications are all missing from Tennyson's 1833 version just to provide wider space for more verbal paint strokes and colour while depicting Shalott.

The second stanzas are harmonious while providing more details about the scenery, but more importantly, while depicting the Lady's castle as

Four grey walls and four gray towers

Overlook the space of flowers,

And the silent isle imbowers

The Lady of Shalott. (ll 15-18 1833/1842)

The castle with its grey walls and towers resembles a prison on an island, cast away from society and the vividness implied by the 1842 edition of the poem. Due to this modification, in the later version of the work, the isolatedness of the Lady is more palpable, as it is given a counterpole, the presence of the gazing people, and a point of comparison.

The third stanzas, in comparison, offer a drastic difference. In the 1833 version, the human presence enters the narrative at this point inviting the reaper on the scene, who hears the chanting of the Lady but does not see her. This way the Lady's persona and presence remain elusive, strengthening the element of mystery around her and calling her a fairy. It is also tell-tale regarding the modifications implemented that the Lady in the later version is only heard, perceived in a more delicate way compared to the more drastic and intrusive act of seeing. Whereas, the revisited version of the poem in its third stanza urges again the act of seeing as

But who hath seen her wave her hand?

Or at the casement seen her stand?

Or is she known in all the land,

The Lady of Shalott? (ll 24-27 1842)

These lines are more visual and explicit than their original version. At the same time, the mere existence of the Lady is questioned by Camelot, the active participant of this delicate connection, due to her lack of visibility.

Between the fourth stanzas of the two poems, there is again a rather tell-tale difference. The 1833 version gives further, picturesque details of Shalott. In this stanza in the original version, Tennyson involves the symbolism of roses, representing love and providing an antithesis for the lilies depicted in the initial descriptions of the place. A peculiarity of the poem is that the person of the Lady and the island of Shalott are entities so gradated, that while reading the descriptions of the place, the readers rightfully might get the impression that the particularities of the persona are being unfolded and provided further depths. Thinking along these lines, shifting from the symbolical traits of lilies towards that of the roses, the events to follow are strongly foreshadowed here. This particularity of the work, gradating the place and the person, is most present in this stanza that after adding further tones to the description of the island, rather swiftly zooms in on the Lady to depict a vivid mental picture of her, as

A pearl garland winds her head:

She leaneth on a velvet bed,

Full royally appareled

The Lady of Shalott. (ll 33-36 1833)

This description of the Lady does not only provide the first physical appearance of her in the narrative but, by placing her on a velvet bed, also tones the character with sexual validity; a trait that contradicts the symbolical values of the lilies. The 1842 version of the poem evades this exciting anomaly by entirely omitting this description and replacing it with the reapers listening to the ladies song, that the 1833 version discussed in the stanza before. The fourth stanza bears special significance as it is the last one of the first part that provides the readers with the first impressions of the setting and the main character. The 1833 version seems to be more aware of this role of the part and allows the titular character more dimension and more space to evolve.

Whereas, the 1842 edition keeps the Lady of Shalott wrapped in mystery, still distant from the readers. It seems, Tennyson thought that depriving the Lady of her validity, physicality and sublime, royal appearance is the way to direct the poem towards the contemporary horizon of expectations.

While analyzing a literary work, two main questions are worth keeping in mind, namely 'What?' and 'How?' The first question directs readers towards an understanding of the content of the work, while the second question observes the technical and formal traits of the piece of literature in question. In the second and third parts of the works, as for 'How?' there is not much for the scrutinizing eyes comparing the two versions of the poem, as several of the stanzas are identical and the tempo and rhyme patterns chime along the entirety of the verses. It is more interesting, however, to turn towards the question of 'What?' along the lines to follow. Even though the changes are minor in the second and third parts, their significance should not be overlooked. Already in the first stanza of the second part, there are some slight changes worth looking at. The 1833 version sounds as

No time hath she to sport and play:  
A charméd web she weaves always.  
A curse is on her, if she stay  
Her weaving, either night or day,  
To look down to Camelot. (ll 37-41 1833)

Tennyson rewrote the above lines in his 1842 edition as

There she weaves by night and day  
A magic web with colours gay.  
She has heard a whisper say,  
A curse is on her if she stay  
To look down to Camelot. (ll 37-41 1842)



In the 1833 version, the feeling of being confined among the “four grey walls” of a prison is strengthened, by including in the description what the Lady has to miss out on or is deprived of. The revisited version handles the Lady’s state and activity as a matter of course and outlines no alternative. It is also interesting to see how he changes the *charmed web* into a *magic web*, giving the focus of the Lady’s attention a more positive connotation. This positive toning is further strengthened as Tennyson paints it with colours *gay*, meaning happy at the time. By adding these positive tones, while painting the Lady in her chamber, Tennyson awakes ambiguity in the readers regarding their feelings for the Lady and their concern for her wellbeing: does she experience weaving in her chamber as confinement or does she enjoy it? The 1832 version does not leave any doubt of the imprisoned state of the Lady, while the rewritten version raises doubts. However, both of the versions are harmonious regarding the threatening nature of the curse and how the Lady might incur that: by looking down to Camelot.

Until this point, the act of looking and its significance has only been implied in the 1842 version, at this point the central nature of the act within the narrative becomes explicit, it becomes a statement in both editions. But how can such a seemingly innocent or insignificant act as to look become an activity that is to be punished? One cannot hurt, harm or inflict any kind of threat by looking. Why is the Lady of Shalott banned from this seemingly self-evident act? Rosemary Betterton quotes Luce Irigaray to suggest a possible answer to this question when she states that

the kind of look which separates the subject from the object of the gaze and projects desire on to that object is essentially masculine. Female eroticism is bound up with touch much more than with sight, women’s pleasure being autoerotic. This, she argues, means that women have a problematic relationship with the whole process of looking in western culture. Women are bound within visual discourse to become objects and never subjects of their own desire (220-221).

This reasoning is more than relevant in Tennyson’s poem, but it is more present in its 1842 version. The revisited edition does not only overshadow the Lady by a curse, for the mere possibility of perceiving the outside world with her eyes, and confines her within her chamber but also clearly assigns the direction of a look by including the gazing citizens of Camelot looking at the lilies around Shalott in its first stanza. This version leaves no doubt about the

natural order and direction of this very action. The autoerotic female pleasure is also represented in the narrative by the web that the Lady “weaves by night and day” (l 37 1842). She is allowed the sensation of touching but not that of looking.

The second stanza of the original version differs quite notably from its revisited form. The first one reflects more sympathy towards the titular character by outlining her mental state, as “She lives with little joy or fear.” (l 46 1833) This line implies the lack of stimuli in the Lady’s everyday life. She hears noises from the outside world and sees reflections of that through her mirror, but nothing reaches her directly. Even though the magic mirror gives her impressions of the outside world, at the same time it separates her from it. The 1842 edition does not bother to reflect on or introduce the mental or emotional state of the Lady. I assume that this particularity of the revisited version does not derive from the poets gradually dissolving interest in her, during his ten years of silence. In the fourth stanza of the second part, both versions claim that “in her web she still delights” (l 64 1833, 1842). Describing the joyless nature of the Lady’s existence, the 1833 edition creates a conflict or inconsistency in the narrative, while the 1842 version, by omitting this part, manages to maintain a coherent narration.

The third and the fourth stanzas are almost entirely identical, the only change Tennyson implemented here was changing the direction of the music *going to* Camelot, instead of *coming from* Camelot in the middle part of the fourth stanza, as if it wanted to foreshadow the direction the Lady is about to take soon. Both versions agree that the vision that set the Lady on her journey leading to her death was that of the “two young lovers, lately wed” (l 70 1833, 1842). When this sight flashes in her mirror, she cannot bear anymore the lack of events, joy or fear. She says the sentence that puts the events, soon to follow, in motion “I am half-sick of shadows,” said” (l 71 1833, 1842) the Lady of Shalott, and while reading this line we see the lilies fade away around the island just to give space for the sea of roses overflowing it.

The third part, both in the 1833 and 1842 editions, begins with a sudden change in pace and dynamics. The still life depicted elaborately so far is taken over and shaken up by the sparkling, flaming vision of Sir Lancelot; a vision so heavily and vividly described, that the readers rightfully assume, this vision will not remain within the frame of the magic mirror. It is really interesting to see how little Tennyson changed about the third part of the poem while revisiting it. This part is dedicated to Sir Lancelot entirely, and the minutely elaborated

descriptions that vivify his presence in the narrative. The narrative that for the first time is pierced by the third person singular pronoun “He”, and this he is named only three lines later, as “bold Sir Lancelot.” (177 1833, 1842) As mentioned before, with the appearance of the male pronoun the atmosphere and the dynamics of the poem change as well, in a contrasting way compared to the previous parts.

How do the descriptions of Lancelot contrast with the descriptions of the Lady? Suddenly we are presented with a number of similes. He is presented in terms of dazzling images of vitality, bright lights, clanging sounds. The sun blazes upon him, his shield sparkles, his armour clashes and flashes, his bridle glitters, his brow glows. He flashes into the Lady’s mirror ‘From the bank and from the river’ (line 105); he is reflected directly but there is also the reflection of his image on the water. For the first time in this poem, a word rhymes with itself ‘river’/ ‘river’, emphasising the idea of reflection (Byron 15).

Byron argues the nature of this contrast as he explains the descriptions surrounding the appearance of Lancelot in the narrative. As if it was not the sun that blazes upon him but he was the sun itself that sparkles on the river and flashes into the Lady’s mirror. This analogue has been present in literature and folklore for centuries, the male energy represented by the sun, casting light, and the female energy, represented by the moon, reflecting the light and gorgeousness of the sun. Even if not explicitly, I can see the presence of this idea within the narrative. It is also interesting that the descriptions of the Lady and Lancelot are in an inversely proportional relation. Little detail is given about the Lady, even less in the rewritten version, however, the appearance of Lancelot is narrated through a whole part from the four sections building up the narrative, discussing such miniature physical details of him as his brows or curls. The possible reasons behind this particularity of the poem might uncover differing intentions from Tennyson’s side. The fact, that from the rewritten version he consciously left out the part, which adds some minor details regarding the physical appearance of the Lady, as argued earlier, might reflect that he did not intend to outline a three dimensional, valid and carnal female character who takes up space within the narrative. Through the picturesque descriptions of Shalott, he covers her in lilies and roses and after that hides her behind willows, aspens and four grey walls. From this position, he allows the readers and receivers of the poem to formulate a mental picture of her. This approach suggests a shyness from Tennyson’s side towards a valid and carnal heroine. But at the

same time, there is a chance, that by offering the elaborate descriptions of Lancelot, Tennyson wanted his readers to see what the Lady saw in her mirror, placing them in her perspective, from where they can understand more easily the decision of the Lady and the course of events to follow. The latter assumption implies a more sympathetic, or even empathic attitude of Tennyson towards the Lady.

After having discovered even the tiniest details of the bold Sir Lancelot, the last stanza of the third part returns to the Lady, just to introduce the effect this breathtaking vision left her with.

She left the web, she left the loom,  
She made three paces thro' the room,  
She saw the water-lily bloom,  
She saw the helmet and the plume:  
She look'd down to Camelot.  
Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror crack'd from side to side;  
"The curse is come upon me," cried  
The Lady of Shalott. (ll 109-117 1833)

The beautifully described details of Sir Lancelot made the Lady forget or even not care about the curse anymore and fill her side of the narrative with verbs of action for the first time in the poem. She left, she made, she saw, she saw and looked and then cried. The flow and continuity of these verbs, apart from changing the ladies passive presence into an active part taking in the course of events, foreshadow what is to come in the fourth, final part of the poem. The one, that offers a lot (maybe the most) to discover regarding the changes Tennyson made during his ten years of silence. The mirror cracked, the curse is come; what is to come after this point is inevitable.

The fourth part, the most extensively revised of all, in both editions begins with a dramatic change of scenery and atmosphere. The blue unclouded weather and the dazzling sun abruptly gets replaced by the stormy eastwind straining, and pale-yellow woods waning (ll 118-

119 1833, 1842) – as if nature pulsed together with the Lady reflecting her inner torment and her fear of the unknown. “All these points stress the natural cycle in which the Lady has now become involved and anticipate her consequently inevitable death. As she has previously turned the world into an aesthetic image, now she does much the same for herself; [...] she takes a small boat and names her last production: ‘The Lady of Shalott’ (Byron 16). At the same time, there is a different way of reading this sudden change of the surroundings of the Lady which builds on Tennyson’s tendency of using symbolism while conveying content. At this point, I would like to turn towards the feminist approach regarding the text, namely that this poem describes a woman’s journey from her allotted passive sphere – as described in Patmore’s poem<sup>1</sup> – towards the realm of the active. Taking this idea as an exit point while deciphering this work, and including in the reasoning the Victorian zeitgeist that did not welcome women in the public space and preferred to confine them within the realm of domestic, the dark, ominous, and threatening scenario might, more likely than not, present in the narrative the disapproval of the contemporary society roused by a woman’s decision to leave ‘Shalott’ for ‘Camelot’, the domestic sphere for the realm of the public. This moment in the narrative is present identically in both versions.

The most exciting change that Tennyson implemented comes in the second stanza of the 1833 version, which I cannot compare to its later edition, as it was entirely wiped out from that one.

A cloudwhite crown of pearl she dight,  
All raimented in snowy white  
That loosely flew, (her zone in sight,  
Clasped with one blinding diamond bright,)  
Her wide eyes fixed on Camelot,  
Though the squally eastwind keenly

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<sup>1</sup> Chronologically Tennyson could not have referred to Patmore’s “Angel in the House”, as the latter narrative poem was written in 1854, more than ten years after the second edition of “The Lady of Shalott”. What I am arguing here to more the concept that had been present at the time of Tennyson publishing his poems, rather than the actual literary work.

Blew, with folded arms serenely

By the water stood the queenly

Lady of Shalott. (ll 127-135 1833)

A stunning, flashing picture of the titular character is described here. This stanza, standing alone, creates an equivalent entity to that of Lancelot's described at large in the third part: a royal and majestic apparition. Her wide eyes do not only pan the space, they have found their object and are fixed on Camelot. The Lady has become the active subject of looking and from this newly found position of hers, she cannot be dislodged, not even by the keenly blowing Eastwind. Her assumed fear has vanished, she is present and conscious of her presence. The mystical, unseen entity has disappeared to give way to a body that demands space and validity. This description of the Lady of Shalott shows strong parallels with William Morris's Guenevere, whom I will discuss in the next chapter, but at this point, it is worth noting that several of the nineteenth-century poets tried to evoke the bold and self-conscious counterpoint of the ideal woman of the age. Now, this is a vision that never found its place on nineteenth-century England's horizon of expectations, not even in a retouched form. The self-conscious, bold female figure, taking her place *next to* the elaborately described and heroized Sir Lancelot, had to be exiled from the narrative to meet the reading public's level of satisfaction and to receive widespread acclaim.

The following three stanzas, in both versions, narrate the Lady's journey to Camelot and describe how life leaves her adorned by beautiful similes and flourishing language. Looking closely at these lines, it seems Tennyson aimed to soften these descriptions as he was consistent about leaving the words "death" and "dying" out from the 1842 edition. Thus "They heard her chanting her deathsong" (l 152 1833) got rephrased as "They heard her singing her last song" (l 143 1842). This way Tennyson tuned down the catharsis value of this momentum in the narrative, trying to navigate it towards safer grounds, and a more easily attainable harmonious resolution. At the same time, muting the possibility of reading the text as the narrative of a 'tragic hero', he also distracts the readers from looking for the hamartia in the story, the tragic flaw of the Lady. This particularity of the poem is most tangible within the lines of the last but one stanzas of the two versions. The 1832 version is worded as

Under tower and balcony,  
By gardenwall and gallery,  
A pale, pale corpse she floated by,  
Deadcold, between the houses high,  
Dead into towered Camelot. (ll 163-167 1833),

while the revisited version from 1842 sounds as

Under tower and balcony,  
By garden-wall and gallery,  
A gleaming shape she floated by,  
A corse between the houses high,  
Silent into Camelot. (ll 154-158 1842).

