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Interpretation and Rumor in Tennyson's *Merlin and Vivien*

CATHERINE R. HARLAND

AT A BITTER MOMENT IN *MERLIN AND VIVIEN*, AS THE ARGUMENT CONCERNING the purity of the Round Table intensifies, an anguished Merlin wonders "How, in the mouths of base interpreters" the King's "white blamelessness [can be] accounted blame!" (ll. 793, 797).¹ Merlin's denunciation of Vivien here is especially resonant, for interpretation, base or otherwise, is the fundamental project of the *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson's poem is a myth about the creation and interpretation of myth. In *Merlin and Vivien*, the first-written idyll (composed in the winter of 1856), Tennyson began a dialogue about the possibilities for creation, interpretation, and meaning which would inform the larger poem.

At the center of the *Idylls* Tennyson places the image of a mysterious text, "writ in a language that has long gone by" (l. 672):

O ay, it is but twenty pages long,
But every page having an ample marge,
And every marge enclosing in the midst
A square of text that looks a little blot,
The text no larger than the limbs of fleas. (ll. 666-670)

Every margin is "scribbled, crost, and crammed / With comment" (ll. 675-676). The text can no longer be directly interpreted, and only Merlin can read the "comment." The charm—which has the power to render its victim invisible, silent, and incapable—is written in this marginal gloss. Here Tennyson implicitly evokes his dominant intertext, *Paradise Lost*. The Fall—or radical flaw in human existence—he renders experientially, as linguistic absence, as the separation from absolute meaning. The modern poet and mythmaker can no longer "read" divine purpose face-to-face; he can only try to come to terms with loss.²

Tennyson reinforces this sense of separation through the suggestive refiguration of a kind of *mise-en-abîme* in the idyll: the text-within-a-text of the story of the charm; the figure of a silent and enclosed woman whose situation is echoed at the end of the idyll by Merlin enchanted in the hollow oak; even Vivien's description of how she will gain access to the charm though it be kept "like a puzzle chest in chest, / With each chest locked and padlocked thirty-fold" (ll. 652-653).³ This refiguring of an increasingly recessive text, of an origin-within-an-origin, images Tennyson's conception

of his poetic task. The mysterious text—whatever its indecipherable content—does not really exist in ideal purity except as a memory of loss.⁴ The original flaw or limitation, the ability to see more than we can attain and imagine more than we can realize, implicates all poetry and language. The Fall, the story accounting for the experience of being separated from an original wholeness, is figured as a text whose meaning is inaccessible, and which is interpretable at all only in fragments. But before examining the debate between Merlin and Vivien to see how Tennyson interrogates this crisis of meaning, I wish to clarify two matters: the ways in which the *Idylls* may be seen to enact the process of interpretation, and Tennyson's debt to Virgil.

Merlin and Vivien acutely focuses a process which characterizes the *Idylls* as a whole. Other critics have commented on the poem's elusiveness and indeterminacy: shadow and substance reverse their meanings; figures tend to literalize themselves; repetitive doublings create an elaborate echo chamber.⁵ More specifically, Tennyson may be said to initiate the process of interpretation by including the reader in the act of mythmaking which constitutes the *Coming of Arthur*.⁶ The various versions of Arthur's birth offered by different witnesses allow Tennyson to weave together memory, hearsay, and dream-vision. No single interpretation can reclaim the lost "source"; each reader, like each poet, must generate meaning through complex reconstructive efforts.

Tennyson's desire to explore the implications of Merlin's "riddling triplets" ("And truth is this to me, and that to thee" [*The Coming of Arthur*, l. 406]) continues to drive the poem, as other characters—often with a desire to locate a single cause (or person to blame) for the fall of Camelot—contribute to the myth-in-process. Tristram, for example, in the provocative apologia for his broken vows (*The Last Tournament*, ll. 649-698), argues that in the struggle of spiritual aspiration with the material authority of natural law, human vows, which were once inspired by a transformative vision, will inevitably be broken. This retrospective analysis of the meaning of Camelot is followed by that of the novice, who refashions the story of Camelot's origins into popular folk-tale (*Guinevere*, ll. 229-305). Arthur also fills in more gaps in the idyll (ll. 451-490); Lancelot (*Lancelot and Elaine*, ll. 284-316) and Guinevere (*Guinevere*, ll. 375-408) contribute additional fragments to the communal story.⁷ Through such additions and interpolations Tennyson continually cancels the efforts of his characters (and critics) to discover a single cause for the collapse of the ideal society.⁸ Tennyson's strategy in the poem is simultaneously to dramatize the human need to generate meaning while also fracturing a single interpretation. He unravels as he weaves, and reminds readers, every step of the way, that the end is in the beginning.⁹

