TENNYSON AS A DRAMATIC POET

TENNYSON AS A DRAMATIC POET

The Context of his Plays

By

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: This thesis examines the plays of Tennyson in the context of his entire canon. It attempts to to show that the plays are important in determining what is truly Tennysonian by showing their place in Tennyson's fundamental concern with retreat and involvement, and in his search for an appropriate dramatic voice in his work.

PREFACE

The reasons for undertaking a study of Tennyson's plays may seem tainted with perversity from the very beginning. It has been universally agreed that the plays are inferior to his other work, and this is generally true; but they are particularly useful and interesting in showing Tennyson in something of a new light - as a dramatic poet, a poet who expresses himself clearly and profoundly in his plays, and a poet much of whose work is dramatic in a sense virtually synonymous with non-lyrical, at least in part.

The plays have been given little careful study. Usually, they receive brief, but rather embarrassed, mention in any book on Tennyson. There are very few critics who have taken the plays seriously enough to write on them, apart from the naively impressed reviewers in Tennyson's own day who compared him to Shakespeare without reseevation. There is however, a full-length book on Tennyson's plays, <u>The Dramas of Alfred, Lord Tennyson</u>, by C.G.H. Japikse (London: Macmillan, 1926). Superficially, the fact that a book has been written about the plays would seem to set them at

an advantage over other aspects of Tennyson's career. But this book is simply an elaboration of Hallam Tennyson's Memoir with a few suggestions of sources for the plays. Unfortunately, the book is as unhelpful as it is dull to read. This paper does not claim to fill the gap left by almost one hundred years of neglect; it merely attempts to point out two possible ways of considering Tennyson's plays and discusses some of the implications arising from them.

Tennyson devoted roughly ten years to the writing of his plays though the plays were not the only projects at hand during this time because he was still working on the Idylls. The significant point is that Tennyson made a sincere effort in writing the plays. Three of these plays show the benefits of this effort and reward the reader's (though not necessarily an audience's) attention. They are the first three plays which he wrote of the final seven plays - Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket - and it is on these plays that the discussion in this paper is focused. During the course of the argument, the minor plays will serve to illustrate general points insofar as they relate to the major history plays.

A word about texts: to avoid cluttering the pages with footnotes, I

have acknowledged certain recurring sources by references in the text. For the plays, all references (except for the two youthful dramatic fragments) are to volumes V and VI of the Eversley Edition (New York, 1908). Quotations are identified by the name of the play, except where this is clear from the context, the act and scene number, and the page number in the appropriate volume; unfortunately, the *Eversley Edition* does not have line numbers. For *The Devil and the Lady* and the poems, the references are to Christopher Ricks' edition, *The Poems of Tennyson* (London, 1969), and are identified by act, scene and line number or by line alone as the case may be. References to Hallam Tennyson's *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, are to the one-volume edition (London, 1905), and appear as "*Memoir*" followed by the page number. Sir Charles Tennyson's biography is identified throughout as "Sir Charles Tennyson" with the appropriate page number.

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I

THE "NOVICE" AND HIS EXPERIENCE

It must have been a particularly unsettling experience for Henry James to discover one day that Tennyson was not Tennysonian. He had earlier discovered that Tennyson's plays were un-Tennysonian and explained why he had reached this conclusion in a review of Queen Mary, Tennyson's first mature play. James concluded that Queen Mary "reads like Tennyson doing his best not to be Tennyson, and very fairly succeeding."[1] The review is at least partly appreciative, though it seizes upon several of Tennyson's weaknesses as a dramatist. James' main reaction, however, is the surprise he evinces at finding that the plays do not fit his previous notion of Tennyson as a poet.

A roughly similar comment is made about the novelty of Tennyson's writing plays by Paul F. Baum, who seems to think that Tennyson has not written any plays before Queen Mary. He remarks equivocally about

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[1]Henry James, Views and Reviews, pp. 166-7.

Queen Mary that "it is not only good dramatic writing or rather a splendid imitation of good dramatic writing, but also a remarkable achievement for a novice."[1] Tennyson, if he could, would be justified in retorting that this comment might have been understandable from a true novice, but not from a critic who has looked very far into Tennyson's work. If Baum is trying to alleviate Tennyson's responsibility in writing what Baum considers to be an unfortunate play, he is doing so on the least defensible of all grounds -- that Tennyson was a novice and did not know any better.

It is true that Tennyson is not known as a dramatic poet, but it is unfortunate that his plays are not more widely known. It is also true that Tennyson was in no sense a novice when he wrote *Queen Mary* since two of his earliest extant works are fragments in dramatic form -- *The Devil and the Lady* and a short dialogue between a young Spaniard, "a spirited stripling with a spice of suspicion and a preponderance of pride" (Ricks, p. 1781) and his elderly servant. Moreover, these early attempts at dramatic writing represent only part of his experiments with dramatic techniques and forms before he began to write his late plays; Indeed, without excessive exaggeration,

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[1]*Tennyson Sixty Years After*, p. 218.

his career may be seen as a series of attempts to write in various dramatic forms, culminating in the decade of the late plays, 1875-1884.

Tennyson's decision to turn to writing plays again in the 1870's was not a complete break from the past, as Baum would have us believe, nor was it a simple return to the work of his childhood. All his life, he had always been interested in the theatre and in dramatic literature, so that it was logical that he should himself try his hand at drama. The Devil and the Lady and the Spanish fragment are both of great importance in forming our impression of Tennyson as a dramatist. Chronologically, they were written very early, probably when the poet was fourteen (Memoir, pp. 19 and 21) and provide remarkable evidence that the dramatic instinct was strong in the young Tennyson. It is also reasonable to assume that by this time he had explored Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in considerable detail, especially since the main influence on The Devil and the Lady is Jonson's little known play, The Devil is an Ass. His acquaintance with drama was largely through reading rather than through seeing productions of the plays, so that it is natural that he shows little awareness of stage-craft and the practical demands of the theatre in these two pieces. It is surprising that these two fragments were never published during his lifetime.

The Memoir informs us that, along with other poems, they were withheld from the Poems by Two Brothers, "being thought too much out of the common for the public taste" (p. 19). This, however, may have been only part of the real reason. Much later in his life, Tennyson once remarked that he intended to destroy them before he died.[1] His dissatisfaction with them in later life and his decision not to publish at least The Devil and the Lady in Poems by Two Brothers are all the more perplexing because, as we shall see later, it has real merit, in spite of its limitations, merit that is almost entirely lacking in the poems which he contributed to the volume. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the first indication of real genius and the prophecy of future greatness came in Tennyson's career with a work cast in dramatic form, a fact which in itself ought to cause us to pause at least before confining Tennyson to the "Tennysonian" of Henry James.

Given the promise of The Devil and the Lady and the bulk of the later plays, the critic may be tempted to say that they represent two isolated phenomena in the career of a lyric, undramatic poet. But again this is an untenable argument, and must be rejected even if it tends to diminish our

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[1] Joanna Richardson, The Pre-Eminent Victorian, p. 18.

opinion of the later plays by proving the poet even less of a novice than we may have suspected. In fact, Tennyson's connections with the theatre and drama were strong enough that we cannot describe him as an elderly poet stupidly trying something new once his usual inspiration had been exhausted. Nor was he the fool who, having been deluded into thinking he was Shakespeare's equal by two generations of adoring readers, attempted to test himself against the great master. FitzGerald's "I think he might have stopped after 1842, leaving Princesses, Ardens, Idylls, etc., all unborn"[1] is equally wrong in suggesting that everything written after 1842 was inferior, because while writing the plays, Tennyson was writing poems in no way inferior to his earlier verse.

Before looking at the plays in terms of their relationship to Tennyson's career in later chapters, it is helpful first of all to examine the background of the plays: Tennyson's opinions and ideas about the theatre, particularly Shakespeare, and the context of the plays within the Victorian theatre.

The Memoir states clearly that Tennyson in early and middle life took a keen interest in the contemporary theatre and attended plays frequently,

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[1]Joanna Richardson, The Pre-Eminent Victorian, p. 203

criticizing both the productions and the plays themselves in detail (p. 563). Perhaps the best glimpses of Tennyson, the theatre critic, are contained in the sequel to a performance of Hamlet by Irving in 1874 as recalled by Mrs. Thackeray Ritchie:

> The play was over, and we ourselves seemed a part of it still; here were the [illegible], players, and our own prince poet, in that familiar simple voice we all know, explaining the art, going straight to the point in his own downright fashion, criticising with delicate appreciation, by the irresistible force of truth and true instinct carrying all before him. "You are a good actor lost," one of them, the real actors, said to him, laughing as he spoke. (Memoir, p. 543)

To Irving himself, Tennyson's comment was that his performance revealed more aspects of Hamlet's character than the poet had seen before (Memoir, p. 543). With such perception at his command then, Tennyson himself deserved better critics than he occasionally had. Dr. Alexander Murray, for example, enjoyed The Cup until two priestesses came on stage bearing an amphora:

> "You will hardly believe me," he told Stoker, Irving's business manager, "When I tell you it had red figures on a black ground, instead of black on red. I need not say that after that I could enjoy nothing."[1]

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[1]Joanna Richardson, The Pre-Eminent Victorian, p. 215.

His attitude to contemporary drama was not enthusiastic. His close acquaintance with all areas of drama led him to hate "the hideous realism and unreality of plays like 'La Tosca'" (_Memoir_, p. 563). But his main criticism of much contemporary drama was that it lacked "nature", that quality which he thought he had bestowed on _The Promise of May_ (_Memoir_, p. 643). Tennyson had a particularly lofty ideal of theatre. He saw it as "one of the most humanising of influences" (_Memoir_, p. 563) and foresaw its potential as a great force for education:

> He always hoped that the State, or the municipalities, as well as the public schools, would produce our great English historical plays, so that they might form part of the Englishman's ordinary educational curriculum. (_Memoir_, p. 563)

His view of the theatre as a didactic influence was no doubt one reason why he turned to British history for the subjects of his first three plays. History as well, provided an alternative to the realistic drama which he despised, one in which he could avoid the goals of a narrow realism and reach a greater, poetic truth. As Sir Charles Tennyson points out, the successes of Irving in Shakespeare, particularly as _Hamlet_, revived an interest not only in Shakespeare, but in poetic drama on the whole. And the new spirit in historical writing to which Sir Charles refers, particu-

larly among Tennyson's historian friends, combined with the new poetic drama to encourage Tennyson to write historical plays (Sir Charles Tennyson, p. 412). Another motivation, Sir Charles suggests, was the great Catholic-Protestant controversy of the second half of the nineteenth century (p. 413). Tennyson's sympathies were obviously Protestant, and the major history plays, he argues, trace the emergence of Protestant England. Although evidence of Reformation spirit is common in the three plays referred to, yet it appears more as English religious nationalism than as Protestantism. History provided Tennyson with subject matter which suited him in every respect: it gave him an opportunity to apply his ideas of educational theatre, it gave him the scope to explore poetically the ideas of power, government, morality, and history which he was treating in the _Idylls_, and it provided him with a metaphor for his own inner struggles. Finally, too, Tennyson was a poet who never stopped searching for new fields to explore within his craft. Singularly restless in his achievement, he always searched for new forms and ideas, and even when he returned to a theme or idea from his youth, it was always with a new insight.

The obvious model for a poet interested in experimenting in historical drama is Shakespeare; and to refer to Tennyson's "devotion" to Shakespeare

is scarcely an exaggeration. In his three major plays, he attempts to supplement Shakespeare's histories, and he unashamedly based them on the Shakespearean model, though the imitation occasionally as in some of the diction and the comic scenes, becomes altogether too slavish. And if the sort of sentimental death-bed argument of which the Victorians were so fond has any weight, it is worthwhile mentioning that Tennyson was reading Shakespeare just before he died, and was buried with a copy of *Cymbeline* (*Memoir*, pp. 776-7). Shakespeare was, unquestionably, Tennyson's favourite writer:

> Tennyson never wavered in his view that Shakespeare was head and shoulders above all other writers. He could understand and imagine the processes by which other great poets arrived at their results, but those of Shakespeare were entirely beyond his comprehension. (Sir Charles Tennyson, p. 451).

Tennyson's taste in Shakespeare was unorthodox by nineteenth-century standards. The *Memoir* indicates that the three plays "which he loved dearly" (p. 774) were *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. He knew Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* well, too; he is acknowledged to be an authority on the problems of the play's authorship in his argument that Shakespeare collaborated with Fletcher:

> This has indeed been a widely held view for over a hundred years. We may place the ultimate blame - or credit - for it

> on the poet Tennyson, about whose sensitivity to style and rhythm, and training in the technicalities of metre, there can be little question. Tennyson intimated to his friends that the verse of large parts of Henry VIII seemed to him much more like Fletcher's than like Shakespeare's.[1]

Tennyson's detailed knowledge of Henry VIII is of particular significance in another sense because it, perhaps of all Shakespeare's history plays, is the closest model for the loosely structured "chronicle play" which Tennyson attempts in Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket. In Henry VIII Shakespeare seems to lack the historical distance necessary to shape his material as completely as in the other plays, something that may well help to account for the fact that the structure of the play is very loose, with, for instance, characters who are prominent in the first part not appearing at all in the latter part. In addition to the looseness of the structure, Tennyson seems to have taken over the element of spectacle so prominent in Henry VIII in scenes like the Christening scene and the meetings of the Council. While Shakespeare provided a lofty model for Tennyson, he proved impossible to imitate and all too easy to copy. There can be no doubt about the merits of his model, but T.S. Eliot points out

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[1]F.D. Hoeniger, "Introduction to Henry VIII", The Complete Pelican Shakespeare, p. 781.

that Shakespeare's influence on subsequent verse-drama has been anything but felicitous; in discussing his own plays, he writes:

> I was... aware... that the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare, for I was persuaded that the primary failure of nineteenth-century poets when they wrote for the theatre... was not in their theatrical technique, but in their dramatic language.[1]

George Steiner sees the crippling influence as extending beyond versification into theme; he writes, "Indeed, from Coleridge to Tennyson, nearly all English poetic dramas are feeble variations on Shakespearean themes."[2]

An integral part of the Shakespearean influence on Tennyson is the kind of Shakespearean production which the Victorian theatre offered its audiences. Unlike the eighteenth century in which Shakespeare was improved to accord with current taste and the ending of King Lear was made into a happy family reunion, the nineteenth century, under the leadership of Macready, began to demand accuracy in the plays and so worked to eliminate eighteenth-century "improvements".[3] Even so, this was not at all the twentieth century's

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[1] T.S. Eliot, "Poetry and Drama", in On Poetry and Poets, p. 85.

[2] George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy, p. 145.

