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VICTORIAN QUEST IN A MEDIEVAL ROMANCE: ALFRED TENNYSON'S "ENID"

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian period produced a large body of Arthurian poetry: William Morris, Algernon Swinburne and Alfred Tennyson, to mention only a few, employed Arthurian motifs and created their own versions of the legend. Tennyson's *Idylls of the king* is probably an attempt on the largest scale to retell the story of King Arthur and his knights. However, in spite of their scope, Tennyson's *Idylls* did not succeed in evoking the spirit of the Middle Ages and should be seen as a product of the Victorian Age. This paper will concentrate on one of the *Idylls* from the 1859 edition, "Enid", which is based on the medieval "Geraint son of Erbin" from *Mabinogion*. Both texts present the story of a quest that Geraint embarks on to find and conquer a knight who offended Guinevere, and of another quest, which he pursues with Enid, his wife. The aim of this paper is to examine the differences between the medieval and the Victorian text and to analyse how, through omission, underlining some aspects of the source text or endowing his characters with Victorian sensibility, Tennyson transformed the original romance into a Victorian story of love.

Very superficial research into the sphere of Victorian arts would suffice to demonstrate an enduring fascination with the Middle Ages: Pre-Raphaelites attempted to restore the spirit of medieval art in their painting and searched for medieval themes, and Victorian architecture is marked by the delight in the gothic. Medievalism is also manifest in literature, and especially in a large body of Arthurian poetry that was created in the Victorian period. William Morris, Algernon Swinburne and Alfred Tennyson,[1] to mention but a few, employed Arthurian motifs and created their own versions of medieval stories. Tennyson's

[1] Lupack and Lupack in their 1999 anthology of texts on Arthurian literature by women indicate that there were a large number of lesser-known writers, including women, who "wrote notable versions of one or another of the *Arthurian* legends", both in verse and in prose (Lupack and Lupack 1999: 4).

Idylls of the king, compared more or less explicitly to an epic[2] in reviews from the period, is an example of the poem retelling the stories of King Arthur and his knights. One of Victorian critics found the term "idylls" inadequate to "the breadth, vigour, and majesty which belong to the subjects, as well as to the execution, of the volume" (Gladstone 1859 [1967]: 251), even though his comment refers to the 1859 edition, which included only four poems.[3] However, in spite of their scope, the *Idylls* were not successful in "engag[ing] some sort of evocation of the Middle Ages" (Richards 1988: 102), which did not go unnoticed both by Tennyson's contemporaries and 20th-century critics. Hopkins (1879 [1967]) claimed that the *Idylls* were "unreal in motive and incorrect, uncanonical so to say, in detail and keeping" (Hopkins 1879 [1967]: 334) and Swinburne described them as "the Morte d'Albert, or Idylls of the prince Consort" (Swinburne 1886 [1967]: 339),[4] thus ridiculing the moral tone of the poems. Tennyson's poems seem to share "[t]he strength and the weakness of Victorian poetry of the past", which is that "it breathes nothing other than Victorian life" (Richards 1988: 101) and, consequently, *Idylls of the king* is a product of the Victorian Age, in spite of the medieval setting and characters.

Idylls of the king is based on a range of medieval texts, mainly Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, but also, to a lesser extent, on other medieval sources, including *Mabinogion*.[5] Although Tennyson's poems seem to be quite faithful to the original stories, they nevertheless remain unmistakably Victorian in their moral tone and characterisation. Most importantly, whereas the medieval sources concentrated most on male characters and adventure, in Tennyson's poems the centre of gravity seems to be shifted towards female characters, and his *Idylls* become stories of love. This paper will concentrate on one of the *Idylls* from the 1859 edition, "Enid",[6] which is based on the medieval "Geraint son of Erbin" from *Mabinogion*.[7] Both the medieval and the Victorian texts fall into two parts, each of which tells a story of a journey. The goal of the first quest on which Geraint embarks is to find and conquer a knight who offended Guinevere; the second

[2] Gray (1980) in *Thro' the vision of the night. A study of source, evolution and structure in Tennyson's* Idylls of the king stresses "a descriptive, a stylistic and a dramatic unity" of the poem (Gray 1980: 2), and compares it to epic poems.

[3] The term "idyll" is "a poem of idealised description" and derives from a Greek word meaning 'a small picture' (Gifford 1999: 16); it implies nostalgia for the past.

[4] Swinburne wrote: "Mr Tennyson has lowered the note and deformed the outline of the Arthurian story, by reducing Arthur to wittol, Guenevere to the level of a woman of intrigue, and Launcelot to the level of a 'co-respondent'" (Swinburne 1872 [1967]: 318).

[5] For the analysis of sources for the *Idylls*, see Gray (1980).

[6] "Enid" of the 1859 edition is later split into two poems, "The marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid" in the 1885 edition.

