



Gender Polemics, Mapping Gendered Worlds in Tennyson's Major Poems Meghamitra Goswami

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Abstract

This critical explication puts forward a contention of gendered topoi-masculine and feminine worlds within the poetic oeuvre of the well-known poet from the Victorian era, Lord Alfred Tennyson, panoptically focusing on his major poems like The Lady of Shalott, The Lotos-Eaters, Mariana, and Ulysses. Implementing an eclectic approach, to sieve the poems through New Historicism, Feminist Criticism, Ecocriticism Lenses, Psychoanalysis and Gendered Studies, this journal expounds the portrayal of binaries like temporal linearity/ cyclical stasis, exterior heroism/ interior repose, and active conquest against passive containment as proposed by Lord Alfred Tennyson.

Keywords: Feminine World, Masculine World, Heroic Agency, Performative Gender, Normative Binaries, Feminine Sphere, Cyclical Temporality

Introduction

The laureate orchestrates between the aggressive, adventure imperative agonistic nature of the Masculine and the tender, stoic and nurturing nature of the Feminine. This conscious distinction outvies mere gender binary and reflects upon the polyvalent human condition: one that pines for heroic ventures while longing placid sanctuary. It is also evident that Alfred Tennyson's poems render as well as perform gender via temporal, linguistic, and spatial constructs. This study is designed to dissect plausible formal and thematic dimensions of Tennyson's gendered worlds.

From the very opening line of *Ulysses*, Tennysonian masculinity manifests as an inextinguishable thrust with verbs of action, expansive spatial metaphors. He uses a commanding apostrophe- "It little profits that an idle king / By this still hearth, among these barren crags," (Tennyson 1-2). Tennyson links Ulysses' ambition to the journey of an archetypal hero by giving references to "Troy", "Ilium" and Achilles's wrath as rooted in the Homeric tradition. The lexicon of voyages like "sail", "travel", "push off", deployed by Tennyson encodes masculinity in terms of external conquest. Tennyson here very adequately presented the male world through statements like

"I cannot rest from travel: I will drink/ Life to the lees..." (Tennyson 6-7)

"Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;

For always roaming with a hungry heart

Much have I seen and known; cities of men

And manners, climates, councils, governments..." (Tennyson 11-14)

When he introduces his son, Telemachus, he uses words like "slow prudence", "mild", "Soft degrees", "centered in the sphere/ Of common duties", "tenderness", and creates a different space. Ulysses' monologues are very much gendered. We can understand this with R.W Connell's "Hegemonic Masculinity", how Ulysses is incapable to succumb his relentless quest, his mariners' lamentation evinces a muted affective register highlighted as permissible sorrow in the early masculinity studies (Connell, R.W. 1995).

All the adjectives "still hearth", "barren crags", "aged wife", "idle king" points towards Freud's fear of castration, emasculation, that ignites from the loss of the fire, resulted from the infertility of aged wife, and the king (masculinity) becomes idle. What the king feels is suffocation of being stagnant. It is the fear psychosis or psychomachia that he experiences whenever he is not on a voyage, and he doesn't want to succumb to the stillness. The contrast becomes conspicuously visible in "household gods", Ulysses' differentiation between his and Telemachus' work. Tennyson uses his speaker Ulysses to create a distinction between the two worlds by considering the feminine world as monotonous, mundane, solely encircled in the domestic sphere, while his world i.e., the masculine world is much more thrilling, outward, dramatic, and progressive (Doucette 2021).

"When I am gone. He works his work, I mine" (Tennyson 43)

Tennyson's differentiation of male and female world takes us back to the Greek tragedy *Odyssey*, where Clytemnestra forbade Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigenia, to call for war, and advises to live with peace. We can now say that it's evident that the bygone literature carries the distinction that the feminine world deals with, peace, stability, and sustainability, while the male world is more aggressive, deals with expansion, adventure, and progression. The ending lines of the poem, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" creates a masculine manifestation, a relentless forward momentum, which sonically enacts the masculine arrow of time. While feminist reading centers on intersectionality, gender nudges us that Tennysonian masculine heroes works within imperialist structures, the sea voyages signify personal ambition as well as colonial expansion, entwining power, race, and masculinity. We can trace these contrasts in the twin poem of *Ulysses, The Lotos-Eaters*", where the opening line "Courage!" he said, and pointed toward the land," (Tennyson 1) stands for a masculine rallying-cry, stating solidarity in adversity. If we look into the structure of the poem, most of the first half is written in iambic pentameter which creates a measured, almost military pulse, analogous to oar-strokes.

"Most weary seem'd the sea, weary the oar,
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam." (Tennyson 41-42)

The second half, i.e., the choric song employs repetitive and soft rhythms "stream", "slumberous", "sleep". Tennyson's phonetic choices like sibilants "swoon", "stream", liquid consonants like "lotos", "low", "slow" creates a sharp contrast between hard plosive masculine energy and the aural feminine softness. We can see polyphonic texture in the narrative, with both the halves creating a dialogic structure where the authoritative voice is undermined by "populat(ing)" its discourse with "the intentions of others" (Bakhtin 1981). The sailor's stoic rally is shifting and encompassing but the synergistic chant of surrender, is proposing Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism.

