



Beyond the illusion of feminism: An analysis of select poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson

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Abstract

The paper examines the representation of women in select poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson and evaluates the degree to which his heroines challenge the Victorian gender norms, while being constrained by the patriarchal rigidity. Although the protagonists carry emotional depth and psychological complexity, their lives are characterized mostly by isolation, suffering, emotional deprivation and finally submission. With their voices filtered through a masculine perspective, their identity hardly exists outside of a male-centric world. The paper highlights that it is the poet who speaks for them, rather than allowing the women to speak for themselves. The use of enclosed landscapes, symbolic imagery and male-dominated narrative structures reflect the constraints imposed on women by the Victorian society. The paper argues that despite the illusion of freedom and autonomy, Victorian ideology shape and dictate the lives of his heroines. Thus, even though they may appear empowered, but are ultimately subordinated.

Keywords: Gender, patriarchy, feminism, tennyson, victorian

Introduction

Men and women have been looked at incessantly in a very different manner as if due to the exigencies of natural biological creation or civilization developing in such a way that men have always been adhered to as blessed naturally with physical strength while a woman is often not taken as a human being but as a delicate persona—a bounty of extreme sensibilities and senses. In the Victorian era, the representations of gender both in literary and social sphere were governed by the emergence of oppositional formulations. As if natural division was not enough, the Victorian era saw the emergence of an ideology, as fanciful and needful as pesticide to clear farm weed—the ideology of ‘separate spheres’: women and men in their own places. This thought dominated the gender roles from the late 18th century through the 19th century in America. Women inhabited a sphere comprising of the home, church and social visits that they exchanged with each other; while men’s sphere was outside the home in the world of industry, commerce, and politics.

Tennyson and his contemporaries had advocated women’s enfranchisement and sympathized with John Stuart Mill and others who had been working for the promotion of the Married Women’s Property Act (1882), and also added that women were generally ‘much better...than men’, morally and spiritually. He has been praised by some recent critics like Ann Colley because of the complexity of the psychology of his portraits of women like Mariana and Guinevere, and has been showed applause for his innumerable women centric poems, with many critics considering it as an endeavor of his to give voice to the middle-class Victorian woman who was so bound within the idea of separate spheres that existed in that era (Colley 41–42). However, it is seen in his poems, that a masculine voice, an unwanted dominating perspective, shadowed all of his portrayal of women. The critic, Kate Millet in her landmark feminist study, *Sexual Politics* (1970) lashed out at Tennyson for his biased depiction of women; she found them sexist, misogynistic, and paternalistic (Millet 39–41). Tennyson was a man of his times, and the way he portrayed

women was far from the ideal “angel of the house” image; but by looking at the female characters in his poems, we cannot get over the fact that his female characters were filled with enough crying, dependencies, and sacrifices.

It would be unfair however if we straightaway claim that Tennyson was misogynistic and sexist while writing about the women and how he delves in to bring out the emotions of the character; because he did not follow gender rigidity, as it can be seen that both the male and female characters in his poems had emotional dependency on the opposite gender. But there was a major setback in his portrayal of women, and that was how he tried to evaluate the psychological complexity of theirs only through the eyes of men. Mariana, Fatima, Godiva, Camilla, Ida, Oenone, Elaine, Vivien, Guinevere, Isabel, Lilian, were many of the female figures portrayed by Tennyson with different psychological characteristics; these figures in general represent his long-standing interest in a wide range of female representation.

Tennyson in his personal life had gone through tough phase when a severe rheumatic illness had attacked him and his wife Emily had nursed him through. Also, it was the time when the Woman Question was being looked at with a different perspective and was gradually answered with more educational and property rights for women. He had tried to frequently give central functions and psychological complexity to the women characters corresponding to the way women had begun to widen their spheres of participation and influence in the Victorian society, as a reaction against the idea of separate spheres, especially by the end of the century. (Vickery 383; Cordea 116). His depictions of women often mirror the ideological tensions of the Victorian era, where traditional concepts of traditional femininity co-existed with the progressively emerging assertions of female agency.

