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Getting It Wrong in “The Lady of Shalott”

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Medea in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* famously declares, “*Video meliora proboque, / deteriora sequor*” – I see what is better, and I approve of it; I pursue what is worse.¹ The passage is justly celebrated, because it transforms what could be a simple commonplace – people do wrong, even when they know better – into something far more paradoxical. Medea’s three staccato transitive verbs emphasize the deliberateness of her declaration. She is not succumbing to a sudden temptation, or even to any temptation at all. The way the lines are phrased does not imply a choice of something sinful but desirable over an abstract but unappealing “good.” Medea not only recognizes what is better, she relishes it; yet she actively pursues what is detrimental. The sense of deliberateness is reinforced by Ovid’s use of first-person, present-tense discourse in this passage: at the very moment that she is getting it wrong, Medea is fully aware of what she is doing. Yet self-consciousness benefits her not at all. Without explanation – there is no conjunction between her preferring the better and pursuing the worse, only a dramatic line-break – Medea relinquishes her self-determination and her self-interest at once.

Ovid’s Medea finds a parallel in Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott*. Most fairy-tale curses are not brought on consciously or deliberately. Sleeping Beauty, for instance (the subject of a poem in Tennyson’s 1830 volume that was then expanded into an entire sequence, “The Day-Dream,” in 1842), falls under her spell when she pricks her finger –

a mere accidental slip of the pin. The Lady of Shalott, by contrast, is aware of the curse that hangs over her, and she brings it upon herself with a series of decisive actions.

She left the web, she left the loom,
 She made three paces through the room,
 She saw the water-lily bloom,
 She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She looked down to Camelot.ⁱⁱ

The syntax, anaphoric and asyndetic, is even more deliberate than Ovid's. "After over a hundred lines of mainly intransitive description," as Herbert Tucker writes, we are suddenly given an "electric series of transitives in [these] lines (not 'walked,' even, but with prosodic reinforcement, 'made three paces')."iii Yet even as she performs these actions, the Lady remains conscious of their fateful consequences: "'The curse is come upon me,' cried / The Lady of Shalott" (ll. 116-117). The very moment when the Lady at last acts with whole-hearted determination is also the moment when she knowingly gives herself up to an outside force.

The powerful fascination of this scene, I propose, derives from its archetypal familiarity. To put oneself under a curse – to know that one is getting things wrong, and yet to pursue – is essential to the experience of creating art. It has long been a critical commonplace that "The Lady of Shalott," like many of Tennyson's early poems, is concerned with the role of the artist. Likewise, critics have often noted how frequently Tennyson's poetry of this period explores the paradox of deliberately willing away one's will, actively renouncing agency, as exemplified most explicitly in "The Lotos-Eaters."^{iv} These two topics are of course closely connected: to become an artist has traditionally

been seen as a surrendering of oneself to a higher power, to a Muse or other source of inspiration. But Tennyson's distinction lies in his equation of artistic creation with a compulsion to pursue what is worse, a consciousness of getting things *wrong*. This is an experience with which every artist – even the greatest – must be familiar: to know what is better; to know what one approves and admires; and yet with every word, every brushstroke, every stitch, to watch oneself do worse. If artists were unwilling to put themselves under this necessity, there would scarcely be any art.

Although this condition may apply to all art, the paradox is more poignant in the case of the verbal arts, because there is no physical medium intervening between the perception of what is better and its pursuit; criticism and literature both take place in language. Moreover, all writers are in some sense critics first: we begin early on to recognize what we like or don't like in a story, a song, a nursery rhyme. And yet this consciousness, or even the ability to articulate what you find better or worse in a work of literature, does not prevent you from writing a story or a line of poetry that you feel to be all wrong. Just because you can say what you like, in other words, doesn't mean that you will like what you say. This limitation applies even to so precociously confident a poet as Tennyson, who recalled that "At about twelve and onward I wrote an epic of six thousand lines.... I never felt myself more truly inspired."^v Yet Tennyson too was a critic first: the earliest surviving piece of his writing is a letter to his aunt containing an extended commentary upon the beauties and faults of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.^{vi} The choice of text seems uncannily prescient, because Milton's Samson is one of the great exemplars in English poetry of *deteriora sequor*. Three times Dalila asks Samson to reveal the secret of his strength; three times he gives a false answer, and each time she

openly and undisguisedly tries to use it to betray him; and yet the fourth time – not deceived, but clearly perceiving how mistaken he is even as he does it – Samson reveals his secret and is undone. Many years later Tennyson would revisit the Samson plot in “Merlin and Vivien”: Merlin too sees precisely how he will betray himself, yet does it anyway.^{vii}