[3] George Rowell, The Victorian Theatre, p. 16.

insistence on accurate texts without major cuts, but the influence of realism led the producers of Shakespeare to employ settings and costumes that attempted to be historically correct. This suggested to Kean the change of The Winter's Tale to Bythinia (on which he could do exact research for a realistic setting) from an imaginary Bohemia. The vogue for medieval settings was nurtured in the latter part of the century, no doubt, by the Gothic revival and the renewed interest in the Middle Ages. Besides the great concern for fidelity to the historical fact (of which Young's dislike for the amphora paintings is symptomatic) Shakespeare was the exercise-ground of the great Acting stars: Macready, Kean, Kemble, Irving, Mrs. Siddons, and Ellen Terry. These celebrities made their names playing Shakespeare and became quite the ruling figures of Victorian theatre. It was Irving's Hamlet which made him the greatest actor in England (Sir Charles Tennyson, p. 412) and recommended him to Tennyson for Queen Mary. The productions of these plays were lavish in the extreme, particularly in the way that the Victorian imagination, fired by the Gothic revival, attempted to recreate a realistic medieval castle for the stage. The idea was, to quote Macready, that "the

accessories swallow up the poetry and the action."[1] At least one of Tennyson's plays, The Cup, was given a similar treatment, with the help of the British Museum's archaeological staff and one hundred pretty girls:

> Irving's imaginative power found full scope, particularly in the temple scene in the second act, in which a hundred beautiful girls were carefully chosen to represent the choir of Vestals, the massed colours of their costumes and their well-drilled rhythmical movements being something quite new in stage production.
> (Sir Charles Tennyson, p. 457)

There is a strong adherence to historical fact in the texts of Tennyson's plays as well. The history plays reveal a meticulous pursuit of historical fact, in part attributable to the taste of the day, but perhaps more essentially to Tennyson's fascination with it and his struggle to be completely objective in his assessment of his historical figures. In his attempt to achieve such objectivity, he read some twenty books (Memoir, p. 564) before writing Queen Mary, and the result suggests the sort of historical drama that might have been written by a professional historian.

Queen Mary presents one remarkable example of how Tennyson tried to

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[1] George Rowell, The Victorian Theatre, p. 16. The emphasis on individual scenic effects led to the isolation of "good scenes" and the approach of the scene as a unit in itself which we see in Tennyson's plays.

make his plays historically accurate. Sir Henry Bedingfield wrote to the poet protesting the injustice done to his ancestor of the same name who was lieutenant of the Tower during Elizabeth's imprisonment. Tennyson's response was to delete the specific identification of Bedingfield from the play and to add a line praising the maligned ancestor, though he maintained that he had portrayed him as he "found him reported to be, whether that were true or no" (Memoir, p. 565). If he had marred a reputation in his pursuit of historical accuracy, Tennyson felt that he had unjustly damaged another; he later regretted that he had not treated the character of Sir Thomas White fairly by not showing him as favourably as he deserved (Memoir, p. 565). This sort of niggling attempt to be fair to all the characters, to depict even the minor characters as they really were, ends in failure because the plays become historical documents of some authority in their own right, not the works of art they are primarily intended to be. In a rather pedantic footnote to Becket, to give one other example, Tennyson justifies his inclusion of the thunderstorm which, according to tradition, actually broke over Canterbury Cathedral after Becket's murder as the four knights were leaving. Thus, Tennyson saves himself from the charge that he is using a cheap melodramatic trick by appealing to historical fact, there-

by excusing something which he realizes may be melodramatic, but nevertheless, extremely effective in theatrical terms. Perhaps an even happier solution to this problem is T.S. Eliot's use of the inner psychological storm at the end of *Murder in the Cathedral*. Even in the non-historical plays, Tennyson stays extremely close to his sources: in *The Cup* he simply fleshes out Plutarch's characters; in *The Falcon*, he changes the ending slightly and to small effect; and his treatment of the Robin Hood ballads holds no surprises. In the minor plays, however (and this is a point we shall raise again) Tennyson seems to adhere to his sources because he has nothing else to say about them, perhaps because they do not greatly appeal to his imagination.

In a larger sense, there are two very important traditions of drama which are useful for setting Tennyson in his proper context: the stage-play, more especially, melodrama, and the closet drama. The stage play was written with the express purpose of being performed in a public theatre, often written by actors and managers primarily concerned about sensational productions, quite disregarding the requirements of taste. These were the people mainly responsible for the much-abused Victorian melodrama. The tradition of closet drama is more literary; a long line of poets and novelists in English have written closet dramas, plays which

were read rather than acted, without any real concern for the technical problems of production. All the great poets of the nineteenth-century - Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Browning, Arnold, and Swinburne - had written plays, most of which have never been staged. Swinburne's Bothwell is a good example of the extremes to which poets went in ignoring the considerations of practical theatre; it is about 15,000 lines long, approximately five times the length of an average Shakespearean play. None of Tennyson's plays shows such a flagrant disrespect for practical matters like these, though the three major history plays, Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket are too long for conventional production, and were in fact cut extensively for stage performance.

Nineteenth-century theatre is perhaps more closely identified with its melodrama than with any other kind of play. These melodramas were thrillers which provided strong emotional release for their middle-class audiences. They were heavily moralistic, and depended on rigid formulae for their characterization, theme, and form. The audience reaction for which they strove was almost purely emotional; their chief intention was to provide a villain who was evil and sinister enough for the audience to condemn by hissing, and a hero and heroine noble and sympathetic enough to arouse the spectators'

sympathy and cheers. Perhaps the easiest method of identifying a melodrama is to determine whether it can exist apart from the stage-production, so great is a true melodrama's debt to the spectacular and the theatrical for its effect rather than to the power of language.

Tennyson's plays are noteworthy for the way in which they try to bridge the gap between melodrama and closet drama. He began writing them fully aware of his lack of technical expertise:

> For himself he was aware that he wanted intimate knowledge of the mechanical details necessary for the modern stage.... His dramas were written with the intention that actors should edit them for the stage, keeping them at the high poetic level.
> (Memoir, p. 563)

Partly in an attempt to gain a wider audience, he added a romantic sub-plot to Harold and Becket in the Harold-Edith and Henry-Rosamund scenes. He had not included a sub-plot of this kind in Queen Mary, and it is the better for it.

Probably the most peculiar notion that Tennyson had about the theatre concerned his role as a playwright. In a letter to Moxon, his publisher, Tennyson asked to be sent each proof twice so that the text of his poems would be as correct as possible (Sir Charles Tennyson, p. 121). And yet, when he wrote his plays he prepared the scripts to be edited for the stage by

someone possessing the technical knowledge which he lacked; usually the editor was Sir Henry Irving. Tennyson believed that his work was finished once the play was submitted to the producers. He had no authority, and wished none, in the alterations and revisions required to make the plays stageworthy, except on a few rare occasions when extra lines were necessary. It was almost as if he believed it was the dramatist's responsibility to work out the original idea in dramatic form, but not necessarily in a form that could be staged. That revision was the function of the well-trained technician, one who could alter the play to become an acceptable production, while maintaining some sort of fidelity to the author's intentions. Thus, there is little connection, sometimes, between what Tennyson wrote and what the audience saw. He trusted Irving implicitly, though he regretted some of Irving's editorial decisions which he felt were made for non-artistic reasons. Still, a letter from his son, Hallam, to Irving illustrates Tennyson's flexibility clearly:

> We are grateful for your trouble... my father will alter anything -- or pray omit any of the lines which you think superfluous. Every amendment has been a real amendment -- so please ask for more amendments if you wish for any.[1]

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[1]Laurence Irving, _Henry Irving: The Actor and His World_, p. 365.

Finally, his determination that the plays should not be undramatic resulted in the determined exclusion of almost all lyricism from his plays. It is untrue that there are no lyrical passages in the plays, though there are surpringly few when one considers Tennyson's inclination to lyric verse. The lyrical aspects of the plays are too complex to be dealt with fully here, and will only be touched upon later, but we can detect almost immediately that the limiting of lyrical passages is deliberate. Tennyson was particularly afraid of including anything which would interrupt the emphasis on action in the plays. Before a play was published or staged, he would read it to friends, asking their advice on what they thought was too lyrical in its context. We are told that he was prepared to sacrifice even the loveliest lines in order not to impede the movement of the play (Memoir, p. 563 n.).

The kinds of plays Tennyson wrote, too, are determined in part by the desire to have them staged. An evening of theatre in Victoria's reign consisted of a major play and a short, trifling curtain-raiser. This practice encouraged the writing of one-act dramas like Tennyson's Falcon. This practice provided a powerful argument in the nineteenth century against performing Tennyson's history plays intact, since they were far too long to allow for a shorter play on the same programme.

In speaking of Tennyson's plays it is almost impossible to make generalizations which apply to all of them. The main obstacle, The Devil and The Lady, which is quite unlike anything else Tennyson ever wrote, is very much a poet's play, a play brimming with poetry and rhetoric, both of which are deliberately restrained later.

The Devil and The Lady is basically a youthful experiment in drama, full of exuberance and fun, two qualities lacking in his later plays and much of his other verse. The play convincingly refutes Sir Harold Nicolson's famous description of the young poet:

> Through the arteries of an athlete fluttered the frightened, sensitive pulses of a mystic; and under the scent and music of delicate and tender things pierced the coarse salt savour of the wold and marsh.[1]

The play is obviously a regurgitation of what the poet has been reading, much of it completely undigested. But its most impressive feature is the spirit of extravagance and vigour everywhere in its characters, its situation, its setting, and above all, in its rhetoric.

There are a few characteristics common to The Devil and The Lady and the later plays, though these tend to be minor similarities, interesting

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[1]Sir Harold Nicolson, Tennyson, p. 9.

because they exist rather than because they illuminate the plays. The first of these is the fondness for word-play, often a conceit, which becomes forced and unconvincing. The characters in The Devil and the Lady are fond of word-play of all kinds, from puns to this parody of jargon both military and erotic:

> Fair excellence,
> Thou hast held out long enough. I prithee now
> Capitulate on honourable terms,
> Disclose the dazzling windows of thine eyes,
> Display the rosy banners of thy cheeks
> And open the portcullis of thy lips,
> Within whose crimson tenement are ranged
> Thine ivory files of teeth. Consider, prithee,
> How shall the airy ardent kiss make way
> Through the thick folds of that dark veil, which bars
> All access to the fortress of thy soul.
> (III, i, 49 ff.)

In the later plays the word-play is still present, but more often as rather strained and earnest manipulation of words which lacks the sparkle of wit:

> My lord Archbishop, may I come in with my poor friend, my dog? The King's verdurer caught him a-hunting in the forest, and cut off his paws. The dog followed his calling, my Lord. (Becket, I, iv, p. 82)

The Devil and the Lady is like the early poetry and some of the later plays in that it is primarily a "literary play" full of allusions and learning that make it not entirely suitable for popular audiences; frequently the point of a joke depends on the audience's knowing what is being parodied or referred to, as in this burlesque of Paradise Lost:

> There is a Heaven beneath this Earth as fair
> As that which roofs it here.
> Dost think that Heaven is local, and not rather
> The omnipresence of the glorified
> And liberated Spirit - the expansion
> Of man's depressed and fettered faculties
> Into omniscience? (I, v, 19 ff.)

But there is one great difference between The Devil and the Lady and the later plays, and that is the moral ambiguity of the former. There is at least some problem of who is the more evil - the devil himself or Amoret. The devil is summoned to preserve Amoret's virtue, and there is no indication that he intends to abuse his trust, but Amoret's vicious denunciation of Magus seems entirely unjustified since he appears tolerable enough, and certainly not the stupid Chaucerian January who richly deserves his gulling. The audience is therefore left puzzled as to her motives and her feelings for Magus. The point is that there is no clear moral focus in the play, partly unintentionally as a result of the young Tennyson's inability to mould so much material, but also deliberately, because the uncertain position of the devil is carefully exploited for superb comic effect.

The contrasts between the juvenile dramatist and the mature one are particularly striking. The later plays are altogether more serious. Even the humour sounds more in earnest. In the comic scenes we are always aware that we are being offered relief from the main action, but it is relief which

bears obviously on the main action. Thus, when Becket gives his banquet for the poor, the comedy of the scene is stifled by the analogy of the rich host in Christ's Parable and its relevance to the action of the play. Unlike The Devil and the Lady the later plays have no real sense of fun and good spirits although as much as we may wish for comedy like that in The Devil and the Lady, its exclusion is deliberate.

> It has been asked why in his historical trilogy he does not give free rein to his sense of humour; the answer is, he held that a certain formal humour was the only humour possible now-a-days in stage-tragedy, which in its rapid action does not allow scope for original humour; and that even this formal humour must be kept in strict subservience to the plot.
> (Memoir, p. 575)

Harold is the only history play in which this theory of dramatic comedy does not figure, and many may feel that it is the better for it, because Tennyson's idea of comic relief seems decidedly un-comic and provides no release from the main action, so heavy is its ironic commentary on the main plot. In Queen Mary, Joan and Tib compare cows briefly, but they soon begin their unconsciously ironic, uncomprehending commentary on the burning of Cranmer and the other heretics. The comedy does not provide the relief which Tennyson believed was necessary to alleviate the play's "intense sadness" (Memoir, p. 566), and Hallam goes on to suggest

that the relief comes, not from comedy, but from "the holy calm of the meek and penitent Cranmer" (Memoir, p. 567).

About the later minor plays, little needs to be said. They are obviously trifles, present few critical problems, and are virtually devoid of interest, except insofar as they illustrate Tennyson's dramatic techniques. The first written of these is a short play, The Cup, with a stronger classical influence than the English history plays. It shows a more careful regard for the unities, though it does not meet French neo-classical requirements. Written in 1879, it was performed (in 1881) before being published with The Falcon in 1884. The subject is noteworthy. The play is based on an incident of extreme marital fidelity in Plutarch, but it is a comparative rarity among Tennyson's later work which is generally remarkable for its Englishness and its lack of the classical sources so frequently used by the younger Tennyson. Although it was highly praised in its day, it is hardly the lofty tragedy it was thought to be, but closer to a Victorian-eye view of a rather sordid Roman melodrama. The Falcon, a one-act play published with The Cup, is an even less substantial play based on a story from Boccaccio. It is the story of the virtuous love of the extravagant Count Federigo for the Lady Giovanna and is made more sentimental

in Tennyson's treatment, in which Boccaccio's bittersweet ending (whereby Giovanna's son dies because he cannot have the falcon) is changed to let him live - altogether a more sentimental, a more improbable, and a less satisfying conclusion.