Each idyll also enacts reading, misreading, and interpretation. The whole of *Lancelot and Elaine*, for example, turns on the problem of misreading. The “face as text,” as Donald Hair has noted, is a motif in the idyll (p. 154). Lancelot misinterprets Guinevere’s expression—“thinking that he read her meaning” in her eyes (l. 86)—and lies to Arthur in order to stay with her; Elaine interprets Lancelot through his shield, reading a “hidden meaning in his arms,” and later attempts to “read his lineaments” (ll. 17, 243). The figure is finally literalized as King Arthur reads Elaine’s letter to the weeping crowd (ll. 1264-79).¹⁰ Tennyson continues to explore the complexity of perception and interpretation in *The Holy Grail*. His grail has no objective existence but is a hollow sign whose meaning is constructed by characters “according to their sight” (l. 871). What they see is subjectively determined by individual desire, fear, and limitation.

Interpretive activity is thus dramatized throughout the poem. Early in the narrative, Geraint misinterprets Enid’s words that she is “no true wife” (*The Marriage of Geraint*, l. 108); Tennyson then underlines his concern through an authorial interruption about the tendency of a “purblind race of miserable men” who inevitably take “true for false, or false for true” in the fallen world (*Geraint and Enid*, ll. 1-7). Later, Balin’s tragic death hinges upon misinterpreting and misunderstanding. Characters are “read” by means of shields which stand in as symbolic substitutes; dreams are detailed for our interpretation; Tennyson invites us to read the symbolic implications of the “four great zones of sculpture” which gird the hall (*The Holy Grail*, ll. 232-245); the last of the twelve windows that “blazon Arthur’s wars” is provocatively blank (*The Holy Grail*, ll. 251-257); and so on. The point of my rapid summary is merely to draw attention to Tennyson’s emphasis on interpretation as a continuous process in the poem, to his implied recognition that the re-creation of a myth is a communal as well as a private activity, and to his concern with the subjectivity—and fragility—of meaning.

From early in his career, Tennyson was compared to Virgil. With the publication of the first four idylls in 1859, the identification of the two poets became even more commonplace.¹¹ Tennyson’s own reverence for and emulation of Virgil are most clearly recorded in “To Virgil” (1888).¹² To the various intertexts (*Paradise Lost*, *The Faerie Queene*, Malory, the Bible, the Vulgate Merlin) that inform the *Idylls*, we may also add the *Aeneid*. Some readers have noted briefly the technical and thematic debt Tennyson’s poem owes to Virgil’s epic, but the extensive presence of Book 4 of the *Aeneid* in *Merlin and Vivien* has gone unremarked.¹³

First, in an idyll where doublings and reversals are legion, the seduction of Merlin by Vivien appears as a parodic echo of the union of Dido and Aeneas in the cave (4.160-172). Tennyson includes from Virgil the woods, the enclosed space, the storm, a lightning bolt, and even the cries of the

nymphs (“summoque ulularunt vortice Nymphae” [4.168]¹⁴—in Tennyson, the orgasmic “Moaning and calling out of other lands” [l. 960]). Merlin, in this rewriting, resembles a latter-day Aeneas who stays behind in Carthage, “lost to life and use and name and fame” (l. 212), unable to pursue his poetic and national destiny.

More important to the idyll, though, is the passage (4.173-197) following the union of Dido and Aeneas, which introduces the figure of Fama—Rumor—and recounts how she spreads her malicious gossip about the lovers. Vivien, who has been variously interpreted as an avatar of Eve, Satan, Sin, Death, Duessa, Delilah, Lamia, and Lilith,¹⁵ also has a classical antecedent in Virgil’s Fama; indeed she resembles no literary figure more strongly.