Tennyson was not the first to recognize avowed failure or mistake as an essential aspect of poetic creation. Percy Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry,” for instance, describes composition as the inevitably doomed and insufficient attempt to recapture an original flash of inspiration.^{viii} But whereas in Shelley the force of inspiration is wholly positive, and failure begins only with our conscious attempts at transcription, in Tennyson’s model inspiration itself can be a “curse,” as often compelling poets to write worse than their critical judgment would allow as to write better (just as rhyme can force a poet into both unexpected insights and unwonted infelicities). This simultaneity distinguishes Tennyson’s conception likewise from the common wisdom that poetry is produced by a succession of inspiration and reflection, flights of pure fancy modified by subsequent revision of faults and weaknesses.^{ix} In Tennyson’s view, recognition of one’s mistakes comes not in retrospect but at the moment they are committed – or even in prospect. Hence, in the crucial final simile of “The Lady of Shalott,” the heroine is said to be “Like some bold seer in a trance, / Seeing all his own mischance” (ll. 128-129). The Lady, in other words, resembles Merlin: she is at once clairvoyant and helpless. It is a condition that Tennyson himself knew well. Throughout his career, Tennyson was painfully conscious of the myriad faults he perceived in his own poetry, and many of his comments show that he was dissatisfied with his poems even as he produced them. “Don’t abuse

my book,” he wrote just as his 1842 collection was being published; “you can’t hate it more than I do.”^x And yet he wrote on.

My reading of “The Lady of Shalott,” then, sees the Lady as a poet figure, but I join a number of other critics in reversing the usual allegory. When the Lady leaves her loom to put herself under the curse, she is not renouncing her life as an artist, but becoming an artist.^{xi} She is abandoning the repetitious, perfectible craft of weaving and instead wilfully entering a state in which she cannot assert her will – in which, crucially, she sees all her own mistakes and yet commits them anyway. There are several significant consequences to reading the poem in this way. The first concerns the question of Tennyson’s revisions. It has generally been understood that Tennyson’s hypersensitivity to criticism led him first to delay publication of his early poems and then to revise them extensively in response to negative comments from reviewers.^{xii} No doubt Tennyson was acutely conscious of his audience: the response of a possibly uncomprehending public is figured in “The Lady of Shalott” both in the reapers and in the knights of Camelot at the end. (I return to the latter at the conclusion of this essay.) But as Christopher Ricks notes, “The matter of Tennyson’s alleged deference to reviewers is intricate,” since “Tennyson’s own dissatisfactions complicate the issue.”^{xiii} No reviewer was as severe on Tennyson’s early poems as he was himself, and “The Lady of Shalott” illustrates this self-criticism. Unlike such earlier productions as “The Poet” and “The Poet’s Mind” – those “grandiloquent cheer-leadings for poetry” as Ricks calls them (Ricks, p. 47) – “The Lady of Shalott” shows the poet coming before the public fully conscious of how much is amiss. It thus discourages the too easy assumption that Tennyson’s poetic misgivings were dictated by outside opinion.

A second and larger significance of this reading concerns Tennyson's place in contemporary debates about the nature of free will. In their analysis of "The Lady of Shalott," Zelda and Julian Boyd find that the poem's linguistic features reflect a broader tendency in Tennyson, who "can only act when he sees his doings as the fulfillment of a Will not his own."^{xiv} This assessment aligns Tennyson firmly with the mainstream of Victorian thinking on the subject of will, as described by John R. Reed: "Free will in the nineteenth century may be defined as man's capacity to put himself at one with some transcendent law."^{xv} But "The Lady of Shalott" depicts art as almost a parody of this ideal: the Lady submits her will, not to a "transcendent law," but to a curse. She demonstrates admirable willpower in breaking through the inertia of her original state, but she exerts it towards a consciously imperfect aim. As Matthew Campbell, in his study of will in Victorian poetry, remarks, "Actions performed against one's better judgement may be carried out with strength of purpose and will."^{xvi} It is important to recognize just how often the actions of Tennyson's poems fit this description – how often they illustrate the poetic dilemma of deliberately pursuing the worse.

In what follows I begin by considering the paradox of conscious error, examining its role in a number of Tennyson's early poems. I then look at Tennyson's three major re-envisionings of "The Lady of Shalott," which demonstrate his continuing fascination with this paradox as an essential element of artistic creation. The first rewriting occurred when Tennyson significantly revised "The Lady of Shalott" for republication in 1842. The revisions blur the distinctions between Shalott and Camelot and so reinforce the sense that the Lady remains an artist when she submits to the curse and quits her tower. The next two rewritings of the story both come in the 1859 volume, *Idylls of the King*.