We can compare both the male and female world with Paul Ricoeur's "time consciousness", where the feminine world presents 'kairos', qualitative repetitive time, and the masculine world, aligns with 'chronos', chronological progressive time. The narrative

emplots time by mediating between the universal flow of 'kairos' and 'chronos' (Ricoeur 1984) Before entering the lotus island, the sailors were living the manly era, prioritizing duty over desire. As soon as they enter the lotos island, this paradigm shifts and the rough, rigid masculine world blends into the soft feminine world. According to Tuan, the 'space', which is the undifferentiated mobile realm becomes the 'place', a meaningful location though emotional rise. This shows the exact way we bound to our emotions to specific configurations of space. Tennyson literalizes Yi-Fu-Tuan's notion of bounding human emotions to spatial configurations, in gendered cartographies (Tuan 1977). The island stands as the metaphor for femininity. The island, presented in lush imageries like "slumberous sheet of foam", "languid air", "downward smoke", "Breathing like one that hath a weary dream" creates an atmosphere which typically points toward femininity. The repetitive structures in the choric song- "All things have rest: why should we toil alone...Nor ever fold our wings, and cease from wanderings, / Nor steep our brows in slumber's holy balm;" (Tennyson 14-20) become the mimicry of natural cycles (growth, bloom, and decay). The island itself holds maternal attributes. It nurtures, envelops, and often provides a womb like place from masculine strife.

Greg Garrard argues that landscapes are not mere neutral backdrops, they typify cultural constructs (Garrard 2004). We can spot this in Tennyson's usage of words like the turbulent "sea" stands for patriarchal ambition, and the "lotos" signifies maternal earth. The enclosed system of the lotus island is portrayed as an ecological metaphor to show sustainability by preserving rather than expanding. The sailor's concordant vow, "We will return no more"; And all at once they sang", after experiencing the lotus points towards the subversion of individual heroic agency, surrendering to feminine repose, changing from the unchanging 'True Masculinity' to the oppressive 'Subordinated Masculinity' (Connell, R.W. 1995). Once they were aloof from their terrestrial life, now longing for the fatherland, for child, and wives "And sweet it was to dream of Fatherland, Of child, and wife, and slave" (Tennyson 39-40). Moreover, their performance as female as per Judith Butler's "gender performativity" is also evident in Tennyson's portrayal of gender(ing) worlds (Butler 1990). The lotus island can also be seen as Michael Foucault's "other space" (heteropoia), where the normative gendered roles blend.

Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* also puts forward a stark dichotomy between the two worlds: where the male world of Camelot is sensual, public, and active, the female world of Lady Shalott is passive, insular, and reflective. The Lady's tower is grey, muted, her life is silent, "half sick of shadows", it's the shadows that only exist for her where the armour and trappings of Lancelot gleams with colour.

"All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,"

His life flows "up and down the people go", including tangible world of flesh, movement, and speech. The repetitive act of knitting and weaving the tapestry is a performance of femininity, that binds the Lady into a social script. Gilbert and Gubar, in "The Madwoman in the Attic" describes needlework as the symbol of decorative female creativity (Gilber and Gubar 1979). Tennyson uses the Lady to literalize the decorative labour as female confinement. Everything she sees is through the mirror, and when she looks directly at

Lancelot that becomes a subversion of gendered act. To understand this, we can pair up with Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection with Tennyson's plot. The Lady's (the subject) once glance at Lancelot (act of transgression) changed her whole world and banished her (Kristeva 1982).

"And moving through' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot:"

Her cinematic breach destabilizes normative expectations and resulted her death. The mirror reflection loop of Lady Shalott and the cyclical time of the lotus island aligns with Eve Keosofsky Sedwick's concept of queer temporality, both withstands marriage, lineage, reproduction, i.e., heteronormative forward-march of life. Unlike the Lady's passivity, Lancelot boldly rides toward Camelot, and sings "Tirra lirra,". His world is more active, chivalric, and full of direct engagement. Tennyson creates the presence of Lancelot immediate and forceful. He has the power to shatter the Lady's mirror, the barrier between her and reality changing her role from an observer to a participant in the masculine world.

"She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side..."

Tennysonian landscape is not merely decaying, it's a citadel constructed by male authority to confine female autonomy. *Mariana*, on the other end stands out by portraying feminine subjectivity. Both Mariana and The Lady of Shalott presents the female vociferation of their desires, identities, and fears with tightly circumscribed spaces. These voices, often intimate and mediated, exposes the fractures of the Victorian self. When Tennyson uses a third person frame as Mariana's voice, Lady of Shalott is perpetually mediated by her mirror.