If we compare these two versions, the evasiveness of the second edition is shouting. Based on the phrasing of the 1842 edition, the Lady could as well have arrived in Camelot sleeping in her boat. Whereas, the first edition operates with rather unsettling pictures and vocabulary, such as “corpse” and “deadcold,” doing justice to the loss of value and the tragedy within the narrative. Isobel Armstrong examines the same phenomenon, recalling Alan Sinfield’s hindsight of the poet, as she says that “the poet’s evasiveness leads to a perpetual emptying out of signification in which language resorts to a fetishistic preoccupation with its own surfaces rather than being deployed in the service of exploring meaning.” (8) But why would this emptying of meaning be appealing to the Victorian reading public? While trying to find the answer to this question, I would like to return to feminist theory which so eagerly deals with this piece of literature. “The Lady of Shalott” illustrates among its lines the domination of the active male domain over the passive female one and how the brave heroine of the narrative tries to bring equilibrium into this very dynamics. Now, if we take a step away from this approach, and replace the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ with the term ‘occident’ and ‘orient’, we find ourselves in the realm of post-colonial theory. These two approaches can be inverted so easily because both of them focus on the interactions between the oppressor and the oppressed. This reasoning is not complete until

the idea of imperial England is included and emphasised. When these poems were composed, England was abundant in foreign, conquered territories, and due to this achievement it was loftily referred to as “the empire on which the sun never sets.” England’s imperialist politics led to the flourishing of trading and economy at the time and an artificial spreading of the British culture. The people of the British Empire were proud of these achievements, especially the gentry and supporters of imperialistic interests. However, they preferred to avoid thinking about the negative consequences of the rapid expansion of the British Empire, such as death, corpses, and the deprivation of oppressed countries of their rights and validity. Taking this idea into consideration, Tennyson’s choice to empty his narrative of deeper meanings and not offering his readers a sense of catharsis over lost values might have played a huge role in landing his rewritten poem on the horizon of expectations at the time.

Emptied of meanings, we arrive at the very last stanzas, just to find there even more value lost. Both stanzas open with indicating the puzzlement of the citizens of Camelot but while the earlier edition describes from an outside perspective the reactions surrounding the arrival of the dead Lady, the 1842 version voices them and introduces their direct questions as “Who is this? And what is here?” (l 163 1842) The irony, which lies within the unity of the two poems, is that these questions are answered in the 1833 version, but not in the one where they are asked. The 1832 edition ends with a note, a post humus self-testimony of the Lady, which says

The web was woven curiously

The charm is broken utterly,

Draw near and fear not – this is I,

The Lady of Shalott. (ll 177-180 1833)

The strength of these lines lies partly in the fact that this is the longest oration, during the entire poem, coming from the Lady. Earlier we heard her announce “I am half-sick of shadows” (l 71 1833) and “The curse is come upon me,” (l 116 1833), but these inserted direct comments only strengthen the impression of the Ladies frustration, a driving element in the narrative, but do not reflect any sort of more layered personality. These final lines are clearly articulated by the Lady of Shalott who was described elaborately in the stanza that was shamefully exiled from the revisited version: the majestic, physical presence emerging from the realm of the unknown into



the world that she aims to perceive, into a space she aims to dominate. She demands to be seen and appreciated, she demands to be present and surrounded. As she invites her confused public to draw near her, for the first time in the poem the figure of a kind and warm-hearted heroine is outlining and the feeling of catharsis and loss strengthens even more. We want to know, see, and hear more of this unknown Lady. But we cannot and it is a genuine calamity.

The 1842 version bears significant modifications, compared to the earlier one, and with ambiguous outcomes. The Lady here is not granted an audience to speak up for herself, even if in an indirect, posthumous manner, but Lancelot speaks for her in the climax of the narrative. This way, the readers are given a “revolutionary situation without revolution” (Armstrong 84). The narrative is left without a real climax. Lancelot talks on the Lady’s behalf when he says “God in his mercy lend her grace, The Lady of Shalott.” (ll 170-171 1842). This is how the knight seals the narrative and leaves the readers empty-handed. The questions of *who* and *what* have remained entirely unattended and the reading public is left with merely superficial implications about the Lady’s lovely face. Most likely she left her Island and unchained the curse for more than just to become the object of a mediocre compliment. Tennyson’s earlier Lady could present herself in first person singular and make a statement in her own right. The 1842 Lady was denied this privilege, she had to remain mute and unknown to be pardoned and welcome on the horizon of expectations. The artist of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood came to her rescue in an attempt to do justice to her voice and validity, or at least to present the dilemma of her narrative in different ways. In the following chapter, I will discuss one of these artists take on the Lady: that of William Holman Hunts. His approach, set against the background of Tennyson’s, is especially exciting because the way he treated the Lady of Shalott in 1857 is quite the reverse of what the poet had completed.

### ***The Ladies of Shalott – The return of the Lady***

Edgar Allan Poe’s reasoning about the gripping force of the death of a beautiful woman, although formulated by an author, was not only relevant in the field of literature but also in that of fine arts. “The Lady of Shalott” was probably the best-known of nineteenth-century poems as a source text for artists. “Between 1850 and 1915 at least 54 works of art were based on it, not including book illustration. In particular, for the Pre-Raphaelites, their followers, and

successors, it was a key text” (Poulson 173). From this abundance of artworks inspired by Tennyson’s poem, I only would like to focus on William Holman Hunt’s two versions of the source text. Like Tennyson himself, Hunt went through a developing process that took years. What I am interested in is whether his way of handling the Lady resonates with Tennyson’s take, which proved to be quite successful, or dared to differ from that. Which dimensions of this complex and symbolically filled narrative did he emphasise, and argue in his own translation?

There is a significant tension overarching the close-knit position of the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, that Hunt was a founding member of, and the Lady. This very tension springs from their opposing artistic principles. One of the most significant and rebellious concepts of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was to take the objects of their art straight from nature. They left their studios, dragging along their canvases, brushes, and paints, and looked for venues, spaces, and people in nature and reality. The Lady, at the same time, found the source of her art in the reflections of her magic mirror, cast away from the real, direct, and authentic. This way of creating art was typical of and expected from artists at the time of the Pre-Raphaelites’ appearance on the horizon of the Royal Academy in 1848. However, The Lady of Shalott’s rebellious act of leaving her “ivory tower” and experiencing the surrounding world first-hand, resonated really well with the ideologies and principles of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Following this analogue further, the Lady’s narrative foreshadowed, that of the Pre-Raphaelites’ as well, although less tragically: after years of breaking mirrors and rebelling against the guidelines of the Royal Academy, the “lovely face” of the movement was discovered and acknowledged. Taking into consideration how these two narratives, that of the Lady and the movement, chime in with each other, it is an even more rewarding task to look at how Hunt handled the story of “The Lady of Shalott”.

William Holman Hunt, just like Tennyson himself, discussed the story of the Lady twice. First, he dealt with the narrative in 1850, just to return to it seven years later as an illustration for the 1857 Moxon edition of Tennyson’s *Poems*. Hunt’s commitment to the narrative and its main character is reflected well by the fact that his 1850 black chalk, pen and ink drawing of *The Lady of Shalott* (figure 3) is among the earliest Pre-Raphaelite representations of the subject.

The picture introduces as much as possible from the poem in a set of tiny roundels on the back wall, surrounding the large central mirror, which plays an important role in the story. At the top is a miniature cityscape, showing Camelot, the symbol of the real world in the poem and the capital of the Arthurian world, thus appropriately dominant in the drawing. The next roundel, moving clockwise to the right, shows the Lady working at her loom, with the large round mirror behind her, while the next one shows her looking into the mirror. The next tiny picture shows Sir Lancelot on his horse, the reason why the Lady breaks the rule by looking through the window. The bottom roundel is obscure but its position in the narrative is taken by the main scene: the mirror cracks as the web flies loose from its frame. In the main mirror, we see Sir Lancelot riding away towards the sketchily indicated Camelot and the opposite view presents Lady dealing with the web. The remaining roundels clockwise foretell the rest of the story: the Lady prepares the boat, sits in it and floats towards Camelot, and finally arrives there, where a figure bends over the Lady's lifeless body; we already know it is Sir Lancelot himself, who commemorates the dead Lady in the last stanza. As Elizabeth Prettejohn says

At first, this seems a straightforward tale of sexual morality, comparable to others represented in Pre-Raphaelite pictures of the early 1850s. The Lady abandons her duty when she sees the image of Sir Lancelot, the most manly of knights, in her mirror; she forsakes the woman's passive role to look directly at him, through the window, and the punishment is death. Although the figure is thin and angular, in the Pre-Raphaelite manner of this date, the shawl around her hips [...], and the beads around her neck suggest the physical attractiveness of a young woman. Perhaps the pose, with one hand near the groin is reminiscent of the 'pudicitia' poses of ancient statues of female nudes, in which the hands modestly cover the sexual parts of the body. The drawing would seem, then, to represent the Lady's discovery of her own sexuality (227).

As Prettejohn argues, the femininity of the lady is well symbolised in the painting, so more likely than not, Hunt aimed to discuss the dilemma of the oppressed woman in his representation and the conflict around the idea. He handles his object rather tenderly by giving her almost childlike, unprovoking features as if he wanted to wrap his main character in the comforting cloth of innocence. This child is merely a victim of events. The mirror in the background is placed right above her shoulders, and this particularity together with the Lady's slightly forward bent position

becomes strongly reminiscent of the classic representations of Atlas, whose punishment for rebelling against the gods was the eternal duty of holding the celestial heavens on his shoulders. This reading of the visual narrative gives the painting a further depth, outlining the heavy burden of womanhood, and reflects the artist's sympathy towards the Lady. Hunt was so obsessed with this visual statement of his, that he only put the drawing aside "when the paper was so worn it would not bear a single new correction" (Poulson 175).

Seven years later, Hunt reached out for the story again to contribute to the 1857 Moxon edition of Tennyson's poems. At this point, a smaller debate formed over "The Lady of Shalott" which reflects rather well how desired this topic was among the artists of the Brotherhood. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, maybe the most well-known member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, got disappointed about Hunt's choice of topic. From this state of his he burst out as "You, for instance, have appropriated The Lady of Shalott, which was the one I cared for most of all..." (Hunt 99-100) and threatened with his withdrawal from illustrating the edition. Hunt, in the spirit of friendly cooperation, offered Rossetti the scene where the Lady arrives in Camelot and the brotherhood and friendship got restored. So how had Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott* (figure 4) changed during those seven years? Maybe the best word to describe the change is *radical*.

The most significant difference between the two versions is that Hunt changes the narrative tone to a symbolical one: instead of introducing the whole of the story with the help of small roundels he uses two larger oval panels, one on each side of the mirror. He is not interested in the narrative anymore, he does not want to elaborate a background story for the Lady to explain her decisions and the tragic outcome following them. Hunt seems to be driven by a moralising force when he wipes out all the circumstances that would help with understanding the Lady and solely focuses on the moment when she decides to step out of her confines. The other important change in the picture is that he also includes in his interpretation the idea of the Crucifixion. In the right panel, the picture of Christ crucified is represented. "Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross might be construed either as a parallel for the Lady's subsequent self-sacrifice in the boat or as a moralising contrast, opposing the Lady's dereliction of her duty to Christ's acceptance of his" (Prettejohn 228). The ambiguous outcome of the picture's symbolism is best clarified by Hunt himself, who explained his choice of complex symbolism as follows:

The parable, as interpreted in this painting, illustrates the failure of a human Soul towards its accepted responsibility. The Lady typifying the Soul is bound to represent faithfully the workings of the high purpose of King Arthur's rule. She is to weave her record, not as one who mixing in the world, is tempted by egoistic weakness, but as a being 'sitting alone'; in her isolation she is charged to see life with a mind supreme and elevated in judgement. In executing her design on the tapestry she records not the external incidents of common lives, but the present condition of King Arthur's Court, with its opposing influences of good and evil. It may be seen he is represented in his double throne, the Queen is not there, and he is saddened by her default; but he is still supported on his right and on his left by the virtues (401).

Based on this reasoning it seems, that Hunt's initial sympathy for the Lady by this time had vanished. She is no longer the innocent girl of the first picture; she has grown and her body dominates the space of the picture. The curves of her body, emphasised by the coiling threads of the web, are now more voluptuous and her hair, formerly tied neatly behind her head, now flies free. This version of the Lady is more reminiscent of Tennyson's 1933 version of her, the one that by 1842 got exiled. The difference between the two pictures, now seeing the second figure of the Lady, is rather conspicuous. We might as well say the two Ladies are the opposites of each other. As the feminist scholar Lynne Pearce argues, we cannot limit the interpretation to what we believe Hunt's interpretation may have been. "She [the second Lady of Shalott] is speaking her anger, frustration and outrage to us at the same time that she is, in Hunt's moral schema, enacting her punishment [...]. A painting ostensibly representing an act of deviance is received by us as an act of noble defiance" (79-80). The strength of her rage is suggested by the vigour with which the Lady twists against the coils of the web, the savage stare beneath her eyebrows and above all the incredible mass of flying hair, which, according to Richard L. Stein, expresses Hunt's final judgement of the Lady.

The upper edge of the illustration is filled by her hair, which appears at first as a shadow overhanging the rest of the scene. One tends to associate the sensuous rendition of hair first with Rossetti; but this may be the most dramatic example of what deserves to be considered a central feature of Pre-Raphaelite iconography. And it is important to recognize that hair is indeed iconographic here, a detail which expresses much of Hunt's

interpretation of the poem. Those thick, apparently flying tresses, the main suggestion of the Lady of Shalott's sudden motion, serve as an emotional symbol as well, the most telling indication of her loss of aesthetic and moral control. A series of visual puns is present in this imagery: coming undone, moral looseness, and not keeping one's hair on [...]. Hunt suggests the artistic dimension of this personal catastrophe by echoing the motif of hair in the tangled ends of the unravelled weaving. Some of the threads have wound themselves around the Lady of Shalott's thighs and legs, so that her gown begins to reveal the attractive outlines it ought to conceal in graceful drapery. [...] The artist has become a prisoner of what she formerly controlled – her art, her thoughts, her physical impulses. We are witnessing her emerging sexuality (294-295).

If we compare the evolvment of Hunt's Lady to that of Tennyson's, an inverted relation seems to outline in front of us. While Tennyson's Lady had subsided, faded, and muted during his ten years of silence, Hunt brought along upon his revisitation the topic a more sensuous, vigorous, and voluptuous female character. This contrast between the source text and its reception manifesting on Hunt's canvas was well reflected in Tennyson's comment on the artwork. "According to Hunt's later recollections, Tennyson rebuked Hunt for representing the Lady's hair 'wildly tossed about as if by a tornado', and for making the web 'wind round and round her like the threads of a cocoon'" (Prettejohn 228). An interesting conflict, indeed: Tennyson aimed to bring "The Lady of Shalott" on the horizon of expectations by tuning down her colours and then fifteen years later another artist reanimates the character that the source text once exiled. Even though Hunt's aim by representing the Lady as a flashing vision was to express his disdain felt over the Lady's emerging sexuality and her loss of moral control, he created an entity that simply cannot be overlooked or ignored. Tennyson tried to hide the serenely, queenly emerging Lady of Shalott from the eyes of his readers and the poems receivers, she was there, she had been there the whole time with her sensual, thick, flying tresses woven through the lines of the poem and Hunt resonated well with this very presence.