This, the earliest version of Tennyson's great work, contains four episodes, the middle two of which, "Vivien" and "Elaine," both revisit the story of the Lady of Shalott; in the completed *Idylls*, the same two poems, now retitled "Merlin and Vivien" and "Lancelot and Elaine," remain together at the center of the poem. "Merlin and Vivien" picks up the image of the "bold seër . . . seeing all his own mischance" from "The Lady of Shalott" and makes him the principal figure of the story. In doing so, the idyll draws out the central action of the earlier poem, the conscious bringing on of the curse, to almost unbearable length. What in "The Lady of Shalott" might seem a momentary impulse is shown in "Merlin and Vivien" in extreme slow motion as a disastrously deliberate submission. "Lancelot and Elaine," meanwhile, elaborates and expands the basic plot of "The Lady of Shalott," as Tennyson noted himself.^{xvii} This retelling of the story reinforces once again the lesson of *deteriora sequor*: the central characters clearly see the distress they are causing themselves, yet they carry on. In conclusion I look at one last "rewriting" – an unpublished poem in which Tennyson closely echoes the conclusion of "The Lady of Shalott" – in order to recall that not all poetic consciousness is consciousness of error. Far more often Tennyson was able to recognize that he had found the words he wanted.

I have said that the paradox of conscious error at the heart of "The Lady of Shalott" is powerful because it is familiar to us from art; but it is worth noting that the paradox pertains just as strongly to the poem's other great subject, love. One can know precisely what one needs and wants in a lover, and yet such knowledge does not prevent one from pursuing someone who has none of these qualities. To say that the Lady makes an error in fixating upon Lancelot is not to disparage Lancelot himself, about whom we

know little. Nor is it to suggest that the Lady ought to have stayed forever at her loom: as I note below, she seems to be equally cursed if she stays her weaving or if she stays *at* it. But if the Lady's hope in breaking away from her loom is to escape the companionship of mere images ("I am half sick of shadows," l. 71), then we can say with assurance that Lancelot is precisely the wrong choice of love-object. As Tucker points out, "Lancelot is no presence, but pure representation: a man of mirrors, a signifier as hollow as the song he sings" (Tucker, p. 112).

The Lady shares her predicament with other Tennyson heroines of the 1830s, who usually have more ample time for consideration than she does and yet act in the same fashion. Mariana for instance recognizes explicitly, not only that her lover cometh not, but that "He will not come" ("Mariana," l. 82); nonetheless, she continues to wait for him. Similarly, Oenone is able to offer perfectly sage advice when she tells Paris which goddess he should choose as the fairest: "Paris pondered, and I cried, 'O Paris, / Give [the apple] to Pallas!'" ("Oenone," ll. 165-166). Yet she herself chooses as unworthily as he, reserving her affection for the very man whose betrayal of her she has just witnessed. At the conclusion of the poem Oenone goes to seek out Cassandra, and her choice of companion is apt; just as foresight is of no benefit to the latter, so her own better knowledge cannot help the former. To draw another Miltonic parallel: Paris' choice resembles the fall of Eve, a giving-in to instant temptation, ambition, and desire (although Paris hands the fruit over, rather than receiving it).^{xviii} Oenone's poor decision, by contrast, resembles the fall of Adam – a conscious, deliberate, undeceived pursuit of what one knows to be inferior.

This predicament is less familiar as an aspect of poetry than of love but perhaps even more essential. It is represented most explicitly, as I have mentioned, in Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters." If the poem had depicted Ulysses' mariners as simply succumbing to temptation – to a life of pleasure on an island more perfect than their own – it would have lacked the tension that makes it so powerful. As it stands, however, the mariners must work hard to convince themselves and each other to remain in the land of the lotos; to give themselves up to idleness requires an act of will. This is clear from the moment in the poem when the idea of permanently abjuring responsibility is first put forth.

Then some one said, 'We will return no more;'
 And all at once they sang, 'Our island home
 Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam.'