Gossip and slander, as Hair rightly observes, contribute greatly to the destruction of Camelot.¹⁶ Vivien, in her role as Rumor, routinely subverts Arthur’s order. She destroys by offering an alternative interpretation of Arthur’s enterprise; more fatally, however, she tells the truth.

Tennyson and Virgil stress similar characteristics of their rumor-mongers. In Virgil’s passage, Fama’s monstrous nature is revealed beneath her feathers:

cui quot sunt corpore plumae,
tot vigiles oculi subter (mirabile dictu),
tot linguae, totidem ora sonant, tot subrigit auris. (4.181-183)¹⁷

Perching like a bird on rooftops, she uses these many eyes and ears to spy on entire cities.¹⁸ Tennyson’s revisions to the idyll in 1874 included the addition of lines 6-146, which emphasize Vivien’s proclivity to espionage.¹⁹ Vivien is described as “Peering askance” (l. 98) through the portal arch at Lancelot and Guinevere, interpreting their relationship as she spies on them. As Fama watches and whispers, flying between earth and heaven (“nocte volat caeli medio terraeque per umbram / stridens” [4.184-185]²⁰), so Vivien “heard, watched / And whispered: through the peaceful court she crept / And whispered” (ll. 136-138).

Virgil also stresses Rumor’s inflammatory nature: “protinus ad regem cursus detorquet Iarban / incenditque animum dictis atque aggerat iras” (4.196-197).²¹ Vivien, too, “recommenced, and let her tongue / Rage like a fire among the noblest names” (ll. 799-800). As Fama gathers strength continually (“Fama, malum qua non aliud velocius ullum: / mobilitate viget virisque acquirit eundo” [4.174-175]²²), so does Vivien. Once Merlin is silenced, the following idyll describes the cumulative power of Rumor: Guinevere sends a disguised Lancelot to the jousts, fearing the “vermin voices” that “buzz so loud” (*Lancelot and Elaine*, ll. 138-139); the tale of Lancelot and Elaine is soon “buzzed abroad” (l. 717) as “all tongues were loosed” (l. 719); the tale “ran . . . like fire” through the court (l. 729);

Lancelot will not let Elaine accompany him for fear of gossip, since the world is “All ear and eye,” and its “stupid heart” and tongue will “blare its own interpretation” (ll. 936-938); Lancelot discusses with Guinevere the power of words for creation and destruction, and urges that a strengthening of their bond is necessary because of “rumours flying through your court” (l. 1183).

Thus Vivien, as Rumor, all eyes and ears and tongue, moves like a fire through the court, destroying by whispers, gaining force as she moves. But while Vivien lies, and especially delights in inverting what is commonly regarded as true (for example, her father dies in battle against/for the King, [*Merlin and Vivien*, ll. 42, 71]), her most insidious characteristic—and the one hardest to combat—is the potent fusion of truth and lies. It is, for example, true that Lancelot and Guinevere are lovers, but less clear that they are ignoble or wanton; it is true that the King seems ignorant of their relationship, but less certain that he is a foolish cuckold (ll. 778-787); it is true that Sir Valence has a child, but less sure where it came from (ll. 702-717); it is true that Sir Sagramore shared a bed with his fiancée, but what happened and why is doubtful (ll. 719-743). This confusion of true and false becomes more pronounced as the kingdom disintegrates.

Virgil suggests that Fama delights in proclaiming truth and lies indiscriminately, fact and fiction together:

tam ficti pravique tenax quam nuntia veri.
haec tum multiplici populos sermone replebat
gaudens, et pariter facta atque infecta canebat. (4.188-190)²³

Commentators on Virgil suggest that this mingling of “facta atque infecta”—literally, things done and not done—is the essence of Fama.²⁴ In view of this definitive attribute of Rumor, the imagery of pollution (as well as that of division, blindness, and silence) which pervades *Merlin and Vivien* takes on a new resonance. With such images as the “pitted speck in garnered fruit” (l. 392) or the “rift within the lute” (l. 388), Tennyson hints at more than sexual corruption. Arthur’s high purpose is broken not only by Vivien as Satanic worm. As “Death in the living waters” (l. 146), Vivien/Fama literally corrupts the purity of Arthur’s word by conflating “facta atque infecta.” Merlin grows “Tolerant of what he half disdained” (l. 176) and soon “half believed her true” (l. 398). Vivien chatters, beseeches, and cajoles while Merlin remains “mute” (ll. 227, 235), overcome by the dark vision which rolls through his brain like a “blind wave feeling round his long sea-hall / In silence” (ll. 230-231).