This paper is a venture to explore the female characters represented by Tennyson in few of his selected poems: “Mariana” (1832), “Mariana in the South” (1897), “The Lady of Shalott” (1833), “Fatima” (1833) and “The Princess” (1847). The study examines the extent to which

literary representations of 'femininity' are transgressive in the early works of Alfred Lord Tennyson. The female characters in Tennyson's poems procure a multitude of characteristics, such as, emphasis on education, independence, non-domestic employment, and, finally, freedom from marriage. However, a masculine voice quietly dominates all the heroines and strips off their illusion of freedom and female emancipation. Starting from the bold Princess with her anti-patriarchal mindset to the imprisoned lady of Shalott living with emotional baggage in a depressed and cursed world bound by societal pressures, his heroines represent the subservient female Victorian. Although he attempts to express the desires and emotions of his female characters, their words are not convincing enough and more often than not, produce voices of weak women. The study thus argues that his poetry, in fact, expresses a form of quasi-feminism, in which women are granted temporary visibility and emotional expression, but are ultimately denied full autonomy.

Literature Review

A number of major studies have examined Tennyson's poetry with particular attention to gender, and these studies can be divided into three distinct groups: critics who claim that Tennyson challenges conventional notions of gender by elevating the status of femininity, critics who claim that Tennyson's representation of gender is ambiguous insofar as he both challenges and reinforces conventional femininity, and, finally, those who claim that Tennyson clearly reinforces traditional Victorian concepts of femininity (Gilbert and Gubar 72–78; Showalter 118–24). The first group of critics demonstrates how Tennyson questions the Victorian myth of gender in his poetry, and so indicates his support of feminism. A second group of critics insist that Tennyson's poetry is ambiguous in so far as it both challenges and reinforces Victorian norms of femininity. In the poem "The Lady of Shalott", the two readings are possible: the lady being trapped within the rigid constraints of patriarchy while at the same time, her resistance indicates her desire for autonomy (Armstrong 191).

The final group of critics maintains that Tennyson reinforces conservative norms of Victorian femininity and masculinity in his poetry. Dwight Culler and Marion Shaw deal with all of Tennyson's poetry, including his earlier poetry such as "Mariana" and "The Lady of Shalott". The heroines of "The Lady of Shalott" and "Mariana" are seemingly transgressive but that Tennyson's projection of them ultimately makes them subordinate; and reasserts the traditional patriarchal order so that the masculine voice maintains its dominance (Culler 154–56; Shaw 98). Terry Eagleton, Kate Millett and Donald Hall all deal exclusively with "The Princess" to claim that Tennyson's highlighting of the feminine in his poetry is a merely a strategy to re-subordinate women and, thus, to reinstate the patriarchy (Millett 42; Eagleton 67). Several critics dealing with Victorian gender note the difficulty of men in feminism; in particular, they insist that men assume female voices in order to speak for women, silencing them with their patriarchal ideology (Gilbert and Gubar 17–18). While Tennyson's poems appear to present the possibility for gender subversion, he ultimately reinstates the conservative and unequal gender divisions that permeate Victorian society (Showalter 123).

Analysis

Tennyson's poems have been evaluated on the ground that they are appropriate voices of female characters, for which until then there was not any central position; however they are not appropriate enough to be considered as the wholesome depiction of women's independence or emotional intelligence. Those women are showed as anything but an ideal figure as angel of the house: living alone in countryside houses, abandoned and isolated from the rest of the world, but their seclusion from the society only brings sorrow and death to them (Gilbert and Gubar 12–13). Tennyson perhaps wanted to create women who defied the existing rules and norms and showed as to how a woman should behave and live, refined and polished enough to be able to be fitted into the society among the different classes, but he failed to show them in a positive light, or with a positive effect. Critics have often argued that Victorian literature, despite appearing sympathetic toward women, frequently reinforces patriarchal notions by punishing women who transgress the conventional domestic roles (Showalter 54).