(ll. 43-45)

"All at once" carries the double sense of "suddenly" and "in unison," and both meanings are paradoxical. Having become nearly catatonic in the previous stanzas, the mariners suddenly perk up at the idea that their lassitude might be permanent. Likewise, they embrace the prospect of being able to care each man for himself, rather than working towards the common good, and yet they express this egoism by beginning to chant all together. The whole rest of the poem consists of their "Choric Song," which we must imagine them to be somehow extemporizing in unison. But the paradox of choosing to improvise collectively is appropriate not only to lotos-eating, but to Tennyson's very conception of "song" or poetic composition. Both imply a relinquishing of the individual will; and yet such relinquishing itself requires a forceful act of volition, since the power to which one is submitting is known to be imperfect.

Hence as the Choric Song progresses, its rhythms move from utter languor to vigorous determination, until by the end the meter has settled into a regular drumbeat.

The final change of rhythm is introduced in the following lines:

We have had enough of action, and of motion we,
 Rolled to starboard, rolled to larboard, where the surge was seething free,
 Where the wallowing monster spouted his foam-fountains in the sea.
 Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,
 In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined
 On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.

(ll. 150-155)

The notion of men binding themselves by oath to relinquish responsibility resembles the paradox of people joining together to extemporize. But the sense of conscious commitment is necessary, because living in Lotos-land, like extemporizing – and like all composition, in Tennyson’s view – requires that one be knowingly “careless.” The state to which the mariners aspire is one of fault, not default. It needs willpower to begin, because one is committing oneself to being as mistaken as the Lucretian gods that the poem goes on to describe.

It is notable that “Oenone” and “The Lotos-Eaters,” originally published in 1832, were both heavily revised for their republication ten years later. The final section of the latter, for instance, was entirely rewritten: the lines I have just quoted, and the strident rhythm they introduce, were new in 1842. Tennyson was not in this case responding to reviewers’ criticisms – appropriately, since the passage vows to ignore the cries and complaints of humankind – but only to his own sense of what was wrong or wanting in

the poem. There is nothing unusual in a poet's revising his or her work, of course, but it seems particularly apt that these two and "The Lady of Shalott" should be the poems Tennyson rewrote most extensively for the new volume, since they are all concerned with conscious error. Of the three "The Lady of Shalott" was the most drastically revised. The original version emphasizes, even more than the final one, the clear-sightedness with which the Lady recognizes her own "mischance" in Part IV. A passage omitted in 1842 describes how deliberately she repeats the forbidden action of looking down to Camelot:

Her wide eyes fixed on Camelot,
 Though the squally eastwind keenly
 Blew, with folded arms serenely
 By the water stood the queenly
 Lady of Shalott.

The ensuing stanza then continues the imagery of open-eyed determination: "With a steady, stony glance"; this was revised in 1842 to "And down the river's dim expanse."

The final version of the poem still preserves a strong sense both of the Lady's deliberateness and of her self-awareness. But it softens some of the hard edges and stark contrasts of the earlier version: in 1832 the Lady's "smooth face sharpened slowly" in death; in 1842, by contrast, "her blood was frozen slowly." The removal of such harsh imagery as the Lady's sharpened features and stony stare reduces the bitter ironies of the poem's original ending and thus helps efface any strict dichotomy between inner and outer worlds. Tennyson is reputed to have said that the Lady moves "out of the region of shadows into that of realities," but this already doubtful gloss could apply only to the first version; the 1842 version refuses such easy distinctions.^{xix} Its most significant alteration,

as a number of critics have noted, regards the phrasing of the curse. In the original version there is no doubt as to what the Lady must not do – “A curse is on her if she stay / Her weaving, either night or day.” In 1842, by contrast, the curse is perfectly ambiguous: “A curse is on her if she stay / To look down to Camelot” (ll. 40-41). As W. David Shaw asks, “Does ‘stay’ mean ‘remain’ or ‘refrain from’?”^{xx} The Lady seems to be cursed whether she goes or stays, whether she stops to look or delays her look. The moral equivalence suggested by the newly ambivalent phrasing precludes a simplistic “shadow vs. reality” reading. Instead, we are presented with two equally shadowy aesthetic worlds: the one within the tower, where the Lady practices her secure but purely mimetic craft; and the world of Camelot and Lancelot – shadowy too, but in a far more brilliant and dangerous way. The 1842 version thus encourages us to read the outside world as representing, not “reality,” but a higher form of artistic creation, which with all its attendant risks and conscious errors the Lady nevertheless chooses over the safe and secondary exercises she has hitherto preferred. It is no accident that only after she has made this choice does her song develop from “echoes” (l. 30) into something more fully realized, a “carol, mournful, holy, / Chanted loudly” (ll. 145-146) – even if it is her swansong.^{xxi}

The 1842 revisions downplay the defiant perversity of the Lady’s choice, therefore, in order to emphasize that the choice is in fact an aesthetic one. But Tennyson’s return to the same story in “Merlin and Vivien” (1859) draws out the moment of choice to much greater length, thus rendering it far more self-conscious, and more obviously paradoxical, than in the earlier poem. What in “The Lady of Shalott” occupies a stanza or two – her nearly simultaneous perception of Lancelot and deliberate

capitulation to the curse – forms the whole substance of the later idyll. Even without the extra time for reflection and debate, Merlin’s decision is more baffling than the Lady’s.