The Promise of May, produced in 1882, is the only play by Tennyson to have a contemporary setting. The reason for this is probably closely allied to the reason that it is comparatively easy to stage - its most obvious models are contemporary melodramas. Like the melodramas, The Promise of May is in prose and is Tennyson's only published non-poetic work. The traditional melodramatic devices are prominent in the play - threatened suicides, wronged females, pathetic coincidences (such as the one which prevents Dora from meeting Edgar in the first act), and the final triumph of outraged virtue over sneaking villainy. But the play is a distinctively Tennysonian melodrama; Edgar's interest in new ideas and new systems of thought is shared by many Tennysonian heroes and by Tennyson himself, though as Tennyson's son wrote:

> Edgar is not, as the critics will have it, a freethinker, drawn into crime by his Communistic theories; Edgar is not even an honest Radical, nor a sincere

> follower of Schopenhauer; he is nothing thorough and nothing sincere. (Memoir, p. 641)

Edgar is not so much a liberal as a melodramatic villain who abuses as many intellectual and philosophical stances as maidens. Tennyson is not attacking liberal causes here; he is only attacking their misuse, particularly the insincere mouthing of them of which Edgar is guilty.

The Promise of May is contemporary in yet another way. If the seduction of Eva reminds us of the affair between Arthur Donnithorne and Hetty Sorrel in Adam Bede,[1] there are also clear echoes of Hardy in the play, particularly in the treatment of the rustic characters. The most striking example is the scene in which Dora pays the servants, giving each some advice with his wages. This recalls the famous comic episode in Far from the Madding Crowd in which Bathsheba pays her servants in much the same way. Hardy's scene is obviously comic and the novelist unfolds it at a leisurely pace, relishing each detail. But Tennyson's treatment is far more serious and Dora's lecture against the evils of drink disturbs the tone

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[1]Tennyson once told George Eliot that the flight of Hetty Sorrel was one of the "two most pathetic things in modern prose fiction." (Memoir, p. 607.)

of the scene rather seriously. Tennyson does not have the humour which makes the Hardy scene so successful, and his own such an unfortunate failure. The play was attacked by its early critics and Tennyson was put on the defensive. His only explanation was:

> I had a feeling that I would at least strive (in my plays) to bring the true drama of character and life back again. I gave them one leaf out of the great book of truth and nature. (Memoir, p. 643)

It is most unfortunate that such a noble defence is to be applied to an inferior melodrama, though it is perhaps significant that Tennyson attempts to elevate melodrama by giving it some intellectual substance.

Tennyson's last play, The Foresters, goes back in part to the chronicle of Britain and the struggle between Church and State in the other plays. It was written in 1881 but was published and performed in 1892, the premiere being in New York, with music by Sir Arthur Sullivan. The play is based largely on traditional ballads with the Shakespearean fairy scene included at Irving's request, and not completely in accordance with Tennyson's judgment (Memoir, p. 746). Certainly, the fairies add little to the play and their appearance has as much relevance to the main action as the ballet-scene to most nineteenth-century opera. Apart from the fairy scene, the play is somewhat better unified than the other longer plays, but

it lacks the force and stature to rank with the three major plays. Once again there is very little analysis of character and of the situation to distinguish the play.

On the whole, it is fortunate that Tennyson wrote more than plays! In themselves, they cannot redeem nineteenth-century theatre from oblivion. The minor plays are of little lasting value but the three major plays are, in some respects, impressive, and they warrant careful study. But they are perhaps particularly significant and interesting in the light which they cast on Tennyson's other work. What they tell us about Tennyson as a lyric poet and as a dramatist is important in our final estimate of him as a writer. Thematically and technically they are in the mainstream of his work; the plays are not a detour, but the logical step in his poetic development. Tennyson took his plays seriously. They are not an isolated phenomenon in a a poet's dotage, but a body of work important and integral enough in his career for us also to consider them carefully.

II

"THE LOT OF PRINCES" - THE THEMATIC CONTEXT

Queen Mary, *Harold* and *Becket* as history plays portray the making of England and it was Tennyson's claim that they filled in the gaps left in the Shakespearean history canon. Tennyson selected three periods of English history which bore particular significance as crucial times in British history. Tennyson, as elaborated by Hallam, explained what he intended:

> "This trilogy of plays... pourtrays [*sic*] the making of England." In "Harold" we have the great conflict between Danes, Saxons and Normans for supremacy, the awakening of the English people and clergy from the slumber into which they had for the most part fallen, and the forecast of the greatness of our composite race.
>
> "In "Becket" the struggle is between the Crown and the Church for predominance, a struggle which continued for many centuries.
>
> In "Mary" are described the final downfall of Roman Catholicism in England, and the dawning of a new age: for after the era of priestly domination comes the era of the freedom of the individual.
>
> "In "The Foresters"... I have sketched the state of the people in another great transition period of the making of England, when the barons sided with the people and eventually won for them the Magna Charta. (*Memoir*, p.562)

Because this is Tennyson's comment on the history plays, the reader should give it careful attention, but it provides little help in understanding

the plays. Tennyson implies in what he says that he is very much interested in the history of England, whether actual or largely mythical as in the case of The Foresters. While Shakespeare's history plays do form a panorama of the making of England, it is clear from a comparison of the histories written by the two dramatists that it is Tennyson who is the more interested in history as an end in itself. Tennyson seeks to trace historical themes in his plays which, strangely enough, are not readily apparent in the plays themselves. For example, it is difficult indeed to see the age of the individual, or even the end of priestly domination, implicit in the death of Becket. And how the "era of freedom of the individual" is related to the action of Queen Mary is anything but cleear. Princess Elizabeth offers no indication that her reign will be less authoritarian than her sister's—only that it will be more English and more Protestant. This is not to suggest that Tennyson's comments are stupid or wrong; but they exaggerate aspects of the plays out of proportion to the significance actually attached to them in the text. In Queen Mary, Tennyson seems more involved in the personal conflict of the queen than in the political implications of her reign in history, and the same general point is valid

for Harold and Becket also.

Because Tennyson's comments tend to distort what appears to be the focus of the plays, it seems scarcely profitable to study them in terms of an historical panorama. A far more rewarding approach to the plays is through the fundamental Tennysonian preoccupation with the conflict between the private and the public. Like most of Tennyson's greatest work, the major history plays deal with the problem. If the plays are ostensibly public statements about British history, they are also on a more significant level, statements by the poet about one of his central preoccupations, the problem of retreat and involvement.

It has long been recognized that a basic concern in Tennyson's poetry is the dilemma of whether the poet should retreat into a world of private aestheticism and self-indulgence, or whether he should commit himself to a life of social action. The tension between "the two voices" is of course, usually identified with the poet's doubts after the death of Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. But it is wrong to associate the theme of retreat and commitment exclusively with the poet's reaction to Hallam's death because biographical fact makes it clear that the theme was prominent

in discussions among the Apostles, and there are numerous poems to be found dealing with this problem which were written before Hallam's death. As Ricks points out (p. 522) the poem entitled "The Two Voices" was largely written before the time of the death, though the conclusion and presumably other sections were modified in the knowledge of this new blow to the poet. The theme is not restricted to the early poems, or those of the 1842 volume. It is prominent in *In Memoriam*, *Maud* and *Idylls of the King*, and throughout his career though it is altered and developed as the poet matures and in the plays it appears as a reflection on the problems facing an essentially private person, one with individual standards, who finds himself in a public role.

The plays, then, show Tennyson extending his treatment of the problem of retreat from the world or commitment to it into a new area. No longer is the conflict simply between the world and the ivory tower, although it is clearly derived from the early forms of the poet's dilemma. In the earliest poems, the theme appears as a clear choice between life and art in terms strongly suggesting the influence on the young poet of Keats, with his ultimate, and hard-won distinction between the dreamer and

the poet. Tennyson's early poems are clearly "literary"; they depend on literature rather than on the poet's own observation and experience which form the basis for his later work. Like The Devil and the Lady, and the poems dedicated to women, they are based more essentially on what the poet has read, rather than on what he has felt. Perhaps the most Keatsian poem in its treatment of escape is "Recollections of the Arabian Nights" in which the poet recalls with nostalgia the time of his own innocence when he could enter the fantastic world of "good Haroun Alraschid" and abandon the outside world. In spite of the obvious attractions of the place, even for a short vacation, the poet seems to sense the unnaturalness of the voyage, since in order to reach this world of escape, he must travel on tides which flow contrary to their normal direction:

> The tide of time flowed back with me
> The forward-flowing tide of time. (ll. 3-4)

Even now, the poet perceives something strange, possibly sinister, in his escape, although the temptation to indulgence is too great for him to resist.

Other early poems offer no happier solutions to the conflict. In

none of them is the reconciliation to the world of action complete. The Lady of Shalott is trapped in a world which is linked to other human activity by a mirror. When she is "half sick of shadows" (l. 71), she leaves her tower, but immediately dies in accordance with the curse put upon her. She cannot remain in her tower, nor can she survive in the outside world; both have their attractions, but neither can offer her complete happiness. The Lady of "The Palace of Art" also leaves the palace for a cottage where she can "mourn and pray" (l. 292), but she cannot have the palace torn down, nor does she intend to accept human companionship; Elton Edward Smith cites Lucas's phrase in suggesting that the soul is exchanging an "ivory tower for an ivory cottage"[1]. The most interesting example of the failure to come to terms with the outside world is to be found in "The Two Voices" where the poet, in countering the voice of despair tempting him to suicide, is forced to surrender all hopes of heroic deeds, and in the end, the poet having been impressed by the sight of a happy family on their way to Church, goes out into the fields to meditate alone. The poet describes his youthful idealism;

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[1] Elton Edward Smith, The Two Voices, p. 25.

Waiting to strive a happy strife,
To war with falsehood to the knife,
And not to lose the good of life -

Some hidden principle to move,
To put together, part and prove,
And mete the bounds of hate and love -

As far as might be, to carve out
Free space for every human doubt,
That the whole mind might orb about -

To search through all I felt or saw,
The springs of life, the depths of awe,
And reach the law within the law. (ll. 130-41)

If "The Lotos-Eaters" and "Ulysses" are regarded as companion poems, we can detect the same pattern. In "The Lotos-Eaters" the sailors are to be won over to the indulgence of the island, away from their voyage home. Once Ulysses reaches his home, however, he finds it crippled by domestic matters which he does not wish to solve and is tempted once again to leave his duty, this time by a vague, possibly fruitless, desire to wander. Once again the obligation to duty, after one has rejected the initial temptation to ease, is ambiguous and unsure, though added doubt has arisen as a result of Hallam's death.

The comic resolution of In Memoriam, too, is clouded with ambiguity. The final statement of faith seems, as Tennyson himself pointed out, too forced, too much of a leap of faith to carry conviction in a poem which so painstakingly traces the slow advance from doubt to faith. Even in

the final section, the poet participates in a social ritual, not social reform, and he seems isolated from the others; his act of reunion with his fellow man is not whole-hearted, for he seems closer to Hallam than to the guests at the wedding:

> The noon is near,
> And I must give away the bride;
> She fears not, or with thee beside
> And me behind her, will not fear.
>
> ...
>
> O happy hour, and happier hours
> Await them. Many a merry face
> Salutes them - maidens of the place,
> That pelt us in the porch with flowers.
>
> ...
>
> But they must go, the time draws on,
> And those white-favoured horses wait;
> They rise, but linger; it is late;
> Farewell, we kiss, and they are gone.
>
> A shade falls on us like the dark
> From little cloudlets on the grass,
> But sweeps away as out we pass
> To range the woods, to roam the park. (ll. 41-4, 65-8, 89-96)

The distinction between "we" and "they" indicates the extent to which the poet feels alienated from the celebrations; only at occasional moments does "we" refer to the bridegroom and his bride as well as the poet. And, as in "The Two Voices", the poet is left alone at the end to reflect on what has happened. Further one might add that the hero of *Maud* seems curiously alone as he prepares to fight in the wars, and Sir Bedivere, at

the end of the *Idylls* is about as isolated as a man can be.

The change in the problem of retreat from the world between its form in *In Memoriam* and its development in the plays is complete. Whereas *In Memoriam* ends inconclusively, the major history plays present situations in which the protagonists are in prominent public office, a position which they have been pushed into; Mary is queen by heredity not by choice, Harold is made King by Edward without having to fight William as he had anticipated, and Becket is made Archbishop against his own advice. These figures, finding themselves already in a public position, are forced to resolve a conflict between their public roles on the one hand and their personal lives and moral standards on the other.

Tennyson could hardly have shown this conflict more clearly than in his portrayal of Queen Mary. Although she is trapped in a public office by forces she cannot control, she is basically a love-sick wife throughout the play. Her only motives are her love for Philip, her devotion to the Church, and her family pride, especially her love for her wronged mother. Unlike Elizabeth, Cardinal Pole, and Philip, she is not sufficiently aware of her public position to rule successfully, and because she is such

a private person, used to having her own way, she cannot compromise on matters of public interest.[1]

Tennyson stresses this view of Mary, in her first appearance. Our most immediate impression is that her infatuation for Philip eliminates all other public concerns. She appears, kissing Philip's portrait, desperately trying to reassure herself of his merit. The hyperbole in her speech as she awaits Philip's arrival, however, indicates even more powerfully what her feelings are:

> God change the pebble which his kingly foot
> First presses into some more costly stone
> Than ever blinded eye. I'll have one mark it
> And bring it me. I'll have it burnish'd firelike;
> I'll set it round with gold, with pearl, with diamond.
> Let the great angel of the church come with him;
> Stand on the deck and spread his wings for sail!
> God lay the waves and strow the storms at sea,
> And here at land among the people!
> (I, v, p. 315)

Philip's statement much later in the play that he is "ever deadly sick at sea" (III, vi, p. 402) effectively undercuts Mary's imaginative extravagance

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[1] In many ways Mary is similar to Shakespeare's Richard II who faces the same conflict, though his personal motives are less respectable. The problems posed by the apparently insoluble clash of private and public moralities are also central in *Henry IV*, *Henry VI*, and possibly *Henry V*.

for the audience as does the confession that he does not love her. In spite of her disappointment, her love for Philip does not falter, but in fact becomes a blind devotion to him which can lead her to commit foolish political mistakes. Renard threatens that Philip will not come until Mary has Lady Jane Gray executed:

> Too much mercy is a want of mercy,
> And wastes more life. Stamp out the fire,or this
> Will smoulder and re-flame, and burn the throne
> Where you should sit with Philip: he will not come
> Till she be gone. (I, v, p. 315)

Mary's peace of mind is challenged here, since she is sympathetic to Lady Jane and wishes to spare her, but her passion for Philip presents such a test for her that she dodges the dilemma by feigning illness and dismissing Renard. She soon learns, however, that Philip is not always satisfied with evasion of the question.

