

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

1809 – 1892

In 1850, the novelist and critic Charles Kingsley praised Tennyson's dramatic monologue "Locksley Hall" as the poem that "has had most influence on the minds of the young men of our day." Throughout his long career, Tennyson's poems continued to resonate with Victorian audiences. The self-reflective grief of *In Memoriam* (1850) touched a chord of genuine sympathy in nineteenth-century readers, including Queen Victoria herself, much as Tennyson's re-telling of Arthurian legend in *Idylls of the King* (1859–85) echoed—while also questioning—the nationalistic zeal of the later Victorian period. Britain's Poet Laureate from 1850 to his death in 1892, Tennyson was the quintessential poet of his age.



He was born in 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, to a privileged family, and his poetic gifts became apparent early on. At age eight, Tennyson was composing pages of blank verse in the style of James Thomson; by ten or eleven he had graduated to studying the work of Alexander Pope, imitating hundreds of lines of Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad*. At twelve, Tennyson set to work on his first epic, a six-thousand-line experiment that mimicked Walter Scott's octosyllabic extravaganzas of war and romance. "I wrote as much as seventy lines at one time," he later recalled, "and used to go shouting them about the fields in the dark." By age fourteen, with an Elizabethan-style drama entitled *The Devil and the Lady*, Tennyson's work was approaching the sonorous agility and understated pathos for which it would be known. His first publication, *Poems by Two Brothers* (1827), a collaborative effort by Tennyson and his two older

brothers, Frederick and Charles, was completed just prior to Tennyson's entrance to Trinity College, Cambridge.

Tennyson distinguished himself at Cambridge, establishing his reputation as both a deep thinker and a poet. In June of 1829, he won the Chancellor's Gold Medal with a blank-verse poem, *Timbuctoo*. Some time in that year, Tennyson met Arthur Henry Hallam, who was to become the poet's closest friend and companion. It was also in 1829 that Tennyson joined the Cambridge Apostles, an undergraduate debating society of which Hallam and many of Tennyson's other Cambridge friends were a part. The year 1830 saw the publication of Tennyson's first important volume, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, which Hallam reviewed for the *Englishman's Magazine* in an essay entitled "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson." Hallam describes Tennyson as a poet of "sensation," one of a school of poets, including Shelley and Keats, whose "fine organs tremble into emotion at colors, and sounds, and movements" and who translate this physiological sensitivity into their verses. It was precisely such sensitivity that Christopher North (the pseudonym of John Wilson) later attacked in his 1832 *Blackwood's* review of the volume. Subsequently many critics have charted Tennyson's gradual movement away from a poetics of sensation and toward a more restrained poetic style.

The early 1830s were a difficult time for the young poet. Following the death of his father in 1831, Tennyson left Cambridge without taking his degree. Soon afterward, his brother Edward lost his sanity, succumbing to what was known as the "black blood" of the Tennyson family. Finally, and perhaps most devastatingly, Arthur Hallam died suddenly in 1833, apparently of a stroke or a brain hemorrhage. Having published one volume, *Poems*, in 1832, Tennyson would remain silent as a poet

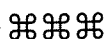
for the next ten years, refusing to publish his many works in progress until the *Poems* of 1842, the work that brought him his reputation as both a remarkable poet and a great voice of his age. During the "ten years' silence," however, Tennyson composed much of what many consider his masterwork, *In Memoriam* (1850), in addition to the innovative dramatic monologues of the 1842 *Poems*, including "Ulysses," "Locksley Hall," and "St. Simeon Stylites."

In 1847, Tennyson published *The Princess*, a poetic medley that explored, through a wildly improbable narrative, the relations between the sexes and the viability of education for women. Interspersed throughout the work are many of Tennyson's best-known lyrics: "Sweet and Low," "The Splendour Falls," and "Tears, Idle Tears," among others. In 1850, Tennyson ascended to the Laureateship and married Emily Sellwood, to whom he had been engaged for thirteen years. That same year, Tennyson also published *In Memoriam*, the elegy on which he had been at work since Arthur Hallam's death. The first of many of Tennyson's books to sell in large numbers, *In Memoriam* went into three editions in its first year alone. Amid a rising swell of scientific discovery and industrial transformation, the poem captured the mood of the era, alternating between faith in science and faith in religion, and reflecting the hopes, doubts, and beliefs of the Victorians.