In his early poem "Mariana", published 1830, Tennyson depicts a sad woman decaying in eternal agony. It is apparent that Mariana does not personify any characteristic of the typical Victorian idea of the "angel in the house." She is not married to her lover, who has deserted her, and, secondly, she neglects the grange where she lives. Not only is she unmarried, she also is not chaste. In Victorian England, it was considered not only unconventional but also transgressive for women to have sexual relations outside marriage, and such women were labeled as "fallen women". She is listlessly waiting for her lover who has no hope of coming either.

The landscape in which Mariana is presented in the poem is a moated grang. The fact that Tennyson chooses not to locate it specifically intensifies the sense of loneliness and isolation in the poem, making it seem as though the grange occupies a liminal place outside of normal space and discourse. Descriptions such as 'thickly crusted' (line 2) and 'thickest dark' (line 18) are heavy and choking, ornamenting the poem like the layers of rust and decay that ornament Mariana's mental and physical landscapes.

Every inch of the landscape, and every minute detail expressed communicates the utter despair of the protagonist and repeatedly reiterates the idea of unrealized potential. Though the grange in the poem is both lonely and isolated we assume that it was once used as a farm and a storage place. The grange itself suggests all the possibilities of fertility and healthy growth while simultaneously asserting the reality of darkness and stagnation, and the land that Mariana lives on is bounded and obstructed by stagnant water. The grange is 'moated', and within it is a 'sluice' where the 'blackened waters slept' (line 38). Each description in "Mariana" simultaneously confronts the reader with fertility and stagnation. The water is filthy and black, but it is sleeping and thus has the power to awake and transform. Likewise, the 'blackest moss' (line 1) and 'marish-mosses' (line 40) obscure and encrust accepted images of health and fertility. Rather than bearing flowers, the flowerpots are 'thickly crusted' (line 2), while the water engenders unhealthy and unwanted growth.

The typically feminine symbols that abound in the rich landscape of "Mariana" are all impeded in one way or another: like the stagnant water, the moon is not able to rise

to its full potential; when it appears in the poem it is 'very low' (line 53). Every element in "Mariana" is painfully bounded and restricted. This idea is expressed most clearly in line 54, where even the 'wild winds [are] bound within their cell'. The sense of restriction and woodenness expressed in "Mariana" has religious undertones. The word 'cell' derives from the monastic term 'cella' which designated an enclosed space such as a monastery, thereby reinforcing the protagonist's confinement within both a psychological and physical boundary (Buckler 78–79). Similarly, a 'grange' might specifically denote an 'outlying farm belonging to a religious house'.

The religious suggestiveness in "Mariana" is fully realized in Tennyson's later poem, "Mariana in the South", a poem which Arthur Hallam described as 'a kind of pendant to his former poem of "Mariana"'. The same sense of darkness and impediments appears in both poems as, for example, "Mariana in the South" opens with a description of a 'black shadow' (line 1) in a 'close-latticed' (line 3) house. The greatest similarity between the two poems is the repetitive though subtly changing refrain of womanly despair. In "Mariana" the refrain deals with the passing of time and the absence of her lover. 'Life', 'night', and 'day' are each described as hopelessly 'dreary' in a poem where the very words 'weary' and 'dreary' repeated in each refrain are accented so as to lengthen them and make their sound seem never-ending, for example:

She only said, 'The night is dreary, He cometh not', she said;
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary, I would that I were dead!' (29-32)

"Mariana in the South" also looks to time as a reference point as her lament is called out 'night and morn'. Both poems have a circularity to them which adds a further layer of constraint and boundaries to the lives of their protagonists. However, Mariana in the South is able to appeal to her Madonna - albeit with less frequency as the poem progresses - and rather than simply voicing her despair, she sings it. Another sense of release becomes available through the shift of tone at the end of the poem when Mariana predicts a time when she will 'cease to be all alone'.