"She only said, "My life is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!" (Tennyson 9-12)

The repeated refrain shows Tennyson's insistence on the voicelessness of the Female, she always is mediated by the unframed female truth, which is mostly unspoken. This triadic structure, third person framing ("She only said") followed by direct quotation and echo ("She said") emerges a sense of discordance, yet the interiority cuts off through Mariana's first-person cry of "I am aweary, aweary, /I would that I were dead!" This momentary collapse of the narrator as well as the character implodes of objectivity, manifesting what Freud coined as "repetition compulsion", where the subject, not consciously reenacts until mastery is illusionary achieved. (Freud 1922). Yet Tennyson exploits her "aweary" pronouncement for morbid aesthetic instead providing her resolution. The utterance of her "I would that I were dead!" is not a mere expression of desire but a ritualistic invocation of death as the only and ultimate escape from her symbolic impasse, poetically sanctioned self-annihilation, a submission of female psyche to male mastery.

Lacan's 'Mirror Stage' describes the infant's misrecognition of the specular image as a coherent self, a joyous mirage masking fundamental lack (Lacan 2006). Similarly, the Lady Shalott's silent interior world is mediated through the images reflected on the mirror

evoking Lacanian Imagery. But as the mirror cracks, her ego-illusion falls in, precipitating a shift from the 'Imaginary' to the 'Real', which becomes a traumatic encounter with her own desire and morality. The sporadic emergence of the first-person "I", disrupts the narrative voice. Mariana's psyche intrudes to the third-person narrative only to be recaptured by Lacanian 'Mirror Stage', that her fragmented self misrecognizes her wholeness, forever searching an impossible completion in the absent lover.

Mariana immerses us in a decaying milieu which mirrors the heroine's psychic torpor. The phrase "She only said" sets up a pattern of narrational displacement, Mariana's voice is mediated, echoing as a Lacanian 'object petit a', the unattainable Other around that her desire circulates. Tennyson skilfully crafts a bifurcated universe, wherein the feminine is bound to enclosure, and their world as one of decay, longing, isolation, and immobilization, whereas the masculine sphere embodies motion, agency, and teleological progression. Tennyson, though his male writing, feigns empathy even as he cages her in an infinite loop of romantic waiting, which is nothing else than coercion: Victorian woman's "place" is a mausoleum of moss and rot. In Tennyson's *Mariana*, time is "Kairotic, i.e., cyclical, qualitative, and suffocating.

"Her tears fell with the dews at even;
Her tears fell ere the dews were dried;" (Tennyson 13-14)

Tennyson's usage of doubling of action underlines her entrapment in an eternal return. Contra this, Tennyson's Ulysses, exalt chronos, goal-oriented, quantitative time. "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." (Tennyson 70)

The amalgamation of Ulysses' linear valour with Mariana's looping kairos, Tennyson casts femininity as stagnant, motionless, and unworthy of evolution, which perfectly portrays the gender devaluation underpinning Victorian social hierarchy. In *The Lady of Shalott*, the barrier imposed by patriarchy is tangible, and in *Mariana*, the barrier is invisible, works as a glass ceiling. This searing puts forward bare patriarchy's siege upon the female psyche, either by caging in a patriarchal fort or by weaving into the very fabric of societal dogma, systematically eviscerating her individuality and trimming down to a domesticated animal, ensnared within the cruel choreography of mandates and roles dictated by patriarchal fiat.

One must ask, whether Tennyson adopts a female persona just to relegate her to spectral stasis? Ostensible sympathy female struggle puts a veil on a deeper exploitation, by dramatizing Mariana's despair, Tennyson defends and reasserts masculine creative omnipotence and frame femininity as muse and cautionary tale. This is theatrical bondage rather than advocacy, where Tennysonian female "I" only exists as an object of aestheticized misery, a cipher with which patriarchal anxieties about female desire and autonomy are contained and extolled.

Conclusion

Lord Alfred Tennyson's poetic sphere refuses closure. The feminine coils into cyclical sanctuary; the masculine spearheads onward into mythic conquest, without attaining sovereign supremacy. The poet's ambivalent portrayal vexes facile binaries (male/ female) and impels us to confront the fissures in our gendered fantasies. We are left with a sense of bewilderment. Does the heroic notion require stillness or perpetual motion? What exactly repose is -an exalted reprieve or an abdication? These uncertain dialectics makes sure that

the poet's verse stays as a battle front of competing desires; for trance and trajectory, for mercy and mastery- an enduring crucible, colliding, converging feminine stoicism and masculine ambition, that confront and challenge us to rethink the definition of conquest and containment. We are left with a question- in fashioning female only as a recursive tableau of melancholic stillness and exalting the male as the telos-driven agent of progress, does Tennyson's mastery on lyric countersign a patriarchal economy which endorse male ambition while exploiting female suffering. If so, can Tennyson's poetic celebration of "noble" agony ever be untwined from the very hypocrisy that commodifies women's interior lives?

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