

Summary of Tennyson lectures, October 1 – 6, 2014

KEYWORDS: ADAPTATION, MEDIEVAL REVIVAL, VICTORIAN

We concentrated on Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

The *Idylls* are an adaptation of Thomas Malory's 15th-century *Morte Darthur*, along with other Arthurian texts from the Middle Ages; they are a product of, and shaped for, the renewed interest in the Middle Ages in the 19th century

The Middle Ages came to represent a lost golden age, an ideal world of magic and the imagination that seemed far removed from the realities of England after the Industrial Revolution

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was shaped by early experiences in the countryside; by his reading of the Romantic poets; by his time at Cambridge and the death of his friend Arthur Hallam; his work included Arthurian poetry from the beginning ("Galahad," "The Lady of Shalott"), but his chief Arthurian work is the *Idylls of the King*, which appeared over many years

Tennyson's original conception for the *Idylls* imagined the tales grouped around "good" and "bad" women

Elements that some readers identify as "Victorian" in Tennyson's treatment include his very negative treatment of Guinevere (and of other women); his emphasis on duty and on the bonds between men; his mistrust of sensuality and passion. I pointed out that there are greater complexities in Tennyson's treatment of even these issues than may at first appear

We considered the role Victorian ideas about chivalry had in Victorian education and imperialism, and looked ahead to the deployment of those ideals in the propaganda surrounding World War I

We began with the story of Elaine, noting the following elements:

- Elaine lives in "'fantasy"; unlike her brother Lavaine, she has no active outlet for her love for Lancelot
- Guinevere is unworthy of both Arthur and Lancelot; she is capricious, jealous, sensual, selfish
- Elaine is physically attracted to Lancelot, and Tennyson plays up his attraction

- Elaine can assert herself only through her death: we noted the emphasis on the personal pronoun in her own imagining of her death

BLANK VERSE

The *Idylls* are written in blank verse; that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter

An iamb is a foot, a unit of metre/ combination of stresses. An iamb is a rising metre (it has a weak and then a strong stress): the human heart-beat is often used to describe the combination: we looked at two lines from a speech from *Henry V* as an example of iambic pentameter:

And **hold** | their **man** | hoods **cheap** | whiles **an** | y **speaks**
That **fought** | with **us** | upon | Saint **Cris** | pin's **day**.

CAESURA, END-STOPPED, ENJAMBMENT

These are all terms that refer to the deployment of flow and pause in a line; I pointed out that it was particularly important in blank verse to make effective use of these techniques

- A caesura is a strong pause or break within a poetic line
- A line is end-stopped if a pause in reading (the end of a syntactic unit) coincides with the end of the verse)
- A line shows enjambment if the sense carries over the end of the line of verse into the next line

We looked at how Tennyson uses these elements to draw a contrast between Guinevere and Arthur. Notice how Guinevere's lightness of mind and character is suggested by the sequence of short phrases; contrast this to the strong initial stress (But/ Ar/ thur) when our perspective shifts to the king. The run-on suggests the overwhelming nature of Arthur's emotion; it is followed by a series of strong, simple statements, underlined by the repetition of "and," characterizing the decisiveness of the king's actions, as well as the action verbs associated with Arthur at the caesuras:

And Arthur yet had done no deed of arms,

But heard the call, **and came**: and Guinevere

Stood by the castle walls to watch him pass;

But since he neither wore on helm or shield
The golden symbol of his kinglihood,
But rode a simple knight among his knights,
And many of these in richer arms than he,
She saw him not, or marked not, if she saw,
One among many, though his face was bare.
But Arthur, looking downward as he past,
Felt the light of her eyes into his life
Smite on the sudden, yet rode on, and pitched
His tents beside the forest. Then he drave
The heathen; after, slew the beast, and felled
The forest, letting in the sun, and made
Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight
And so returned.

ALLITERATION, ASSONANCE, CONSONANCE

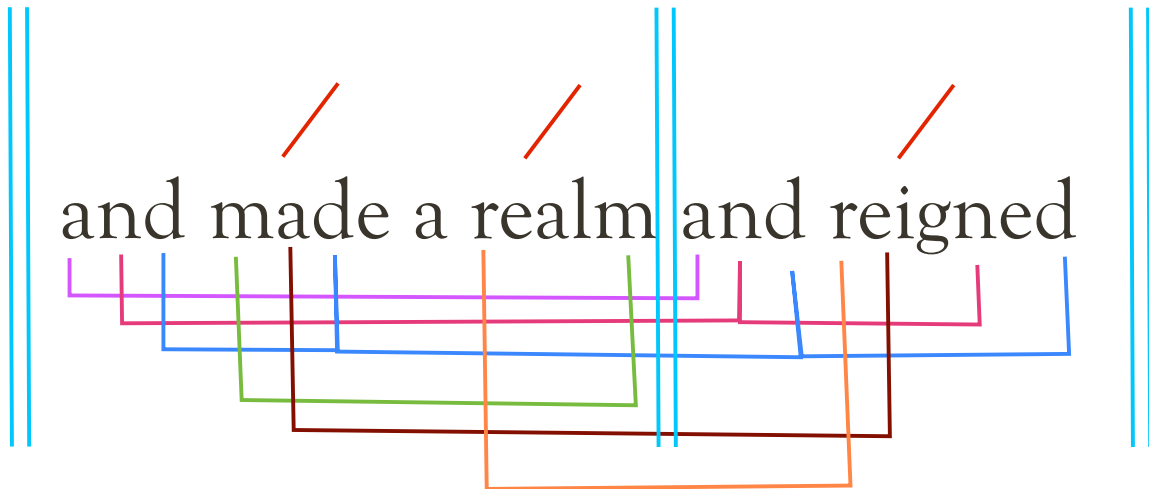
These are all ways of deploying sound

- **Alliteration** is the repetition of initial consonants
- **Consonance** is the repetition of two or more consonants anywhere within a word
- **Assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds

We looked at how these effects are used in the lines that emphasize Arthur's first triumphs:

And Arthur and his knighthood for a space
Were all one will, and through that strength the King
Drew in the petty princedoms under him,
Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame
The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reigned

I also scanned the last line for you, and illustrated how the sound patterns meshed with the metre to build an overwhelming impression of strength:



REPETITION

Poets may repeat words or phrases for effect. We looked at how Tennyson uses repetition to show Elaine asserting herself in death: only her act of self-willed death allows her to assert her personhood. The passage also repeats the word “there,” suggesting the significance of her entry into the Arthurian world as part of her self-definition.

And no man there will dare to mock at me;

But there the fine Gawain will wonder at me,

And there the great Sir Lancelot muse at me;

Gawain, who bad a thousand farewells to me,

Lancelot, who coldly went, nor bad me one:

And there the King will know me and my love,

And there the Queen herself will pity me,

And all the gentle court will welcome **me**,

And after my long voyage I shall rest!