Throughout discussing the narrative of the Lady of Shalott, I emphasized the presence of one female character of significance in the story, although there are two. "A redcross knight for ever kneel'd / To a lady in his shield," (ll 78-79 1842) suggests Tennyson the importance of another nameless lady in the poem, the one who is responsible for Lancelot's lightheartedness

towards the Lady of Shalott: Guinevere. In the following chapter, I will turn towards Guinevere, and her personal narrative within the Arthurian cycle, interpreted by William Morris first, and then Tennyson again. Following that, I will look at the afterlife of the written narratives in form of illustrations by William Morris and Florence Harrison.

## Chapter two: Guinevere

This chapter will focus on and discuss in detail the figure of Guinevere, wife of King Arthur and beloved mistress of Sir Lancelot, presented by William Morris in his poem “The Defence of Guenevere” (1-17), published in 1858, and Tennyson’s “Guinevere”<sup>2</sup> (269-286) as part of his major serial of poems, *Idylls of the King*, reflecting Tennyson’s life-long interest in the Arthurian legend. The connection between the Lady of Shalott and Guinevere, at this point, is plain to see: they both engaged in a romantic relationship with Lancelot. However, this relationship in the case of the Lady of Shalott has remained within the confines of platonic and unrequited love, as it has turned out from the previous chapter, due to Lancelot’s light-heartedness and ignorance. Whereas, with the latter Lady, the relationship, more likely than not, has manifested on the level of active sexuality and adultery; both terms being of flagrant nature for Victorian minds. Considering this, the figure of the Lady of Shalott and Guinevere might seem like ultimate counterpoints of each other; the Lady representing Arthurian or Christian purity, while Guinevere embodying female sexuality and daringness; a contradicting topic of the era. Daniel Pool argues, recalling Dr. William Acton’s reasoning in the mid-1860s, the opposing views surrounding female sexuality, as

The majority of women (happily for them),”wrote the eminent Dr. William Acton in the mid-1860s, “are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind. ... No nervous or feeble young man need, therefore, be deterred from marriage by an exaggerated notion of the duties required from him.” Indeed. “The married woman,” continued the good doctor, “has no wish to be treated on the footing of a mistress.”

Dr. Action’s books were very popular, and they suggest how much truth there was in our stereotypes of the constrained character of nineteenth-century English sexual behaviour. [...] Yet Dr. Action’s reassuring murmurings about the absence of sexual feelings among nineteenth-century Englishwomen were contradicted even by contemporary scientific evidence. A Scottish gynecologist with sufficient prestige to address the Royal College of Physicians wrote in the 1890s that of the approximately 190

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<sup>2</sup> The variations regarding the name of the titular character are numerous, even the two poems in the focus of this chapter differ in its spelling; I will faithfully follow Tennyson’s and Morris’s lettering while quoting them, and during me discussing them, or wording my chain of ideas, I will refer to the Queen of Camelot as ‘Guinevere’.



women out of 504 who had responded to his questions, 152 said, yes, they did have sexual desires, and 134 reported that they had orgasms.” (186-187)

Based on Pool’s argument, it seems that at the time, even science was on contradicting terms regarding the phenomenon of female sexuality. Thinking along these lines, the figure of Guinevere provides a remarkably exciting subject to scrutiny, as she represents the conflicted or even bipolar way of thinking about female sexuality in the nineteenth century, thus providing introspection “in[to] the perilous no-woman’s-land which stretches between duty-to-thine-husband and duty-to-thine-own-heart (Pierce 115). As mentioned before, the complexity of Guinevere’s character will be introduced by looking analytically at two poems, one of them being William Morris’s “The Defence of Guenevere” and Tennyson’s “Guinevere” from the *Idylls of the King*.

But, before I would embark on discussing the two poems, it is essential to turn towards the source text, Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* briefly, as for discovering in its entirety how the two poets, Tennyson and Morris, received or read this content, and to see how the two plots relate to each other within the storyline, at least a vague introduction of the original text needs to be provided. Both of the poems base their focal points in the story after Lancelot’s return to Camelot from his quest for the Holy Grail. He reunites with the Queen, thus initiating the inevitable split of the Round Table. But this period is not about a series of idle romantic encounters, as one might expect; during this time Lancelot has to save his Queen twice: first, when Guinevere is accused of trying to poison Sir Gawaine and later when Mellyagraunce abducts the Queen in an attempt to compromise the couple and cast light on the adultery they committed. Although this attempt of Mellyagraunce fails on the level of immediate consequences, it still manages to create a longstanding conflict within the Court, as it divides along with the estimation of Guinevere’s faithfulness and purity. Not long after these events, Lancelot visits Queen Guinevere in her bedchamber; a surprisingly unusual and bold move that results in the ambushing of the lovers. Lancelot flees, but Guinevere, sticking to the unusual and bold, refuses to go with him; the decision which results in her subsequent bringing to judgement. This is the point in the plot when Morris’s defence speech is inserted, which happens to be brave enough to differ significantly from the source text, as in Malory’s story it is Gawaine who defends Guinevere’s honour as “For I dare say [...] my lady, your Queen, is to you both good and true” (469), whereas in Morris’s reinterpretation Gawaine is the accuser or, as the Queen phrases

it, the one who lies about her (9). Still, both writers, Malory and Morris, are in harmony regarding the (temporary) solution of the conflict, when they send Lancelot to save Guinevere from the stake at the very last moment, to the readers most genuine relief. “The knight who came was Lancelot at good need” (Morris 17). Later, Lancelot persuades Guinevere to return to Arthur and the Court, which by this time is irreversibly split, just like its main symbol, the Round Table; while the country is war-torn. Due to this conflicted state of their surrounding setting, several afflictions await the main characters, from which Guinevere manages to flee to a convent in Amesbury; this is the point in the plot where Tennyson’s narrative becomes inserted in the flow of events. Here, upon hearing of Arthur’s death while duelling with Mordred, Guinevere takes her vows and becomes a nun. Following this hinge point of the story, Lancelot visits her one, final time in the convent, but she refuses him: “For as well as I have loved thee, mine heart will not serve me to see thee, for through thee and me is the flower of kings and knights destroyed” (Maloray 523), sounds the final judgement from the Queen, blaming Lancelot and herself for the most unfortunate fall of the King, of his ultimate achievement, Camelot and of all that it represents. Guinevere dies a year after Lancelot’s visit, much beloved by the inhabitants of the convent, and the grief-stricken, heartbroken knight, who refuses to eat or drink, follows her to death shortly after.

Morris’s and Tennyson’s Guinevere, compared to one another, seem like polar opposites of each other. Both of the poets start with the rather gripping ‘in medias res’ manner of describing the events, but in the middle of events, we find two very different heroines. At this point of my argument, I am in debt regarding the articulation of these differences, but by the end of this chapter, this idea will crystallise. While comparing the two poems, I aim to stay faithful to the chronological order of the frame story, so Morris’s “The Defence of Guenevere” in front of her judges is what I will examine first, which soon will be followed by Tennyson’s “Guinevere”, retreated to the convent at Amesbury.

## Morris's Guenevere

The first verse of "The Defence of Guenevere" starts with the conjunction 'but' as if this tiny word was to foreshadow what Morris is about to provide his readers with; the word being the synonym of "on the contrary", or as a linking word standing between two contradicting clauses. Is Morris about to oppose the general idea surrounding Guinevere? This question is answered immediately, as the main character is described in a rather sensual way, with "wet hair backward from the brow / Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek" (1). Hair and eyebrows were rather sexual features of the female body, both in medieval, where the plot is set, and Victorian times, just as the hands, mouth and cheek. In the introduction of the setting, the readers are provided with a portrayal of Guinevere who is *flash* and blood, "cheek of flame" (1), filled with passion and emotions.

As the poem progresses, the scope of the setting becomes wider, as in the second stanza the word "shame" is mentioned three times, thus recalling the anticipated mental state of the main character and her reputation reflected by those surrounding her. But this aggregation of the word shame or shameful serves an opposing cause, that is to describe that Guinevere does not feel shame at all, although she knows, she should. This anticipation seems to weaken as Guinevere's "head / Still lifted up" (1) is added to her visual representation and vanishes as soon as Morris, from the fourth stanza gives voice to the character, thus allowing her to express and explain herself, uninterrupted till the sixteenth stanza. Morris uses enjambment while wording Guinevere's direct sentences, suggesting thus the passionate and speedy nature of her monologue, which begins as "O knights and lords" (2). From the addressing of the audience, it becomes clear that the Queen is surrounded by men solely. This particularity of the situation underlines again Guinevere's courage and the inharmonious or unjust nature of her male-dominated confines: she stands all alone in front of a certain number of men who are about to judge her. Her vulnerability is further emphasised by the fact that her name and title are not mentioned. She is present on the scene in her female quality, nothing else. This is the point where the scene, and its risk becomes unfolded in its entirety: a single woman in front of a body, or unity of men, waiting to be judged and about to defend herself; standing alone, but standing brave.

Guinevere starts her defence monologue with an imaginary scene. Her description runs from the fifth to the thirteenth stanzas, in which she outlines, inviting the knights and lords into her perspective, a situation of decision in which the outcome and the conditions are entirely uncertain. She is trying to present her own deed as a series of events over which she had no influence, in lack of any kind of guidelines, but the consequences are rather solid: “One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell / Now choose one cloth for ever, which they be, / I will not tell you, you must somehow tell” (2). This stanza is particularly interesting when we read them taking into consideration the mid-Victorian social circumstances and the situation of women surrounded by them. As hell and heaven leave no possibility for a middle ground, neither do the categories or, as Katja Lindskog phrases it, “suffocating linguistics and moral codes” (459), women at the time could fit in: the madwoman in the attic, doomed by society, or the angel in the house, the quality set as a requirement for women. This relevance is rather delicately but consistently present throughout the whole poem.

Then Guinevere continues her reasoning and says “Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, known” (3). She emphasises her regret and unknowingness and then adds “Lancelot went away, then I could tell” (3). This is the point in the text where Guinevere’s sin shifts from allegorical grounds to the field of reality as she mentions the name of Lancelot for the first time. Being conscious of this very shift, Guinevere immediately addresses her accuser and adds her statement as “Nevertheless you, O Sir, Gauwaine, lie, / Whatever may have happened through these years, / God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie” (4). This stanza is the only one that is repeated in the poem, later in the forty-eights and ninety-fifth stanzas, being the pillar stone of Guinevere’s defence speech. As Lancelot’s name has been said, it is evident that Guinevere’s reasoning cannot remain anymore on the level of picturesque allegories and hypotheses; she cannot avoid anymore talking about what actually happened and for what she has to stand trial now. It is more than interesting to see, how Morris descends from the position of the objective narrator, right beside Guinevere as he comments in the stanzas to follow: “Her voice was low at first, being full of tears, / But as it cleared, it grew full loud and shrill, / Growing a windy shriek in all men’s ears” (4). Morris sentences these lines to describe how the Queen evolves from vulnerable and threatened into a threat, raising her courage and her voice at the same time. His choice of words, referring to her audience as “all men’s ears”, seems to direct this threat out of that medieval, imaginary room filled with knights and lords, into the reality of the contemporary;

into “all men’s ears” of nineteenth-century England. As he continues commenting on the events, the threat becomes surrounded by pathos and evolves into an unearthly, enchanting entity:

Though still she stood right up, and never shrunk,  
But spoke on bravery, glorious lady fair!  
Whatever tears her full lips may have drunk,  
She stood, and seemed to think, and wrung her hair,  
Spoke out at last with no more trace of shame,  
With passionate twisting of her body there: (4)

This stanza leads the readers into the recalling of the actual events of Guinevere’s sin, but also the lines through which Morris’s personal attitude and judgement regarding his heroine appear the most clearly. It is also interesting to look at this part of the poem considering punctuation. While reading Guinevere’s direct monologue, exclamation marks appear sometimes, adding to and emphasising the dramatic nature of her content and her overheated state of mind, but Morris, during narrating the events avoids the use of this punctuation mark, except when describing her as “glorious lady fair”. The word ‘fair’ is of utter importance here, as being of several meanings. It might seem that Morris only aims to underline with her exclamation mark the immaculate appearance or light hair and complexion of Guinevere, and just by restricting to this meaning of ‘fair’, knowing that Morris linked aesthetics with morals, it can be, partly rightfully, concluded, that the poet is aiming to hint Guinevere’s innocence and morality. But fair as an adjective can also refer to an act without cheating. Thinking along these lines, it seems that Guinevere is not alone anymore in that room against the knights and lords as Morris decided to stand with her. Further on, by describing the different features of her appearance and glorifying those, Guinevere becomes represented as a sexual character and Morris does not leave the readers in doubt about whom he is in unity with, as for the mid-Victorian debate over the sexual validity of women. From this position, the poem moves on to describe what happened between Guinevere and Lancelot.

Guinevere introduces the course of events to follow with a rather picturesque introductory line. “It chanced upon a day that Launcelot came / To dwell at Arthur’s court: at Christmas-time / This happened; when the heralds sung his name” (4). She underlines the significance of Lancelot in what is to come by making the heralds sing his name, as if his appearance in the Queens narrative had been predestined. At the same time, by starting her

encounter with the word “chanced”, Guinevere emphasises again the happenstance nature of the events being recalled. This recollection of hers stretches from the twenty-first till the end of the forty-seventh stanza, and at some points happens to be rather vague. She often interrupts herself from going into details. This characteristic of Morris’s poetry is mentioned by Elizabeth K. Helsinger, as she discusses how the poet tends to “leave[.] characters and readers unhappy” with just providing senses of events, but not allowing them to grasp what actually happened, especially if the action, that is only hinted, is of meaning or significance (85). The development of the relationship is pictured by the passages of the seasons, hinting that her falling love with Lancelot was as inevitable and axiomatic as the natural phenomena surrounding us throughout the year. Pearce outlines a rather interesting reading of this rhetorical particularity of hers highlighting its relevance in a Victorian nexus when she puts

In as much as it was a love that fell upon her gratuitously and without choice, Guenevere, then, was innocent. Her defence is that she *did not intend* to fall in love with Launcelot; that it ‘just happened’. In the mid-Victorian period in which this text was produced, ‘love at first sight’ was a discourse that was gaining popularity. Although undoubtedly a dangerous proclivity for the middle and upper classes with property to consider, romantic love of the type that simply leaps out and knocks you down, was becoming, in every way, a popular fiction (118).

Morris ignores the bipolar Victorian way of thinking, conflicted between love and marriage or the ideal and fallen woman, and puts in the focus of his poem the idea of courtly love, or, as Pearce puts it, love at first sight. This idea, however, at the point of intersection of the traditional categories, managed to create a third dimension along which Victorian people could think about romantic feelings. Although, the idea being relatively new, its rules had not been entirely set, thus providing a dangerous ground for contemporaries.