He is a wizard, after all, and apparently capable of seeing some way into the future.

Asked by Vivien why he has abruptly left Arthur’s court,

Merlin locked his hand in hers and said:

‘O did ye never lie upon the shore,

And watch the curled white of the coming wave

Glassed in the slippery sand before it breaks?

Even such a wave, but not so pleasurable,

Dark in the glass of some presageful mood,

Had I for three days seen, ready to fall.’

(ll. 288-294)

Merlin’s flight away from Camelot reverses the direction of the Lady’s, but his language in this passage, the imagery of waves and shadowy reflections, distinctly recalls the earlier poem. Even more strikingly, Merlin’s response to his sense of impending doom, like the Lady’s, is to climb into a vessel – Merlin “found a little boat, and stept into it” (l. 196) – and to give himself up to the will of the elements.

The wave that Merlin describes in his speech is merely metaphorical.

Nevertheless, the perfect illogic that the imagery suggests – Merlin foresees a storm and therefore puts out to sea in an undersized boat – typifies his behavior. Even more explicitly than the Lady, Merlin determines what the worst possible course of action would be, then performs it. The choice that faces him in “Merlin and Vivien” concerns whether or not to entrust Vivien with a powerful “charm,” a spell performed “With

woven paces and with waving arms” that leaves its victim apparently “Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower” (ll. 203-207). The language in which the charm is described once again deliberately recalls “The Lady of Shalott” – not only the “tower” with its “four walls,” but the weaving, the pacing, and even the waving (“who has seen her wave her hand?”). The spell is obviously dangerous – Merlin, in another reminiscence of the Lady, calls it a “cursèd charm” (l. 433) – and Merlin therefore refuses at first to reveal it. For several hundred lines Vivien plies him with flattery and sexual temptations, and he seems at times to soften, but still keeps silent. Frustrated, she grows spiteful, and Merlin then clearly sees through all her earlier blandishments, muttering, “I will not let her know” (l. 821). And yet despite this resolution, which is followed by no less than a thunderbolt from heaven as a sign of Vivien’s intent to betray him, Merlin acts in total defiance of his better knowledge and betrays himself.

“Merlin and Vivien” thus greatly expands the paradox of conscious error found in “The Lady of Shalott.” The paradox seems to pertain more to love than to poetic composition in this case, although there are hints of the latter as well. Merlin the wizard “Was also Bard,” we are told, and Vivien confirms the title, calling him “Her seer, her bard, her silver star of eve” (ll. 167, 952). His error, moreover, involves a “charm” – etymologically a *carmen*, or song.^{xxii} The association grows stronger, however, in the next episode in *Idylls of the King*, “Lancelot and Elaine.” This episode is self-evidently another version of “The Lady of Shalott”: both works draw upon the same traditional Arthurian material, although Tennyson claimed to have been unaware of the full version of the Elaine legend when he composed the earlier poem. In any case, “Lancelot and

Elaine” makes no attempt to hide its filiations with “The Lady of Shalott,” which are obvious from the opening lines.

Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable,
 Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat,
 High in her chamber up a tower to the east
 Guarded the sacred shield of Lancelot.

(ll. 1-4)

The lily and the tower reappear from the opening stanzas of the earlier poem, while the repetition of Elaine’s name allows her to appear as “fair Elaine ... of Astolat,” echoing the “fairy Lady of Shalott” invoked by the reapers at the end of Part I. As before, Lancelot is introduced together with his emblematic shield. Even the key word “loveable,” hanging unfulfilled at the end of the first line, seems to pick up phonetically the “Long fields of barley” that occupy the same syllabic position in the earlier work. The deliberate echoes return at the end of the idyll, after Elaine floats into Camelot, when Lancelot “mused at her” (l. 1260), just as he “mused a little space” at the Lady of Shalott.