[7] Chrétien de Troyes wrote another version of this romance, where the protagonist is not called Geraint but Erec.

quest, on which this paper is going to concentrate, he pursues with Enid, his wife. The aim of this paper is to examine the differences between the medieval and the Victorian texts and to analyse how, through omission and underlining some aspects of the source text, Tennyson transformed the original romance into a Victorian story of love.

The quest, either for an inaccessible ideal (represented by the Holy Grail) or for adventure, is usually at the centre of the narrative in Arthurian romances. The quest may be connected with a test of the hero's chivalry and courtesy: during his journey he was confronted with other knights or monsters but also with temptations. The success of the quest depended on whether or not the knight passed the test to which he was subjected on the way. Female characters were not insignificant in romances, but their story seems to be subordinated to the story of adventures: they might be a goal of the quest, or they might test the knight during his journey. Therefore, in Malory's romances, as Belsey (1994) indicates, Guinevere was "by far the most shadowy of the central figures ... even though her role in its [Round Table brotherhood's] destruction is critical and her love for Lancelot is at the heart of Malory's narrative" (Belsey 1994: 110). Similarly, love in romances might be a force that "motivates heroic adventures", "gives strength and courage" or "distracts the hero's attention and thus exposes him to danger" (Belsey 1994: 102) and thus it is also considered mainly in reference to chivalry. In "Geraint, son of Erbin", Enid is an important figure insofar as she serves as an auxiliary to Geraint's adventure. She is not even an object of his first quest, only a means of fulfilling it, just as she seems to be just the bait to attract adversaries and thus enable him to prove his courage in the second quest. Interestingly enough, the reader does not even know her name until she is married to Geraint.[8] Therefore, although Enid is crucial to the plot and although the second quest might also be seen as a test of her faithfulness, the romance is predominantly the story of Geraint.

In contrast to the Middle Ages, the Victorian period seems to favour female stories and, as Radford indicates, a romance "... has moved from being about a male subject to being about female one" (Radford 1992: 5). Although Tennyson seems to be faithful to the original medieval texts, this shift is evident in his *Idylls*. Even the titles of his 1859 poems point to female characters: "Enid", "Vivien", "Elaine", and "Guinevere". Through a number of simple procedures, "Enid" is transformed from a story of Geraint's adventure into a story of Enid's love, since both characters, not just Geraint, pursue a quest, and the stress is

[8] The narrator in Chrétien de Troyes indicates that Enid's name is unknown before she is married: "When Erec received his wife, he must call her by her right name. For a wife is not espoused unless she is called by her proper name. As yet no one knew her name, but now for the first time it was made known: Enide was her baptismal name" (Chrétien de Troyes 1994: 25).

shifted from the test of the hero's prowess to the test of heroine's fidelity. Belsey indicates that in contrast to Chrétien's version of the romance where the central theme is "the nature of the conflict between love and chivalry" (Belsey 1994: 100), which might also be applied to the *Mabinogion* version, in Tennyson's *Idylls* the central theme is that of illicit passion. Furthermore, whereas in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* "desire is *left out of account*. It is neither denied or condemned; it is not excluded or repressed; but its very inevitability, its obviousness, means that it is readily *overlooked*" (Belsey 1994: 112), and "Arthur is much more concerned about Lancelot's treason than Guenevere's infidelity" (Belsey 1994: 113), for Tennyson it is adultery, the sin "against moral and spiritual duty, desire in opposition to Law" (Belsey 1994: 118), which becomes the central issue.

The analysis of the apparently insignificant differences between "Enid" and its medieval source, "Geraint, son of Erbin", shows that Enid and her story acquires a greater significance in the former. In his poem, Tennyson disrupted the chronology of the original, so that the poem begins when Geraint and Enid have just been married, and the story of their meeting is presented later in retrospection. This apparently innocent artistic procedure allows Tennyson to place the second quest undertaken by both protagonists in the foreground and thus stress the motif of Geraint's suspicions as to his wife's constancy. In the first verses of the poem, the newly married couple stay at King Arthur's court until Geraint hears gossip about Guinevere's affair with Lancelot:

> But when a rumour rose about the Queen,
> Touching her guilty love for Lancelot,
> Tho' yet there lived no proof, not yet was heard
> The world's loud whisper breaking into storm,
> Not less Geraint believed it; and there fell
> A horror on him, lest his gentle wife,
> Thro' that great tenderness for Guinevere,
> Had suffer'd, or should suffer any taint
> In nature... (Tennyson 1994: 434).

Afraid that his wife might get under negative influence of the sinful queen, Geraint decides to leave the court. In *Mabinogion*, the reason for his departure is the necessity to defend the lands of his father, who is too old to deal with the enemy by himself, and whose wish is "to send Geraint his son unto him to defend his dominions and to know his boundaries" (*Mabinogion*: 218).[9] In the *Idylls*, however, the defence of his lands is only a lame excuse for Geraint: "Till the king himself should please/ To cleanse this common sewer of his realm,/ He

[9] In Chrétien de Troyes no reason for Geraint's leaving Arthur's court is offered.