Tennyson's life changed notably as a result of both his marriage and his suddenly public role as Poet Laureate. The Tennysons had two sons within the next four years, the elder of whom was named Hallam after Tennyson's deceased friend. (After his father's death, Hallam Tennyson wrote a biography entitled *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, and he penned a second volume in 1911, *Tennyson and His Friends*. Alfred Tennyson's grandson Charles also wrote a biography in 1949.)

Many critics have argued that Tennyson's style changed after his appointment as Poet Laureate. Certainly it is true that he assumed a different voice in the occasional poems composed in his role as Poet Laureate, most notably the "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" (1852); likewise "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854) projects an explicit political stance largely absent in his earlier works. But Tennyson continued to evolve as a poet, publishing an experimental "monodrama," *Maud*, in 1855 and the first four segments of his epic, *Idylls of the King*, in 1859. *Maud* was in many ways Tennyson's most controversial publication. Critics complained of the poem's irregular rhythms and of the "screed of bombast" that seemed to some like "the rasping of a blacksmith's file." *Idylls of the King*, on the other hand, was largely—though not universally—hailed as a *magnum opus*. Tennyson had contemplated writing an epic from his childhood; the finished *Idylls* reflects the poet's mature thoughts about Victorian life, politics, and culture through the world of Camelot and King Arthur.

Tennyson's later publications include the plays *Queen Mary* (1875), *The Falcon* (1879), and *The Promise of May* (1882), all of which were produced on the Victorian stage, and numerous volumes of poetry, including *Enoch Arden* (1864), *Tiresias, and Other Poems* (1885), *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After* (1886), and *Demeter and Other Poems* (1889). In 1883, Tennyson accepted a barony from the Queen and took a seat in the House of Lords. He died in 1892 at his second home, Aldworth, and is buried beside Robert Browning in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.



Julia Margaret Cameron, *Mariana*, 1875.*Mariana*

Mariana in the moated grange
(*Measure for Measure*)¹

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.²
The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
She only said, "My life is dreary,

¹ *Mariana ... Measure* Tennyson's epigraph is adapted from the words of the Duke in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, 3.1.277: "There, at the moated grange, lies this dejected Mariana." Earlier in the scene, the Duke has recounted how Mariana, having lost her dowry (and her brother) in a shipwreck, has been deserted by her betrothed; *moated grange* Cottage or small farmhouse surrounded by a moat, or water-filled ditch.

² *The rusted ... gable-wall* The pear has been espaliered, or trained to grow against a wall on a lattice or framework of stakes.

10 He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

Her tears fell with the dew at even;^o
Her tears fell ere^o the dew were dried;
15 She could not look on the sweet heaven,
Either at morn or eventide.
After the flitting of the bats,
When thickest dark did trance^o the sky,
She drew her casement-curtain by,
20 And glanced athwart the glooming flats.³
She only said, "The night is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

25 Upon the middle of the night,
Waking she heard the night-fowl crow:
The cock sung out an hour ere light:
From the dark fen^o the oxen's low
Came to her: without hope of change,
30 In sleep she seemed to walk forlorn,
Till cold winds woke the gray-eyed morn
About the lonely moated grange.
She only said, "The day is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
35 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

About a stone-cast from the wall
A sluice with blackened waters slept,
And o'er it many, round and small,
40 The clustered marish-mosses⁴ crept.
Hard by a poplar shook alway,
All silver-green with gnarled bark:
For leagues no other tree did mark
The level waste, the rounding gray.
45 She only said, "My life is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

³ *flats* Flatlands or lowlands.