“Muse” has a particularly ironic ring here, because although Lancelot speaks more, and more articulately, in the idyll than in “The Lady of Shalott,” he would not claim that his speech is inspired. To the contrary, he is acutely conscious of the insufficiency of the words he speaks, even as he pronounces them. Just before Elaine’s appearance, as he presents the “nine-years-fought-for diamonds” to the queen, Lancelot clumsily asks her to receive them as

An armlet for the roundest arm on earth,
 Or necklace for a neck to which the swan’s

Is tawnier than the cygnet's: these are words:

Your beauty is your beauty, and I sin

In speaking, yet O grant my worship of it

Words, as we grant grief tears. Such sin in words

Perchance, we both can pardon.

(ll. 1160, 1176-1182)

Lancelot's errant words are all the more surprising since, as Tennyson is at pains to remind us, he has had nearly a decade to prepare them. Establishing a series of annual jousts for the diamonds, Arthur claims that they will serve as a "nine years' proof" of might and true worthiness (l. 62). The time-period is deliberately chosen: nine years is the length of time the Lady of the Lake spent fashioning Excalibur, according to the "Morte d'Arthur." It is also, as Robert Douglas-Fairhurst reminds us, the length of time that Horace in his *Ars Poetica* recommends that one should leave a poem alone before publishing, as a "proof" (to use Arthur's appropriately textual terminology) of its worth.^{xxiii} The diamonds and the words that accompany them are thus associated: both have been long-prepared and hard won. But all of the time and self-reflection in the world cannot help Lancelot make his speech effective; his delay may be Horatian, but his words, as he himself feels, are flaccid. They only seem to make things worse: Guinevere turns his flattery around, calling the diamonds "An armlet for an arm [i.e. Elaine's] to which the Queen's / Is haggard, or a necklace for a neck / O as much fairer" (ll. 1219-1221). In a gesture reminiscent of the Lady's, she seizes the diamonds and, ruining the work of years in a moment, turns and tosses them out the window into the river.

Almost immediately the diamonds seem to transform, like magic beans, into Elaine: “right across / Where these had fallen, slowly past the barge / Whereon the lily maid of Astolat / Lay smiling, like a star in blackest night” (ll. 1232-1235). Elaine, like the diamonds, has been increasingly associated with words that come admittedly too late. At the beginning of the poem she contents herself with the imitative and functional art of embroidering a protective case for Lancelot’s shield. But after Lancelot leaves her without a farewell and she submits to the inevitability of her disappointment, Elaine changes her occupation; the case seems like “poor work” to her now, and she begins instead to sing her plaintive “Song of Love and Death” (ll. 984, 998). As she sings, her very appearance becomes textualized:

As when we dwell upon a word we know,
 Repeating, till the word we know so well
 Becomes a wonder, and we know not why,
 So dwelt the father on her face, and thought
 ‘Is this Elaine?’

(ll. 1020-1024)

The simile is particularly apt, since all of Elaine’s remaining words and gestures are both familiar and strangely empty. The Lady of Shalott followed Lancelot down the river and died in her pursuit; Elaine, in a more consciously futile (and self-consciously aesthetic) gesture, decrees that she will float down to Camelot only after she has died. Similarly, the parchment that the Lady bore with her in the 1832 version served at least an identificatory purpose. But Elaine already knows Lancelot all too well, and her letter therefore acknowledges its own belated inadequacy: “I loved you, and my love had no

return, / And therefore my true love has been my death” (ll. 1268-1269). Elaine’s appearance makes both Lancelot and Guinevere realize that, like her, they have consciously bound themselves to a love that can only go wrong – “love’s curse,” as Lancelot calls it, introducing that key word once again (l. 1342). So it is, and poetry’s too. But if Elaine had not committed herself, like the Lady, to entering such a curse, she had never writ, nor no man ever loved.

When the Lady floats into Camelot at the conclusion of the 1832 version of “The Lady of Shalott,” she is greeted with incomprehension.

They crossed themselves, their stars they blest,

Knight, minstrel, abbot, squire and guest.

There lay a parchment on her breast,

That puzzled more than all the rest,

The wellfed wits at Camelot.

The lines could be taken as evidence of Tennyson’s anxiety concerning the reception of his poem. If so, his fears were partly justified: John Stuart Mill, in an otherwise wholly positive review, called this final stanza “a ‘lame and impotent conclusion,’ where no conclusion was required.”^{xxiv} Yet Tennyson showed no resentment; to the contrary, when he rewrote the final stanza for 1842, he toned down the sarcasm directed at the audience.

Who is this? and what is here?