The second of Mary's great loves is the Church and she is so closely identified with it that there are several references made to her as the second Mary, an analogy which she herself uses in her "Prince of Peace" soliloquy. Her attitude to the Church explains her relentless and politically foolish persecution of heretics. Her duty is to purge the Church of heresy and she is determined to do this even if she must sac-

rifice her crown:

> If we could burn out heresy, my Lord Paget,
> We reck not tho' we lost this crown of England -
> Ay! tho' it were ten Englands! (III, iv, p.381)

It is not enough that she should marry a foreigner in a time of great national pride among her people, but she must kill heretics who do not accept the Roman Catholic Church, thus creating a host of ready-made martyrs to stir up public antipathy against herself, the Church, and Philip. But she cannot compromise those feelings which are most important to her. She insists on continuing her attack on heresy over the objections of Philip (III, vi, p.402) who sees the political stupidity in the executions, and even over those of Cardinal Pole, the papal emissary, who cannot justify the vigour of the persecution even on ecclesiastical grounds:

> Methinks that under our Queen's regimen
> We might go softlier than with crimson rowel
> And streaming lash. When Herod-Henry first
> Began to batter at your English Church,
> This was the cause, and hence the judgement on her.
> She seethed with such adulteries, and the lives
> Of many among your churchmen were so foul
> That heaven wept and earth blush'd. I would advise
> That we should thoroughly cleanse the Church within
> Before these bitter statutes be requicken'd.
> (III, iv, p.385)

Mary cannot understand these arguments because of her own strong con-

victions; she cannot suspend her faith and her idea of right to gain popularity, even if this means she must lose her throne for what she believes.

Finally, Mary is governed by her childhood experience, and her bitterness over Henry VIII's divorce action against her mother.[1] She is attracted to her mother, too, by the Spanish blood which also binds her to Philip. The psychological insights into this aspect of Mary's character are almost startlingly perceptive and credible. She cannot forgive her father's treatment of her mother and she shows no sympathy for those who supported his claims for the divorce. Cranmer has recanted his heresy, but in spite of this and against all precedent, Mary has him burned nevertheless, simply because he supported the king against her mother:

> Cranmer is head and father of these heresies,
> New learning as they call it; yea, may God
> Forget me at most need when I forget
> Her foul divorce - my sainted mother - No!
> (IV, i, p.410)

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[1]It is interesting to note that she pities her mother as the victim of a king who let political considerations interfere with his marriage in securing the annulment.

One of the most significant aspects of Mary's character is that she seems unable to distinguish between personal enemies and political opponents, and between heretics and traitors. Cranmer, for his support of Henry's divorce, is somehow an enemy of Mary's mother, and hence of Mary herself. And to her mind, there is no difference between a heretic and a traitor; she punishes the same way and talks about them indiscriminately in the same speech, if not the same breath:

> The King and I, my Lords, now that all traitors
> Against our royal state have lost their heads
> Wherewith they plotted in their treasonous malice,
> Have talk'd together, and are well agreed
> That those old statutes touching Lollardism,
> To bring the heretic to the stake, should be
> No longer a dead letter, but requicken'd.
> (III, iv, p.380)

She cannot hold her position with any real power because she cannot separate herself from her position, that is, she is the same person when she is Queen of England as when she is a man's adoring wife. She will gladly give up any part of her official position to preserve her love for Philip, the authority of her Church, and the honour of her mother. Any political wisdom and insight she does have seems to be as a judge of character, but this is instinctive suspicion perhaps more than a political skill. She may be able to see through Noailles (I, v, pp. 309-10) but she does not

understand the temper of her kingdom; she may suspect that Philip does not love her, but she does not comprehend the political advantages he intends to gain.

Philip, indeed, is the foil to Mary's love of the private life.[1] Far from being the idealized demi-god which Mary envisions, he is an ugly, unprincipled scoundrel whose only goal is to gain power and whose most fundamental consideration is to survive at all costs. Thus, he consents to marry the Queen of England not only to gain England for himself and for Spain, but also to prevent a royal alliance with France, a match which would upset the existing balance of power to Spain's disadvantage. Perhaps the most disappointing example of this kind of behaviour, for Mary, is Philip's request, once it seems clear that Mary will not give birth to a "Prince of Peace", that she make Elizabeth her heir to the throne. In

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[1]Philip is pretty clearly a straightforward melodramatic villain who remains totally evil and undeveloped in the play. Compare Hardy's use of the same stock figure in Alec D'Urberville. Hardy counts on our ability to identify him as such, and then turns his stock characterization to further development in the novel. Perhaps Tennyson's wish that Irving not play Philip reflects his own dissatisfaction with Philip.

spite of her fear that Elizabeth will make England Protestant again, Mary's love for her husband, now an almost absurd desire to please him, overcomes her objections and at his insistence, she agrees. Philip's reasons are very simple and completely political - he wants Mary Queen of Scots who is closely allied to France kept off the throne of England so that England is at worst neutral in the French-Spanish conflict. Philip makes his intentions quite clear, however; he has no real intention of giving up the British throne, but now that he is tired of Mary, he considers marrying Elizabeth if she should ever become queen. He is sure that there will be war with France, and he is determined to have English support in it. For Philip political motives carry the greatest importance, and he is only too pleased to leave a wife he detests once it is clear that she is no longer attractive or politically useful to him.[1]

Mary and Philip, then, represent two extremes. Philip's actions are planned with a view to his political success. Mary (and this is how she

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[1]It is interesting to compare Philip with Synorix in The Cup. Although he is identified as the ultimate rake, Philip's marriages are largely political, whereas Synorix uses national political issues and problems to advance his private suit for Camma's hand in a deliberate confusion of public and private roles.

gains the reader's sympathy) is a figure of conscience, no matter how mistaken that conscience may seem to us, and everything else is made secondary to this basic concern. Mary is too intelligent never to doubt her position, but she sincerely believes she is right and everyone else is wrong. Thus, she is justified in her persecution of Protestants, however unwise politically it may be. She may give in to Philip, but she never really compromises her views on heresy; she succeeds in imposing her personal religious views on a nation largely out of sympathy with Catholicism. As long as she is queen, she will rule only in accordance with her own conscience, never as a result of political compromise. And, above all, she will remain a wife foolishly infatuated with an idealized husband who does not really exist. Perhaps one short exchange sums up their attitudes most graphically. They are discussing whether or not he can delay another day before leaving her:

> Philip: Madam, a day may sink or save a realm.
>
> Mary: A day may save a heart from breaking too.
> (III, vi, p.407)

In capsule form Mary and Philip reveal their respective attitudes to their position. Philip, always the consummate politician, is concerned

about the fall of an empire, while Mary's thoughts are solely for their marriage and her love for her reluctant husband. Philip has no problem accommodating his private self to his public role and as such is scarcely human; Mary can find no satisfactory reconciliation and is altogether human.

There are many differences of treatment between *Queen Mary* and *Harold*. Perhaps the most significant of these is that *Harold* is called superficially a tragedy, "A tragedy of doom". Tennyson made no such claim for *Queen Mary* and, in fact, did not even call it a history play, but referred to it as "more of a chronicle-play" (*Eversley*, VI, p. 627). There are copious supplies of omens both natural and supernatural in the play, but their function is mere literary than prophetic, and while Harold is wrong to sneer at them, they seem to be merely signs accompanying his fall, not signs from the Fates to warn him. Harold, like Mary, is a private figure forced to occupy a throne tainted with rash, unfulfilled promises and ugly political compromise. Harold is utterly honest, a man of the highest standards of personal morality, completely unaccustomed to the dealing, lying, and negotiating in which he becomes involved. When he aspires to take over Edward's throne, his vague planning collapses and he

is destroyed because he does not have William's qualities as a successful leader. He is a more complex figure than Mary, because he seems comfortable in his position as Earl of Wessex; and his demonstrated talents as a merciful administrator combined with his sense of public duty indicate that his motives in seeking the throne are commendable. But it is when he is thrust into the turbulent and dangerous politics of the succession that his personal standards are challenged and he is destroyed.

<u>Harold</u> contains one type of character imported directly from <u>Queen Mary</u> with virtually no change - Aldwyth. Like Philip, her marriages are political ones, and she is prepared to marry a man she hates to gain whatever political ends she considers necessary, as well as a considerable share of personal prestige:

> I see the goal and half the way to it. -
> Peace-lover is our Harold for the sake
> Of England's wholeness - so - to shake the North
> With earthquake and disruption - some division -
> Then fling mine own fair person in the gap
> A sacrifice to Harold, a peace-offering,
> A scape-goat marriage - all the sins of both
> The houses on mine head - then a fair life
> And bless the Queen of England. (I, ii, p. 509)

William shares some of Aldwyth's opportunism, though he remains a fuzzy and rather shapeless character who develops little in the play. He is the arch

political strategist, using every half-baked pretext he can discover to justify his claim to the English throne. Like Philip he is prepared to employ any means to gain power even at the expense of betraying established values and ideas.

Harold and Edward share certain characteristics in contrast to William and Aldwyth. Both are seriously concerned with the dictates of their own consciences. Edward is perhaps closest to Queen Mary in his piety and in his lack of interest in contemporary politics. As Stigand says of the old king, he has "a conscience for his own soul, not his realm" (III, i, p. 541). Edward, even more than Harold, has been trapped in his public role, but he has retreated from it and has chosen the life of a saint. As Tennyson sees him, Edward is a weak king, a man unpardonably more interested in the after-life than in this. He has come to regret his foolish promise of the English throne to William, made when the throne was not his to give away. And his weakness as a leader is compounded by his Normanness, his love for his French ancestors and his unquenched suspicion of his English realm. Faced with these difficulties Edward has surrendered his Kingship in practice, while retaining it in name, weakening not only his own position, but also

the authority and prestige of the kingship itself.

Harold differs from Queen Mary and Edward because he is already committed to a life of statecraft, and the play implies that he has been very successful at it. As a man with considerable ambition and a sense of responsibility, he wishes to succeed to the throne on Edward's death, but this ambition to ultimate public office is a significant cause of his defeat. Harold's complete integrity is widely known:

> Being brave he must be subtly cow'd,
> And being truthful wrought upon to swear
> Vows that he dare not break. (II, ii, p.516)

William's knowledge of Harold's character leads him to trick the English nobleman, by forcing him to swear on concealed relics, and pinning his claim on Edward's hasty and thoughtless offer of the throne. Harold's "Better die than lie" (II, ii, p. 522) (apart from any unfortunate twentieth-century anti-Communist echoes it may have) is a clear statement of his honesty and courage.

Great claims have been made[1] for the perjury scene where Harold swears on concealed Norman relics. Certainly its theatricality cannot be denied, but its significance within the development of the play is less clear. William does not use the relics to gain Harold's promise for the

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[1] For one such view, see Jebb's review in Eversley, vol. V, 662-3.

first time, but merely to confirm the doubts lurking in the minds of the French nobles (and of Harold) about Harold's sincerity. When he first makes Harold promise to help his claim to the throne, we see his shrewdness once more, since he forces Harold's hand by threatening his young brother, Wulfnoth, who in turn sways Harold by appealing to his love for Edith.[1] The great oath-taking scene, however, makes Harold's acceptance of the throne from Edward more intolerable, since his word is now perjured and valueless. Harold has violated his personal standards of conduct, so that his position on the throne is almost as weak as his predecessor's, as Edward realizes when he forbids him to marry Edith. Harold is trapped after that scene; he cannot regain his lost integrity, nor can he give up his throne. Unlike Orestes in <u>The Eumenides</u>, Harold is not pursued by a relentless, supernatural doom towards his death. Rather, his fate seems to stem from his own immediate problem, the problem of maintaining his integrity in public office. In one sense, his tragedy is of his own making; he is not

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[1]Harold's private nature is emphasized by his wish for a holiday, a chance to leave his political responsibilities to bring his brother home. (I, i, p. 496). It is a significant contrast that the emphasis in William's character is reversed because his son, Rufus, is spoiled and rebellious even though his father is a great political leader. (II, ii, pp. 517-18).

obliged to perjure himself as he did and yet to resist such temptation is almost more than human. This, I think, is Tennyson's point. The temptations are attractive because they are always difficult to resist. But when Harold makes a political promise in response to threats to his family, a promise which he does not intend to keep, the pressure on such a man's integrity is so great that he will inevitably fail. Quite simply, a man in Harold's position cannot afford to allow personal feelings and beliefs to interfere with his own career if he wishes to succeed. William and Aldwyth are clear examples of this, although Harold may be the greater ruler, the wiser and more generous man:

> In mine earldom
> A man may hang gold bracelets on a bush,
> And leave them for a year, and coming back
> Find them again. (II, i, p. 514).

Harold is not boasting about the honesty of his people as much as the ideal moral atmosphere where his own example serves as a model for his subjects. While concern for his people consolidates his position, it is ineffective against such a military and political muscle-man as William whose strength and ambition aid him to his eventual triumph.

The Prefatory Sonnet says that the play is based on the premise that

might is right. Tennyson is consciously playing with this cynical tag and although he says he believes it, he means that it is true only on a large historical scale, and since the drift, if not the progress, of history is toward the good, William is not simply a villain trampling justice and virtue. His strength defeats Edward and Harold's weakness, though it is right that this should happen, because in historical process, all things work out for the best. We cannot have the final perspective which sees everything in its ultimate significance because such knowledge belongs only to God, so we must simply trust that the final outcome will be happy:

> Forward then, but still remember how the course of Time will swerve,
> Crook and turn upon itself in many a backward streaming curve.
>
> Follow you the Star that lights a desert pathway, yours or mine.
> Forward, till you see the highest Human Nature is divine.
>
> Follow light and do the Right - for man can half-control his doom -
> Till you find the deathless Angel seated in the vacant tomb.
>
> Forward, let the stormy moment fly and mingle with the Past:
> I that loathed, have come to love him. Love will conquer at the last.
> ("Locksley Hall, Sixty Years After", ll.235-6,275-80)

Might is not necessarily right in the immediate view. Tennyson is saying simply that the final judgment has yet to be made on Harold, William, and their contemporaries, and that his own response to their weaknesses and strengths as the problem of retreat in opposition to altruism is in no way definitive.

Tennyson's last major play, Becket, looks at the same problem of a private man in a public office, though here the situation and its ramifications are more complex than in the earlier plays because Tennyson is employing the fact that this is the most commonly known plot of all the history plays to achieve a richer effect. Here, the conflict is two-fold: between what Becket was as Chancellor and what he is now as Archbishop, and between what he believes his role is and what the rest of the aristocracy believe it to be. The structure of the play reinforces this dilemma; the Prologue shows Becket as the unordained Chancellor and the play itself deals with Becket as a priest and Archbishop. And yet, once he appears as the Archbishop, there is no doubt of how he will act in his new position. The Church, he says, is to be a bulwark against those people with whom he had previously been allied:

> The people know their Church a tower of strength,
> A bulwark against Throne and Baronage. (I, i, p. 29)

Late in the play he expresses his view of the separation of church and state even more strongly:

> When they seek to overturn our rights,
> I ask no leave of king, or mortal man,
> To set them straight again. Alone I do it.