When both our mouths went wandering in one way,  
And aching sorely, met among the leaves;  
Our hands being left behind strained far away.  
Never within a yard of my bright sleeves  
Had Launcelot come before – and now, so nigh!  
After that day why is it Guinevere grieves? (9)

Guinevere also seems to struggle on the confusing grounds of courtly love; her finishing the account with a question, strongly leaves the readers with this feeling. It gives a further significance to this closing thought of hers that she names herself for the first time in the poem. The first time she defines herself comes right after having described her encounter with Lancelot. Is this moment in her life the most defining one, even as the Queen of Camelot? Perhaps this conclusion would be too far-reaching to aim for, still, an interesting idea. And immediately after that, she returns to her statement, previously seen in the 16th stanza, announcing that Sir Gauwaine is lying; using the exact same words, as if these lines would provide the refrain of the poem, and a shelter for the mired Queen from the accusation inflicted on her. Although, her confession seems to accord with the charges, brought against her, since she did confess about “mouths [...] wondering in one way” (9), still she insists that Gauwaine is lying. At this point, the Queen, and her innocence seems to be in a conflicted state, and so does Morris. Frederick Kirchhoff reached the same conclusion and from that position, he argues that

this ambiguity can be blamed on Morris. His Guenevere is confusing because he was unable to sort out his conflicting attitudes towards her. Attracted by her egoistic vitality, he nevertheless cannot wholly absolve her guilt. But the confusions of the poem also mirror the unresolved complexities of Guenevere herself. She, like Morris, is not sure whether to be proud or ashamed, to ask for sympathy or to give defiance (411).

Kirchhoff uses a rather condemning adjective while arguing Morris’s Guinevere depicted in the poem. He delineates an “egoistic” Queen in his reasoning, and this scope of negative attributes seems to widen as the poem proceeds with Guinevere’s reasoning for her innocence, using manipulation as her ‘weapon of choice’. She brings up, as her basis of defence, Gauwaine’s personal history as she asks him to “[r]emember in what grave [his] mother sleeps” (9). Gauwaine’s mother was beheaded by Agravaine, Gauwaine’s brother, as she had been accused of adultery (Kirchhoff 412). The similarities between the two situations are plain, just as Guinevere’s intention with bringing up this story of the past. Further on, she outlines the intergenerational nature of the injustice she is dealing with. Then, almost out of context, she recalls a time, when she had to defend herself from another knight.

This Mellyagraunce saw blood upon my bed—  
Whose blood then pray you? is there any law

“To make a queen say why some spots of red  
Lie on her coverlet? or will you say,  
'Your hands are white, lady, as when you wed,

” 'Where did you bleed?' and I must stammer  
out—'Nay,  
I blush indeed, fair lord, only to rend  
My sleeve up to my shoulder, where there lay

” 'A knife-point last night:' so must I defend  
The honour of the lady Guenevere?" (11)

At this point in the poem, it can no longer be overlooked how important colours are in the text not just while describing events but also hinting at deeper relations. Lindskog underlines this significance, as she writes

As with the choosing cloths, here Guenevere presents a contrast between two colors, red and white, as the measure by which we are to obtain truth about what happened in the past. But, for the second time, it becomes clear that the naming of the colors cannot help to determine the truth of the situation (though this time they would appear to be of much stronger evidentiary value). Rightly or wrongly, Guenevere again insists that the ethical dilemma does not reside in the difficulty of determining “what really happened”; the dilemma is not whether she is guilty or innocent. It is clear enough that she is innocent of the charge at hand but [...] is guilty of receiving Launcelot in her chamber. Instead, the familiar connotations of the contrast between red and white - lust versus chastity, guilt versus innocence - direct her audience away from asking “what happened?” and toward asking something along the lines of “what was the experience?” (467)

Based on Lindskog's reasoning, we can conclude that Guinevere's method of escaping the stake is changing the question of the dialogue, from 'what', to 'what like', as if she tried to distract her audience from the obscenity of her past deed. At the same time, she reveals fractions of events among the lines, as she calls Lancelot repeatedly “my knight” while recalling the fight. Both Guenevere and Morris's conflict seems to increase, being trapped between truth and consequences. The recollection of the fight ends in the seventy-fourth stanza, when she says “Yet



Mellyagruance was shent, / For Mellyagruance had fought against the Lord;” (13) and finishes her report on the events. With her last word, she hints that Lancelot’s was acting upon God’s will, thus trying to overwin Christian values to her side. The paradigm that she offended according to her accusers.

Moving on with the poem, from stanza seventy-five to eighty-seven, Guinevere returns from the past to her audience and the present tense of her narrating, but her reasoning seems to get more and more desperate, or even “narcissistic” (Lindskog 468).

With all this wickedness; say no rash word  
Against me, being so beautiful; my eyes,  
Wept all away the grey, may bring some sword

To drown you in your blood; (13-14)

Both Morris and Guinevere seem to be in harmony regarding the importance of beauty within the narrative: Morris, with his picturesque and passionate descriptions on the titular character, “with no clear borders or spatial distances between the viewer and the viewed” (Lindskog 469), aims to provide a basis for her defence, while Guinevere several times returns to the idea of her beauty while presenting her speech. But is beauty of bigger importance here than just providing the main character with the mediocre and superficial rhetoric of a manipulative narcissist, who aims to find shelter in her appearance? To answer this question we need to turn to the source text, its setting, and to the allegorical importance of King Arthur who tried to lead his country from the realm of pagan beliefs into Christianity; residing at the point of division of the two, opposing paradigms. Considering this particularity of the original text, it feels as if Guinevere was winking back towards the values of the old, pagan world.

Elaine Scarry’s reasoning accords with and unfolds this idea as she, while analysing the story of two Pre-Christian characters, Odysseus and Nausicaa, clarifies the three key features of beauty, saying that beauty is sacred, unprecedented, and last but most importantly lifesaving. “Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living” (23-25). Scarry goes further than just classifying key concepts; she enhances and intensifies the experience of beauty, and its validity as she goes on with her argument and puts

The moment of coming upon something or someone beautiful might sound - if lifted away from Odysseus's own voice and arriving from a voice outside him - like this: "You are about to be in the presence of something life-giving, lifesaving, something that deserves from you a posture of reverence or petition. It is not clear whether you should throw yourself on your knees before it or keep your distance from it, but you had better figure out the right answer because this is not an occasion for carelessness or for leaving your own postures wholly to chance. [Beauty] is life-affirming, life-giving; and therefore if, through your careless approach, you become cut off from it, you will feel its removal as a retraction of life (27).

Scarry's line of thoughts seems to understand Guinevere's complex intentions as she brings up beauty as her final reason while defending herself. She is charming and threatening her audience at the same time. The very attitude that overtly accords with and mirrors the contradicting perspectives regarding the sexuality of women in a mid-Victorian setting.

The long-awaited, final encounter of the poem begins as "Just for one night" (16). A familiar phrase, linked to reflections on adulterous acts emphasising the occasional and happenstance nature of the act. This is how Guinevere embarks on introducing the final part of her speech, the one that takes the readers and her judges closest to her adulterous act in its entirety. Considering this, being familiar with Morris's and Guinevere's generous and self-vindicating vagueness, it is of no surprise that this part of Guinevere's speech only stretches across five stanzas; a rather evanescent amount of stanzas if we compare it to the whole body of the text. However, this would provide the climax of the text, the most important part of Guinevere's defence at the end of which the Queen simply decides not to speak, shouting out as "By God! I will not tell you more to-day/Judge any way you will—what matters it?" (16) After this exclamation, she immediately returns to her main argument, calling Gauwaine a liar, on a final note, because following that "She would not speak another word" (17). Her silence is broken by the sound of Sir Lancelot, her knight, coming to her rescue.

The solution to the situation seems somewhat canny this way. Did all the elaborate reasoning and verbal boldness from the side of the titular character happen in vain? Is there still no horizon and validity provided for an active heroine standing up against a unity of men, as the harmonious resolution to the conflict still gets brought along by a male character? Morris, at this point, seems to contradict the tenuous message he delicately embedded in his narrative, leaving

Guinevere without a response or reaction to her defence and allowing her to escape consequences by the hand of her lover. At the same time, with this particularity of his narrative, he returns, at least seemingly, to the comfort of the expectation horizon of the era.

Constance W. Hassett contradicts the idea of Guinevere's vain harangue, and provides a possible explanation to its contradictory nature, as she puts "her defence relies less on the explanatory force of words than on their duration. Language consumes the minutes until rescue arrives" (195). Based on her reasoning, the long monologue never aimed to be a speech of defence, only a cunning trick to win time until her saviour arrives. This interpretation directs the reader back to the idea of the self-conscious, bold and capable Guinevere who, knowing well whom she is about to convince of her innocence, and realising the impossible nature of her very venture, still manages to escape the stakes using her verbal skills and wit. Morris is consistent in abandoning the horizon of expectations of the mid-Victorian reader. Hale and Stevenson return to a harmonious conclusion, emphasising the historical context when they argue:

In the Victorian era when women's sexuality generated enormous cultural uneasiness and marital fidelity was sanctified, Morris created a fully sexual woman who makes no apology for her adulterous love but rather celebrates herself and her status as loyal Queen. There is no inconsistency in Guenevere's self-presentation because Morris, like a true champion of his lady, was able to enter into the medieval frame of mindfully enough to allow his Queen never to doubt – or to need to defend – her sexuality or her adulterous love (177).

Based on Hale and Stevenson's argument, Morris by the end of the poem arrived at the imaginary scene of the narrative, impersonated by Lancelot, and saved her Queen himself. A rather chivalrous act from the side of the poet, not only on the scene of the imaginary and narrated but also among the confines of the actual and present. This chivalrous act did not remain without counterattacks.

Morris did not aim to accord to contemporary values and remain within the horizon of expectations of the time, thus providing his readers with a sense of satisfaction. This bold attitude of his was mirrored in the number of criticisms surrounding his collection of poems in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. Acclaimed critics at the time either expressed their disapproval for the innovative nature of the poem or simply decided to overlook it. Critics, in general, were content with the idea of the literary resurrection of King Arthur and his knights, praising Tennyson for initializing this trend, but Morris's attempt to defend his Guenevere

resulted in such remarks as “misfortunate”, “careless”, “a very tedious affair” or condemned the author for “giv[ing] readers as much trouble as possible”.<sup>3</sup> Turning towards the zeitgeist and the expectations of the era again, it is illuminating to see that it was the *Ecclesiastic and Theologian* periodical that underlined the poems' confusing presence in the age's scope of literary understanding. While summarising the critical content on Morris's work in an unsigned review the critic's final thoughts sounded as:

From the above extracts and remarks, our readers will be enabled to form some tolerable opinion of the character and value of "The Defence of Guenevere and other Poems." There can be little doubt that had more pains and a greater amount of care as to detail been expended on the book, it would have had a much better chance of obtaining a permanent place in the poetical literature of the present age.” (“Morris's Defence of Guenevere”)

Morris failed to provide the feeling of “satisfaction” to Victorian readers and the reception of his verbal portrayal of Guinevere responded to his unwillingness in a mutual manner.

### **Tennyson's Guinevere**

A year after Morris's attempt, in 1859, Tennyson also embarked on creating his own Guinevere in his first set of the *Idylls of the King*. The Guinevere presented by Tennyson is very different from the one described by Morris. As Pearce words it, “Morris's “Defence of Guenevere” opens up as many doors as Tennyson's “Guinevere” closes” (115). I would like to return to this conclusion of Pearce's, once I have completed the task of close reading Tennyson's poem, to re-evaluate its validity from that position. To be able to compare the two heroines and relate them to the horizon of expectations of the age, Tennyson's poem on the titular character also needs to be introduced in detail.

The poem, already in the first stanza, provides the readers with impressions that are heavily opposing what Morris had depicted earlier.

Queen Guinevere had fled the court, and set

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<sup>3</sup> For more insight visit [http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/Poetry/Defence\\_of\\_Guenevere/Supplementary/defencesuppreviews.html#Spectat](http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/Poetry/Defence_of_Guenevere/Supplementary/defencesuppreviews.html#Spectat) or Accessed: 09 March 2021.

There in the holy house at Almesbury  
Weeping, none with her save a little maid,  
A novice: one low light betwixt them burn'd  
Blurr'd by the creeping mist, for all abroad,  
Beneath a moon unseen albeit at full,  
The white mist, like a face-cloth to the face,  
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was still. (ll. 1-8)

The mist, which is of a constant presence in Tennyson's cycle of poems, has descended on the figure of the once proud and bravely speaking Queen so heavily that she has vanished entirely from sight, leaving the readers with a shattered, crying, and lonely main character. The light of passion surrounding the "cheek of flame" (Morris 1) has faded, Guinevere's features are dim and hardly discernible at the "low light" (l 4). Her only companion is a novice. The presence of this, more likely than not, young girl of underrepresented social status says more than a hundred words about Guinevere's decline in hierarchy. As Queen, she was surrounded by an armada of ladies in waiting, and escorts amidst courtly splendour; by now this is all gone. She is solely surrounded by the mist and her only companion is the novice who, as later it turns out, does not even know who she is.

It is a rather tell-tale motive from Tennyson's side that he begins his poem with the verb "had fled", a verb that bears strong connotations. Those who have offended the law, be it secular or divine, are the ones who flee from consequences. By inserting this particular verb of action, the poet does not leave his audience any doubt regarding the reputation of Guinevere, and his own judgement of her. This verb, recalling the course of events that led Guinevere to the nunnery, returns several times in the poem. Tennyson strengthens the impression of her being a sinner by reusing "fled" at a quick pace, already at the beginning of the second stanza. "For hither had she fled" (l 9). This is how the poem introduces the readers to a recollection of past events which resulted in the present state of Guinevere.

It is Tennyson, who moves the readers from the narrating present to the past, and explains why there had arisen a fierce hatred in Mordred for Lancelot, and how he managed to chase away the lovers from Camelot. As the events and Mordred's intention gradually surface, terrible visions begin to appear in Guinevere's dreams:

An awful dream; for then she seem'd to stand

On some vast plain before a setting sun,  
And from the sun there swiftly made at her  
A ghastly something, and its shadow flew  
Before it, till it touch'd her, and she turn'd -  
When lo! her own, that broadening from her feet,  
And blackening, swallow'd all the land, and in it  
Far cities burnt, and with cry she woke. (ll 75-82)

Reading these lines, the description strongly resembles an apocalyptic experience, in the nexus of the New Testament, in the form of burning cities, and an indescribable force swallowing lands. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah also resonates well with this description. More likely than not, Tennyson aimed to foreshadow here the inevitable, the fall of Camelot. He does not fail to point his finger to the prime mover of the astounding event. As he inserts this nightmare into Guinevere's dream, he reconducts the consequence to the cause or the causer. Morris spares his Queen this heavy burden. The connotation seems rather Biblical: the womanly sin as the cause of an overarching catastrophe and the collapse of a sublime establishment. As Eve was responsible for humankind's exile from Paradise, so is Guinevere for the collapse of the Round Table and the failure of the noble principles surrounding that. It is more than noteworthy, compared with Morris's version of the original text, how religious thinking and the handprints of Christianity are all over Tennyson's "Guinevere".

At this point in the poem, as the above-mentioned particularity of the text is of huge significance along the entire narrative, I would like to make a short detour to Tennyson's rather personal way of relating to religion within a Victorian nexus. During the nineteenth century, England was an overwhelmingly Christian country. Queen Victoria's reign was encompassed with an enthusiasm for building and restoring churches. However, scientific advances, such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, resulted in difficulties among educated people to accept the content of Biblical texts as literal truth. This duality created an uneasy atmosphere around contemporary society. Tennyson was among those, who remained faithful to the Church of England, seemingly unbothered by the scientific developments of the age as for his religious faith. His way of approaching the idea of religion and belief in God was rather personal, and also very close-knit with his working process of the *Idylls of the King*. Once Tennyson confessed,

“My greatest wish is to have a clearer vision of God” (Taylor 298). Taylor follows up with this idea as he puts:

Tennyson found in Catholicism, and in the Catholicism of his friends, a powerful support for his desire to believe in the authenticity of his early mystical experiences. Tennyson’s interest in Catholicism was remarkable [...]. He was a poet laureate, after all, favorite of the Queen, writer of patriotic poems, some of which lambasted the Whore of Babylon, the “church-harpies,” “that half-pagan harlot kept by France.” Arthur “swept the dust of ruined Rome / From off the threshold of the realm, and crushed / The Idolaters, and made the people free”, with pagan and papal Rome conflated (285).

