

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## TENNYSON

AN invitation to give this lecture before the University of Cambridge is an honour too great for any conventional words of acknowledgment; but I may be permitted at the outset to offer my thanks to the University, and further to say that even if it had been possible to decline an invitation which comes with more than the force of a command, the name of Leslie Stephen would have been enough to drive away all craven scruples, and to put spirit, as he has done so often, into the hesitating wits and will.

No one standing in this place with a task so serious before him could ask for better auspices; and I think it a fortunate thing that I am able to remember Leslie Stephen here to-day as in a sort of way his vassal and one of his company. I have sat by his side at College tables; I heard him speak, in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

December 1894, his noble commemoration of Stevenson, and although unhappily he had given up his occupation as Chief Guide before I was sworn in as one of the Sunday Tramps, yet my name is there in the list, and it will be a pleasure, I hope, to one or two others, as it is to myself, to find that one of the Sunday Tramps, though the latest and the least worthy, has been asked to give this lecture. But apart from these personal and private matters—which still I am bold to think are not irrelevant nor unworthy of this audience—the name of Stephen brings with it the thought of everything that is honest and sincere; it gives the best encouragement that anyone could wish, though it does not make the task, in itself, less difficult.

In the Lives of the Poets, as of other men, we have all our favourite passages to which we turn by preference, and which we make into symbols or examples, standing for all the rest; or which perhaps we remember for some trivial reason or unreason, because they touch on some associations of our own. Out

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

*TENNYSON*

---

3

of the Life of Tennyson I take one thing which is not altogether trifling, and which seems to me to be characteristic and memorable, though it is not part of the common tradition, the things that are generally repeated about the poet. It is the misunderstanding between himself and his friend Monckton Milnes over the poem which Tennyson refused at first to send to the album—*The Tribute*—which Milnes was editing.

Milnes was offended and wrote an angry letter. Tennyson's reply (given in the two biographies, Lord Houghton's and his own) brings out the character, temper and humour of a very remarkable man dealing with a very severe trial of his patience. His friend had lost his head, but kept his talent for language, and in some of his carefully chosen phrases (like 'piscatory vanity') had shown that he meant not only to quarrel but to wound. Tennyson's answer is a proof of the virtue of imagination in dealing with practical affairs. Milnes's sharpened phrases have their full effect, and Tennyson suffers the pain that

1—2

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

was intended. Anger comes also, not mere resentment, but the passion that would have destroyed all vestiges of friendship. That can be made out from Tennyson's words: 'I put down my pipe and stared at the fire for ten minutes till the stranger vanished up the chimney.'

Milnes, the smaller man, had been only able to think of one thing; his friend in those ten minutes staring at the fire had taken in the case in all its bearings; had felt the injury, had understood the irritation of his friend, and been bitterly amused by his vanity and dumbfounded by his want of sense. Staring at the fire, he had seen all this as a poor wretched thing which *the Stranger*, the Accuser, was doing his worst to make into a lasting enmity. He stares the stranger out of countenance and up the chimney; the friendship remains unbroken, because Tennyson is magnanimous; and one need not require any more convincing proof of the largeness and generosity of his nature and his mind; of his intellectual virtue, if I may

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

*TENNYSON*

---

5

use the term freely and in no restricted or scholastic sense.

For many years past the Devil's Advocate has been busy, and it is impossible to ignore him. It is not on the ground of the biography but on the poems themselves that he must be met; nevertheless I take this passage from the biography to begin with, to show what sort of a man Tennyson might be in a problem and ordeal of personal conduct. The Lives of the Poets are often useful to correct false impressions; the Lives of Wordsworth and Keats do not prove that they were good poets, but they show that their adversaries were mistaken about them. Wordsworth among the Girondists, taking a share in the French Revolution, and Keats on his long walking-tour, travelling to the Ross of Mull, are very different from the tame soft creatures which some of their reviewers imagined them to be. Tennyson's character was often misjudged in a similar way; the Life of Tennyson makes it impossible to repeat the old false opinions.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Devil's Advocate is always worth listening to, and not always easy to refute. It may be true that Homer could not draw the maps of a campaign nor the plan of a country-house; that Dante was too reckless in his punishments and too careful about the spots in the moon; that Milton went wrong, if not as Bentley thought yet in the way Pope has described him. It is easy to collect instances of this kind, and of a much severer kind, about these and other great poets. But the plain man (though his authority would hardly be allowed either by Milton or Tennyson) is generally right, even if he may not be right in all particulars as to this sort of argument. The plain man feels simply that the good things are not touched; that even though the faults and errors may detract from one's estimate of the poet's work as a whole, they do not spoil the good things. Let us suppose that the *Lady of Shalott* and the *Lotos Eaters* and *Tithonus* are absolutely good; then they are not less good because other less good things were written by the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