Several commentators have seen Vivien as figuring an aspect of Tennyson’s poetic identity, and *Merlin and Vivien* as the site of his creative conflict.²⁵ I would now like to extend this perspective, by showing how Tennyson uses the figure of Vivien/Fama to enact his vision of Camelot’s

simultaneous creation and destruction. Tennyson's basic strategies here are parody and reversal: as Merlin weaves one version of Camelot, Vivien unravels it with a counter-interpretation. The poet remarks that she "leavens" the world (l. 139). Her alternative story or version of Camelot—materialist, natural, "base"—is the inevitable and necessary "other side" in Tennyson's organic perspective. Through Vivien, as Fama, Tennyson dramatizes the transition from "pure" private imaginative vision to a communal view in which "every minstrel sings it differently" and the story lives "dispersedly in many hands" (ll. 455-456).²⁶ One might see this transition as the moment of the linguistic fall the idyll recapitulates.

In an idyll characterized by linguistic duplicity, double entendre, paradox, and parody, Vivien and Merlin debate many matters—the nature of poetry ("tender rhyme" or "noble song" [ll. 381, 431]), men and women and their relationship to love and fame, the magic charm and how the Queen in Merlin's story came to be imprisoned by it; finally they discuss the Round Table, which Tennyson identifies as "an image of the mighty world" (*The Passing of Arthur*, l. 403). I wish to focus on this last topic of their verbal battle, for it is here that Tennyson most directly demonstrates the inevitable intermingling of truth and fiction, the elusive and slippery character of language, and the difficulty of containing Rumor.

Vivien interprets the Round Table to a Merlin "careless of her words" (l. 698). Believing her to be motivated by a desire for revenge against the knights—"ye dream they babble of you" (l. 688)—he discounts her view. She proceeds hierarchically, initiating her perspective with an analysis of the apparent sexual transgressions of three knights (Sir Valence, Sir Sagamore, Sir Percivale). She next attacks Lancelot and Guinevere, and lastly the King. This procedure generates interpretations increasingly difficult to refute, and exposes the vulnerability of the King's authority. The question relating to Sir Valence is whether or not his child is a bastard (ll. 702-717). This "tale" Merlin appears to correct by reference to empirical fact: "He brought, not found" the child; "take the truth" (l. 717). The next issue, whether or not Sir Sagamore slept with his bride before the wedding (ll. 718-743), suggests that Vivien has the facts right this time, but has misread their implications (they did share a bed, but remained, according to Merlin, "stainless man beside a stainless maid" [l. 735]). To oppose the next story, of Sir Percivale, however, who is rumored to have had sexual relations with "one of Satan's shepherdesses" (l. 756), Merlin is unable to adduce fact but must appeal to his faith in Percivale's whole character: "that he sinned is not believable; / For, look upon his face!" (ll. 758-759). Percivale's countenance and character appear unchanged. Merlin's responses to Vivien's empiricism thus enact an increasing reliance on believing where he cannot prove.

Vivien then turns her attention to Lancelot: "Traitor or true? that commerce with the Queen" is "clamoured by the child, / Or whispered in the corner" (ll. 768-770). Merlin must admit that in this instance Vivien's charge of sexual misconduct is "true," but even here he tries to deflect judgment from Lancelot and Guinevere by setting their relationship in its historical context: when she first saw him, "A rumour runs, she took him for the King" (l. 774). What is fact? What is fiction? Merlin's final appeal—"let them be. / But have ye no one word of loyal praise / For Arthur, blameless King and stainless man?" (ll. 775-777)—provokes Vivien's most subversive interpretation: is he a man at all who blindly refuses to see the sexual hypocrisy all around him? Arthur is, she cries, the "main cause of all their crime," though "crowned King, coward, and fool" (ll. 786, 787). This attack on the King calls forth Merlin's angry declaration that Vivien is a "base interpreter." To read the King's "white blamelessness" as its opposite, as "blame," to question his purity and absolute authority, is for Merlin excremental harlotry: Vivien's every sense is "false and foul / As the poached filth that floods the middle street" (ll. 795-796). Harlots, "like the crowd," level all nuance to "an equal baseness" (ll. 829, 828).