> Give to the King the things that are the King's,
> And those of God to God. (V, ii, pp. 197-8)

Like Harold, Becket has come to outstanding public office from a more secure office; he has been committed previously to public service, so that his dilemma is not solely the conflict between his office and quiet home-life, but rather between a secure position and one where he is exposed to criticism and physical danger. As long as Becket was Henry's secular lieutenant, both attempting to curb the authority of the Church, Becket was safe. But now that he has been made Archbishop and is expected by the king to be a puppet under his control, Becket fights king and barons to assert the proper role of the Church in an attempt to keep the functions and the jurisdictions of the two from coming into conflict. The conflict between the chancellor and the archbishop is only part of a larger and more general tension between the past and the present. The things Becket used to do are not the things he must do now. The change in standards - or perhaps more precisely, in aims - is particularly poignant in that it entails the break-up of the remarkable friendship which had existed between the King and Becket:

> The friends we were!
> Co-mates we were, and had our sport together,
> Co-kings we were, and made the laws together.
> The world had never seen the like before. (II, ii, p.109)

Becket expresses doubt about the wisdom of the appointment before he is officially given the position, realizing that the argument to get him to accept the Chancellorship had proven idealistic and meaningless:

> He did prefer me to the chancellorship,
> Believing I should ever aid the Church -
> But have I done it? He commends me now
> From out his grave to this archbishoprick.
> (Prologue, p. 23)

The problem about Becket which has fascinated writers is whether or not there actually is a change in Becket's character as he gives up secular office for ecclesiastical, where his personal beliefs are exposed and challenged. Tennyson makes it clear that there are certain aspects of Becket's character which seem to us more appropriate to the Chancellor than to the Archbishop as when, surely aware that Henry is considering him as the likeliest successor to the See of Canterbury, he justifies his love of sensuous pleasure:

> Men are God's trees, and women are God's flowers;
> And when the Gascon wine mounts to my head,
> The trees are all the statelier, and the flowers
> Are all the fairer. (Prologue, p. 10)

Becket as Chancellor makes elaborate sauces to make the fish eaten on the days required by the Church, more palatable. (Prologue, p. 9) and it is significant that he continues to look after Rosamund de Clifford, the King's

mistress, after his ordination as carefully as before. The change in Becket, then, is not so much one in character as in allegiance. As long as he was Chancellor, he was the King's man, but as Archbishop, he becomes the Church's man, and he carefully distinguishes between these two authorities.

Becket's challenge lies in convincing those around him that there is basically no contradiction between his past and his present, or between the state and his personal views concerning the Church without remaining the King's pawn. In another way, Henry wants Becket to be the same kind of Archbishop as Chancellor and so he suggests Becket retain both positions. He expects the Archbishop to give him the support of the Church for what he does, and he wants him to remain Chancellor with only incidental concern for his religious functions. When Becket insists on separating the two positions by resigning his Chancellorship,[1] Henry realizes that his gamble has lost, and that Becket is determined to fulfil his religious appointment seriously and completely. Becket accepts the position to uphold a principle,

[1]Unlike Mary, Becket's struggle is to keep personal motives out of public acts. He attempts to separate public and private ambitions, but the mixture of complaints from the King and the Queen that lead up to his death provides the convincing evidence that this is not possible.

but as we have seen, principle stands no chance against adaptability which aims at survival whatever the cost or risk.

But as Louise Rouse Rehak points out, Tennyson's Becket is even more complex because the dramatist does not answer the questions arising from Becket's rigidity in maintaining his personal position against the King:

> We cannot know whether the historical Becket was inspired by God or deluded by pride; the playwright is entitled to accept either possibility, or to use both. Eliot assumes the former, and draws a theatrically effective sermon therefrom; Tennyson makes no final declaration. If in the body ofthe play he suggests the latter, in the conclusion he tempers scepticism with a possibility of genuine sacrificial faith, covering the death with a terrible irony.[1]

Becket admits his stubbornness and arrogance, but he feels that the King is equally at fault; both, in fact, are too "headlong" for their offices (II, ii, p. 115). And Roger of York is guilty only of exaggeration when he accuses Becket of "boundless arrogance" (V, i, p. 170). Becket's pride is a strength in that it leads him to resist the King, but it takes him too

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[1]Louise Rouse Rehak, "On the Use of Martyrs: Tennyson and Eliot on Thomas Becket", University of Toronto Quarterly, XXXIII (1963), 45.

far in his crusade and he is consequently destroyed by the forces which it stirs up. His refusal to compromise at the beginning of the play is commendable although at the end, this is less clear. There is something rather petty about Becket by the end of the play. Beyond the sense of his impending martyrdom, he realizes, and perhaps exaggerates, the forces opposing him. Becket does not view any compromise on his part as a desertion of the Church, but rather as a betrayal of his own personal principles:

> False to myself - it is the will of God
> To break me, prove me nothing of myself!
> (I, iii, p. 60)

The archbishop's own conscience is the arbiter of his actions, not the Pope, King Louis, King Henry, or his own devoted followers; and any failure to follow the lead of his conscience is a personal failure. The issue is not so clear in Henry's mind, however, for he suggests that Becket confuses his will with God's:

> Whatsoever may displease him - that
> Is clean against God's honour - a shift, a trick
> Whereby to challenge, face me out of all
> My regal rights. (II, ii, p. 111)

The archbishop is surrounded by compromises, people who have realized that to survive means that they must accommodate themselves to their environment. King Louis is a perfect example of how such a compromise

must be effected. Louis' devotion and piety are beyond reproach - one reason why Eleanor left him - and yet he is apparently an effective ruler. He tells Becket that there is no room for one-sided fanaticism of the kind Becket espouses, since it denies the value of the present in this world over the next. Louis argues that such a compromise is not a cheap abdication of one's principles, but a pragmatic and reasonable attitude in view of one's position:

> We have claspt your cause, believing that our brother
> Had wrong'd you; but this day he proffer'd peace.
> You will have war; and tho' we grant the Church
> King over this world's kings, yet, my good lord,
> We that are kings are something in this world.
> (II, ii, p. 113)

Unlike Edward, Louis has adjusted himself to his dual roles, as a faithful member of the Church and as a secular monarch. But Becket cannot take such a liberal view of Henry's position and continues to consider the king a threat to the Church's authority. Yet it is clear that Henry is willing to compromise with Becket, in order to achieve some sort of unity within the Kingdom:

> I must patch up a peace -
> A piece in this long-tugged-at, threadbare-worn
> Quarrel of Crown and Church - to rend again.
> His Holiness cannot steer straight thro' shoals,
> Nor I. The citizen's heir hath conquer'd me
> For the moment. So we make our peace with him.
> (II, ii, p. 107)

Henry does not seriously consider a permanent truce, but he knows that he needs Becket's support at least temporarily and is prepared to woo it. Above all, he does not want a foreign-controlled Church (a common English complaint in Queen Mary and Harold as well) and so he flirts with the Pope supported by the Holy Roman Empire in a half-hearted attempt to undermine or at least control the authority of the Church in England. Henry also takes the unusual measure of having his son crowned during his own lifetime so that there will be an unchallenged heir to the Kingship if he should be killed. Even when the child has to be crowned without Becket's participation, Henry is most anxious to placate Becket and to secure the son's position by having Becket himself confirm the rite which is completely his prerogative. And when he can get no support from Becket, he sends emissaries to Rome to bribe and bully the Vatican's support away from Becket to himself. (II, ii, p. 121).

Henry's utterly convincing talents as a treacherous schemer in the style of Philip, Aldwyth and William are surpassed only by his wife's. Eleanor is the most sophisticated and most successful politician in the play. In an illuminating comment, she confesses that she fears Rosamund not as a rival for Henry's affection (because she is realistic enough to

know that Rosamund has won that battle), but as a potential political enemy. She does not fear Rosamund's charms, but she anticipates the effect of those charms on Henry and sees only trouble for herself:

> I would she were but his paramour,
> for men tire of their fancies; but I fear
> this one fancy hath taken root, and
> borne blossom too, and she, whom the
> King loves indeed, is a power in the State.
> (Prologue, p. 25)

Rosamund's potential political power and the possibility of civil war after Henry's death present two very real problems to Eleanor. In her eagerness for power and her determination to keep what authority she has, she decides to kill Rosamund, and partly to secure her position against the King, offers to ally herself with Becket against Henry, though her love or respect for the archbishop cannot justify such an arrangement. She echoes Louis' criticism by commenting on Becket's excessive zeal:

> My honest lord, you are known
> Thro' all the courts of Christendom as one
> That mars a cause with over-violence.
> (II, i, p. 166)

But Becket is no more responsive to her plans, offers, and threats than to the others, and Eleanor, like Henry, is defeated by the archbishop's personal integrity. Even when his own people urge a concession Becket remains adamant in spite of his forebodings and they remain powerless to

defend their lord who further orders them to open the doors of the Cathedral, leaving the four knights free to enter.

In Tennyson's interpretation, it is significant that Becket is murdered almost by mistake. Henry utters his famous line, "Will no man free me from this pestilent priest?" (V, i, p. 179) in anger after he has learnt that Becket has sent Rosamund to a convent. Eleanor turns the issue from a personal one to a national one by making the matter a question of loyalties -- whether to the King or the archbishop. So, while Henry storms about the ills of the Church, it is, in fact, his personal relationship with Rosamund which triggers the outburst. We know that Henry is subject to these fits of rage and we have been told that he soon repents of them. But Eleanor interferes, and plays upon the feelings of the four knights, so that, while none of Henry, Eleanor, or the knights is completely responsible for Becket's death, their accumulated strength is sufficient to destroy him, ostensibly for political reasons, though, as far as Henry is concerned, the reasons are almost solely personal.

Becket's personal integrity and firmness of intention have until this point, been successful. He has managed to reach a stalemate with the King where Henry is forced to try to make peace with his Archbishop. Even

Eleanor's attempt to get Becket's help against Henry and Rosamund is frustrated. By separating the Church from Henry's government and by pursuing what he considers to be the correct rather than the politic course, Becket has placed himself in a position of great danger, admittedly, but also one of power and prestige. To a large extent, Becket has succeeded in what he set out to do. His death is the miserable result, perhaps partly justified, of the corruption and the resentment which he has so far been able to control. When Eleanor, representing the corruption around him, sees that he cannot be beaten fairly, she strikes back in the most effective way possible. At all costs, it seems, Becket must be killed so that his values will not spread.

In another light, Mary, Harold, and Becket fit into a larger typically Victorian pattern. Several major later nineteenth century writers are concerned with the problem of innocence in a corrupted society; perhaps Herman Melville's Billy Budd is the best example to illustrate this theme. Billy, a young, completely honest, illiterate sailor is pressed from a merchant ship, The Rights of Man, to join a British warship where he is placed under a corrupt, cynical and sadistic Master at Arms. It is only a matter of time until Billy is disgraced and hanged because the warship, like man,

cannot stand too much perfection. Billy is so much an innocent (he cannot write, and when he cannot frame the words to defend himself, resorts to physical violence) that he is a complete misfit in society and is actually a disturbing influence to be cast out by a society which is so corrupt that it cannot live with the truth. Thus Billy is hanged, not because his judges think he is guilty but because society's rules cannot make a humane exception in Billy's case. Not only can society live without Billy, but it must do so in order to survive without reforming its values drastically. Much the same theme can be found in Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles where Tess, the child of Nature, is corrupted by industrial society (represented by Alex D'Urberville) and is made an outcast of that society, in spite of Hardy's assertion that she is a pure woman. Jude Fawley, too, is another innocent figure who is rejected by society because he does not subscribe to accepted values and so disrupts conventional morality. And then the innocent Victorian wilting-violet melodramatic heroine evokes the same tradition as she is thrown out of her tiny cottage by the wicked, corrupt landlord, while her husband is sailing the South Seas in search of his fortune.

Mary, Harold, and Becket are not less innocent than the Billies, the Tesses and Judes, and the violets. They cannot survive in an age of compromise

because they are naive or innocent enough to believe that they can maintain their own personal values in the face of a corrupt society. Mary's love for Philip and the Church, Harold's honesty, and Becket's ideals are all unacceptable, even dangerous, to society as it exists, and, like human dinosaurs, they are killed by a more efficient morality. The great difference between the major and minor plays in this respect is that in the minor plays innocent virtue triumphs over the evil around it. Camma maintains her honour by defeating Synorix's evil plans to marry her; Federigo's simple devotion and love over many years earn him the hand of his beloved Lady Giovanna; in a rather nauseatingly gruesome way, Dora claims victory for virtue over the scoundrel, Philip Edgar who has ruined her sister; and Robin Hood (who significantly leaves his castle for the virtue to be found in natural environment of the woods) triumphs over the wickedness of the Sheriff of Nottingham and Prince John. It is possible that one of the reasons that these plays are less satisfying than the major ones is that the success of virtue seems forced, and seems to carry less conviction with Tennyson.

T.S. Eliot[1] has remarked that Tennyson's voice of doubt is always the

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[1] T.S. Eliot, "In Memoriam", reprinted in Tennyson - A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. J. Killham, p. 214.

most artistically satisfying of his moods. His comic poems, such as The Princess, are never completely successful, because, it seems, the poet is unsure of himself in a light-hearted poem. Seriousness and doubt always seem to be pressing in on the light poems, giving them a decidedly ambiguous tone. The simple justice of the minor plays is too rigid and neat a conception for a poet so completely steeped in evolutionary ideas where, in Darwinian terms, a creature dies because he cannot adapt to a new environment, through no fault of his own. Whatever the cause, these shorter plays are less satisfying because they limp to a conclusion where the justice meted out seems unwarranted by the action of the play.

It is clear, however, that the three histories are marked with a profound pessimism. Pessimism and optimism are the two great catch-all categories for Victorian writers, particularly Tennyson and Browning. It is safe, however, to make this observation about Tennyson's plays without entering into the controversy over Victorian optimism because the sadness and bitterness at the end of the history plays is undeniable. Harold, for instance, ends with the Norman defeat of the English and the death of Harold, the English King. And yet the Prefatory Sonnet, "Show-Day at Battle Abbey, 1876" concludes:

> We stroll and stare
> Where might made right eight hundred years ago;
> Might, right? ay good,. so all things make for good --
> But he and he, if soul be soul, are where
> Each stands full face with all he did below.
> (Vol. 5, p. 485).