*TENNYSON*

7

---

author of them. The plain man looks to those peaks and summits of poetry and finds them beyond all comparison with the lower levels where the historical critic is working out his survey. The critic will go wrong unless he recognises this other point of view and the fact that a good poem has a value of its own which nothing can spoil, as nothing in the world can take the place of it. The essence of a poem is that it should be remembered for what it is, not that it should be catalogued in an historical series in relation with what it is not. This is not meant to depreciate criticism or the history of literature, but to show their necessary limitations; which perhaps are sufficiently obvious.

It is not enough for a poem that it should be what is called 'touching'; one remembers Goethe's deadly saying about the hearts of sensibility: 'any bungler can touch them.' But it remains true that if a poem is not wonderful it is nothing; here as in philosophy wonder is the beginning of wisdom, and the end too, when the wonder of novelty

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

has turned into the deeper wonder at the well-known, the familiar, the unfathomable beauty.

Where did the new music of Tennyson come from? It is the sort of question that the critic is always asking, and it is not as foolish as it looks. It is true that a good poem is a singular and miraculous thing; it is also true that most good poems have ancestors. Here we come to the other side of the matter. The plain man is justified in saying, as against the critic, that the *Lady of Shalott* and the *Lotos Eaters* are not spoilt by anything the critic may have to say about other things. But he is not justified if he says that the critic has no business to meddle with the ancestry of these poems; that it is irrelevant to look for the old story of Shalott, and impertinent to compare the *Lotos Eaters* with *The Castle of Indolence*. Here the weakness of the plain man is apt to show itself. He thinks too idolatrously of what he worships; he thinks that the more you know about the poem the less you will



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

TENNYSON

---

9

admire it. It may be so sometimes, but the poem that is damaged in this way is not worth troubling about. The Commentator of course needs to be carefully watched. He must not here debate the question whether Astolat is Guildford, as Malory says, or Dumbarton, as another author has surmised. But he will gain something if he follows out Mr Palgrave's note to the *Golden Treasury* and finds the old Italian story in the *Cento novelle antiche*, which was read by Tennyson and from which he took the matter of his poem. This original story is not the same thing as Malory. It is taken from the same source as Malory, 'the French book' of *Lancelot*. But it has quite a different effect, and the effect is nearly related to the English poem. The Italian story, like the English poem, is detached from its context; it is not like the Idyll of *Elaine*, part of a large and complicated history. The Italian story has no ties and dependencies; it is a thing by itself, in the old clear language, one of the beautiful small things of medieval art. It

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-67995-5 - Tennyson: The Leslie Stephen lecture: Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 11 November 1909

William Paton Ker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

does not trouble itself with the story of the maid of Astolat as it is given in detail in the French book and in Malory; it takes hardly anything from the French book but the death of the Lady of Shalott; the voyage in the boat without a steersman; and the marvel in the Court of King Arthur at Camelot.

Great part of the beauty of Tennyson's poem comes from the mystery of its story. It is a lyrical romance, and its setting is in a visionary land; there is no burden of historical substance in it as there is in the *Idylls of the King*. This strange isolation of the story, making its own world, is part of the old Italian *novella*; and it is this quality which makes the greatest distinction in the new order of romantic poetry to which Tennyson's poem belongs. It is this which is found in *La Belle Dame sans Mercy* and in the most magical poems of William Morris's first volume. It makes these poems, and *The Lady of Shalott* along with them, very different from the older romantic school