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Introductory critical studies

ALFRED TENNYSON

This book provides a valuable introduction for students and other readers of Tennyson's poetry and presents a challenging new account of its major themes and concerns.

Elaine Jordan examines Tennyson's uneasy position as a writer of the male middle-class ascendancy and shows how his poetry reveals ambivalent attitudes towards manliness, war, and nineteenth-century scientific rationality. In his early *Idylls* she finds him experimenting with different political attitudes, investigating the relationship between individual happiness and general progress; in his monologues he is caught between motion and stasis, calling into question the Romantic quest to integrate the language of self with its object; in *The Princess* he addresses contemporary debates on the role and status of women; his *In Memoriam* explores loss and relationship through images of the body and questions of language; *Maud* deals with images of masculinity and femininity in relation to violence and sexual love; and *Idylls of the King*, his most imperialist and most pessimistic poem, highlights his regard for intuition and vision in the face of scientific 'laws' of nature and society.

The study introduces these themes and shows how they relate to each other. By means of close and persuasive analysis of the poetry, Elaine Jordan argues that Tennyson's treatment of issues such as gender reveals the questioning of social life which underlies his art.

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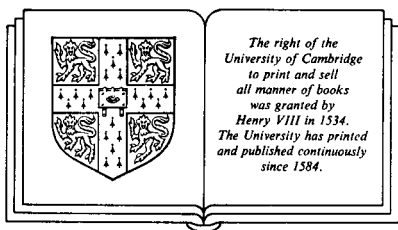
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# ALFRED TENNYSON

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*To Matthew, Tom and Susanna,  
and to my mother*

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And if I be, as truecast Poets are,  
 Half woman-natured, typing all mankind;  
 So must I triple-man myself and case  
 My humours as the caddisworm in stone,  
 Or doing violence to my modest worth  
 With one long-lasting hope chain-cable-strong  
 Self-fixt, inmoor in patience, till I die.

Unpublished lines, 1839

(Printed in Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, p. 161)

. . . a man solitary and sad, as certain men are, dwelling in an element of gloom, – carrying a bit of Chaos about him, in short, which he is manufacturing into Cosmos! . . . He had his breeding at Cambridge, as if for the Law, or Church; being master of a small annuity on his father's decease, he preferred clubbing with his mother and some sisters, to live unpromoted and write poems. In this way he lives still, now here now there; the family always within reach of London, never in it; he himself making rare and brief visits, lodging in some old comrade's rooms. I think he must be under forty, not much under it. One of the finest looking men in the world. A great shock of rough dusty-dark hair; bright-laughing hazel eyes; massive aquiline face, most massive yet most delicate, of sallow brown complexion, almost Indian-looking; clothes cynically loose, free-and-easy; – smokes infinite tobacco. His voice is musical metallic, – fit for loud laughter and piercing wail, and all that may lie between; speech and speculation free and plenteous: I do not meet, in these late decades, such company over a pipe! – We shall see what he will grow to. He is often unwell; very chaotic, – his way is thro' Chaos and the Bottomless and Pathless; not handy for making out many miles upon.

Carlyle to Emerson, August 1844 (*The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, ed. J. Slater, New York, Columbia University Press, 1964, p. 363)

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## Preface

Work on this book has fascinated and instructed me, and I have hoped that in following up what captured my attention it would also interest readers. Though I have drawn gratefully on a wide range of works on Tennyson, I have not given a bibliography of these: works mentioned in the notes provide a sufficient starting point for further reading. One can almost always find something even in books which are antipathetic: in writing we are dependent on others even as we become convinced that only our own way of going about things will do.

My main enterprise has been to re-read the poems: to listen to them and then come back from that immersion to try and communicate my sense of what they were and how they worked. No such reading is ever entirely innocent and open. My individual response in the England of the 1980s is coloured by this moment and place, and must also encounter what I can recover of Tennyson in the 1830s or 1860s, for example – very different moments in his long career.

In pursuit of his range of interests in the current of the nineteenth century I have been enlightened by work which crosses the boundaries of the literary. Poetry is a special discourse, but not a restricted one. I have tried to make available to students the results of my reading, not only in the specific studies of the *Tennyson Research Bulletin* or in Isobel Armstrong's survey of critical responses to poetry in the light of Victorian aesthetics, *Victorian Scrutinies*, but in studies ranging from printing technology and publishing practice to political and legal changes in the status of the middle classes and of women. Tennyson's distaste for the Manhood and Beauty model of men and women, and his serious concern with what women could be, have engaged me particularly; I hope this will not prove to be too much at odds with my sense of how erotic his writing is.