⁴ [Tennyson's note] *Marish-mosses*, the little marsh-moss lump that float on the surface of the water.

*The Lady of Shalott*³

PART I

On either side the river lie
 Long fields of barley and of rye,
 That clothe the wold⁴ and meet the sky;
 And through the field the road runs by
 To many-towered Camelot;
 And up and down the people go,
 Gazing where the lilies blow
 Round an island there below,
 The island of Shalott.

Willows whiten,⁴ aspens quiver,
 Little breezes dusk⁵ and shiver
 Through the wave that runs for ever
 By the island in the river
 Flowing down to Camelot.
 Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
 Overlook a space of flowers,
 And the silent isle imbowers⁶
 The Lady of Shalott.

By the margin, willow-veiled,
 Slide the heavy barges trailed
 By slow horses; and unhailed
 The shallop⁵ flitteth silken-sailed
 Skimming down to Camelot:
 But who hath seen her wave her hand?
 Or at the casement seen her stand?
 Or is she known in all the land,
 The Lady of Shalott?

Only reapers, reaping early
 In among the bearded barley,
 Hear a song that echoes cheerly
 From the river winding clearly,

³ *The Lady of Shalott* The title character is based on the figure of Elaine in the Arthurian romances, who dies of love for Lancelot; she is called "the lily maid of Astolat" in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Tennyson first encountered the story, however, in a medieval Italian romance called "La Donna di Scalotta" and changed the name to Shalott for a softer sound.

⁴ *Willows whiten* I.e., the wind exposes the white undersides of the leaves.

⁵ *shallop* Light open boat for use in shallow water.

And ever when the moon was low,
 And the shrill winds were up and away,
 In the white curtain, to and fro,
 She saw the gusty shadow sway.
 But when the moon was very low,
 And wild winds bound within their cell,¹
 The shadow of the poplar fell
 Upon her bed, across her brow.

She only said, "The night is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!"

All day within the dreamy house,
 The doors upon their hinges creaked;
 The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse
 Behind the mouldering wainscot² shrieked,
 Or from the crevice peered about.
 Old faces glimmered through the doors,
 Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
 Old voices called her from without.
 She only said, "My life is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!"

The sparrow's chirrup on the roof,
 The slow clock ticking, and the sound
 Which to the wooing wind aloof
 The poplar made, did all confound
 Her sense; but most she loathed the hour
 When the thick-moted² sunbeam lay
 Athwart the chambers, and the day
 Was sloping toward his western bower.
 Then, said she, "I am very dreary,
 He will not come," she said;
 She wept, "I am aweary, aweary,
 Oh God, that I were dead!"

—1830

¹ *wild winds ... their cell* Reference to Virgil's *Aeneid*, 1.52, in which Aeolus, god of winds, keeps the winds imprisoned in a cavern.

² *thick-moted* I.e., thick with motes of dust.

Down to towered Camelot:
 And by the moon the reaper weary,
 Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
 35 Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy
 Lady of Shalott."

PART 2

There she weaves by night and day
 A magic web with colours gay.
 She has heard a whisper say,
 40 A curse is on her if she stay
 To look down to Camelot.
 She knows not what the curse may be,
 And so she weaveth steadily,
 And little other care hath she,
 45 The Lady of Shalott.

And moving through a mirror clear
 That hangs before her all the year,
 Shadows of the world appear.
 There she sees the highway near
 50 Winding down to Camelot:
 There the river eddy whirls,
 And there the surly village-churls,
 And the red cloaks of market girls,
 Pass onward from Shalott.
 55 Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
 An abbot on an ambling pad,^o
 Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
 Or long-haired page in crimson clad,
 Goes by to towered Camelot;
 60 And sometimes through the mirror blue
 The knights come riding two and two:
 She hath no loyal knight and true,
 The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
 65 To weave the mirror's magic sights,
 For often through the silent nights
 A funeral, with plumes and lights
 And music, went to Camelot:
 Or when the moon was overhead,
 70 Came two young lovers lately wed;
 "I am half sick of shadows," said
 The Lady of Shalott.