While Mariana inhabits a bounded watery landscape, the Southern Mariana lives in a world 'Of stony drought and steaming salt'. There is no water present in the land to provide relief from the days that pass from 'heat to heat'. Everything is suggestive of overpowering heat and consuming brightness. The sand is 'glaring', the inlets are 'bright' (line 8), and the light is described as a 'furnace'. Against this vivid and overwhelming heat, the Southern Mariana persistently dreams of relief in the form of fresh and flowing water. We first see this in her dream of the 'runlets babbling down the glen', and when she wakes, 'the babble of the stream' (line 51) is starkly juxtaposed with the 'dusty-white' river bed. In the last stanza, when hope in the form of death beckons Mariana, the shift in tone is heralded by 'a sound as of the sea'.

However, neither Mariana nor the Southern Mariana is able to realize the full potential of her feminine self. Tennyson communicates the failure of each primarily through the landscape she inhabits. The words of the women themselves are limited to a short refrain of four lines which varies only very slightly. They are unable to see beyond their despair or outside the refrain that hammers relentlessly in their minds, tainting their entire world. Mariana is surrounded by stagnant water and requires strong motion to break her state

of beautiful feminine apathy. This sort of action is enticingly suggested throughout the poem. Tennyson writes 'Unlifted was the clinking latch' (line 6) and - as the critic Christopher Ricks succinctly puts it -, 'at once crushes and raises hope' (Ricks 80). All the motion expressed in 'Mariana' is uncomfortable and frustrated. This is communicated through verbs such as 'flitting', 'glanced', 'seemed', 'crept', 'shook', 'sway' and 'creaked'. The southern Mariana exists in a similar, though interestingly different, state of impotence. Hers is a state of dehydration, a landscape in which desire has risen to such an extreme that it has dried up every avenue of female fertility and creativity.

Enclosed spaces are constructed around almost all of Tennyson's female figures. Critics have noted that Tennyson transforms the surrounding landscape into an objective correlative of his protagonist's inner desolation and despair, where nature itself becomes immobilized and oppressive rather than regenerative (Tucker 114). "The Lady of Shalott" presents us with another constricted woman who closely resembles the two Marianas. Like Mariana, the Lady of Shalott is placed in a luminal area, isolated from the mainland of patriarchal Camelot and dwelling alone on the island of Shalott. Both Mariana and the lady are constricted by water that hems in their isolated dwelling-place. However, the water takes on a different role in the later poem: rather than being left as a stagnant and limiting presence, the water becomes representative of a process of visual dislocation. Not only is the lady unable to live in freedom in the normal world; she is also unable to look at the world directly. Thus, her visions of the world take the form of 'shadows' (line 48) that she observes through the safety of 'a mirror clear' (line 46).

"The Lady of Shalott" mirror provides a reflection of reality, an inversion of the patriarchal landscape of Camelot. The Lady is forced to inhabit this reflection as if it were reality for fear of a curse despite the fact 'She knows not what the curse may be' (line 42). The patriarchal landscape only becomes fit for female eyes through an inversion, and the curse itself can be interpreted as the idea that women ought to be disconnected from reality. The mirror is initially 'clear' but later reappears in the poem as 'the mirror blue' (line 60) and then again as 'the crystal mirror' (line 106), before dramatically cracking 'from side to side' (line 115). If the shadows that dance across the mirror are the only reality available to the Lady of Shalott, then these changes in its colour and texture are significant. At the beginning of the poem the lady trusts the mirror image completely, believing it to be a direct translation of the world, a 'clear' or untainted perspective. Her looking glass transforms and takes on colour in the following passage:

And sometimes through the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott. (60-63)

The colour change occurs at the same moment as the suggestion of love and partnership and the simultaneous assertion that the lady has no knight of her own and therefore no place within these issues. There is an absence of love, loyalty and truth in her life, and because of this her view of the world is coloured by the mirror's melancholy blue. Finally, the mirror becomes 'crystal':

From the bank and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror
'Tirra lira', by the river. (105-108)