Tennyson did not only relate to the concept of religion and Catholicism as the poet laureate, as such bearing a significant social status and social responsibility, but also on a very personal level. His quest in religion was more about finding ground for the mystical, rather than sticking to the dogmas and expectations of the church. The figure of King Arthur was of huge importance in his way of reflecting on contemporary issues within the *Idylls of the King*. In Tennyson’s reinterpretation, Arthur became “the symbol of England and of the post-Reformation Church of England, where the king and the church were one: ‘I made them lay their hands in mine and swear / To reverence the King, as if he were / Their conscience, and their conscience as their King” (Taylor 297).

Considering Taylor’s reasoning, it is an even more engaging task to see, how Tennyson represents and treats Guinevere as there is so much at stake: Guinevere does not only betray her role and fails to be the “angel of the house” as a woman and a wife but undermines Arthur’s vision of a strong and united establishment, a “vast design” (l 664), Camelot, that in a symbolical sense represents Victorian England and its values. As the significance of the poem has now been clarified and all the overt and covert territories of concern have been discovered, it is time to return to the unfolding of the poem.

The visions and nightmares torturing Guinevere did not cease until “ev’n the clear face of the guileless King, / And trustful courtesies of household life, / Became her bane” (ll 84-86). According to Tennyson, it was her guilty conscience that drove her away from or even turned her against the blessings of household life and her perfect husband. The idea of “the guileless King” is present in Morris’s version as well but with a different tone or colouring. “Belonging to the time ere I was bought/By Arthur’s great name and his little love” (Morris 6) – this is how Morris

represents the King: high in reputation but low in providing love. These lines also provide the institution of marriage with a rather pejorative connotation. In both poems, the descriptions of the King guide the narrative towards the recalling of the adulterous act of Lancelot and Guinevere. Both Morris and Tennyson are rather generous with their titular character as they provide little detail regarding the shameful act, leaving most of the events to the readers' imagination.

Passion pale they met  
And greeted. Hands in hands, and eye to eye,  
Low on the border of her couch they sat  
Stammering and staring. It was their last hour,  
A madness of farewells. (ll 98-102)

This is the state in which Guinevere and Lancelot are interrupted by Modred's creatures, and they need to escape from them. Guinevere, upon realizing what is happening, cries out as 'The end is come, / And I am shamed for ever' (ll 109-110). A harrowing realization of strong resemblance with that of the Lady of Shalott's. Does that particular feature of the line only derive from the fact, that both ladies were depicted by Tennyson? Or is there a deeper connection between them? I will return to the answering of this question at a later stage. At this point, what is more interesting regarding the focus of this essay, the reception of the literary works in question, how Guinevere and Lancelot share the guilt between themselves. Lancelot chivalrously offers to take the weight of their sin all alone, as he says:

Mine be the shame; mine was the sin: but rise,  
And fly to my strong castle overseas:  
There will I hide thee, till my life shall end,  
There hold thee with my life against the world.'  
She answer'd, 'Lancelot, wilt thou hold me so?  
Nay, friend, for we have taken our farewells.  
Would God that thou couldst hide me from myself!  
Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou  
Unwedded:[...] (ll 111-119)

Beyond the opposing physical descriptions and states of the two Guineveres of the two poems, a further difference is to be discovered here, maybe of deeper significance than the previously



mentioned one, and that is the idea of self-denunciation. Tennyson depicts a more complex character to his readers and by adding to her portrayal of Guinevere the tones of self-denunciation, the ability to self-reflection, and accountability, he elevates his Queen higher on the scale of morality, than Morris his bravely talking main character “with her head / Still lifted up” (Morris 1). Morris’s Guinevere never took responsibility for what she did. She could not provide a reasonable basis for her defence, only her exciting and enchanting presence and her beauty. But Tennyson’s Guinevere takes and accepts responsibility for her actions, even if she is offered an escape and a possible happy ending. This is an internal act, which requires much more courage and character, than “Guenevere’s” external act, talking passion-filled in front of her accusers. While colouring Guinevere and providing her new tones, Tennyson does not fail to satisfy Victorian readers underlining the importance of marriage, and acknowledging the seriousness and the unacceptable nature of the betrayal of this very institution, thus remaining on the horizon of expectations of the era.

In the hope of abandoning her guilt, Guinevere flees to Almesbury surrounded by beautiful, Tennysonian descriptions of mysteriously whispering spirits, glimmering wastes and wealds. She is alone in this rather atmospheric landscape, a correspondent setting for self-reflection and consideration. At this point in the narrative, she words – in Tennyson’s narration – a recurring thought in the poem “Too late, too late!” (l 130). At this early stage in the narrative, this realization of hers is still encompassed by uncertainty from the side of the readers. Is it too late to flee? Or does she mean saying farewell to her lover was too late? Does she regret not having done that earlier? Tennyson answers these questions gradually as the poem unfolds. With this announcement and the numerous questions surrounding it, Guinevere arrives in Almesbury, and back in the present of narration. Upon her arrival, she asked the nuns not to ask her about her name and identity and they obeyed, as “her beauty, grace and power, / Wrought as a charm upon them, and they spared / To ask it” (ll 142-144). Tennyson’s Guinevere does not entirely turn her back at “Guenevere”. At certain points in the poem, it is the charming, enchanting Queen, created by Morris, who appears in front of the readers' eyes, but even so, she does not aim to benefit from her charm and breathtaking appearance any longer.

The narration leads the readers back to the opening scene, Guinevere and the novice in a room. Interestingly enough, up to this point of the narrative, these two characters have remained silent. The silence is broken with the little novice starting to sing. The song sounds rather

familiar, as ‘Late! so late! / What hour, I wonder now?’ (ll 158-160) As these lines resonate so well with Guinevere’s inner torment, the Queen encourages the novice to proceed with her song. The novice obeys and doing so, unknowingly, sings about Guinevere’s moral dilemma, foreshadowing what is to come, as

Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?

O let us in. tho’ late, to kiss his feet!

No, no, too late! ye cannot enter now. (ll 175-177)

As the lyrics so promptly represent Guinevere’s present state, worn down by her emotions, she starts to cry. The novice tries to comfort her by proclaiming that whatever it shall be that bothers her, that might only be something minor trouble compared to that of “the good King and his wicked Queen.” (l 207) As if she kept on singing the Queen’s guilt but in prose. It has become clear that the Queen, however hard she has tried, cannot escape the consequences of her action. It gained upon her also in the anticipated physical and mental safety of the convent. Facing the deeds of the past and their consequences in the present awaits inevitably. He is at the gates.

After building up the atmosphere of the narrative present, and unfolding the characters forming the narrative, the little novice embarks on a recalling of past events, recollections that she heard from his father, which all pointed towards and foreshadowed the “evil work of Lancelot and the Queen” (l 305). Reading the novice’s description of a utopian world, unspoiled by the presence of the Queen, one assumes that Tennyson more likely than not refers to the glory of Victorian England, and blaming Guinevere for Camelot’s fall resonates well with contemporary concerns. As Shantanau Siuli discusses the object of this concern as he describes that:

in the 1890s prostitution was a fact of life which was replaced by a social morality that accused sexual licence and [...] its public manifestations. Gathering intensity as the urban population rose, and with the ‘circulating harlotry’ in the streets, theatres and pleasure gardens, moral panic over prostitution was at its height in the 1850s and early 1860s” (512-513).

Besides causing moral concerns, prostitution played a part in the then-current and widespread nature of sexual diseases. Victorian society held prostitutes accountable for this unfortunate situation and considered them possible threats to their nation’s glory. This attitude is present in the poem. Tennyson’s way of handling Guinevere resonates with this social particularity. It

seems, Guinevere is the symbol of everything that was wrong with Victorian society. Torres comes to a similar conclusion, as he says “if Tennyson’s Arthur is a “blameless King” and seemingly supernatural, his Queen Guinevere is the opposite. He blames her for the demise of Arthur’s kingdom” (104). At this point of the poem, Arthur relates to Guinevere as a thesis to its antithesis.

A rather captivating particularity of the poem is, how it gradually reveals the rage, which is still present within the broken and obedient Guinevere portrayed by Tennyson. As this hidden rage slowly uncovers and reaches its climax, Morris’s passionate Queen appears in front of Tennyson’s readers. Guinevere’s inner monologues, gradually evolving into an outrage, develop and strengthen gently, but steadily, such as “Will the child kill me with her innocent talk?” (l 212), “Will the child kill me with her foolish prate?” (l 223) In line 269 the Queen cannot bury his growing anger within inner comments anymore and starts to give remarks about the novice’s account “somewhat bitterly” (l 269). As the novice, adverting to discussing Lancelot’s person and labelling him as “most disloyal friend in all the world” (l 338), Guinevere cannot contain herself anymore and changes to overtly hostile rhetoric, calling her ignorant as “O closed about by narrowing nunnery-walls, / What knowest thou of the world, and all its lights / And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe?” (ll 340-342). This inserted narration of past events climaxes when the novice puts parallel her audience, the woman of unknown background in the room with her, with “the sinful Queen” (l 351). At this moment, Guinevere’s rage flares up like the flames of the stakes she escaped, and the readers are presented with Morris’s passionate Queen, refusing all allegations and charges.

For here a sudden flush of wrathful heat  
Fired all the pale face of the Queen, who cried,  
‘Such as thou art be never maiden more  
For ever! Though their tool, set on the plague  
And play upon, and harry me, petty spy  
And traitress.’ When that storm of anger brake  
From Guinevere, aghast the maiden rose,  
White as her veil, and stood before the Queen  
As tremulously as foam upon the beach  
Stands in a wind, ready to break and fly.

And when the Queen had added 'Get thee hence,'

Fled frightened. (ll 354-365)

But the fire of "wrathful heat" dies out just as quick as it flared up, and Guinevere returns to her original state and mindset, regretting having scared the novice, adding "But help me heaven, for surely I repent" (l 370).

Before moving on within the narrative, there is one more particularity of this dialogue, worth noticing and of enlightening force as for my focus. While the novice is garrulously narrating the events surrounding the arrival of the Queen to Camelot, assuming she is distracting her from her sorrow, she asks Guinevere to compare Lancelot and Arthur, as "[b]ut pray you, which had noblest, while you moved / Among them, Lancelot or our lord the King?" (ll 323-324)

The Queen answers this question as follows:

Sir Lancelot, as became a noble knight,  
Was gracious to all ladies, and the same  
In open battle or the tilting-field  
Forbore his own advantage, and the King  
In open battle or the tilting-field  
Forbore his own advantage, and these two  
Were the most nobly-manner'd men of all;  
For manners are not idle, but the fruit  
Of loyal nature, and of noble mind.' (ll 326-334)

Her answer, even though being of rather evading nature, mirrors well her present state of mind. After all that has happened, the series of unfortunate events Lancelot and her have brought on Camelot, she is still loyal to her knight, she is still unable to condemn him. Guinevere praises Lancelot's noble manners, and while doing so, she places him beside Arthur on a moral pedestal. But as soon as the Queen remains alone in the room, with only her thoughts to keep her company, this equilibrium between the two male figures changes dramatically. She recalls the "golden days" (l 377-397) when she first met Lancelot to accompany her on her journey to King Arthur. This inserted retrospection provides a basis for the development of the two characters' relationship, describing them rapt in sweet talk in Maytime. The narration of this paradise-like experience ends and changes tone dramatically when Guinevere

[comes] to that point where first she saw the King

Ride towards her from the city, sigh'd to find  
Her journey done, glanced at him, thought him cold,  
High, self-contain'd, and passionless, not like him,  
'Not like my Lancelot' (ll 400-404)

The introduction of this inner recollection overwrites what has been said, and unfolds Guinevere's position regarding the two male characters, Arthur and Lancelot, in its entirety, in its purest form. Lancelot still holds the place within Guinevere's heart that Arthur has never even got close to. Even now, in this shattered and repenting state of hers, the Queen holds Lancelot as her dearest, true knight, hidden in her hearts and thoughts. Whereas, Arthur, and her picture of him have not changed and are still concordant with the King whom Morris's Guenevere described in her passion-filled monologue, fuelled by her desperate will to escape the horror of the stakes. This particularity within Guinevere's narration will be of deep significance regarding the outcome of the poem at a later stage, reflecting on the Queen's personal development.

As a ghost, stepping out of the realm of dreams or the imaginary, so does Arthur leave behind the domain of Guinevere's recalling and appear in the reality of the narrative present, "as a terrifying materialization of Guinevere's guilt" (Pearce 120). He is heralded by a "sudden cry, 'The King.'" (l 408) This cry detaches Guinevere from her immersing in a trance-like series of visioning past events and immediately draws her back in the narrative present. Her state in the present is illustrated by a description bearing several connotations and meanings. As she hears the King approaching her room,

Prone from off her seat she fell,  
And grovell'd with her face against the floor:  
There with her milkwhite arms and shadowy hair  
She made her face a darkness heard his armed feet  
Pause by her; then came silence, then a voice,  
Monotonous and hollow like a Ghost's  
Denouncing judgement, but tho' changed, the King's:  
'Liest thou here so low, the child of one  
I honour'd, happy, dead before thy shame?' (ll 411-420)

This scene and its visual attributes are of enlightening force regarding the narrative. Guinevere's shelter does not provide safety from her past anymore. She has to face her past deeds and Arthur,

who is personally representing all her fallacies. The scene, in which Arthur's appearance is embedded, is maybe a bit theatrical but bears very strong symbolic and reflective force. The positioning and descriptions of the two characters, Guinevere with her hidden face against the ground lying at Arthur's feet, seemingly represents the vast moral difference between the two – Arthur high, Guinevere low –, and as such seems to be an intention of the poet of a rather plain didactic nature. Further on, if we want to observe this scene from a Victorian point of view, scrutinizing to what extent the poem tried to please contemporary readers' expectations and provide them with a feeling of satisfaction, we need to turn our sights to the Royal Academy in 1858, a year before the first set of the *Idylls of the King*, with "Guinevere" included, appeared. What we will find there is Augustus Egg's representation "of an adulterous wife and her dreadful fate, *Past and Present*, a three-part narrative painting exhibited [...] at roughly the time Tennyson was composing "Guinevere" (Adams 433). The first painting of the triptych *Past and Present, No. 1* (figure 5), also known as *Misfortune*, tallies almost perfectly Tennyson's description of the scene in which Arthur appears in front of Guinevere in the convent. In the painting,

the wife lies prostrate at her husband's feet, while he sits grimly at the table and their children [...] play cards in the background. The husband is holding a letter, evidence of his wife's adultery, and simultaneously crushes a miniature of her lover under his foot. The setting is an ordinary middle-class drawing room, but closer observation reveals that the room is full of symbols. Egg was clearly influenced in his approach by Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* of 1853. The house of cards is collapsing, signifying the breakdown of the couple's marriage. The cards are supported by a novel by Balzac – a specialist in the theme of adultery. An apple has been cut in two, the one half (representing the wife) has fallen to the floor, the other (representing the husband) has been stabbed to the core. As a parallel, the two pictures on the wall depict the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. [...] In the background of the picture the mirror reflects an open door, denoting the woman's impending departure from the home. The position of her arms and the bracelets round her wrists give the impression that she is shackled (Fowle, [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk) Accessed: 24 03 2021).