Merlin's own interpretation appears as a final comment on Vivien's: the knights are "All brave, and many generous, and some chaste" (l. 815). While this assessment seems temperate and just, the increasingly concessive adjectives ("all," "many," "some") also indicate the inevitability of Vivien, whose inquisition is echoed in a later idyll by a mad and disillusioned Pelleas:

"Is the Queen false?" and Percivale was mute.
 "Have any of our Round Table held their vows?"
 And Percivale made answer not a word.
 "Is the King true?" "The King!" said Percivale.
 "Why then let men couple at once with wolves.
 What! art thou mad?" (*Pelleas and Ettarre*, ll. 522-527)

Vivien, later Pelleas, and finally Tristram assume that if the troops are corrupt, the question must arise whether the general is too. Yet Percivale's response is the same as Merlin's. The attack on the King, the questioning of the sacred, transcendent being who confers meaning, is the most dangerous and frightening of blasphemies.

Tennyson's ambivalence concerning Vivien is as apparent in his presentation of her view of "the mighty world" as it is elsewhere. Her counter-interpretation of the Round Table allows him to interrogate the claims of the fallen, "base" world of sexuality and desire. Hierarchy and authority are increasingly vulnerable as the story of the "truth" is dispersed into many hands and the belief in the Unseen is slowly devoured by the demands of Nature.²⁷ Tennyson implies that while Vivien may be one of those "other

minds" who will follow Arthur's passing, though she may find her truth at the "bottom of the well" (*Merlin and Vivien*, l. 47), her interpretation of Camelot is never simply false. In essence, Vivien argues that human beings are fundamentally flawed ("There is no being pure, / My cherub; saith not Holy Writ the same?" [ll. 51-52]), that the Round Table is corrupt, that vows are broken daily, that Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship is not courtly love but human passion, and that the King is a man, subject, like other men, to error. Tennyson foregrounds Vivien's perspective, and through her calls attention to the continually shifting relationship of sign and substance, word and action.

Tennyson complicates matters further by what appears to be a conscious emphasis on gender in the poem. Vivien wants power, the power of the Word, access to the domain of "magic" language. In various ways in the *Idylls*, Tennyson metaphorically constructs language as phallogocentric. In *Pelleas and Ettarre*, for example, he conflates tongue, sword, and manhood. Pelleas, in losing his belief in an ideal, loses all three: unhorsed by Lancelot, he cries, "'Thou art false as Hell: slay me: I have no sword.' / Then Lancelot, 'Yea, between thy lips—and sharp'" (ll. 564-565). Later, when Guinevere urges an anguished Pelleas to "loose thy tongue" and let her know his grief, he hisses, as explanation for his silent rage, "I have no sword" (ll. 588, 590).

For her part, Vivien suggests that gender prevents her from the free expression of what she knows about the Round Table. She insists on her own ability to interpret without Merlin's help: "Take Vivien for expounder" (*Merlin and Vivien*, l. 317). Only feminine decorum inhibits her: "Were I not woman, I could tell a tale" (l. 694); "were it not for womanhood" (l. 784), she would name the King a cuckold. A woman, she argues, is censured for plainly interpreting Camelot's hypocrisy, although the knights themselves, as Percivale later observes to Pelleas, are a "free-spoken Table" and prone to gossip (*Pelleas and Ettarre*, l. 516). Vivien thus figures interpretation as an aggressive and phallic act: she will "dig, pick, open, find and read the charm" (*Merlin and Vivien*, l. 658), no matter how deeply buried in locked caskets. Her response to Merlin's mistrust reiterates the image of phallic sword: Vivien claims she is "'Stabbed through the heart's affections to the heart!'" and is "Killed with a word worse than a life of blows!" (ll. 866, 868). Finally, the phallogocentric perspective Pelleas will articulate is reified in the idyll by the image of Vivien groping down her side to her belt, looking vainly for a dagger with which to stab Merlin. She "found it not" (l. 851). Without a phallus, she cannot "tell a tale"; she remains excluded from the powerful charm of language.