Crystal has many facets and here can be taken to represent a multiplicity and intensity of perspective. Ricks writes that

this passage shows a 're-reflection' which is overwhelming to the point that it serves to cancel out the Lady of Shalott's previously calm life of reflection. He also points out the 'river/river' rhyme in this passage as 'the only time in the poem, a word rhymes with itself - a perfect reflection'. This perfection within the verse is used ironically to describe the Lady's reflected life, a life which creates an imperfect reality, and a mode of perception which is ultimately unsustainable. Interestingly, the process leading up to this perfect reflection is described through terms of heat and fire similar to those used in "Mariana in the South". In the description of Lancelot we read 'The helmet and the helmet-feather / Burned like one burning flame together' (line 93-4). He is later described as 'Some bearded meteor' (line 98) and he glows 'in sunlight' (line 100). Likewise, when he appears in the mirror he does so blindingly: 'he flashed into the crystal mirror' (line 106). The burning and all-powerful language of desire follows Lancelot into the world of Shalott, and shatters the fragile life of female art and reflection.

Throughout Tennyson's work, feminine spaces are portrayed as incompatible with and separate from patriarchal society. They are generally fragile frameworks that shatter with the first hint of fiery desire, or fall into apathy along with protagonists who possess no will to realize their independent female creativity. The enclosed emotional and physical environment that these female figures inhabit reflect the psychological paralysis and social repression. These reveal limitations placed upon women's autonomy in Victorian culture (Armstrong 187).

One poem which appears to provide an exception to this pattern of tragic female figures and landscapes is "Fatima". Though the first stanza appears to portray weakness in love, and female fragility through phrases such as 'O withering might!' (line 1) and 'Lo, parched and withered, deaf and blind' (line 6), a strong sense of Fatima's power manifests itself as the poem progresses, there is no refrain in this poem and because of this its protagonist is not bounded tightly by language and landscape in the style of the women we have so far looked at; instead the steady four beat rhythm powerfully carries the poem forwards.

Once more we encounter the language of fiery desire: the poem features a 'burning drouth' (line 13), 'a fire / Is poured upon the hills' (lines 30-1), and Tennyson describes 'a sultry sky' (line 37). However, the fire here is not immobilizing. Instead, Fatima takes on a force and power entirely different to Tennyson's other women. In the third stanza she says:

Last night, when some one spoke his name,
From my swift blood that went and came
A thousand little shafts of flame
Were shivered in my narrow frame.
O love, O fire! once he drew
With one long kiss my whole soul through
My lips, as sunlight drinketh dew. (15-21)

Not only do we see powerful motion in the 'swift blood', which contrasts the cramped and uncomfortable motion in poems such as "Mariana", but we also perceive an assumption of masculine power in the phallic 'shafts of flame' which take over the body of the protagonist. Furthermore, though the poem explores the familiar female terrain of fire and water, it appears to find a possible synthesis. The sunlight and the dew come together in two of the most beautiful lines of the poem. In the penultimate stanza we encounter similar images, though here they are more intense. The strong and assertive 'My heart, pierced through with fierce delight, / Bursts into blossom in his sight' is overtly sexual.

At first glance it appears that this poem embraces feminine spaces and provides a powerful feminine discourse for its bold protagonist. However, when we look closely we find that this is not the case. Though powerful, Fatima's language is full of phallic imagery and male pronouns. The last few lines are the most telling. Fatima tells us determinedly: 'I will possess him or will die. / I will grow round him in his place' (lines 39-40). The verb 'will' gains strength by italicisation and repetition, but is ultimately undermined. Fatima has no female power or language to express herself with. Unlike the luminal female landscapes of other poems, the strong female here is forced to grow 'in his place'. Despite her will and determination, she is ultimately nothing but an appendage to a man in a male environment. To assume power Fatima assumes male discourse, but this leaves her without a voice of her own, and this is the true tragedy of Tennyson's women.

The poem intervenes into the cultural and social dialogues on women's rights and rebellion and male response to feminist demands. The son of Tennyson, Hallam Tennyson remarks that his father had held an opinion that the sooner woman finds out, before the great educational movement begins, that 'woman is not undeveloped man, but diverse', the better it will be for the progress of the world.