The series of paintings achieved huge popularity, Ruskin himself applauding them in his *Academy Notes* at the time of their exhibition as "There is not a more painstaking nor sincere

piece of work than this in the room” (Ruskin 166, 1903). Tennyson’s decision to create a verbal replica of this painting and thus resonate with a widely popular interpretation of this social and moral dilemma seemingly took his poem closer to the taste and expectation horizon of contemporary audiences: the adulterous wife at the feet of her husband, whose heart is “stabbed to the core”. Egg gives his narration a full arch as in the last piece of the triptych the wife, the fallen woman, is depicted under a bridge staring at the Moon, leaving no doubt of the only natural outcome of such a vicious act.

At the same time, a Biblical scene might also appear in front of the readers' eyes arriving at this scene in the poem, namely that of a “sinful woman” – often thought of as Mary Magdalene, although the sources differ or remain silent regarding the woman’s identity – washing the feet of Jesus Christ and drying them with her hair. Jesus does not reject the woman’s gesture of repentance, thus exemplifying the forgiveness of sins. At this stage in the narration, it is not clear yet, which direction Tennyson will take.

Arthur is in the room and Guinevere at his feet. Implemented in this setting, awaits a long monologue of the King (ll 419-577), that will answer several of the questions that have emerged while reading “Guinevere” and remained unanswered until now. The initial thoughts of his monologue fit in well with the setting, operating with ideas such as “shame” (l 420), “Red ruin, and breaking up of laws” (l 423) as if the purpose of Arthur’s arrival was to force Guinevere to face the crime she committed and place the heavy burden of guilt and consequences on her shoulders, pressing her deeper on the ground. Arthur gives a painfully detailed account of what has come from Guinevere and Lancelot’s cursed romance. While doing so, he does not fail to include Lancelot’s share and responsibility in the course of events. After all, he was not only betrayed as a husband but also as a friend and a king. This is a rather generous motive placed within the narrative, and also a paradox concerning the zeitgeist, which preferred to put the blame on the fallen woman. Maybe the purest reflection of this general state of mind is the series of Contagious Diseases Acts passed by Parliament, starting in 1864, that only held women, or more accurately put, prostitutes accountable for the concerning spread of sexual diseases. Arthur, even while fronting his wife with her crimes, avoids this biased way of reflecting on the past.

Then in ll 445-447 the beautifully worded but dooming reasoning breaks, unexpectedly angling the readers from the anticipated direction this monologue would take, as Arthur says:

Fear not: thou shalt be guarded till my death.

Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies

Have err'd not, that I march to meet my doom. (ll 445-447)

Along these lines, unexpectedly inserted in a heart-broken Arthur's monologue, the direction Tennyson aims to take slowly starts to filter in. The idea of the coldly condemning husband, at this point, begins to fade away just to give way to a rather familiar figure, the exact opposite of the one disappearing. Arthur knows he is "to meet his doom", he is going to die, and still, he does not refuse or resist his fate. This motive is a rather well-known Biblical one; Jesus Christ, knowing of all the monstrosity that awaited him, had not refused to fulfil his role as redeemer of humankind. This parallel has been argued several times during the years of literary scrutiny. The reason why this particular reading of the narrative is illuminating, regarding the focus of this essay, is that by highlighting Arthur's parallel, we know who is listening to him at his feet: the "sinful woman" awaiting repentance. Of course, at this point, she does not know what is to come.

From this short insertion, Arthur quickly returns to voicing his broken heart.

Thou has not made my life so sweet to me,

That I the King should greatly care to live;

For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life. (ll 448-450)

This link in Arthur's chain of thoughts might seem like the reason why he does not mind meeting his doom. But for contemporary eyes of the Victorian period, there is more to discover here. Tennyson here gives the antithesis of what Coventry Patmore outlined as the duties of "The Angel in the House" as "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf / Of his condoled necessities" (75). Guinevere failed to fulfil these tasks. Suiting this colouring, using Patmore's idea as a reference or guideline, Arthur goes on listing all his glorious achievements and summarises the principles and ideologies he introduced and Camelot was built upon. As if he was to describe the polar opposite of everything Guinevere in her present state represents. The description of glorious achievements and ideas finishes rather reproachfully as he puts "And all this throve before I wedded thee," (l 481), offering again the antithesis of Patmore's Angel. Arthur's monologue resonates with Patmore's concepts on another level, as well. The readers are provided with arguments and descriptions solely from Arthur's point of view, he does not engage in a conversation with Guinevere, she is solely listening to him. The male perspective is prevailing and axiomatic in Patmore's poem and during this section,



Tennyson seems to follow along with this tendency. By doing so, he prepares the readers for the darkest visions of the poem.

Arthur goes on to describe all the misfortune that derived from Guinevere's "shameful sin with Lancelot;" (l 484). In his recalling, he transforms Guinevere into Eve or Pandora, responsible for all misfortunes in one person. After having opened the door (or box) of treason and infidelity and entering that, several of his knights followed in her footsteps. This new and doomed pattern caused the fall of Camelot and cast Arthur in solitariness, missing "the wonted number of [his] knights." (l 495) Then he goes on to unfold a rather important reasoning that answers burning questions around his actions and decisions as

Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.  
I hold that man the worst of public foes  
Who either for his own or children's sake,  
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife  
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house:  
For being thro' his cowardice allow'd,  
Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and saps  
The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse  
With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young.  
Worst of the worst were the man he that reigns!  
Better the King's waste hearth and aching heart  
Than thou reseated in thy place of light,  
The mockery of my people, and their bane. (ll 508-523)

In this extract, Arthur explains why he did not choose connivance as a way of handling this delicate issue, a tickler, even though bringing it to sunlight and reacting to it publicly has threatened much more than just an unsound marriage. Arthur's most precious achievement has collapsed due to the scandal that did not remain in the dark. Based on the above reasoning, Arthur was conscious about making this decision, and so was Tennyson while highlighting this motive within the plot. As for Arthur, given the fact that he is referred to as the "guileless king", he will not allow any clandestine act to remain undiscovered in his "house". The equality, that carpentered his Round Table, must be a value on all other realms of life in Camelot; justice and administering justice cannot be an exception from this principle. As for Tennyson, the reason for

highlighting this particularity of the story is to be discovered within the practices of the Victorian society. Adams might help with understanding this peculiarity of the poem, as he puts

Like much of Tennyson's poetry, *Idylls* frequently underscores the fragile integrity of privacy by attacking those who would pry into the personal lives of the great. Yet the moral design of the poem, culminating in Arthur's famous denunciation of Guinevere's sin, is built on a circulation of rumor and scandal that constantly perplexes the boundaries of public and private. Arthur's declaration that he "must" publicize Guinevere's transgressions sets forth in unusually stark form the Victorian logic of moral pollution; yet Arthur thereby aligns himself with the logic of the Victorian press, and thus suggests the extent to which Victorian sexual morality depends upon, is indeed constituted within, the manifold apparatus of Victorian publicity (423).

Based on these ideas, Tennyson, besides adding extra shades to the genuineness of his beloved character, more likely than not aimed to reflect on contemporary social standards and provide his readers with the feeling of satisfaction. Scandal, gossip, and the presence of the press in private matters was a norm in mid-Victorian England. Contemporary readers, due to this particularity of the era, most likely resonated rather well with Arthur's reasoning and his decision to bring the Queen's "shameful sin with Lancelot" (l 484) onto the public sphere. Failing to do so would not only have been a mockery of Camelot's people, and their bane, but also that of the Victorian public.

After having clarified this motive of his, Arthur holds a long, meaningful pause in his monologue, during which the readers are drawn back to the reality of the narrative present. Guinevere is still at the feet of the speaker, and as if she was trying to strengthen the attributes and the iconography of the "sinful woman", lays her hands on his feet. Outside the convent Arthur's warhorse neighs, as a reminder of the finiteness of the time of his visit. The touch of Guinevere, even though approaching from a subordinate position, does not leave Arthur unimpressed. The tone and direction of his monologue shifts significantly, "as at a friend's voice, [,] he [speaks] again:"

Yet think not that I come to urge thy crimes,  
I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,  
I, whose vast pity almost makes me die  
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,

My pride in happier summers, at my feet.  
The wrath which forced my thoughts on that fierce law,  
The doom of treason and the flaming death,  
(When first I learnt thee hidden here) is past,  
The pang – which while I weigh'd thy heart with one  
Too wholly true to dream untruth in thee,  
Made my tears burn – is also past – in part.  
And all is past, the sin is sinn'd, and I,  
Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God

Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the rest. (ll 528-542)

An unexpected but heart-warming turn of the narrative this is, clarifying the question that at some points of the poem seemed to be answered in an opposing way, namely, which direction Tennyson will take: punishing the “fallen woman” or forgiving the “sinful” one. As much as Tennyson has seemed to aim to satisfy contemporary readers, keeping them on their horizon of expectations, with this dramatic change or the monologue, he grabs the readers by their shoulders and turns them around, pointing towards an entirely different direction in their literary understanding. Arthur’s harsh and damning words disappear with the ice, melting around the figure of the “cold, high, self-contained and passionless” King. The piercing adjectives describing Guinevere tame down, and invite “golden head”, “pride”, and “happy summer” to add descriptive force to Arthur’s monologue. The monologue that is saturated with love and condonation, a monologue of unconditional love. At this point, it becomes irrefutable that Tennyson’s Arthur is going along the path of forgiveness, and as if the parallel was not clear enough the religious significance of this decision of his becomes explicit, as he includes “Eternal God” in his reasoning. Guinevere is forgiven. She is not threatened anymore by the unfortunate fate of the cast-out, foreshadowed in Egg’s third piece of his series of paintings. Guinevere is redeemed by Arthur, the redeemer.

From the heights of the sanctity, Arthur’s speech turns towards the secular and carnal, and while doing so, guides Guinevere towards a painful revelation. “O golden hair, with which I used to play / Not knowing! O imperial-moulded form, / And beauty such as never, woman wore,” (ll 544-546) Arthur describes a female figure, almost identical with that of Morris’s “Guenevere”. The shadowy hair that covered Guinevere’s face at the arrival of the King is

shining again in dazzling gold, Guinevere is radiant again in front of the readers' eyes; a sexualised figure wrapped in beauty. As Arthur goes on and in this parlance his passion is growing and overflowing everything that has been said before, just to climax in a most heartfelt confession, as

Here looking down on thine polluted, cries  
“I loathe thee:” yet not less, O Guinevere  
For I was ever virgin save for thee,  
My love thro’ flesh hath wrought into my life  
So far, that my doom is, I love thee still. (ll 553-556)

This is the point when it becomes revealed what we have been listening to the whole time: Arthur’s desperate but genuine love confession. A passion that will fly you high, just to grab you again and pull you down to the deepest pits of heart-sore. This ambivalence of feelings is popularly referred to or allegorised as a roller-coaster (clearly not among Tennyson’s contemporaries) due to its rapid and waving movement. Arthur’s monologue follows the same pattern of movement, praising Guinevere at times and then shifting to blasting in the next moment. As soon as this realization is achieved, the entire content is cast upon a different lighting. Arthur has always had a passionate attitude towards his Queen, the one that Guinevere has never noticed based on her recalling of him. This assumed cold attitude chased her into Lancelot’s embrace and resulted in the collapse of Camelot. Why was Arthur so shy about expressing that abundance of feelings and affection he, at this point undeniably, had for Guinevere? While trying to answer this question, once again, it has to be observed in a contemporary, mid-Victorian nexus. Victorian England, on the surface at least, was characterised by prudery. Showing affection publicly was frowned upon and regarded as vulgar. Considering this, Arthur’s attitude might most rightfully seem to the observing eyes, as the fictional embodiment of this very attitude. Linley helps with finding a conclusion around this question, as she argues that “Arthur’s self-representational crisis in that idyll, [...], suggests Tennyson’s recognition of the constructed nature of sexuality” (366). Oppressing feelings, only to live up to social standards, is an artificial and unnatural act, an act that Victorian England set as a requirement for the public. The prudery, mentioned before, was accompanied by hypocrisy; a consequence of the forced and unnatural standards. Arthur’s attitude, reflecting on this very issue, resulted in Guinevere’s escape into adultery that led to the fall of Camelot. Taking all of

these into consideration, it might seem more and more feasible that Tennyson was trying to point out, that the affected standards that Victorian society had to deal with led to the widespread nature of prostitution and sexual diseases, a possible threat to Victorian England. It is an unsettling, conflicting but brave suggestion or more promptly put criticism, especially from the period's poet laureate. By implying this conclusion, Tennyson seems to set the contemporary horizon of expectations on fire – but so delicately that it is hard to notice.

The King says his farewell, but before he would face his last battle, of which he knows he is not going to survive, strengthening the parallel with Jesus once more, there is a final moment, maybe the one that expresses most purely his attitude towards Guinevere. Tennyson describes it as

And while she grovell'd at his feet,  
She felt the King's breath wander o'er her neck,  
And in the darkness o'er her fallen head,  
Perceived the waving of his hands that blest. (ll 377-380)

I have a strong feeling that separating these four lines from the body of the text, making it a stanza isolated from the rest of the poem, was not an act of a happenstance nature from Tennyson's side, as there is so much in them. This insertion describes beautifully that Arthur's final visit to his wife was not only an act of generosity but of passion, thus giving a further depth to the already complex dynamics of the two characters. And this passion is not at all something sublime or sacred, as one would expect of Tennyson's Arthur, but most carnal and humane. The description of Arthur's breath over Guinevere's neck surrounds the two with the air of eroticism, due to which the "guileless King" immediately appears before the readers and Guinevere as a most humane entity; a quality that she has not discovered in him before. Solomon arrives at the same conclusion articulating that "probably the most humanizing element in Arthur's character is his deep love for Guinevere, the sincerity of which we cannot doubt, for in spite of the Queen's infidelity he avows his love at a climactic moment near the end of his career" (261).

After having filled the room and the shattered Queen with passion, Arthur leaves both of them just as swiftly as he arrived. Guinevere is alone again accompanied only by her repentance and changed views. During the scene, she never looked at or spoke to the King, and upon realising it, she is about to take her last chance as "The casement: 'peradventure,' so she thought, / 'If I might see his face, and not be seen.'" (ll 583-594) A motive in the narrative that seems

rather familiar from another story, but in an inverse way: the Lady of Shalott. At this point it seems that the two Ladies are yearning for each other's position. The Lady of Shalott wanted to move from the realm of "unseen" to the "seen", and that is how her journey with a dramatic ending started. Whereas Guinevere, after having enjoyed years of being seen and loved, now wants to take shelter in the "unseen", and end her journey in the public sphere there, in the "ivory tower", where the Lady of Shalott wanted to escape from. In both narratives, this change of heart and position is embedded in a movement of huge significance. The Lady of Shalott "left the web, [...] left the loom, / [...] made three paces thro' the room/[...] / [and] looked down to Camelot" (ll 109-113 1833) and Lancelot for the first time, while Guinevere rises from the floor to run to the casement and look at her husband for the last. The two characters have never before stood that close to each other, even if they were connected by the shared object of their romantic interest, at least before Guinevere's revelation, which I will discuss in the next paragraph. Although of inverse intention, they both are standing and looking at something they just discovered to be most precious, but at the same time, out of their reach because as they are looking at the object of their longing, it is leaving their sight and lives forever. This is how the stories of Guinevere and the Lady of Shalott interweave and create a full circle.