If Merlin and Vivien embody conflicting aspects of Tennyson's poetic identity, his treatment of both is similarly ambivalent. Both demonstrate the problematic relationship of language and gender, Vivien by emphasizing

her exclusion from the magic word, and Merlin through an overt misogyny that hastens his fall. Vivien's protean potential appears to be quickened by Merlin's casual stereotyping. In the course of the idyll he sees her as a playful kitten, as Eve, as actress, gossip, and whore. He assumes that she is, because a woman, ignorant, jealous, and fickle. Merlin's attitudes are summed up in his angry exclamation that "men at most differ as Heaven and earth, / But women, worst and best, as Heaven and Hell" (ll. 812-813), and that "harlots paint their talk as well as face / With colours of the heart that are not theirs" (ll. 819-820). Tennyson implies that Merlin is "overtalked and overworn" (l. 963) not only by Vivien's sexual charms or even by his own melancholy—he is poised between a vision of past glory and future apocalypse—but by an imagination committed to culturally sanctioned types. Vivien plays upon this careless perspective, to Merlin's destruction, by adopting the various roles he assigns her.²⁸

Tennyson's foregrounding of gender and language in the relation between Merlin and Vivien invites another look at the silent female figure who haunts the text, the mute and invisible Queen of Merlin's story-within-a-story, victim of the charm hidden in a marginal commentary which only Merlin can read. The female figure had always been a part of Tennyson's poetic identity.²⁹ Vivien tells Merlin, who has tried to "spell the lines" (l. 365) on her face, that, however wise, "ye hardly know me yet" (l. 353). The Queen imprisoned in the text is similarly mysterious. Merlin and Vivien give conflicting interpretations of her nature and identity: Merlin argues that her charismatic power, which causes youths to sicken and armies to wane, is either unconscious or unwitting; Vivien, projecting her own character onto this silent figure, argues that the Queen uses her power deliberately, to make her husband jealous (ll. 553-611). The question is never resolved. This strategy of irresolution is, as we have seen, pervasive in the idyll. The Queen resembles the female subjects of Tennyson's early poetry, a corporate presence who, as Shires argues, "represents the undersense of poetry itself, melody and pure sound, and even unconsciousness" (p. 51). If we accept this interpretation, it is possible to see the usual female figure in Tennyson's poetry displaced by an empowered and articulate Vivien. The "undersense of poetry" has been transformed. Vivien's alternative interpretations of the human story disrupt the master narrative. The potent, sensational, vital underside of Camelot is constructed by transmuting the Lady of Shalott into Rumor.

In 1856, as he began the great task of reinterpreting the story of Camelot, the story of the Fall, of radical loss and absence, Tennyson attempted to confront—if not to resolve—the issue of his own vexed poetic identity, and to acknowledge the complex relation of gender to the production of meaning. The disruptive presence of Vivien, especially in her

capacity as monstrous Rumor, subversively mingling true and false, dispersing the tale into communal fragments, presenting the natural underside of the ideal enterprise, complicates but enlivens (Vivien—*vivus*—alive) the “many-corridor complexities” (l. 730) of Tennyson’s text and challenges “the tale, / The told-of, and the teller” (*Balin and Balan*, ll. 534-535).