But the poem is ambivalent, and in fact oppressive too, in its gender ideology even though it has a surface of golden tolerance; and this has not gone unrecognized by critics. Emily Davies, a powerful Victorian advocate of women's rights and education, has been quoted as saying that the poem "The Princess" has set feminism back by twenty years, reflecting contemporary feminist dissatisfaction with Tennyson's conservative treatment of women's emancipation and higher education (Rosenblum 162).

In the poem, there is a pronounced fear of women raising their voices, as was commonly depicted by many other poets in the mid-nineteenth century. The description of Princess Ida, the protagonist of the poem starts off as one having an uncompromising voice. Her father Gama is perturbed by this attitude of hers and he tells her suitor about the undesirable circumstances surrounding Ida's rebellious behavior and dominant, outspoken voice. Throughout the poem, it is found that the empowered voice of a woman shakes and petrifies the father or the would-be husband of the protagonist; the male authority is disrupted. The Prince, with his fragile, indeterminate character is plagued by "weird seizures", and there are repeated references of Gama worrying about "losing the child." He espouses a rigid binary segregation between the two sexes saying that

Man is the hunter; woman is his game:
The sleek and shining creatures of the chase,
We hunt them for the beauty of their skins;
They love us for it, and we ride them down. (147-150)

After nursing the battle wounds that the prince is afflicted with, Princess Ida falls in love with him; this gives us an insight into the gender-typical view that a true woman is she who drops her reasoning and becomes a slave of her own feelings as well as of others; her murky reason is employed rather to burnish than to snap her chains.

In the end when Ida renounces her 'maiden fancies', and admits her failure, the seizures of the prince are unsurprisingly cured and he forgives her: a woman it seems is obliged to beg for forgiveness of her spouse if she per chance uses her reason to voice her opinion and lay down the rules befitting her and entire womenfolk; and it is pure

love when her hurtful and insecure spouse forgives her for using her reason which nature has gifted equally to both men and women, but is bleached by the paternalistic views of society. He, the *great* Prince prophesizes a shared future for men and women, in which men guide the way of their wives (because they are incapable of handling strong voices of the fair sex) and the wife sets “herself to man, / Like perfect music unto noble words.”

Adding onto that, the wounded Prince perhaps is vitalized by the submission of his beloved and holds her “sweet hands”. To reassure his possession of her and to institute the male hegemony, he refers to her as “My bride, / My wife, my life.” The tale ends when Idea “tremendously” regrets over the fact that the Prince will never love her because of her anti-male behavior; and to this angst of her, he replies in a long monologue that closes the tale of Princess Ida. Even the poem is written within a narrative framework in which seven men tell the tale of Princess Ida’s rebellion and transformation, while the women only sing the songs which separate the sections of the poem and those songs too are about maternal love and wifely love.

The prince acts as if he alone dominates both Ida and the discourse between them when he commands her, “yield thyself up.” Also returning to the framework of the poem, towards the end there were only the voices of the men which were audible anymore; Lilia and her aunt had no chance to speak as they are drowned out by the male voices of visitors from the Mechanics Institute. This poem on women empowerment and education ends ironically with the silencing of the female protagonist, Princess Ida. To add a commentary on the nadir of this poem—the situation which it seems befitting to be called the demise of the free will of women—it is agreeable to accord with what Mary Wollstonecraft had said about the understandings of women which are neglected, and how women are blown away, and overwhelmed by a minute gust of desire.

Critics have frequently argued that although *The Princess* appears to engage and uplift feminist ideologies, the poem finally reinscribes traditional gender roles by subordinating female independence to heterosexual reconciliation and domestic ideology (Killham 214). ‘Civilized’ women are incapacitated by vague refinement and they become a prey to their own senses. When their reasoning is reduced and their senses are sharpened, they are termed as women having delicate sensibility by the society; and at any moment if a woman tries to break free of her senses or overcome her fragility, her behavior is termed as unstable and her voice is wavered down by the male supremacy which has its foundation based on the insecurities of women and in all intents and purposes, is alive due to the silence and daunted constitution of feminine faculty.