[Geraint] craved a fair permission to depart,/ And there defend his marches" (Tennyson 1994: 434). Thus, from the beginning of the poem, adultery or the fear of adultery becomes a dominant motif for action and, consequently, the tests which Enid undergoes during the quest is supposed to prove her faithfulness.

Both in Tennyson and in the medieval original, after he marries Enid, Geraint grows negligent of company and chivalric pursuits, which results in murmurs against him. However, the reasons for Geraint's behaviour are again reinterpreted by Tennyson. In *Mabinogion*, the hero first ensured that his lands were safe, and then he "did not cease therefrom until his fame spread over the face of the kingdom" (*Mabinogion*: 221). It is only then that he "began to love ease and leisure, for there was none who was worth fighting against him. ... And thereafter he loved dalliance in his chamber and with his wife, so that naught save that was pleasing to him" (*Mabinogion*: 221). Tennyson's Geraint, however, does not find peace because of his jealousy. Not only does he grow

> Forgetful of his promise to the king,
> Forgetful of the falcon and the hunt,
> Forgetful of the tilt and tournament,
> Forgetful of his glory and his name,
> Forgetful of his princedom and its cares
> (Tennyson 1994: 434),

but he also seems to derive no pleasure from his love to his wife, only anguish and jealous fear lest she should become unfaithful. His thoughts are poisoned with suspicions. Therefore, he does not forsake chivalry for pleasure, but in order to become Enid's guard: "thinking, if ever yet was wife/ True to her lord, mine shall be so to me,/ He [Geraint] compassed her with sweet observances/ And worship, never leaving her" (Tennyson 1994: 434). When he sees her sad, he becomes even more "suspicious that her nature had a taint" (Tennyson 1994: 435).

Consequently, in the *Idylls* Geraint has no doubts that Enid's complaint "I fear that I am no true wife" (Tennyson 1994: 435), which he overhears and which makes him embark on "this fatal quest of honour" (Tennyson 1994: 469), indicates her unfaithfulness. In fact, Enid is worried about the "scoff and jeer and babble of him/ As of a prince whose manhood was all gone,/ And molten down in mere uxoriousness" (Tennyson 1994: 434), and she believes that she is the cause of his loss of manliness. Still, Geraint interprets her words as a proof of her fickleness:

> In spite of all my care,
> For all my pains, poor man, for all my pains,
> She is not faithful to me, and I see her
> Weeping for some gay knight in Arthur's hall
> (Tennyson 1994: 436).

In the medieval version of the story, however, Enid's words do not seem to be so unambiguous for her husband, and the thought of her unfaithfulness is only "another thought": "And another thought distressed him, that is was not out of care for him that she had spoken those words, but because she was mediating love for another man in his stead, and desired dalliance apart from him" (*Mabinogion*: 222). Although medieval Geraint does take into account adultery on the part of his wife, he seems to be piqued mainly by what he believes to be doubts as to his prowess.

Therefore, the medieval Geraint during his quest seems to be more concerned with proving his power to Enid than to prove her, which is evident in the oath he makes before the departure: "Shame on me ... if thou come here till thou know whether I have so utterly lost my strength as thou reckonest, and further, whether it will be as pleasant for thee as was thy desire to seek dalliance with him thou wert thinking of" (*Mabinogion*: 222). In the medieval version Enid is also tested, and the description of the quest in Chrétien's de Troyes version could also be applied to *Mabinogion*: "The test to which [Erec] then submits [Enid] in a quest for adventures, proves to be a double one, furnishing repeated demonstrations of his prowess for her reassurance and of her fidelity to him as, time after time, she breaks silence to warn him of danger" (Barron 1987: 33). Still, the balance in the medieval versions of the story, be it *Mabinogion* or Chrétien's de Troyes account, is in favour of adventure and of the test on Geraint's manliness. Enid remains a relatively insignificant figure.