And in the lighted palace near

Died the sound of royal cheer;

And they crossed themselves for fear,

All the knights at Camelot;
 But Lancelot mused a little space;
 He said, 'She has a lovely face;
 God in his mercy lend her grace,
 The Lady of Shalott.'

(ll. 163-171)

In keeping with the other 1842 revisions, the new stanza softens the harsh ironies and contrasts of the original version. The irony that remains is a mournful situational irony, as Lancelot at last returns the Lady's appreciative gaze, but too late.

Critical opinion concerning Lancelot's response is divided. A small majority of critics considers his words to be culpably superficial and reductive, while a dissenting minority defends his speech as being, under the circumstances, as sensitively reflective as could be expected.^{xxv} I concur rather with the latter opinion, all the more because there occurs an important echo of Lancelot's words in a later poem of Tennyson's. In 1851 Alfred and Emily Tennyson's first child, a son, was stillborn. Tennyson wrote, but did not publish, a short poem on the occasion, "Little bosom not yet cold," which concludes with these lines:

Whate'er thou wert, whate'er thou art,
 Whose life was ended ere thy breath begun,
 Thou nine-months neighbour of my dear one's heart,
 And howsoe'er thou liest blind and mute,
 Thou lookest bold and resolute,
 God bless thee dearest son.

(ll. 8-13)

Tennyson finds himself in the unexpected position of addressing a stranger who is not wholly a stranger, whom he encounters, after much expectation, only when it is too late. His final two lines adhere almost exactly to Lancelot's formula. He praises the child's appearance – the only aspect of the stranger to which he has access – and then, like Lancelot, follows with a blessing and a concluding address (“dearest son”). There is no reason to think that Tennyson was conscious of the parallel. But the echo nevertheless suggests that Tennyson was not inclined to be critical of Lancelot's closing words. To the contrary, he seems to imply that, on this occasion at least, he got it right.

ⁱ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 7.20-21.

ⁱⁱ Lines 109-113. All quotations from Tennyson's poetry refer to *The Poems of Tennyson*, 2nd edn., ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987).

ⁱⁱⁱ Herbert F. Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), p. 114.

^{iv} On the traditional reading of "The Lady of Shalott" as an allegory of the conflict between art and reality, see below, note 11. More recent, more self-conscious allegorizations have made use of the poem to describe the workings and developments of Tennyson's poetry, and of Victorian poetry more generally; see Gerhard Joseph, *Tennyson and the Text: The Weaver's Shuttle* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 102-123, and Kathy Alexis Psomiades, "'The Lady of Shalott' and the Critical Fortunes of Victorian Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 25-45. On the complex place of agency in Tennyson's poetry – what Joseph calls the "hovering state between the fatality of suffering victim and the agency of the striving, seeking, unyielding hero" (p. 172) – see William Brashear, *The Living Will: A Study of Tennyson and Nineteenth-Century Subjectivism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969).

^v Hallam, Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 1:12; hereafter cited as *Memoir*.

^{vi} The letter is reprinted in *Memoir* 1:7-9, and in *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982-1990), 1: 1-2 (hereafter cited as *Letters*).

^{vii} See my *Milton and the Victorians* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2009), pp. xxx-xxx.

^{viii} In Shelley's famous simile: "[T]he mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to a transitory brightness: ... but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet"; see David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers*, 2nd edn. (New York: Heinle and Heinle, 1995), pp. 1143-1144.

^{ix} Wordsworth implies such a model in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continual influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts" (Perkins, *English Romantic Writers*, p. 425). Tennyson's model of composition is closer to Keats's Negative Capability – "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (*ibid.*, p. 1276). The Lady, however, is in no doubt: she clearly sees her own missteps.

^x To Edward FitzGerald, early July, 1842 (*Letters* 1:204). The comments are not merely defensive: although FitzGerald was often critical of Tennyson's work later in life, in 1842 he was at the height of his enthusiasm for Tennyson's poetry and was one of those who, in Tennyson's words, had "continually urged [him] to publish" in spite of his doubts (1:204). A few weeks later, responding to a letter from an admirer of his new book, Tennyson wrote almost ungraciously, "The admiration which you profess for my volumes must seem to me in some measure misplaced. I can seldom open them without

feeling hatred of their imperfections” (1:207). See also his similar comments on the publication of *The Princess*, in *Letters* 1:281-282.