Notes

- 1 *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987). References to *Merlin and Vivien* and other idylls are given by line numbers.
- 2 The “Morte d’Arthur,” written in 1833-34, shortly after Arthur Hallam’s death, is of course the germ of the *Idylls*. John D. Rosenberg suggests that the “generative moment” of the poem is loss; that possibly the “great world of Arthurian myth came into being solely to memorialize this primal scene of loss, the loss of a once-perfect fellowship in a once-perfect world” (“Tennyson and the Passing of Arthur,” *VP* 25 [1987]: 141).
- 3 See Gerhard Joseph’s discussion of the history of *en abîme* in “The Echo and the Mirror *en abîme* in Victorian Poetry,” *VP* 23 (1985): 403-412.
- 4 There has been much speculation about the content of this text. One might plausibly think that it embodies the story of the Fall (the Urmyth of humankind), or absolute truth, or the Arthuriad, or that it functions as a self-reflexive image of Tennyson’s own poem. For some other recent interpretations, see Cecil Lang, *Tennyson’s Arthurian Psychodrama*, Tennyson Society Occasional Papers, No. 5 (Lincoln, 1983), who argues that the text is the British Constitution; Donald Hair, *Tennyson’s Language* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1991), who compares the text surrounded by commentary to an ancient and dead language which “transforms itself into newer and more recent languages that gradually replace the original” (p. 161); and Linda M. Shires, who, in “Rereading Tennyson’s Gender Politics,” in Thais E. Morgan, ed., *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990), suggests that the “crisis of control over the text is also a crisis of gender” which pervades Tennyson’s work (pp. 46-65).
- 5 See, for example, John D. Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), especially pp. 9, 56, 91, 135; and Margaret Homans, “Tennyson and the Spaces of Life,” *ELH* 46 (1979): 693-709.
- 6 See William E. Buckler, *Man and His Myths: Tennyson’s Idylls of the King in Critical Context* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 25ff.
- 7 Dwight Culler, in *The Poetry of Tennyson* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), argues that three key passages in which characters describe Camelot retrospectively, as it existed before the first two idylls, indicate the heroic poem Tennyson found himself unable to write (pp. 221-231).
- 8 Guinevere is the main scapegoat. Tristram, for example, argues that the Order failed “First mainly through that sully of our Queen” (*The Last Tournament*, l. 677); the novice remarks “so glad were spirits and men / Before the coming of the sinful Queen” (*Guinevere*, ll. 267-268); and Arthur makes his most infamous remark in this connection: the realm failed “all through thee!” (*Guinevere*, l. 490).
- 9 For example, in Leodogran’s vision (*The Coming of Arthur*, ll. 426-443); in Arthur’s

reading of Excalibur (*The Coming of Arthur*, ll. 299-308); in Merlin's vision of the falling wave (*Merlin and Vivien*, ll. 187-194); in the bard's vision, recounted by the novice (*Guinevere*, ll. 300-305).

In Gerhard Joseph's *Tennyson and the Text: The Weaver's Shuttle* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), Tennysonian weaving is seen as endless textual (from *texere*, to weave) elaboration—an elaboration that may be regarded as constituting an alternative figure for the *mise en abîme*.

- 10 In the context of his discussion of living speech and dead letter in the *Idylls* (pp. 145-169), Hair suggests that by the time of this idyll the vows "start looking like lies because those who swear them think that the words no longer correspond to anything outside themselves" (p. 154).
- 11 See, for example, John Jump, ed., *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), pp. 443, 450, 453, for Victorian reviewers who compared Tennyson to Virgil. Modern reaction may be summarized by Douglas Bush's comments in *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1969 [1937]), especially pp. 226-278. In some of Tennyson's best work, Bush maintains, it is difficult to "mark where Virgilian inspiration leaves off and Tennyson begins" (p. 227).
- 12 For Tennyson's views on Virgil, see also Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memoir* (London, 1897), 2:12, 385, 414 (and 484-485 for some additional nineteenth-century comparisons of Tennyson and Virgil).
- 13 In *King Arthur's Laureate: A Study of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 16-18, John Philip Eggers notes that the plot of the *Idylls* resembles a key passage in the *Aeneid* describing the Golden Age (8.314-327). He points out that both Troy and Camelot are "cities built to music," and that both poems recount the declension of the Golden Age to the Age of Iron. Robert Pattison, *Tennyson and Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), discusses the epic qualities of the poem in relation to Virgil. See especially pp. 143ff. J. M. Gray, "Thro' the Vision of the Night": A Study of Source, Evolution and Structure in Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1980), *passim*, points out Virgilian echoes in gestures and individual lines.
- 14 I quote the *Aeneid* from P. Vergili Maronis, *Aeneidos, Liber Quartus*, ed. with commentary by R. G. Austin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).
- 15 For example, Rosenberg suggests that Vivien combines the roles of Eve and Satan, and that she is the ultimate femme fatale (*The Fall of Camelot*, p. 114); David Staines sees her as the embodiment of evil in the form of corrosive lust, in *Tennyson's Camelot: The Idylls of the King and its Medieval Sources* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1982), p. 26; Thomas Hoberg, "Duessa or Lilith: The Two Faces of Tennyson's Vivien," *VP* 25 (1987): 17-25, compares her to Shakespeare's Edmund (p. 20) and then to Lilith (p. 22), in arguing that her amoral pagan order presents a formidable and attractive alternative to Arthur's. For a similar view, see Eggers, pp. 63-65.
- 16 Hair argues that "from the beginning, slander is the chief threat to Arthur's order," and that "the explicit theme of many of the *Idylls* is slander" (p. 147). He notes, following Culler, that Tennyson's word for such thoughtless talk is "babble," and traces this term through several idylls (pp. 149-150). Cf. Culler (pp. 239-241) on the "power of language to deceive and corrupt." James Eli Adams' article, "Harlots and Base Interpreters: Scandal and Slander in *Idylls of the King*," *VP* 30 (1992): 421-440, appeared after my own was written. Adams' article resembles mine in noting the significance of rumor, scandal, and "base interpreters" in the poem, and in emphasizing the dialogue between