In Tennyson's poem, however, the balance is shifted in favour of Enid, and the quest is at least as much the test of Enid as of her husband. Tennyson seems to elaborate on the fragments, which specifically refer to Enid, and omits some of the deeds of Geraint. One example of the omission might be the fight with the giant, which Geraint slayed in *Mabinogion*, and which is not mentioned in the *Idylls*. Tennyson's decision not to include the giants in his story might stem from his treatment of the marvellous (Gray 1980: 19), but this explanation cannot be applied to his omission of other scenes, like the duel with Gwiffred Petit, or even the final scene where Geraint fights the knight in the garden.[10]

Instead, Tennyson elaborates on the attempted-seduction scenes during the quest, which are to prove Enid's devotion to her suspicious husband. The scenes are based on the medieval sources but, as Gray indicates, the Earls of Limours and Doorm were presented in *Mabinogion* "merely as villainous bandits" whereas "Tennyson recreates them into far more striking figures, over life size in one way, and under life size in another way, both being incomplete,

[10] The fragments that Tennyson omitted were present both in *Mabinogion* and in Chrétien's de Troyes "Erec and Enide".

exaggeratedly one-sided, moral cripples" (Gray 1980: 18-19). Tennyson's decision to elaborate on these two figures might stem from his desire to present the two extremes of Geraint's own nature that he conquers (the effeminate Earl Limours and the brute Earl Doorm) as Gray explains (1980: 19), or simply from Tennyson's greater stress on characterisation. Whichever the case, the two scenes dramatise Enid's plight and thus make the test that Enid undergoes a more prominent element of the story than it was in *Mabinogion*.

The meeting with Earl Limours (not even named in *Mabinogion*) takes place in a tavern, where Geraint and Enid stay for a night during their quest. Both in the medieval and Victorian version the Earl is attracted to Enid because of her exceptional beauty and in both versions he tries to convince her to betray her husband and marry the Earl. In *Mabinogion*, the Earl points to the fact that Enid travels without attendants and in a way that is not befitting to a person of her rank and offers her a better social position: "I will give my earldom into thy power, and do thou stay with me" (*Mabinogion*: 229). In the *Idylls*, the Earl is Enid's former suitor, which might make the prospect of eloping with him more alluring to her. Moreover, he appeals to her love rather than merely to her desire for position and riches. Not only does he call her "the pilot star of [his] lonely life" and his "early and [his] only love" (Tennyson 1994: 459) but he also implies that Geraint does not love her anymore:

> ... your wretched dress,
> A wretched insult on you, dumbly speaks
> Your story, that this man loves you no more.
> Your beauty is not beauty to him now...
> ... nor will you win him back,
> for the man's love once gone never returns...
> (Tennyson 1994: 460).

Tennyson makes thus the temptation stronger and more convincing and, consequently, Enid's test becomes more difficult.

Similarly, Tennyson's rendition of the scene in the castle of Doorm highlights the fact that Geraint wished to test Enid's constancy. In both the medieval and the Victorian story, Enid is brought to the castle when her husband faints because of his wounds and is pronounced dead. She laments his death and weeps over him. When the Earl of Doorm tries to force her to eat and drink and enjoy the feast, she obstinately refuses. He hits her and Enid cries, and Geraint who was only unconscious and not dead, kills the Earl who thus mistreated his wife. In *Mabinogion*, Geraint reacts only when he hears Enid's cry, as he only "came to himself at the echoing of her shriek" (*Mabinogion*: 238). In the *Idylls*, however, he lies conscious for some time, only pretending to be dead, as he desires to "prove her to the uttermost" (Tennyson 1994: 466).

After the events in the castle Doorm, Geraint decides that their quest might come to an end. Although in *Mabinogion* there is an implicit acknowledgement that during their journey both the hero and his wife were tested, it becomes explicit in the *Idylls*.[11] Instead of medieval Geraint's casual remark that "he knew then that she was in the right" (*Mabinogion*: 238), Tennyson has him explicitly state that they have both undergone a quest:

> Enid, I have used you worse than that dead man [Earl Doorm];
> Done you more wrong: we both have undergone
> That trouble which has left me thrice your own:
> Henceforward I will rather die than doubt...
> (Tennyson 1994: 469).

Therefore, Geraint admits both his mistake in judging Enid and the fact that he put her to a test. In spite of all his cruelty and all the temptations that awaited her during their journey, she did not waver in her love and thus she came from the test victorious.

In contrast to the *Mabinogion*, Tennyson's "Enid" is not so much the story of Geraint's quest and his adventures, as the story of Enid's quest. The difficulties that the hero has to overcome during his two journeys are counterbalanced with the obstacles Enid surmounts: his encounters with the adventurers, Earl Limour or Earl Doorm coincide with the test to which Enid is put, and just as Geraint is victorious on the battlefield, Enid remains victorious in the sphere of morality. In fact, although outwardly not much different from "Geraint son of Erbin", "Enid" transforms the medieval original into a story of female rather than male quest, as it is not the question of chivalry that is exemplified by Tennyson's poem, but rather the question of faithfulness and loyalty in marriage.

[11] Chretien puts into Erec's mouth the words of forgiveness towards Enide: "Sweet sister mine, my proof of you has been complete! Be no more concerned in any wise, for I love you now more than ever I did before; and I am certain and rest assured that you love me with a perfect love. From this time on for evermore, I offer myself to do your will just as I used to do before. And if you have spoken ill of me, I pardon you and call you quit of both the offence and the word you spoke" (Chrétien 1990: 61).

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