After four stanzas of silence, while listening to Arthur's monologue, Guinevere speaks again. It seems that the already departed King's reasoning has transformed Guinevere; the Queen talking now is the polar opposite of her previous self but within all these transformations, the idea of "late", central to the narrative, remained with her. It seems, she still sees Arthur as some supernatural entity, when she says

I thought I could not breathe in that fine air  
That pure severity of perfect light –  
I yearn'd for warmth and colour which I found  
In Lancelot – now I see thee what thou art,  
Thou art the highest and most human too,  
Not Lancelot, nor another. Is there none  
Will tell the King I love him tho' so late? (ll 640-646)

Reading these thoughts is especially illuminating when put parallel with Guinevere's earlier reasoning regarding Lancelot's personality (ll 400-404) and realising how the imbalance of the Knight and Arthur's characters has shifted to its polar opposite. It also mirrors, how she has

discovered the “human” in Arthur, and in her present state of mind, she does not think about this quality as the antithesis of the “guileless King” but as a newly discovered realm of his husband’s personality. The discovery, which guides her to the realisation that it is the King whom she loves. This very realisation guides her back to the thought of “late”, but contrary to her previous reasoning, she does not affirm the validity of the idea, but asks it.

At his point, approaching the end of the poem, Tennyson’s Guinevere departs entirely from Morris’s Guenevere. While close-reading this poem, we have seen the two fictional characters side by side, resembling each other or almost seeming identical. Tennyson also seemed to be confusing his readers, while portraying the full scale of traits of his Guinevere, but at this point the poet’s position is evident. Before unfolding this very position, I would like to return to a statement of Lynne Pearce, mentioned at the beginning of this section discussing “Guinevere”, namely that “Morris's “Defence of Guenevere” opens up as many doors as Tennyson’s “Guinevere” closes” (115). Although Pearce’s conclusions are in some ways similar to mine, at this point I have to contradict her. Morris does not provide his titular character with the invaluable trait of accountability and the ability of self-reflection. His Guenevere remains one-dimensional and static during the entire narrative: a narcissistic heroine wrapped up in her own beauty and assumed superiority, who uses her verbal skills and wits to escape consequences. Meanwhile, Tennyson provides several depths and uses numerous colours while depicting his own vision of the sinful Queen. Due to his efforts, Guinevere is given forgiveness and most importantly a development in character by the end of the narrative.

This tension between the two characters is also rather interesting approached through reception theory and considering how the two poems related to the horizon of expectations of contemporaries. In mid-Victorian England, once the husband and the wife exchanged vows, the husband took responsibility not only for the property of his spouse but also for her actions (Pool 184). Women, restricted mainly to the realm of passive and private, had no responsibility or accountability outside these very confines. Tennyson, awarding his Guinevere with the possibility of reflecting on the events of past errors and arriving at certain conclusions along with them, treated her rather liberally and fair. This equality within the realm of responsibility was mostly unheard of at the time. Tennyson opened up a new territory or “gate” for his Queen, through which she attained validity and could become an active character, responsible for her own faith. Morris decided to leave her Queen within the confines of Victorian standards outlined

for women since her resolution, her escape, is brought along by a male character in the end and not by her own right. Leaving behind Guenevere's self-obsessed character and the role of the victim of circumstances, who just followed along with the events, Tennyson's Guinevere is granted her award. As Tennyson describes in his final stanza

She said: they took her to themselves; and she  
Still hoping, fearing 'is it too late?'  
Dwelt with them, till in time their Abbess died.  
Then she, for her good deeds and her pure life,  
And for the power of ministration in her,  
And likewise for the high rank she had borne,  
Was chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess, lived  
For three brief years, and there, an Abbess, past  
To where beyond these voices there is peace. (ll 684-692)

Guinevere herself gains her harmonious resolution, ending her life acclaimed and loved due to her good nature and exceptional personality. And the startling statement that during the narrative softens into an echoing question, "is it too late?" is also resolved and answered. It was not too late. It is never too late.

### **Jane Burden the sinful Queen**

After having analysed these two poems, representing their titular characters in differing, at points even opposing ways, I would like to turn towards their further reinterpretations, or as Helsinger likes to think of the illustrations surrounding a given work of literature, "acts of translation". (ix)

Looking at William Morris's *Queen Guenevere* (figure 6)<sup>4</sup> is a most exciting task, due to several factors. Firstly, in the case of this painting, the source text and the translation derives from the same person. Morris found the topic, or maybe more precisely put, the character engaging enough to return to it and offer his understanding of the story in a different way of

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<sup>4</sup> Recent research has established that the picture is intended to represent Iseult, but for the purposes of this essay, their similarities are more significant than their differences, so I propose to class the two subjects together. Scholars I quote also refer to the artwork as *Queen Guenevere*.



artistic expression, in form of a painting. Does he use the space provided by a canvas to add further dimensions or readings to his narrative? Or does he remain within the confines set by his poem? The significance of this topic within Morris's artistic activity gets underlined by the fact that this illustration was his only easel painting and "he struggled for months on this picture" (Fowle, [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk) Accessed: 29 03 2021). This assumed significance guides us towards the second factor framing this work of art's rather exciting nature, which is the parallel that the narrative bears with Morris's personal life. The parallel that might explain Morris's passionate and accommodating attitude towards the fictional character of Guinevere or the person, standing behind the well-elaborated figure of the Queen among Pre-Raphaelite muse and artists, Jane.

Jane Burden was born in Oxford of a rather humble background, as the daughter of a stableman and a laundress. In 1857, during a theatre visit, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones discovered her beauty, and thus started a new chapter in the story of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

They asked her to model for them. Jane's destiny was set in motion. Her androgenic, but sensual look, with her square jawline, cushiony lips, deep-set grey eyes, and thick, wavy black hair, aroused something in people. [...] Jane sat mostly for Rossetti. However, Morris painted her as the tragic Arthurian princess [...], during the first months of their friendship, and wrote on the finished canvas "I cannot paint you, but I love you" (Canjuga, [dailyartmagazine.com](http://dailyartmagazine.com) Accessed: 29 03 2021).

Jane married William Morris in 1858, whom she had met through Rossetti – a motive in the relationship of the trio resembling that of Guinevere, Arthur, and Lancelot's, with the Knight escorting the Queen to meet her future husband. Jane's relationship with the two men is mirrored well in her comments about them. She reflected fondly on Rossetti as "unlike any other man", whereas Morris, her husband she thought of as "the most magnanimous, the least selfish of men". These descriptions resonate well, once again, with the imaginary ways, Guinevere deemed Lancelot and Arthur: the Knight unparalleled and the guileless King, attracting little love in his highness and glory. Once Morris married Jane, he directed her towards educating herself, due to which after a while Jane, although coming from a humble background, was quite comfortable within upper-class circles, as well. As a result, this way Jane resembled more and more the cunning and witty Guenevere, whom Morris had created in various ways such as poetry,

painting, and reality. From this triad, in the following part, I aim to focus on the Guenevere represented in the form of a painting.

Morris, just like with his poem, does not leave the onlooker any doubt regarding the exceptionality of his female character. Queen Guenevere is a central figure in the painting, dominating or even conquering the scene as an “appearance of command and authority” (Pearce 125). In the painting, she is caught in the act of fastening her belt; a detail that might be easily be looked over, still bearing a paramount significance. Belts, shawls, any kind of decoration around the hips, in the Pre-Raphaelite methodology of symbolism, are meant to represent the presence of female sexuality and its moving importance, just like in William Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1852). It is important to note that in the latter painting, the shawl is an indicator of the female protagonist's estimation, whose fate seems to be of just as a happenstance nature as the shawl casually wrapped around her hip. Thinking along these ideas, it becomes clear, why the act Guinevere is performing in the painting is worth noting: she does not only happen to be a woman whose sexuality is cast upon her, as a sort of curse, on the contrary! She chooses to be of sexual validity. It is her who willingly wraps around herself the decorative piece of clothing and all the connotations surrounding it. She is in full control of her actions and decisions. Just as “Guenevere”, *Queen Guenevere* proudly faces the accusations of adultery and does not aim to satisfy any sort of expectation by adjusting her actions to them. The crumpled sheets on her bed further strengthen this impression of her.

Her pose is also of a defining role while deciphering the traits Morris aims to grant his Guinevere with. The Pre-Raphaelite women usually are portrayed as seated. Standing or the act of rising from sitting, that the main female characters are caught in, is an expression of their frustration felt over their circumstances. Queen Guenevere steps outside of this nexus, standing straight, self-aware and self-confident in her room. This gesture of hers, or more promptly put that of Morris, reflects as if she was placed outside of the scale women were to be positioned on, stretching from the ideal “Angel of the House” to the fallen woman; an appearance whose validity stretches over the limitations of time and the different social debates and ideologies typical of certain periods.

Morris also does not fail to represent the love triangle, discussed above. This particularity of the painting might have arrived on the canvas from the realm of the subconscious, but it is there: Jane Burden, soon to be Jane Morris, is surrounded in the painting by both William Morris

and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. At the time of the birth of this painting, Morris, not having discovered entirely his own artistic voice, was hugely under the influence of Rossetti, an already acclaimed artist then. According to Hilton

his [Morris's] portrait of her [Jane] as Queen Guinevere has the constricted, unreal space of some of Rossetti's early paintings, and in this space she appears as flattened, lifeless. In fact, the painting's only real liveliness is in the treatment of the rich tapestries of the Queen's bedroom, in the vivid delicacy of her chamber's accessories (165).

Thinking along these lines, Morris's painting might seem to us, as a rather personal and intimate confession, imitating both overtly and covertly his personal story that inevitably intertwined with the Arthurian narrative. If we accept Hilton's judgement, there is an air of uneasiness around the figure of Queen Guenevere that is due to Rossetti's influence on Morris's art, and parallel with its artistic materialization, also on Morris's private life. However, the central figure is surrounded by beautiful patterns of tapestries, the primal signs of the real genius of William Morris, the direction along which his art is to accomplish itself and become his very own and the visual materialization of the love and caring Morris surrounded his Jane with. And of course, there is the central figure, Queen Jane, forever in the core of King Morris's broken heart.

At this point in my argument, returning shortly to the realm of reception theory, I would like to invite Georges Poulet into my method of reasoning, as he discusses how the different texts he reads become part of his own narrative, and become objects of his own understanding, mental, and emotional state. This "remarkable transformation wrought in [him] through the act of reading" (307) is exemplified here as Morris made his personal narrative part of his reading of "Queen Guinevere" and vice versa. The painting is saturated with his love for Jane and the threat around it, in the form of brushstrokes springing from Rossetti.

### **Florence Harrison's sympathetic take on Guinevere**

Discussing works of art in which the question of women's sexuality is central it is always beneficial to look at how female artists, thinkers, creators have related to the topic in question and represented their own readings of them. Surrounding the *Idylls of the King*, there are quite some women illustrators. Lupack explains the possible reason behind this particularity as

“Tennyson’s interest in the women of the legend, indicated by the original names of the first four idylls as well as by his treatment of the Lady of Shalott, attracted a number of female artists” (97). Following on with this idea in mind, now I will turn to Florence Harrison and her illustration of “Guinevere” from the 1912 edition of *Tennyson’s Guinevere and Other Poems* (figure 7). Before offering my understanding of Harrison’s translation of the source text, I would like to include Broome Saunders’s reading of the work of art in question, as I find it rather enlightening. While describing Harrison’s Guinevere, she says that

[t]he 1912 edition has seven plates for ‘Guinevere’, as well as headers and end papers illustrating this title poem of the volume. The front cover of the book shows a crowned Guinevere in a pose reminiscent of Joan of Arc. With closed eyes raised to heaven, she clasps a long sword in both hands, the rich swirls of her art deco gown hiding the bottom of the sword. The religious iconography is continued in the angels who hold her veil at either side of a semi-circle that forms a halo around her head, a star in the centre of which alights above her crown. Clouds at either side of the halo suggest a storm brewing which will blight the bright star: the inclusion of decorative hearts shows the love focus of ‘Guinevere’, as well as of many other poems in the volume. The tongues of flame suggest both passion and destruction, a passion that will burn up a kingdom. Yet this is not an image to suggest any blame to Guinevere; instead, we get an image of a medieval warrior queen, presented as a martyr and a tragic heroine (316).

Summarising these lines, it seems, Harrison had a rather sympathetic, or even empathic attitude towards Guinevere. Her positive reading of the narrative of the titular character saturates her illustration, not only in the form of a beautifully elaborated figure, dominating the cover of the edition, but also in its details, through which Harrison provides further depths to the story of Guinevere. Broome Saunders points out rather aptly this sympathetic attitude while highlighting the presence of the sword in Harrison’s vision. The association she offers, that of Joan of Arc’s, seems also well elaborated. It is a reoccurring motive in Tennyson’s “Guinevere” that the Queen is condemned in rather extreme terms, being called a disease or pollution, the way Joan of Arc was condemned and later burned. This heavy-handed attitude from Tennyson’s side can be attributed to the sporadically didactic nature of Idylls. “[Tennyson’s] text has a social message, to offer an ideal in the face of what he saw as the destruction of religion, the growth of materialism, and the threat to marriage with the contemporary changes to the matrimonial law”

(Broome Saunders 266). Harrison dismisses this particularity of the narrative entirely, and instead of underlining the threat Guinevere represented in the pages of the *Idylls of the King*, she depicts the Queen as an exciting mixture of a glorious queen and a victim of men. This latter component of this complexity is presented through the sword. The sword in Guinevere's hands reflects very well her source of conflict, bearing several symbolic connotations. First, resembling the shape of a cross, it includes the question of religious morals and self-sacrifice. Second, as a phallic symbol, it highlights how male intervention shaped the Queen's fate. And while portraying Tennyson's Queen in the triumphal position Morris had offered his readers, she creates a rather interesting crossover of the two Guineveres. While doing so, she offers all her sympathy to the character.

## Conclusion: The Thorny Road of Honour

Arriving at the final section of my argument, I would like to evoke the thoughts of Hans Christian Andersen, worded in 1856 in “The Thorny Road of Honour.” The last sentence of this work of his sound as “On mighty wings, the spirit of history floats through the ages, and shows—giving courage and comfort, and awakening gentle thoughts—on the dark nightly background, but in gleaming pictures, the thorny road of honour, which does not, like a fairy tale, end in brilliancy and joy here on earth, but stretches out beyond all time, even into eternity!” (174) While discussing the characters of the Lady of Shalott and Guinevere, Andersen’s beautifully worded idea has faithfully accompanied me and led me towards thinking about the reception of these female figures not only in their own literary period but “beyond all time”.

The Lady of Shalott’s “road of honour” was thorny indeed, not only in her own narrative, leading to her tragic end, but also as a piece of written work. The original poem was received by the public with disdain and venomous criticism, which finally resulted in the Lady’s deprivation of values, colours and validity. In her reworked and simplified version, she managed to find her place on the Victorian horizon of expectations. But however hard Tennyson tried to cover all the exciting features of his titular character in his 1842 version of “The Lady of Shalott”, the queenly standing Lady with “her wide eyes fixed on Camelot” (l 131, 1833) kept on revisiting the public through the numerous Pre-Raphaelite translations of the text. Hunt in his later representation of her (figure 4) added details to the source text that foreshadowed what awaits the real Ladies of Shalott of Victorian society. He depicted the Lady breaking free from the entangling of the web around her legs and as soon as this pattern, shifting from the realm of imaginary, conquered the domain of the real the narrative of the Lady lost its popularity. By the time of the First World War hardly anyone was wondering about the mysterious persona hidden on the Island of Shalott. Due to the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870, 1874 and 1882, women were gradually becoming more involved in the affairs of the public sphere. This development was followed by improved opportunities for education and work, which also supported a greater degree of female independence. “From 1895 a woman assaulted by her husband could apply for judicial separation and could no longer be forced to return to her husband’s home” (Poulson 183).