Knowing how much Tennyson's love of pictorial art informed his poetry, and how much he admired Turner, I looked at Turner's paintings and became convinced of significant affinities between the older painter and the poet, as they expressed in their



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different media their response to the age. Work on Turner by John Gage, Ronald Paulson and Mordecai Omer was very exciting here. Their commitment to their art, their investigation of its powers and problems in their time, is accompanied by shared influences in their reading in mythological scholarship and spiritualism or theosophy. I came to see that what looked like minor eccentricities of thought – the sort that feed into ‘alternative’ cults still – were elements in a major historical transition from the dominance of religious ways of thinking to the dominance of science.

John Killham’s pioneering *Tennyson and ‘The Princess’* offered a base for thinking about this transition, which carried with it rethinking of society and of the role of women. All this was elaborated by W. D. Paden’s *Tennyson in Egypt* (1941), and by A. J. Busst, E. S. Shaffer and Barbara Taylor in their respective works which are mentioned in the notes of this book; finally clinched and made coherent to my mind by unpublished work of Gareth Stedman Jones, which he has kindly allowed me to cite. Tennyson seems to me modern, sceptical and rationalistic; but his sisters and brothers, especially Mary and Frederick, were fascinated with spiritualism, entering the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem. Spiritualism, like mesmerism and phrenology, was a form by which older religious and ethical habituations tried to adapt to the materialism of science. Tennyson’s poetry, addressing common human experience of desire and death, is another mode of adaptation, enquiry and endurance, immensely influential and to me undoubtedly better. In studying the effects of scientific enquiry on nineteenth-century ideas, imagination and writing, I have learned much from Gillian Beer, W. F. Cannon, Walker Gibson and from Tess Cosslett’s book *The Scientific Movement and Victorian Literature*, Harvester Press, 1982, as well as the book she edited, *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

I would like now to express my gratitude to friends and colleagues for their encouragement and advice, and for odd passing comments that provoked further thought according to my own fancy: especially to Leonore Davidoff, Ludmilla Jordanova, Angela Livingstone, David Musselwhite, Gabriel Pearson and Harry Tait. My thanks to Sylvia Sparrow, who helped with that archaic business of typing, and to Terry Tostevin and all the library staff at Essex University for their friendliness and patient help; also to the librarian of Trinity College, Cambridge, for per

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mitting me to examine manuscripts of *In Memoriam* and *Maud*; and finally to the Tennyson Research Centre, Lincoln, for quotation from the unpublished 1848 Lincoln proofs of *The Princess*, by permission of Lord Tennyson and the Lincolnshire Library Service.

My greatest debt is to Christopher Ricks, both for his scholarship and his critical intelligence. When I was an Oxford undergraduate, having come from the very different world of a northern girls' grammar school, he showed me that being clever was not incompatible with common human affections; my original work on Tennyson's manuscripts was under his supervision; and his generosity has been continued even when increasingly we have disagreed. He has animated my thinking – pointing out, for example, that 'Cyril' in *The Princess* is an anagram of 'lyric', which was far from a petty point for my reading, especially when supported by the lines in the 1848 proofs to which he drew my attention, and which now conclude my account of *The Princess* in Chapter 3. For this and for other information, insights and admonitions I am grateful.

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## A chronology of Tennyson's life and major publications

- 1809 Born at Somersby, Lincolnshire, on 6 August
- 1816–20 Pupil at Louth Grammar School
- 1827 *Poems by Two Brothers* published by Jacksons of Louth
- 1827–31 At Trinity College, Cambridge
- 1829 Beginning of friendship with Arthur Henry Hallam, b. 1811  
 In June, awarded the Chancellor's Gold Medal for his prize poem, *Timbuctoo*  
 In October, elected to the undergraduate debating society, the 'Apostles'
- 1830 Publishes *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, in June
- 1831 Death of his father, in March  
 Leaves Cambridge without taking a degree
- 1832 Severe review of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* by 'Christopher North' in *Blackwood's Magazine*, in May  
 Hallam's engagement to Emily Tennyson recognized by Hallam's family  
 Publishes *Poems* (dated 1833)
- 1833 Harsh review of *Poems* by J. W. Croker in *Quarterly Review*  
 In September, the sudden death of Hallam, while visiting Vienna
- 1834–6 Love for Rosa Baring
- 1836 Marriage of his brother Charles to Louisa Sellwood, and the beginning of Tennyson's love for her sister Emily, whom Tennyson had met in 1830
- 1837 In May the Tennysons move from Somersby to High Beech, Epping, in Essex  
 His engagement to Emily Sellwood recognized by both families
- 1840 Engagement broken off, partly for financial reasons  
 The Tennysons move to Kent, first to Tunbridge Wells and in 1841 to Boxley, where Park House, near by, the