^{xi} The notion that the Lady leaves the realm of art to enter the contrasting realm of the real world forms the basis of many readings of the poem, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing strong through the twentieth. See for instance Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 49-50; Clyde de L. Ryals, *Theme and Symbol in Tennyson's Poems to 1850* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), pp. 72-76; Gerhard Joseph, *Tennysonian Love: The Strange Diagonal* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1969), pp. 48-50; Alastair W. Thomson, *The Poetry of Tennyson* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 41-44; Daniel Albright, *Tennyson: The Muses' Tug-of-War* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1986), pp. 30-32. Major challenges to this notion, which read Camelot as representing instead another (and higher) realm of art or imagination, include James L. Hill, “Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’: The Ambiguity of Commitment,” *Centennial Review* 12 (1968): 415-429; Flavia M. Alaya, “Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’: The Triumph of Art,” *VP* 8 (1970): 273-289; A. Dwight Culler, *The Poetry of Tennyson* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 44-49; and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., “Poetry as Vision: Sight and Insight in ‘The Lady of Shalott’,” *VP* 19 (1981): 207-223. All of the latter, however, read the Lady’s act as transcendent; none considers her choice of the curse as representing a conscious pursuit of something worse, as well as better.

^{xii} On Tennyson’s critics and their effect upon his poetry, see Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., *Tennyson and the Reviewers* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952).

^{xiii} Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 65n.

^{xiv} Zelda Boyd and Julian Boyd, "To Lose the Name of Action: The Semantics of Action and Motion in Tennyson's Poetry," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 2 (1977): 27.

^{xv} John R. Reed, *Victorian Will* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1989), p. 197. The notion was venerable and widespread; as Tennyson succinctly puts it in *In Memoriam*, "Our wills are ours, to make them thine" (Prologue, l. 16).

^{xvi} Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), p. 31. For the most part, however, Campbell, like Reed in his excellent chapter on "Romantic to Victorian Poetry" (pp. 164-198), concerns himself with actions that consciously strive for what is better.

^{xvii} See Ricks's headnotes to both poems for Tennyson's comments on their sources. The connection between the two has often been commented on; see especially Constance W. Hassett and James Richardson, "Looking at Elaine: Keats, Tennyson, and the Directions of the Poetic Gaze," in *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 287-303. The relation between "The Lady of Shalott" and "Merlin and Vivien" is much less frequently discussed.

^{xviii} Culler writes that the depiction of Paris' choice in "Oenone" "has echoes of the temptation scenes in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and, indeed, it is less a judgment scene than a temptation. It is a temptation *to* judge, as well as to judge wrong"; *The Poetry of Tennyson*, p. 79.

^{xix} *Memoir* 1:117; but Culler, as Ricks's headnote points out, casts doubt on the attribution of this comment to Tennyson (*The Poetry of Tennyson*, p. 44).

^{xx} W. David Shaw, *Tennyson's Style* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), p. 64. See also Isobel Armstrong, "Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott': Victorian Mythography and the Politics of Narcissism," in *The Sun is God: Painting, Literature and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 49-107.

Armstrong remarks, "If she *pauses* to look out of the window, she brings the curse upon herself. If she *remains*, ... she is equally cursed"; this underlines a condition in which "the opposition between 'real' and 'inner' worlds dissolves" (pp. 59, 63).

^{xxi} In 1832 the Lady's song is explicitly compared to that of "dying swans," who traditionally sing *only* when dying. This reinforces the suggestion that the Lady achieves a true artistic vocation only after she leaves her loom. On the image, see Catherine B. Stevenson, "Tennyson's Dying Swans: Mythology and the Definition of the Poet's Role," *SEL* 20 (1980): 621-635.

^{xxii} It is possible that the "charm / Of woven paces and of waving hands," as it is repeatedly called, is wordless. But Merlin associates it with poetry after he hears Vivien's song: "Vivien, when you sang me that sweet rhyme, / I felt as though you knew this cursèd charm, / Were proving it on me" (ll. 432-434).

^{xxiii} Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), p. 271.

^{xxiv} See John D. Jump, ed., *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 89.

^{xxv} The most vocal disapprovers of Lancelot include James R. Kincaid, *Tennyson's Major Poems: The Comic and Ironic Patterns* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 34-35, and Carl Plasa, "'Cracked from Side to Side': Sexual Politics in 'The Lady of Shalott,'"

VP 30 (1992): 247-263. Lancelot is defended by Alaya, "Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott'," pp. 286-287, and Shannon, "Poetry as Vision," p. 222. For good readings that mediate between the two positions, see Joseph Chadwick, "A Blessing and a Curse: The Poetics of Privacy in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott'," *VP* 24 (1986): 13-30, and Hassett and Richardson, "Looking at Elaine," p. 299.