Conclusion

Tennyson’s obsession with female characters as protagonist in his poems and his desperate attempt at the revival of the lost voice of women in the Victorian era might appear to the mass audience as an enterprising challenge that he has taken upon. He might seem as a poet who has spun the wheel of gender norms upside down and reinforced a dominant female voice. Many of the critics have felt that Tennyson was one of the few to throw light onto the despair of women, and broach the controversial topic of women’s sufferings.

It is however, very apparent that Tennyson could not eliminate his gender typical views when he acts as the voice of the women through the characters he had created, like Mariana, The Lady of Shalott, Ida, etc. His conservative gender norms have by all means found a place in the deep layers of the poem, and his passages reflect the same. All of his female characters, as far discussed, have been rendered voiceless and desolate. The feminist critics have complained about the conservative ending of his poems, and the ill fate of his characters: death or being reduced to submission (Gilbert and Gubar 76–77).

Princess Ida is depicted by Tennyson as the most radical, and ambitious of all the four women that have been discussed so far. She refuses to adhere to the ‘necessary’ dependence of the women on their husbands through marriage, and she is very bold and outspoken about it; whereas Fatima, Mariana and the lady of Shalott have wasted their lives on listlessly waiting for men, and getting their fragile hearts broken and their souls wrenched by their lovers whom they have been craving for both physically and emotionally. They have lost all ambitions and have been repetitively ruining their lives, day and night contemplating and lamenting on the thought that their love has been left unfulfilled.

Princess Ida wanted to establish a separate university for women; and the lady of Shalott was living an isolated life, in misery and despair. Both of these situations of seclusion can be compared with each other. Princess Ida wanting to open a segregated institution for women and the lady being cursed to live in isolation are indicative of the ideology of the separate spheres that existed in that era. Later when Ida’s dream university is converted into a hospital, the conservative intention of Tennyson hiding behind the smooth, shining surface of his so-called feminist credo is revealed. From being educators and students in the university, the women were reduced to the being nurses to take care of the wounded men, thus placing the women back in their stereotypical gender roles: a woman in the position of a caretaker and nurturer rather than that of a scholar or a mere student.

The final submission, the marriage of Ida, the death of the lady of Shalott, Mariana’s existence in perpetual sadness, and Fatima immense emotional dependence on her lover—all are significant of how Tennyson portrays the world women to be revolving only around the male counterpart; and no dreams, no wishes, and not even the notion of self-love. These instances reify each of Tennyson’s protagonists as an ‘angel of the house’: a woman chained within the spheres of her domestic life, craving for love and attention of her lover, and catering to the needs of him, and her existence being forever sealed within that emotional stockade of her senses and melancholia.

Tennyson as had been said earlier, supported John Stuart Mill, a social reformer fighting for the rights of women. But his poems reflect otherwise, especially, his poem “The Princess” that is an embodiment of harsh and relentless female oppression (Hall 49). Tennyson, even though raised one and only character, Princess Ida to a pedestal so high and distinctively bold, she is ultimately staggered down. She was given the *carte blanche* to open her own dream university for women, but Tennyson made no hesitation to drag her low and bind her free spirit within the domestic sphere.

It is therefore evident that although Alfred Lord Tennyson appears to sympathize with women and their struggles, his poetry speaks otherwise. Instead of female emancipation, his verses reflect the female subordination that was and expected of and celebrated in the Victorian society. His poetry ultimately reinforces the patriarchal values of that time. Despite the psychological depth and complexity that his characters carry, yet they remain emotionally confined within structures of dependence, silence, and submission. As a result, Tennyson failed to be effectual in being the voice of the Victorian women as his representation reflects not complete feminism, but a limited and quasi-feminist vision shaped by the conservative gender ideology of his age.

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