## CHRONOLOGY

- home of the Lushingtons, was to provide the setting for *The Princess*
- 1840–1 Invests his inheritance of about £3,000 in a mechanical wood-carving scheme promoted by his doctor, which fails finally by 1843
- 1842 Publishes *Poems*, in May. The first volume took poems from 1830 and 1832, with some written *c.* 1833; the second, new poems. Also published in America, by Ticknor
- 1843–4 Hydropathic treatment for ‘hypochondria’ near Cheltenham, where the family has now moved
- 1845 Granted a Civil List pension of £200 per annum, on the grounds that his poetry is unlikely to become popular
- 1847 Publishes *The Princess*, in December
- 1849 Renews correspondence with Emily Sellwood
- 1850 Publishes *In Memoriam* anonymously, at the end of May  
 Marries Emily in June  
 Appointed Poet Laureate in November, succeeding Wordsworth who had died in April
- 1852 Birth of his son Hallam; a first son had been stillborn, in 1851  
 Publishes *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*, in November
- 1853 Moves to Farringford, Isle of Wight, which he buys with the proceeds of *Maud* in 1856
- 1854 Birth of his son Lionel
- 1855 Publishes *Maud, and Other Poems*, in July
- 1859 Publishes *Enid, Vivien, Elaine and Guinevere*, in July
- 1862 Publishes *Idylls of the King* with a Dedication in memory of the Prince Consort (d. December 1861), in January  
 In April, first audience with Queen Victoria, at Osborne, Isle of Wight
- 1864 Publishes *Enoch Arden, and Other Poems*
- 1865 Death of his mother, in February
- 1868 The foundation stone of his second home, Aldworth, at Blackdown in Surrey, is laid
- 1869 Publishes *The Holy Grail and Other Poems*, in December (dated 1870)

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- 1872 Publishes *Gareth and Lynette* volume. With the Imperial Library *Works* (1872–3), the *Idylls of the King* with a new Epilogue: *To the Queen* are complete except for *Balin and Balan*, written 1874
- 1875 The publication in June of *Queen Mary* inaugurates Tennyson's career as a playwright. It was produced the next year, with Henry Irving, who also produced and acted in *The Cup* (with Ellen Terry) and *Becket*, in 1893
- 1879 Publishes *The Lover's Tale*, the first authorized edition of this much-pirated early poem
- 1880 Publishes *Ballads and Other Poems*, in December
- 1883 Accepts a barony, taking his seat in the House of Lords in March 1884
- 1885 Publishes *Tiresias, and Other Poems*, in November
- 1886 The death of his son Lionel at the age of thirty-two, returning from India  
 Publishes *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*
- 1888–9 Severe rheumatic illness
- 1889 Publishes *Demeter and Other Poems*, in December
- 1890 Records some poems, with the assistance of Edison
- 1892 Dies at Aldworth on 6 October  
*The Death of Oenone, Akbar's Dream, and Other Poems* published posthumously

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## A note on sources

I have drawn extensively on the notes to individual poems in Christopher Ricks, *The Poems of Tennyson*, Longman, 1979 (referred to as Ricks, *Poems*).

For biographical information I have relied largely on three books:

Charles Tennyson, *Alfred Tennyson*, Macmillan, 1950.

Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, Macmillan, 1972.

Robert Bernard Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart*, Faber and Faber, 1983.

Information which does not appear in the notes is drawn from these sources. Within my text I cite line references for the published poetry unless the poems are short ones, and refer the reader to pages in the Ricks edition for all manuscript extracts, which are given in his notes to the poems. This edition has now been revised in three volumes (1987), to include material from the Trinity College manuscripts which could not originally be quoted; but I assume that the one-volume edition which I have used will be adequate for readers of this book, and accessible.