The optimism of the last few lines of the Sonnet seems rather out of keeping with the sadness of the rest of the poem, but it is all the more out of place when compared to the ending of the play. Edward's vision of England's future arouses the spirit of his people for the battle ahead, but it comes too early in the play to qualify the final disaster. If might is right, because all will be right eventually, then the play comments on the sonnet ironically; the future foreseen by Edward is simple and ideal, and the situation of uncertainty about William's attitude to the English focuses our attention on the problems of the present. England may be great in the future, but for the present the English have lost a great leader and have been conquered by a foreign army and its king. It is difficult, to say the least, to see how such a conclusion, even in the terms set out by the sonnet, can be anything but pessimistic. In the frightening dislocation of events which causes Becket's death, too, there is a blackness which is hard to dismiss; and Queen Mary, so engrossed in her husband and in her Church that she cannot rule wisely, is equally a figure used to develop a pessimistic

point of view. Perhaps the most important bitterness emerges from the inability of the main characters to survive in a world of plots and schemes. To survive, they must have no private scruples or attachments; they are caught in a Darwinian world. The three history plays are in a sense a lament for the ethical dinosaurs who cannot survive because of their firm principles. Tennyson admires Mary, Harold, and Becket for their attempts to be true to themselves while performing their public function, even though he realizes they cannot survive.

The problem remains of what, if any, biographical associations the plays may have. If the theme of the individual in a corrupt society has any connection with Tennyson's life, there may be some biographical reason for the pessimism of the plays. While the relevance of the early poems to Tennyson's life is obvious, the relationship of the themes of the plays is equally interesting. It is significant to note that Tennyson, hitherto among the most personal of poets, was made Poet Laureate in 1850, succeeding Wordsworth. Tennyson characteristically took the appointment seriously, regarding it as a position from which it was his responsibility to act as a national spokesman. The Laureateship was not an office to be refused, even if Tennyson's shyness and dislike of publicity argued against it, but he

refused the offer of a baronetcy three times before he was finally persuaded to accept a barony in 1883. Since the first three offers (in 1865, 1873, and 1874) are roughly contemporary with the major plays, it is reasonable to suggest, though impossible to prove conclusively, that the thematic concerns of the plays may be related to Tennyson's own doubts about accepting a further public position:

> He dreaded the jealousy and malicious attacks which the appointment would provoke, and he knew that he himself could never take any active part in the House, and shrank from the introduction of so troublesome an element into the last years of his life.
> (Sir Charles Tennyson, p. 471)

Possibly he felt that as Poet Laureate he had achieved the proper balance between his private life and his public position, and regarded the offer of a title as a threat to the balance. Hallam, in the Memoir (p. viii), tells us that his father did not want a biography written, nor did he want his notebooks and unpublished manuscripts published (Ricks, p. xix). Such a fearful protection of his own privacy may well have added greater urgency to Tennyson's personal concerns in his plays when they deal with the problems facing people who find themselves (either nominated like Becket and Tennyson or by heredity, like Mary) unaccountably in public office. There is a terrible doubt about the effect of public office on a man to whom personal friends and family affairs

have meant so much. Here even the consolation lamely held forth in the Prefatory Sonnet to _Harold_, offers no help or reassurance.

III

TENNYSON AND THE DRAMATIC INSTINCT

Perhaps the most common approach to the career of Robert Browning is through the poet's search for a poetic voice. In his essay on Shelley, Browning discusses his own poetic ideals in some detail. His main point is that Shelley is the epitome of what he calls the subjective poet, whereas Shakespeare is the model for objective, dramatic poetry. Browning's personal ideal is the subjective-objective poet, the poet who expresses himself through a facade of objectivity. To this end, he flirted with the drama, writing several unsuccessful plays before he adopted the dramatic monologue as the suitable medium for his poetic theories. Even in the plays it is clear that he cannot get the freedom he wants, because, as George Rowell points out, nineteenth-century poets, both Romantic and Victorian, had major adjustments to make before they could adapt themselves to dramatic techniques of writing. Browning's plays already suggest the dramatic monologues to come:

> Browning could portray character but not character in action. His portraits convince so long as they remain within the framework of the poems, but when in the plays he gives them the freedom of the stage, they obstinately refuse to move, to converse, or to strike the spark of life in conversing.[1]

Browning's change to the dramatic monologues was an important, perhaps the crucial, step in his development as a poet. The early monologues are almost completely dramatic, with no distinguishable umbilical cord attaching them to Browning, but as he developed his craft even further, he began to discover ways of making the poems more subjective, while still retaining some distance between his poems and himself, so that we are justified in reading the later monologues, not only for the dramatic situation, but also for what these poems tell us about Browning.

These comments are not intended to introduce a lengthy discussion of Browning as a dramatic poet, but they provide a useful illustration for comparison with Tennyson's attempts to find a dramatic voice for himself in his own poetry. Tennyson is normally considered as an essentially lyric poet, almost in a sense of "lyric" meaning "non-dramatic". Once readers of Tennyson become aware of the fact that he wrote seven complete plays, they generally are ready to concede that he is, to some extent, a dramatic poet,

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[1] _The Victorian Theatre - A Survey_, pp. 36-7.

but they will maintain that to call him a dramatic poet, on the basis of his verse apart from the plays, is perverse. But while Tennyson was not always a dramatist in disguise, as a poet he was constantly experimenting with dramatic techniques; he may have begun writing plays for publication late in his life, but his dramas represent the culmination of a lifetime of experimentation, not a last-minute beginning as some critics would have us believe.

In fact, Tennyson's plays fit into his career of searching for new dramatic techniques just as they develop the conflict between the private and public person. Somehow, we think of Browning as a dramatic poet, but not of Tennyson in the same way. And yet Tennyson developed the dramatic monologue before Browning, having written two of his finest dramatic monologues, "St Simeon Stylites" and "Ulysses", by the end of 1833, although they were not published until 1842, the same year as Browning's *Dramatic Lyrics*. Although there appears to be no influence by Tennyson on Browning in this matter, it is significant that Tennyson was the first to exploit the form, suggesting that his search for a dramatic voice was just as real and as important as Browning's. Drama was clearly not foreign to him even

as a young man. For in addition to the two early fragments, some critics have noted a dramatic instinct elsewhere in his poetry, quite apart from the plays themselves: Harley Granville - Barker, in his essay, "Tennyson, Swinburne, Meredith - and the Theatre", refers to Tennyson's "native dramatic instinct"[1] and Laurence Irving, in contrast to the condescension he usually evinces toward Tennyson the dramatist, remarks, "much of his verse had the authentic ring of the theatre."[2]

His most obvious early attempts to handle dramatic material and techniques are, of course, The Devil and the Lady and the short Spanish fragment. Yet, in spite of the fact that it is cast in dramatic form, there is much that is undramatic about The Devil and the Lady. The long speeches are too slow and reflective, the plot is almost completely actionless and the play's gusto stems from language rather than action, and the fragment (though this is difficult to judge, because the play is incomplete) seems to lack any real discipline and shape. But it is at least potentially

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[1]H. Granville-Barker, ed., The Eighteen-Seventies, p. 169.

[2]Laurence Irving, Henry Irving: The Actor and His World, p. 555

dramatic in several ways - in the carefully delineated characters, particularly those of the suitors, and in the situation itself there is possibility for sustained dramatic action, although it is not fully realized by the young poet.

Although The Devil and the Lady is deficient in plot development and action it has many elements of drama in a lesser sense, being dramatic in the way that, say, Paradise Lost is dramatic. Many of Tennyson's poems are dramatic in this sense. Though many of the very early lyrics like the Odes in which the situation is generalized and the poet speaks in his own voice, have nothing dramatic about them, others clearly do: "Antony and Cleopatra", "Mithridates Presenting Berenice with the Cup of Poison", "The High-Priest to Alexander" and "The Dying Man to His Friend" all present situations and characters in a manner closely resembling an embryonic drama, even though they are largely exercises in depicting character and situation in a short lyric.

On a more general level, there are three main dramatic techniques which run through Tennyson's work prior to the plays: the use of tension through the juxtaposition of disparate ideas, poems, or characters; the exploitation of setting and situation, particularly in the dramatic monologues;

and finally, the externalization of the poet's beliefs and ideas, mainly through the use of personae. In Tennyson's best work, these three elements appear together, and any attempt to distinguish them completely, entirely distorts the poems. Still, a critical attempt at separation, inadequate and impossible though it may be, is helpful in order to examine the development and eventual fusion which they undergo.

It is clear from a glance through the Table of Contents of a collected Tennyson that the poet was always aware of different points of view on many issues. From the earliest poems we find companion poems entitled "The Poet and "The Poet's Mind", "Nothing Will Die" and "All Things Will Die", expressing different attitudes to various questions. Or there are pairs of poems which complement each other: "The Merman" and "The Mermaid", "The Lotos-Eaters" and "Ulysses", and even on a larger scale, spanning almost all of Tennyson's career, "St Simeon Stylites" and "St Telemachus", "Oenone" and "The Death of Oenone", "Locksley Hall" and "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After". A useful example, "The Merman" and "The Mermaid" deals with life and love under the sea from two opposite points of view - the active life of the Merman and the passive existence of the Mermaid. As Hallam says in the Memoir, Tennyson was always searching for hidden motives,

always challenging the traditional view of a figure: "[He] had a strong desire to reverse unfair judgments, and an eager delight in the analysis of human motive and character." (p. 563). Such a preoccupation with exploring the opposite of an accepted truth reflects a dramatic instinct and is as prominent in these early poems as it is in the conception of Queen Mary which runs completely against popular tradition in its attempts to vindicate her from the popular condemnation she has received. Tennyson was fully aware of the effect achieved by juxtaposition of this sort, and he exploits this technique more thoroughly in In Memoriam than elsewhere. Here, instead of writing a sustained poem on Hallam's death, he produced a long poem made up of 133 sections, each distinct from those around it, and yet reflecting images and ideas from elsewhere in the poem and reworking them in a new context. Images such as those of Christmas, the bells, and the yew-tree are not simply unifying devices for the poem, but are also the means by which, through parallels with slight differences, Tennyson gains depth and richness for the poem otherwise impossible. Through the tension from such a technique Tennyson allows the sections to affect each other in much the same way that characters in a play react and pass judgments upon each other. An even more striking instance of this is Maud which is more dramatic in its

outward form. Here the various sections and their technical differences, the short song-like lyrics, and the longer bursts of "spasmodic" passion work together to achieve an effect similar to that in In Memoriam.

The second technique of dramatic writing involves the "situation" poems, most notably, the dramatic monologues such as "Ulysses", "Tithonus", "St Simeon Stylites" and others.

Unlike the first stream, here dramatic interest arises, not from a tension between abstracts, but from a realized character in a particular setting, although the sense of the moment is not as great in Tennyson's monologues as in Browning's. Yet he manages to convey a striking impression of a character revealing himself in the most graphic of terms without always associating the confession with a crucial moment. This sort of writing is not restricted to the dramatic monologues, however; one of the most interesting examples is the superb short poem, "Mariana". Unlike the other poems dedicated to ladies this one is sincere in its emotion; the depiction of Mariana's sorrow and boredom is perhaps unsurpassed in Tennyson. Here the poet has taken a passing reference from Measure for Measure and has expanded it into a full poem with carefully developed character and setting. Tennyson emphasizes the setting so much as he passes back and forth between Mariana's emotions and the background that the two become almost indistinguishable,

though in their distinctness a tension is established, like that of the first stream mentioned previously. Elsewhere, too, Tennyson almost always attempts to establish a concrete situation for his poems. The Idylls of the King and the English and Domestic Idyls show Tennyson at his most successful in establishing a concrete setting for his work.

The final dramatic technique is closely linked to the second in its attempt to find some sort of objective correlative, a metaphor to express the poet's thought. Also involved is a great desire on the part of the poet to remain as aloof from his poetry as possible, so that he cannot be held responsible for all the "I" in his poems. This applies even to the largely autobiographical poems such as In Memoriam, first published anonymously, perhaps because the poet found it too personal to be closely identified with it. Yet there are only a very few minor fictional details in the poem (for example, the exact place of Hallam's grave) when compared to the correct biographical analogies. Once the author's identity had been discovered, however, Tennyson made the following remark, partly in an attempt to correct a dangerous school of biographical criticism, but also partly to remove himself at least a little from the poem:

> It must be remembered that this is a poem, not an actual biography...,The different moods of sorrow as in a drama are dramatically given...,"I" is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking thro' him.
>
> (Memoir, p. 255)

The distinction Tennyson suggests is a difficult one for the reader to follow, and one might wonder if this is perhaps not another attempt on Tennyson's part to wriggle out of embarrassing self-exposure if it were not for the suggestion that "Ulysses" is a more personal poem than "In Memoriam. The Memoir quotes Tennyson as saying that"'Ulysses' gave my feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in In Memoriam"(p. 163).[1]

The next step in the process was the writing of Maud, subtitled A Monodrama, a drama with only one character. Here, unlike the dramatic monologues, the structure is considerably freer and the play covers a longer period of time, with vague suggestions of the intervals made throughout. Like the dramatic monologue, however, only the central character's point of

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[1]Paradoxically, Tennyson is often more personal in ostensibly dramatic writing than in apparently personal expressions of grief. Until recently it was assumed that "The Two Voices" marked Tennyson's initial reaction to the news of Hallam's death, though Ricks' evidence now discounts this. Apparently, "Morte d'Arthur" expresses Tennyson's grief more directly than "The Two Voices".

view is explicitly developed; the only opinion or information about the lurid love affair and its consequences available to the reader is that of the hero, though his varying mental states make the poem less straightforward through its moments of irresponsible, insane passion. There is no conflict between characters except as it is reported to us, but the conflict here is between different emotional states; as Tennyson explains, "The peculiarity of this poem... is that different phases of passion in one person take the place of different characters" (Memoir, p. 334). But that it is far removed from being merely lyric poetry is clear from Tennyson's calling it a "little Hamlet" (Memoir, p. 334). Maud has several dramatic characteristics, but is incomplete as a play. Character and motivation particularly, receive careful treatment, as does the speaker's magnificent rhetoric. As a play, it lacks any immediacy of action, except that of speech. All the action is reported to us undramatically and our interest is made to depend on the speaker's emotions and his rhetoric. As usual, however, Tennyson had to dissociate himself from the poem's protagonist. The biographical interpretations of Maud[1] prompted Tennyson to make the

[1]Such interpretations are partly vindicated by R.W. Rader's "Maud": The Biographical Genesis which shows that Maud has its origins in biographical experience, especially Tennyson's passion for Rosa Baring.

response, probably the definitive comment on the problem of biography in art as related to himself:

> In a certain way, no doubt, poets and novelists, however dramatic they are, give themselves in their works. The mistake that people make is that they think the poet's poems are a kind of 'catalogue raisonné' of his own very self.
> (Memoir, p. 339)

Here Tennyson carefully excludes himself from identification with the young man, but he does not deny that part of the artist emerges in his work. Although one would hesitate to associate all of the ideas in Maud with Tennyson himself, yet it is most often the ideas which Tennyson held which betray his presence in his later work, particularly, as the poet himself acknowledged, in the Idylls of the King. The last line of Maud, to cite one instance, "I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assigned" (II,l. 59) is, in many ways, similar to the resignation which Arthur expresses in "The passing of Arthur":

> The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
> And God fulfils himself in many ways,
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
> (ll. 408-10)

Both passages express a common Tennysonian resignation to accept the will of God in history, particularly in times of apparent misfortune. Tennyson attempts to use the same argument in the Prefatory Sonnet to Harold, but as

we have seen, it conveys little conviction in that context.