PART 3

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
 He rode between the barley-sheaves,
 75 The sun came dazzling through the leaves,
 And flamed upon the brazen greaves¹
 Of bold Sir Lancelot.
 A red-cross knight for ever kneeled
 To a lady in his shield,
 80 That sparkled on the yellow field,
 Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy^o bridle glittered free,
 Like to some branch of stars we see
 Hung in the golden Galaxy.
 85 The bridle bells rang merrily
 As he rode down to Camelot:
 And from his blazoned baldric^o slung
 A mighty silver bugle hung,
 And as he rode his armour rung,
 90 Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather
 Thick-jewelled shone the saddle-leather,
 The helmet and the helmet-feather
 Burned like one burning flame together,
 95 As he rode down to Camelot.
 As often through the purple night,
 Below the starry clusters bright,
 Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
 Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glowed;
 On burnished hooves his war-horse trode;
 From underneath his helmet flowed
 His coal-black curls as on he rode,
 As he rode down to Camelot.
 105 From the bank and from the river
 He flashed into the crystal mirror,
 "Tirra lirra," by the river
 Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
 110 She made three paces through the room,
 She saw the water-lily bloom,
 She saw the helmet and the plume,

¹ greaves Armor worn below the knee.

She looked down to Camelot.
 Out flew the web and floated wide;
 The mirror cracked from side to side;
 "The curse is come upon me," cried
 The Lady of Shalott.

PART 4

In the stormy east-wind straining,
 The pale yellow woods were waning,
 The broad stream in his banks complaining,
 Heavily the low sky raining

Over towered Camelot;
 Down she came and found a boat
 Beneath a willow left afloat,
 And round about the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse
 Like some bold seer in a trance,
 Seeing all his own mischance—
 With a glassy countenance
 Did she look to Camelot.
 And at the closing of the day
 She loosed the chain, and down she lay;
 The broad stream bore her far away,
 The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white
 That loosely flew to left and right—
 The leaves upon her falling light—
 Through the noises of the night
 She floated down to Camelot:
 And as the boat-head wound along
 The willowy hills and fields among,
 They heard her singing her last song,
 The Lady of Shalott.

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
 Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
 Till her blood was frozen slowly,
 And her eyes were darkened wholly,
 Turned to towered Camelot.
 For ere she reached upon the tide
 The first house by the water-side,
 Singing in her song she died,
 The Lady of Shalott.

Under tower and balcony,
 By garden-wall and gallery,
 A gleaming shape she floated by,
 Dead-pale between the houses high,
 Silent into Camelot.
 Out upon the wharfs they came,
 Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
 And round the prow they read her name,
The Lady of Shalott.

Who is this? and what is here?
 And in the lighted palace near
 Died the sound of royal cheer;
 And they crossed themselves for fear,
 All the knights at Camelot:
 But Lancelot mused a little space;
 He said, "She has a lovely face;
 God in his mercy lend her grace,
 The Lady of Shalott."
 —1832 (REVISED 1842)

*The Lotos-Eaters*¹

"Courage!" he said, and pointed toward the land,
 "This mounting wave will roll us shoreward
 soon."

In the afternoon they came unto a land
 In which it seemed always afternoon.
 All round the coast the languid air did swoon,
 Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.
 Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;
 And like a downward smoke, the slender stream
 Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem.

A land of streams! some, like a downward smoke,
 Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn,² did go;
 And some through wavering lights and shadows broke,
 Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below.

¹ *Lotos-Eaters* In Homer's *Odyssey* (9.82–104), the Lotus Eaters were a race of people who inhabited a remote island; they existed in peaceful apathy because of the narcotic effects of the lotus plants they ate. When Odysseus landed on the island, some of his men ate the lotus plants and wanted to stay on the island, rather than return home to their families. The speaker in line 1 is Odysseus; his men sing the "Choric Song" beginning at line 46.

² *lawn* Fine fabric.