As the Lady of Shalott left her chamber to look at Camelot, so did the Ladies of Victorian society and the closing thought of the Lady in her 1833 version, saying “The charm is broken utterly” (1178) turned from what might have seemed a mere self-validation of a fictional character into a statement overarching the reality of the time and its exciting social changes. These social changes provided new challenges surrounded by new narratives and set new heroines and female characters on the thorny road of honour.

Guinevere challenged the Victorian horizon of expectations in a different manner. Camelot’s Queen sinned in a way, only men were allowed to at the time. She committed adultery. Legal regulations around this act were rather imbalanced at the time, reflecting a general position or way of thinking regarding adultery. “Divorce was granted by Parliament only for adultery, and women could not procure a divorce unless the adultery was compounded by other offences, such as incest or bigamy” (Wolfram 157). This inequality between men and women was much criticised but not remedied until 1923. Sinning against the holy matrimony was only accepted when committed by men, although discretion around the act was expected. Looking at how Tennyson and William Morris handled this delicate topic and Guinevere has been a rather enlightening venture, especially considering the differing positions of the two poets: Tennyson the poet laureate, an acclaimed actor of the contemporary literary scene, and Morris, a man in love with his “Guenevere”. While “Tennyson, in reworking Malory, essentially censored the undesirable aspects for his Victorian audience” (Dailey 79), Morris wrapped his heroine in a sparkling, flashing cloak of courage, wit, and self-awareness. Their intentions were rather clear, still, the outcome has turned out to be something strongly opposing those. Morris, however hard he tried to glorify his female character, ended up with a one-dimensional narcissist incapable of repentance. In the meantime, Tennyson, while portraying his cast out, broken Guinevere, added to her portrayal the tones of self-reflection, personal development and redemption attained in her own right. Tennyson’s Guinevere is saved and redeemed, while Morris’s Guenevere simply flees from consequences and the stake by the hand of her lover, Lancelot. Morris could not absolve his Queen of the sin of adultery, only glorify her. This motive in his work was also present in his personal narrative, which once again resurfaced in his 1858 painting of Queen Guenevere (figure 6) portraying Jane Burden, soon to be Jane Morris. Paintings of models should not be referred to as portrays, as the particularities and personal traits of the model remain hidden behind and secondary to the traits and features of the fictional

character depicted. *Queen Guenever*, however, can more likely than not be considered as a portrait of Jane Burden herself. Morris's paint strokes, while depicting the titular character, were driven by the awe and passion he was held in by Jane. "I cannot paint you but I love you" he is said to have written hopelessly on his canvas as one day she sat to him (Hilton 166). Blinded by his overflowing feelings, he failed to offer further readings or depths to the narrative and character of Guinevere.

This very fault was corrected by Florence Harrison while illustrating *Tennyson's Guinevere and Other Poems* (figure 7). She approached the character of Guinevere from a more sympathetic and understanding approach, emphasising the significance and responsibility of the men in the outcome of the narrative and portraying her bearing clear resemblance with Joan of Arc, as a mere victim of circumstances. While outlining this reading of the narrative, Harrison skilfully included in her translation the glorious traits of the character, thus interlacing the seemingly opposing portrayals of Tennyson and Morris.

And what do the texts of Tennyson and Morris leave us with beyond all time? What solution do they offer to the ones eager to retrieve a moral from Guinevere's narrative and dilemma? Although the solution is not as palpable as in the case of a didactic content, the moral lies there within the lines of both poems, and the outcomes, the "brilliancy and joy" of the two texts are harmonious. Tennyson offers his readers a solution through the portrayal of King Arthur, his words and his loving attitude. After having rung out his broken heart and recounted at large all the turmoil, caused by Guinevere, taking place in his kingdom and his soul simultaneously, Arthur's final words to his Queen sound as "I love thee still. / Let no man dream but that I love thee still." (ll 556-557) Arthur has never ceased to love Guinevere in Tennyson's reading, and through this unconditional love, Guinevere is given salvation, grace and peace within the walls of the convent and most importantly the prospects of repentance and personal development, along with that. This is a beautiful and generous gesture from Tennyson's side, especially as the poet laureate of an era that mainly offered damnation and death for fallen women as the harmonious resolution to their narratives.

Morris's solution has to be looked for outside of the frames of "The Defence of Guenevere". The poem fails to offer some sort of resolution of enlightening nature but as the narrative of the poem is so integral to Morris's biography, his fault at finding and providing a



harmonious outcome is understandable; more likely than not, at the time the poem was written, Morris was also desperately looking for the resolution of the narrative of a complaisant husband. Then in 1871, just after moving to Kelmscott Manor with Dante Gabriell Rossetti and Jane Burden, he decided to take the Arthurian path of unconditional love and, in an attempt to find his 'Holy Grail', travelled to Iceland "in order to allow the situation between Janey and Rossetti to crystallise in some way" (Kocmanová 118). Further resembling Arthur, he was exposed to a turmoil of feelings. According to his biographers, his poetry of the period reflected disillusionment still, he was consequent in sticking to civilised behaviour in this difficult situation. But unlike Arthur, at the end of summer 1871, he returned from his quest with his 'Holy Grail' in form of a weighty statement followed by a nine-line poem.

Love is enough: though the World be a-waning,  
And the woods have no voice but the voice of complaining,  
Though the sky be too dark for dim eyes to discover  
The gold-cups and daisies fair blooming thereunder,  
Though the hills be held shadows, and the sea a dark wonder  
And this day draw a veil over all deeds pass'd over,  
Yet their hands shall not tremble, their feet shall not falter;  
The void shall not weary, the fear shall not alter  
These lips and these eyes of the loved and the lover. (228)

These lines from Morris chime well with Arthur's final position regarding his beloved Guinevere in Tennyson's poem. *Love is enough* vividly describes, just as Arthur in his monologue, the tortures of Morris's soul in the odd love triangle, just to provide shelter from and a resolution to them in its closing lines. These are the very thoughts that provide the harmonious solution to "The Defence of Guenevere", the essence of which is worded already at the beginning of the poem: Love is enough. At this point, we might frown as Bernard Shaw did while labelling this piece of written work as "that irritating nineteenth-century cliché", but we would be just as wrong as he was (Kocmanová 120). Morris did not only mean to provide relief from his troubles

with a battered romantic commonplace. Just like Tennyson creating an Arthur resembling Christ, Morris also approaches love in a mythical or even spiritual sense, as “the answer to the troubles of the world” (Kocmanová 131). This is the gleaming message that Morris puts against “the dark nightly background”. Love is enough is still with us and available also to those not necessarily well-versed in the world of literature. This short but meaningful message can be read on postcards, posters; the most various articles of use even today. One could say this is the trivialisation of something meaningful but this meaning is so strong and eternal, that not even the most frequent use can harm, corrode or invalidate it in any way. Clad in this message, Guinevere walks along the Thorny Road of Honour and her narrative “stretches out beyond all time, even into eternity.”



## Index of listed works of art



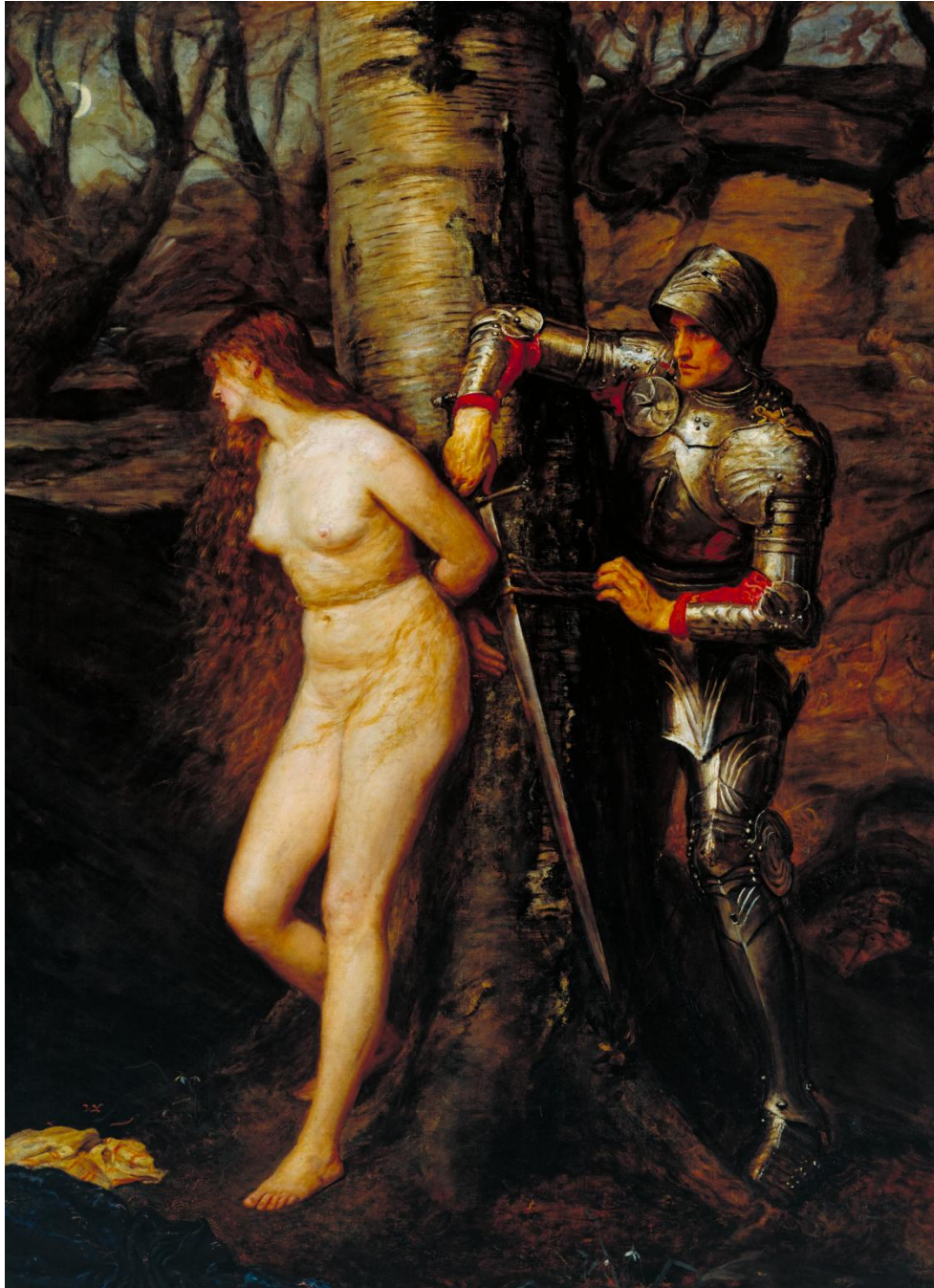
*Figure 1*

William Holman Hunt

*The Awakening Conscience* 1853-4, frequently retouched (RA 1854)

Oil on canvas 76.2 x 55.9 (arched)

Tate



*Figure 2*

Sir John Everett Millais

*The Knight Errant* 1870

Oil paint on canvas 184.1 x 135.3

Tate



*Figure 3*

William Holman Hunt

*The Lady of Shalott 1850*

Black chalk, pen and ink 23.5 x 14.2

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



*Figure 4*

William Holman Hunt

The Lady of Shalott 1886-1905

Oil on canvas 185 x 143.7

Wardsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut



*Figure 5*

Augustus Leopold Egg

*Past and Present, No. 1* 1858

Oil paint on canvas 635 x 762

Tate





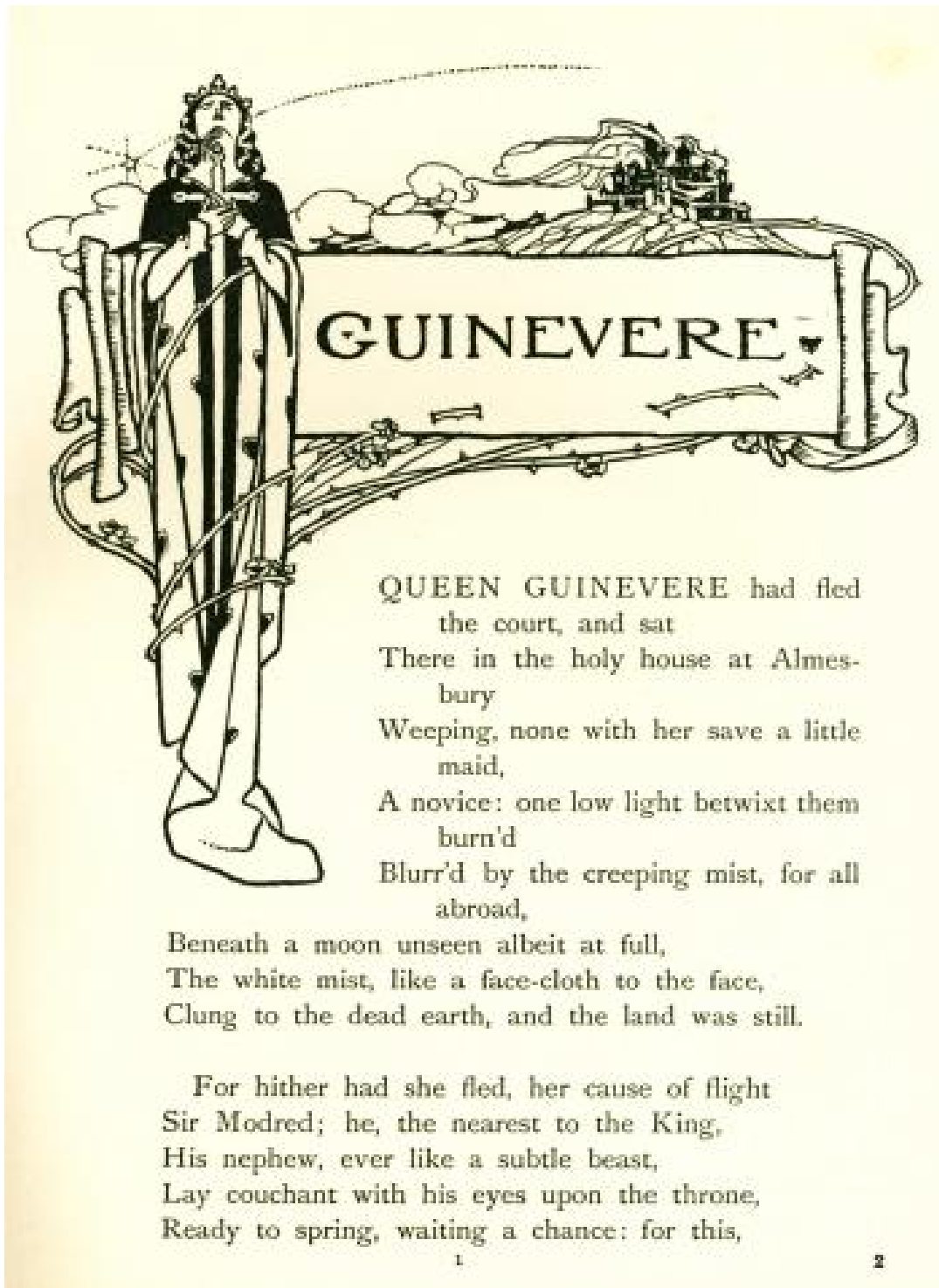
*Figure 6*

William Morris

Queen Guenevere / La Belle Iseult 1858

Oil on canvas 70 x 50

Tate



*Figure 7*

Florence Harrison

*Guinevere* 1912

Illustration from Tennyson's *Guinevere and Other Poems*

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