The Idylls of the King remains Tennyson's great allegorical comment on both human nature and contemporary society, inasmuch as the poem is not only an allegory of the Christian soul, but also of government, history, and of human progress. Tennyson himself preferred the expression "parabolic" rather than "allegorical" to describe the poem since he did not intend it to support a consistent allegorical interpretation throughout. He has used traditional Arthurian material, freely adapting and arranging it to his own purpose. Tennyson has succeeded in more than finding an objective correlative, a metaphor for what he wanted to say; he has presented his material in such a way that it suggests far more than it spells out literally - surely the aim of the narrative poet who transcends his story. And yet, the Idylls is much more than dressed-up philosophy; like the greatest art, it stands on its own without appeal to what it really means. And the narrative is so skillfully handled that the themes of the poem emerge only slowly and always unobtrusively, so complete is the poet's control of both thought and narrative.

In addition to the parabolic expression of Tennyson's meaning, we find other traces of the dramatic in the Idylls. There are many dramatic scenes,

whether for the interest in confrontations of great psychological interest, or for the splendours of pageantry, or both: the marriage of Guinevere, the dismissal of the Roman ambassadors, the scene between Merlin and Vivien, the death of Elaine, the madness of Pelleas, the last tournament with Lancelot brooding rather than presiding over it; the last meeting between Arthur and Guinevere, and the final scene of Arthur on the barge. And as in _In Memoriam_ and _Maud_, the sections of the _Idylls_ complement and enrich each other in deliberate verbal and narrative echoes. Arthur lives to echo the words spoken at his Coronation, "The old order changeth, yielding place to new" (The Coming of Arthur", l. 508), from the barge before he finally leaves Sir Bedivere, but the echo is more than a unifying device, summing up as it does Arthur's experience as king. In a narrative approach "Pelleas and Ettarre" and "Gareth and Lynette", dealing with similar stories and situations, in themselves show the extent to which degradation and corruption have crippled Arthur's table. In "Pelleas and Ettarre" the atmosphere of lightness, happiness, and romance is no longer possible because the treachery and lust of Ettarre and Gawain have overcome the faithfulness and love of Gareth and Lynette.

The earliest drafts of Tennyson's _Idylls_ show that he considered pre-

paring the material as a masque (Memoir, pp. 521-2), although the mind balks at the idea of masque embracing the life of King Arthur as the Idylls does. It is significant, however, that F.E.L. Priestley, in his essay on the Idylls[1] finds an analogy for the structure of the poem in a modern three-act drama, with the three groups of four idylls each, following the pattern which he detects in such plays.

Particularly significant in connection with the Idylls, however, is Tennyson's comment made while writing "Gareth and Lynette":

> If I were at liberty, which I think I am not, to print the names of the speakers, "Gareth" "Linette" [sic] over the short snip-snap of their talk, and so avoid the perpetual "said" and its varieties, the work would be much easier.
>
> (Memoir, p. 512)

It can be assumed from this that Tennyson considered using a dramatic form for "Gareth", one which would eliminate much of the role of a narrator and gain the speed he needs for the "snip-snap" dialogue. In fact, he wrote a poem, "The Ring", in this form, although it is unsuccessful in its awkwardness of narration.

"Gareth and Lynette" appeared in 1872, and three years later, Tennyson

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[1]Reprinted in J. Killham ed., Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson, pp. 239-55.

had published his first play, Queen Mary. The step was a logical one in the light of his earlier career, particularly with regard to his experimentation with dramatic techniques and his difficulties with "Gareth". The plays must have seemed the ideal solution for the problems of lively dialogue, but his experience with dramatic techniques and forms, specifically the dramatic monologue, occasionally proved to be a handicap rather than a benefit. Tennyson, in Queen Mary, does not seem to have distinguished satisfactorily between a dramatic monologue and a drama, since many of the flaws of Queen Mary can be traced to the influence of the monologues. The play is, very largely, less dramatic than literary; that is, its unity derives from recurring images and ideas, like the patterns of imagery which add unity to Maud and to the Idylls, rather than from a more dramatic means. Harold, as we shall see, achieves the same effect, though in a bolder and simpler way which is, on the whole, more suited to a theatre audience's powers of comprehension. Of all of Tennyson's plays, however, the structure of Queen Mary is perhaps the loosest. The play's panoramic "chronicle" structure makes little allowance for any of the traditional dramatic unities, but Tennyson tries to shape his material through motifs which guide the reader through the vastness of the play. One pattern which is carefully developed is

the play on the name of Queen Mary as the Virgin Mary referred to earlier:

> Here a pious Catholic,
> Mumbling and mixing up in his sacred prayers
> Heaven and earth's Maries. (II, ii, p. 330)

Cardinal Pole's greeting also uses the ambiguity: "Ave Maria, gratia plena, Benedicta tu in mulieribus" (III, ii, p. 363). And in the fine speech which reveals the torment within her own mind, Mary refers to her imaginary unborn child as:

> The second Prince of Peace -
> The great unborn defender of the Faith.
> (III, ii, p. 368).

Such use of recurring motifs, though common in Shakespeare, is not necessarily a dramatic device, and is not sufficient alone to unify so diffuse a play.

Tennyson does not succeed in unifying the play satisfactorily. The action is remarkably diffuse and undisciplined, covering various highlights of Mary's reign, including her marriage to Philip, her persecution of traitors and Protestants of whom Cranmer is the most important, and finally, her death. Like Henry VIII, the play seems to end arbitrarily, and the fact that the play ends very shortly after her death seems almost coincidental. In part, the looseness of the structure is accounted for by the historical bias with which Tennyson writes. But it is apparent that the play is not entirely

crippled by history texts, for Mary is largely a product of Tennyson's own mind, not of the history books which controlled the character of Sir Henry Bedingfield:

> She had, my father thought, been harshly judged by the popular verdict of tradition, therefore he had a desire to let her be seen as he pictured her in his imagination.
> (Memoir, p. 566)

Tennyson's imaginary queen is an exception in the play, however. *Queen Mary* is flawed not only by his attempt to be faithful historically to people and events, but also by his encyclopedic view of the action, his attempt to include all important events and people, at least indirectly by referring to them. As a result, the play has well over forty speaking roles and enough silent parts to crowd any stage.

The characterization of *Queen Mary*, too, warrants careful study. As we observed in connection with *Maud*, since the dramatic monologue and monodrama involve only one character, the problem of distributing characters throughout the play and developing their character to the proper extent, does not arise. All that the poet attempts in a melodrama or a dramatic monologue is to penetrate the speaker's psychology and emotions to give us what insight he can. Obviously St Simeon, for example, holds the

centre of the stage spiritually and physically as he has held it for thirty years, and, since he is the only speaker, he is the central figure poetically as well. Our interest does not lie with his audience, whether heavenly or terrestrial, but with him. This is the challenge of writing a successful dramatic monologue; to develop a character who will reveal himself unconsciously and spontaneously as another objective commentator would describe him. But if the character has to be all-sufficient, the poet need not consider how to maintain the balance between characters, how to control minor figures so that they will not overshadow more important ones. Adding characters to make a drama out of a monodrama might not seem to be a serious difficulty for a playwright, but it proved to be for Tennyson in _Queen Mary_, where his portrayal of the queen is at the same time one of the most impressive aspects and one of the greatest flaws in the play.

Of all the plays, _Queen Mary_ is closest to the monologues because it is so completely dominated by the character of the queen. We have seen how Mary attempts to rule completely according to her own will and forces her personality and prejudices on all her subjects. Accordingly, she becomes the most interesting and powerful character in the play, completely overwhelming all others. Hallam's remark, quoted earlier, about Tennyson's

fascination for Mary suggests why he wished to correct what he thought was an incorrect opinion of her. His attempt to redeem Queen Mary from being Bloody Mary occupies so much of his attention that the queen is the only particularly interesting character in the play. We have examined her character earlier in some detail, and it will be sufficient here to point out that his conception of Mary is so complex, so complete, that none of the other characters can match her for power and interest. Fortunately, given the choice of making all the characters equally complex or of making them flat and two-dimensional, Tennyson chose the latter, for the former solution would have made the play far more unwieldy and turgid than it already is.

In removing much of the blame from Mary, however, Tennyson has done Philip no favour. He has become ultimately responsible for many wrongs which had formerly been attributed to Mary alone. It is he who forces her to execute Lady Jane Gray and continue the persecution of the Protestants, though he later sees the foolishness of this decision. And Philip, in the disappointment which he causes Mary over his obvious lack of affection, is really responsible for precipitating the queen's death. Philip can do nothing right, he is every inch a smiling, damned villain, the complete

embodiment of evil. All of the other characters have no great interest for the reader or the play-goer, with the possible exception of three comparatively unimportant ones: Wyatt, Princess Elizabeth, and Cranmer. Wyatt, easily the most likable and sympathetic character in the play, is wonderfully developed although perhaps he is allowed too much attention for so minor a figure. And Elizabeth's rather coarse scene with the smelly messenger, though it provides a fresh insight into the heir to the throne, and increases our interest in her, seems of questionable value and importance. Cranmer, however, is the only character who begins to rival Mary's prominence, just as his martyrdom threatens her authority by making him a popular hero instantly. Tennyson devotes a surprisingly large amount of the play to Cranmer's recantation and execution. Undoubtedly, Cranmer's motives are complex, but Tennyson does not seem to be fascinated by him as much as by the queen, and so the brilliance of her characterization is missing. It may be speculated that one reason Tennyson gives what seems to be undue emphasis to Cranmer is that he is to some extent a preliminary sketch for Harold who shares some of the personal weakness which is eventually turned to strength in their deaths.

Mary's dominance is reinforced by the almost complete absence of a

line of action. The play might well have been called The Life and Reign of Queen Mary, like Shakespeare's Famous History of the life of Henry VIII. There are many subsidiary actions, but no single movement in the play, only a sketchy chronicle of Mary's reign. The sound of chopping-blocks, burning heretics, and the noise of Wyatt's rebellion are important in the play, but they remain in the background. Most attention is focused on Mary and her emotional and political problems in a rather limited scope for a history play which claims to show part of the making of England; Tennyson's overriding interest in her as a character places her in the centre of the play, even at the expense of history, while plot and secondary characters are largely neglected. Perhaps this may have been deliberate, but it is equally likely that the influence of the dramatic monologues where a single character is the sole concern is responsible for the present shape of Queen Mary.

Mary is also too complex a character for the theatre. Her motives are almost too complicated to be understood by an audience in a theatre, even if the play were performed in its full length. Her character and emotions are so subtly drawn and carefully balanced that, unless the performance were exceptionally clear, the audience would be led to misunderstand

her character and her obsessions. Yet her character is so interesting and full that when she is on stage, she dominates the action completely and when she is not, the play crumbles through lack of interest. If the characterization of the queen is a triumph of subtle analysis and delicate balancing of motives, it is just this complexity which helps to make the play, as a whole, lopsided and weak.

Tennyson's next play, Harold, is, as Hallam tells us, the product of careful study on the part of Tennyson to determine what the qualities of a good modern play were:

> To meet the conditions of the modern drama, before writing "Harold" my father had studied many recent plays. He had also refreshed his mind with the dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles.
> (Memoir, p. 575)

In view of such careful preparation, it is ironic that Harold was not staged during Tennyson's lifetime and that it has fewer defenders than either Queen Mary or Becket. It is in some respects a better play: the plot is developed with considerable care and is better unified than in Queen Mary; the number of characters has been cut to twenty-three, and an attempt has been made at a sustained sub-plot. There are incidental actions as there were in Queen Mary, but they contribute more directly to the

direction of the main action. Here there are no Wyatt rebellions which serve only to provide more victims for Mary's busy off-stage executions. But *Harold* lacks the colour and the power of the other history plays. It may be a sounder play than *Queen Mary*, but it lacks the flash of genius which distinguishes the treatment of the Queen and gives *Queen Mary* much of its value.

Harold reveals Tennyson's interest in historical accuracy once again, though he took liberties with his sources in changing the Norman bias of the Bayeux Tapestry to an English one for the play. The play has a clearer shape than *Queen Mary*, perhaps because there were not so many primary and secondary sources for him to entangle himself in. His study, too, has helped him to master and shape his material into a more unified, and thus more powerful, form. As in *Queen Mary*, he uses recurring motifs to give shape to the play, though here his use of omens, as important as they are to the central action of the play and the final calamity, is bolder, less subtle, and more effective theatrically as a result. Even from the first scenes, the omens warn of the disaster to come, so that the play's conclusion is implicit in its beginning, quite unlike *Queen Mary*.

Other differences in style between the two plays can hardly have

been greater.

Whereas, in Queen Mary, the emphasis was on the central character, here the protagonist is remarkably uninteresting, and the poet's concern is to a far greater extent with action and plot. Harold is easily the least impressive of the major characters in the three history plays; he is too honest and upright to attain any great power over an audience's attention. He is open to the same objections of stuffiness and tediousness as King Arthur - and with considerably more justification; even the conflict between the public and the private seems less interesting in him than in either Mary or Becket. Comparatively speaking, there is no colour or excitement about him, no doubt about his motives as with Becket, or no foolish infatuation as with Mary.

Insofar as plot and character can be distinguished, there is a stronger sense of plot in Harold than in Queen Mary; the play is called "a tragedy of doom", and as awkward as some of the omens may seem, they give a sense of the importance of the events in the play leading to a definite conclusion. The control over the plot is accompanied by restraint in the characterization. None of the characters, with the possible exception of Edward, shows any great complexity, especially again when compared to Queen Mary. With such a dull

hero, the temptation must have been great for Tennyson to over-develop minor characters, but fortunately he succeeds in resisting it. Everything is remarkably restrained and subdued, perhaps to the play's detriment in some respects.