Merlin and Vivien concerning the “alleged sexual transgressions” (p. 424) of the Round Table. But Adams focuses on how Tennyson’s “representation of sexual transgression is inseparable from his notorious preoccupation with the mechanisms of Victorian publicity” (pp. 421-422). He argues that from Merlin’s perspective Vivien is guilty not of slander but of scandal (p. 430), and that he accuses her “not of falsehood, but of a breach of privacy” (p. 427).

- 17 “each feather upon whose body— / Incredible though it sounds—has a sleepless eye beneath it, / And for every eye she has also a tongue, a voice and a pricked ear.” Throughout, translations of passages of the *Aeneid* are from C. Day Lewis, trans., *The Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid of Virgil* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966).
- 18 Cf. an image in Merlin’s remarks to Vivien: “Overquick art thou / To catch a loathly plume fallen from the wing / Of that foul bird of rapine whose whole prey / Is man’s good name” (ll. 724-727).
- 19 Ricks, 3:396. The addition has the effect of complicating the character and motivation of Vivien. In exile from the “dream” of love “that never yet was mine” (l. 115), she “labours with an evil dream” (l. 99). The passage also echoes Satan spying on Adam and Eve (*Paradise Lost*, 4.355ff.).
- 20 “At night she flits midway between earth and sky, through the gloom / Screeching.”
- 21 “Not long before she came to the ears of king Iarbas, / Whispering inflammatory words and heaping up his resentment.”
- 22 “Rumour, the swiftest traveller of all the ills on earth, / Thriving on movement, gathering strength as it goes.”
- 23 “Loud-speaker of truth, hoarder of mischievous falsehood, equally. / This creature was now regaling the people with various scandal / In great glee, announcing fact and fiction indiscriminately.”
- 24 See Austin, p. 73; cf. John Conington, ed., *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*, 4th edn., 3 vols. (London, 1881-84), 2:270. Conington notes that Fama does not really transgress the bounds of truth in telling about the relationship of Dido and Aeneas. Cf. Hair, who observes that although Vivien’s talk is malicious, “at this stage . . . [it] seems not wholly untrue” (p. 154).
- 25 A number of these commentators have identified Tennyson with either Merlin or Vivien, and some have seen Merlin and Vivien as aspects of one being. Gordon Haight, “Tennyson’s Merlin,” *SP* 44 (1947): 549-566, first identified Tennyson with Merlin; Fred Kaplan, “Woven Paces and Waving Hands: Tennyson’s Merlin as Fallen Artist,” *VP* 7 (1969): 285-298, sees Vivien as the negative side of Merlin’s imagination and his defeat as Romantic and internal; Culler (Chapter 10) argues that Merlin’s seduction is Tennyson’s, who in becoming Vivien and singing her “tender rhymes” had betrayed his youthful ideal; Henry Kozicki, *Tennyson and Clio: History in the Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 103-104, sees Vivien as a projection of Merlin’s world-weary sensuality.
- 26 Hair (pp. 149-150) also notes that the leavening image may suggest that Vivien, like Satan, “serves God’s purposes.”
- 27 Cf. Hoberg, who argues that Vivien is, like Tristram, a votary of an amoral pagan natural order that offers a positive alternative to Arthur’s. He concludes, however, that “the damage that Vivien inflicts . . . is as trifling as the means she uses to inflict it” (p. 20).
- 28 Some readers, of course, see Merlin’s misogyny as embodying Tennyson’s own commitment to patriarchy. Stephen Knight, for example, in *Arthurian Literature and Society*