Harold is a study of how events accumulate against a man who once acted wrongly. Harold's insincere oath to help William claim the English throne proves to be his fatal mistake. Because he perjured himself in this false oath, he is partly responsible for his own doom, even if his death results from the conspiracy of events against him. Harold makes one crucial action which dooms him irrevocably. As a consequence, external forces accumulate to manipulate him, play with him and finally, to destroy him. Harold is pressed to take the throne by Edward, he is forced into marriage by Aldwyth's scheming, and he is forced to defend his throne by William's threat of invasion. Since he compromised his integrity, Harold is as much the victim of the action as Mary is the mistress of it. Through the complications of events, Harold's character remains constant and uninteresting while our attention is concentrated, as in a Greek tragedy, on the ominous forces massing against him as they work out his doom.

Becket is the richest of the three history plays because it combines

the interest in character found in Queen Mary with the interest in plot in Harold. In the previous chapter, we discussed the ambiguity in Becket's character and motives and the difficulty in deciding whether Becket was spurred on by arrogance or piety to meet his martyrdom. In virtually every respect, he is so much more complex than Mary that his motives are completely ambiguous. And yet the play resembles Harold in that here too, its hero takes a position whose repercussions are the subject of the play. Becket's decision to carry the Church's crusade against the civil incursions of the King into ecclesiastical authority is the single most important act in the play, since it establishes the great confrontation between Archbishop and King. Like Harold, Becket is doomed by that act, and the rest of the action concerns the concentration of the forces opposed to the Archbishop. Like Harold, too, his doom is partly of his own making, but only partly, because his death is really incidental to the main dispute, arising out of a side-issue.

Although Becket does not have the thinness of characterization we see in Harold, yet there is no single character or group of characters to rival Becket for dramatic power. Walter Map is perhaps an exception, though his role is very small and presents no threat to the balance of the play.

Eleanor and Henry are interesting only as opponents of Becket, one in her magnificently adaptable plans, and the other in his crude bluster. In contrast to Queen Mary, the characterization is controlled and there are no minor characters given scene-stealing roles. Tennyson does not use the audience's familiarity with the story to add depth to the minor characters to the same extent as Becket, whose characterization is left unrivalled in the play.

There is one basic problem about the history plays which must be raised: to what extent are they suitable for stage production which is, after all, the ultimate aim of Tennyson's attempts as a dramatist. Like all plays written for the stage, they require production in order to achieve their full effect. And yet, they are impossible to stage as they were written for several reasons. As was suggested earlier, the texture of the plays is often very dense, and motives, character, and emotions may be confused or even altered in a careless production. Long though the plays are, Tennyson's writing is usually economical and spare. It is very difficult, for example, to know what to cut out of Becket to shorten it and yet to preserve the tone of ambiguity in the original. The play is so full that it probably reminds audiences raised to appreciate the austerity and concentration of Murder in

the Cathedral, of an exceedingly over-padded Victorian sofa and yet everything is necessary to the play. Cuts in *Queen Mary* could be made without damaging the play seriously, but *Harold* and *Becket* must be staged intact if they are to make much sense to their audiences.

The producer who attempts to stage a play like *Becket* is faced with a difficult decision. Either he must cut the play as Irving did and try to retain as much of the flavour of the original as possible, or he must try to stage the play on the play's own terms. The sheer length of the plays is not the major obstacle, because Eugene O'Neill has proved that audiences can be brought to accept a play like *Mourning Becomes Electra* with its inordinate length and its psychological complexity. But this still leaves the problems of the elaborate staging necessary and the great psychological delicacy which somehow must be conveyed.

Tennyson, however, was determined that these plays should never become closet-dramas, read but unproduced. So great was his desire to have them performed that he took what was for him the unprecedented step of allowing his text to be edited and changed without his approval. The alterations deemed necessary for successful presentation usually destroyed the plays as Tennyson conceived them; Irving's reduction of *Becket* is roughly half the

length of the original and gives little idea of the complexity of Tennyson's play. Another, and perhaps greater, concession to production which Tennyson made was the curtailment of lyricism in the plays. Apart from the songs, there are surprisingly few moments of the kind of poetry we have come to associate with Tennyson. The style he uses is deliberately prosaic so that it will be easily understood by the audience, and yet slightly Elizabethan, so that the language, although plain, has some distinction in it. Mary can on occasion wax poetic in her "Prince of Peace" speech and her vision of Philip landing in England, and Edward's visions are exceptional in their context. A speech from Becket, however, seems more typical of the diction of the plays, not necessarily un-poetic in thought or image, but prosaic in the words used to convey the image:

> I once was out with Henry in the days
> When Henry loved me, and we came upon
> A wild-fowl sitting on her nest, so still
> I reach'd my hand and touch'd; she did not stir;
> The snow had frozen round her, and she sat
> Stone-dead upon a heap of ice-cold eggs.
> Look! how this love, this mother runs thro' all
> The world God made - even the beast - the bird!
> (V, ii, p. 189)

The plays too, have a sort of spectacular pageantry about them that cries out for full production. Any play can gain impact from being staged, but there are so many scenes in Tennyson's histories which suggest visual

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pageantry. Like the Christening scene in Henry VIII, there are court scenes in Tennyson's plays which could benefit from spectacle, by showing the entire court, nobles and churchmen alike, in full ceremonial dress. The reception for Cardinal Pole, Harold's oath scene in the Palace at Bayeux before all of the Norman Court, and the scene in Northampton Castle when Becket is to sign the customs, in effect surrendering to the absent King, are but three examples of scenes which could gain considerable power, as Tennyson intended they should, from a spectacular production. Not all of the scenes, of course, are this obviously intended for pageantry. But Tennyson seems to choose his settings carefully, with an eye to production, whether they be in Guildhall, on the beach of Normandy, or in Rosamund's bower.

Because of the problems to be faced in producing them as well as their formidable length, the plays have never enjoyed a high reputation. Even Jerome Hamilton Buckley, whose book on Tennyson is guilty of a certain amount of idolatry, admits, "None of the plays seriously altered the course of the English theatre."[1] When the plays are discussed in histories of the theatre,

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[1] J.H. Buckley, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet, p. 214.

it is as a curiosity; their chief significance seems to lie in the fact that they were written by Tennyson. Critics argue, and with some justification, that the plays are tediously long and often undramatic (though, as in the character of Queen Mary, undramatic aspects are sometimes the most impressive), and that the plays are needlessly and pretentiously Shakespearean in their comedy and in their diction. There is often, they point out, a profound imbalance in the plays, whether between character and action, or major and minor characters. The minor plays, too , are open to the accusation of being trivial. It is obvious that they are not complex though this is partly because of the limitations imposed by their brevity. Characters in relatively short plays cannot be subtly developed, especially when they originate as they do in The Cup, The Falcon, and The Foresters, in scarcely-known literary sources. Synorix, Camma, Federigo, Robin Hood, Marion, and Prince John are static types of goodness or wickedness, not realistic studies in psychology. On the surface, it may seem that The Promise of May is more complex, but its is the complexity of melodrama. Philip Edgar's conversion is not unexpected in a play which contains all possible melodramatic clichés and is, when the proper formula is applied, as uncomplicated as the other minor plays.

While admitting the validity in much of these objections, we must, however, remember that these plays are not total failures. The plays are full of impressive scenes, speeches, or ideas which seem to be detachable from the rest of the play. All the plays have especially effective and memorable moments: the long, ridiculously bombastic and delightfully funny, love speeches in The Devil and the Lady, the later scenes between Mary and Philip, the scene in Harold describing the battle punctuated by the chanting of the Canons from Waltham, the magnificent scene in which Henry inadvertently brings about Becket's death, Camma's death scene, the recognition scene at the end of The Promise of May, and so on. The fact that the plays have good moments is due in part to Tennyson's limitations as a poet unable to sustain an idea to any extensive development. Essentially, he is very much the poet of lyric impulse, of short poems of great, but unsustained, inspiration. Tennyson himself recognized that his short pieces were preferable to his long poems.[1] It is significant too, that even his longest poems, In Memoriam, Idylls of the King, and Maud are not sustained simple poems, but an assemblage of short poems. The plays seem to demand more

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[1]J.H. Buckley, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet, pp. 80-1

sustained control than Tennyson could produce and, relatively speaking, they are dramas of memorable parts.

When Tennyson followed his sources as scrupulously as he did for his plots, his imagination had the task of creating characters who could act credibly within the given limitations of the plot. Significantly, most of the important changes Tennyson makes from his sources are in character rather than in plot. The creative responsibility in writing plays was, for Tennyson, primarily one of creating character, of enriching a situation with appropriate characters. The liberties that he takes with the character of Queen Mary and Becket, thus are of far greater importance than any changes in the actual historical events. The plays, then, as a group, show the interest in personae and in characterization accompanying his dramatic interests which we have traced throughout his career.

IV

DID "TENNYSON" WRITE TENNYSON'S PLAYS?

In his perceptive review of Queen Mary, Henry James is puzzled by the new Tennyson whom he finds writing plays instead of lyric verse:

> It is the least Tennysonian of all the author's productions; and we may say that he has not so much refuted as evaded the charge that he is not a dramatic poet. To produce his drama he has had to cease to be himself. Even if Queen Mary, as a drama, had many more than its actual faults, this fact alone - this extraordinary defeasance by the poet of his familiar identity - would make it a remarkable work.[1]

Here James is anticipating his famous discovery, upon meeting the poet, that Tennyson was un-Tennysonian. For James, Tennyson is a lyric poet, and he expects the plays, viewed in terms of what Tennyson ordinarily writes, to be a sort of busman's holiday for Tennyson, and expresses surprise that they are quite unlike what he expected. The previous chapters have attempted to show that what James thought was Tennysonian is, in fact, only a part of what is Tennysonian. James, and too many critics since his time, have limited Tennyson essentially to a narrow range of

[1]Henry James, Views and Reviews, p. 166-7.

short, exquisite, lyrics, a kind of poetry in which he is acknowledged to excel. But they are reluctant to grant Tennyson any other accomplishments. To treat him as a lyric poet who somehow managed to write dramas not only ignores the significance of these plays in his career, but results in an unnecessarily rigid assessment, even a serious distortion of his achievement. Therefore, we must avoid calling the plays un-Tennysonian, even if they come as a surprise to the students of his lyrics. Rather, we must modify our definition of "Tennysonian" to include the plays as an essential part of his canon. Thematically, they bear the indubitable Tennysonian stamp, and they also represent his search, one carried on throughout his life, for a suitable dramatic voice. The plays do not reveal another, dramatic Tennyson, but they do throw certain aspects of his career into bolder relief; they do not so much contradict the traditional view of Tennyson, as modify and complement it.

As much as the statement would surprise and shock James, the plays are completely Tennysonian, and no great revision of our ideas of what is Tennysonian is necessary to accept this. When one reads his lyrics, one is often so caught up by Tennyson's genius for sound and metrical effects that one does not observe anthing else at work. But this is an injustice

to Tennyson, both as a poetic thinker and as a superb craftsman. The plays help to show that Tennyson is more than the poet of "vowel music".

Just as Tennyson's earlier poems provide a key to the thematic interest of the plays, so the plays throw into relief a dramatic aspect of his earlier work that has largely been ignored. The plays deal with basic Tennysonian themes, particularly the problems of retreat and commitment, though the situation of the plays is a development of one original form of the tension between art and life. Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket are forced to deal with the problem of how they are to exist in a hostile world, a world which does not acknowledge their desire for private values and motives in spite of their public position. Tennyson's own fear of publicity and public exposure is probably the major biographical concern behind the plays, not, as Sir Charles Tennyson suggests, his opposition to Catholicism (p. 414). The very real doubts about the purpose of his appointment to the peerage, about what additional and undesired prominence the title might give him, and about what he might accomplish in the House of Lords are all probably behind the pessimistic view of the failures of Mary, Harold, and Becket in public life.

The plays also show the development of one aspect of Tennyson's

poetic craft, the search for a suitable dramatic voice which allows him to express his own feelings without resorting to the "I" which he often found so embarrassingly misunderstood earlier in his career. The plays remind us that there is much more that is dramatic in Tennyson's poetry than conventional notions about the "Tennysonian" suggest. Aesthetically, the plays do not of course represent Tennyson's highest achievement, but they mark the culmination of one direction in which his technical experimentation was leading. The plays show the integration of several strands of dramatic writing present, but only rarely given much notice, in Tennyson's earlier work. The plays then, technically as much as thematically, are essential to a balanced view of Tennyson's achievement.

James again touches a significant point when he says that though Queen Mary "is not the best of a great poet's achievement, only a great poet could have written it."[1] Without trying to prove the second half of his assessment, we can agree that the first part expresses a fair judgment of the plays. The plays have never been discussed particularly favourably, and even as ardent an admirer as Buckley is forced to admit that Tennyson's

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[1]Henry James, Views and Reviews, p. 196.

foray into the drama was "misdirected".[1] That this is true of the results, the plays themselves, is clear. But Buckley ignores the value which the plays have, quite apart from any aesthetic value, as a commentary on the career of Tennyson. The true importance of the plays rests in what they add to our understanding of Tennyson, not in their power as dramas whether for the stage or not. That Tennyson wrote plays will not completely change our view of his genius as essentially lyrical, but it will, and should modify our idea of what is Tennysonian. What is truly Tennysonian is basically lyrical, but the lyricism is frequently tinged with the dramatic in technique and form. James' approach to Tennyson is too limited, making no allowance for the plays as an integral part of the poet's canon, and thus leads to a distortion of any critical evaluation of Tennyson as a poet. The fact remains that our judgment must be influenced by the fact not only that he wrote some competent drama, but that he was, as we often forget, the only nineteenth-century English poet to write plays that were successful in the theatre. In view of the plays' weaknesses and flaws, it is unfortunate that the encouragement which Tennyson received was naive and flattering adulation

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[1] J.H. Buckley, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet, p. 215.

rather than helpful criticism. Less enthusiasm and more constructive advice might well have produced better plays, but as Tennyson probably realized, the most famous poet of the age stood little chance of getting the sort of advice he needed to improve the value of the plays.

The plays are a significant achievement, nevertheless. Tennyson began to write his later plays when he was sixty-five, roughly fifty-one years after his first attempts. He had been Poet Laureate for twenty-five years and was the most popular and distinguished English poet living at the time. Yet, in this apparent security, he wrote plays which reveal both a great uncertainty about one's role in public life and a search for an appropriate solution to the problem of the poet's personality in his own work. The plays did not produce the answers to these problems, nor do they mark the conclusion of his career. And yet, whatever their merit as dramas may be, they provide invaluable assistance in our understanding of Tennyson.

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